

An Exploration of the Teaching Model for Continuation Writing in High School English Guided by Question Chains

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Abstract

Continuation writing tasks require students to produce creative output based on deep comprehension of reading materials, serving as a crucial pathway for cultivating comprehensive language application and critical thinking skills. However, current teaching practices often encounter challenges such as superficial text interpretation, logical disconnects between continuation plots and original narratives, and insufficient cognitive processes underpinning student responses. To address these challenges, this paper draws upon constructivist theory to design a series of logically structured questions that target core content and cognitive processes. By constructing a scaffolded pathway from comprehension to creativity, it explores a continuation writing teaching model guided by question chains. The paper outlines the principles and pathways for designing the question chain and, using the text “After Twenty Years” from Unit 4 “Developing Ideas” in the Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press’s High School English Compulsory Coursebook 1 as an example, details how to implement the four-stage question chain—“Guided Reading, Inquiry, Conceptualization, and Creation”—to guide teaching practice. Practice demonstrates that this model effectively deepens students’ textual interpretation, stimulates their intrinsic motivation for writing, and ensures the logical coherence and creativity of continuation content, offering new perspectives and methods for high school English continuation writing instruction.

Keywords

Question chains; Continuation writing; Teaching model; Teaching practice

1. Introduction

The English Curriculum Standards for Senior High Schools (2017 Edition, Revised 2025) (hereinafter referred to as the “Curriculum Standards”) explicitly state that English instruction should focus on cultivating students’ “logical, critical, and innovative” thinking skills, developing their ability to “analyze and solve problems using

language in specific contexts.” As a novel task that closely integrates receptive skills (reading) with productive skills (writing), continuation writing assignments seamlessly combine reading comprehension with creative writing. They not only assess students’ comprehensive language application abilities but also directly evaluate their thinking qualities, such as logical reasoning, critical thinking, and innovative thinking, perfectly aligning with this educational orientation(Mao, 2024). At the level of examination assessment, the English college entrance exam reform has also undergone a significant shift—reducing the number of grammar questions and introducing the continuation writing, reflecting a greater emphasis on students’ practical language application skills(Zeng, 2022).

Although the importance of continuation writing has become widely recognized, current high school English teaching practices often fail to achieve the desired outcomes, exposing several pressing issues that require urgent attention. The main manifestations are as follows: First, superficial text interpretation. Students’ reading often remains at the plot-summarizing level, lacking in-depth exploration of character complexity, authorial intent, and textual gaps. This “cramming” approach results in students grasping only the skeletal framework of texts, failing to perceive their substance and essence. Second, disjointed continuation planning. Students’ continuations often deviate from the original theme, character settings, and plot threads, resulting in logical gaps or abrupt character shifts, reducing the exercise to “writing for the sake of writing.” Third, the absence of visible thought processes. The traditional “assignment-student writing-teacher grading” model overlooks the cognitive construction process from reception to production, creating a “disconnect” between reading and writing. This leads to a mechanical and passive learning experience(Lin, 2022).

The “Question Chain” serves as an innovative teaching model that guides students to progressively delve into texts by designing a series of appropriately challenging and interconnected questions, thereby stimulating inquiry interest and offering fresh insights to overcome challenges in continuation writing instruction. The question chain teaching model provides cognitive scaffolding through a sequence of questions, fostering the development of higher-order thinking skills. It further reinforces language internalization and transfer through writing tasks. This study explores a high school English continuation writing teaching model guided by question chains, aiming to promote deep integration of reading and writing, enhance teaching effectiveness, and provide practical teaching pathways for high school English teachers.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Researches on Continuation Writing

Learning a foreign language is basically a process from scratch, in which one must learn to express their thoughts in the way others use language(Swain & Lapkin, 1998). Professor Wang Chuming referred to this process and proposed the concept

of continuation writing in 2010. Continuation writing as a language learning task that closely combines input reading with output writing. Professor Wang Chuming, based on the interactive collaborative model, pointed out that in the process of continuation writing, the output of learners and the pre reading materials should undergo “collaboration”, which occurs at multiple levels such as language, situational patterns, and communicative intentions, prompting learners to absorb new language forms (C. Wang & Wang, 2014). Although the continuation task itself integrates Krashen’s “comprehensible input” and Swain’s “mandatory output”, where reading materials provide high-quality input and continuation forces learners to engage in meaningful output, paying attention to the gap between language form and meaning, thereby triggering acquisition, there is still relatively little research on continuation writing abroad. Since its inclusion in the Zhejiang college entrance examination English and gradual promotion nationwide in 2016, domestic research, especially in the field of high school English teaching, has grown rapidly. Some scholars, such as Jiang Lin and Tu Mengwei, have shown that compared with independent proposition writing, continuation writing can significantly improve learners’ language accuracy, fluency, and syntactic complexity (Jiang & Tu, 2016).

2.2. Researches on Question Chains

The formation of the question chain can be traced back to the Socratic questioning method (He & Zheng, 2021). The earliest research on question chains abroad was the “problem continuum” theory proposed by American educators such as Meek in 1992. And Johnson defined question chains as a set of questions, used for discussing narrative or expository text, that enables students to develop, learn, and apply a text-based concept (Johnson, 1992). At present, there are also many studies on the definition and classification of question chains in China. Wang Houxiong is the earliest scholar in China to interpret the question chain, and he believes that the “question chain” refers to a systematic sequence of teaching questions developed by educators to achieve specific instructional objectives. Based on students’ prior knowledge or experience, these questions address potential or anticipated confusion during the learning process, transforming textbook content into a clearly structured, systematic series of pedagogical inquiries (H. Wang, 2010). In terms of classification of question chains, scholar Wang Houxiong categorizes them into eight types, such as introductory question chains, exploratory question chains, and transfer question chains (H. Wang, 2010). Scholar Guo Yifei categorizes problem chains based on their logical structure into progressive problem chains and radiating problem chains (Guo, 2019). Using Bloom’s Taxonomy of Cognitive Objectives, scholar Hou Xuexia believes that teachers can categorize questions into three types: demonstration questions, reference questions, and evaluation questions (Hou, 2025).

2.3. Researches on Teaching Continuation Writing Based on Question

Chains

Scholar Guo Yifei believes that by presenting a sequence of questions, the question chain can effectively help students develop problem-solving abilities during the process of analyzing and resolving issues(Tu, 2021). Scholar Guo Yifei believes that by designing questions to guide students in textual reading, teachers can help them better decode information, process information, construct meaning, engage in critical inquiry, and express themselves in multiple dimensions(Ma & Zhang, 2021). The core of the continuation writing teaching model guided by question chains lies in designing a series of interlocking, progressively deepening questions centered on the overarching goal of the continuation task. This makes implicit thought processes explicit, guiding students to gradually complete the entire process from text deconstruction to meaning reconstruction under the impetus of questions(Hou, 2025).

2.4. Summary

Current researches on continuation writing instruction using question chains has made significant contributions to English continuation writing pedagogy, yet it still exhibits the following shortcomings. Question chains are often employed as tools for plot analysis and information extraction, but their effectiveness in guiding students to explore thematic significance, stimulate deep thinking, and foster creative imagination remains limited. Some studies feature overly complex question chains that lack hierarchical structure and fail to adhere to fundamental design principles. Many existing studies propose teaching strategies that remain experiential, failing to deeply integrate core theories of continuation writing and lacking systematic design grounded in students' cognitive mechanisms. The "Four-Stage Teaching Model" proposed in this study addresses these shortcomings and holds significant innovative value both theoretically and practically.

3. Constructing a Four-Stage Teaching Model for Continuation Writing Based on Cognitive Mechanisms and the Question Chain Principle

3.1. Cognitive Mechanisms of Continuation Writing

The cognitive process of continuation writing is fundamentally a complex mental activity of "deconstruction-reconstruction." To efficiently guide students through this process, the instructional model must adhere to its inherent cognitive principles and provide clear operational scaffolding. It comprises four core stages:

3.1.1. Reading

This foundational stage involves information intake, where students perceive linguistic symbols in the text to acquire basic details about characters, settings, and plot.

3.1.2. Comprehension

Building on reading, students analyze and synthesize textual information to infer character motivations, plot development logic, and underlying themes, achieving a leap from “understanding words and sentences” to “understanding deeper meanings.”

3.1.3. Construction

This creative mental representation process involves conceptualizing continuation content based on original text comprehension. This includes predicting plot trajectories, designing character actions, planning emotional arcs, and establishing logical and emotional continuity with the source material.

3.1.4. Expression

Students must employ language consistent with the original style, grounding plot developments through detailed descriptions while ensuring seamless transitions. This stage involves vocabulary selection, sentence structure application, and rhetorical refinement—the externalization and final presentation of cognitive achievements.

3.2. Principles of Question Chain Design

Based on the task characteristics of continuation writing and students' cognitive patterns, its design path must adhere to the following core principles:

3.2.1. Goal-Oriented Principle

Question chain design must originate from clear instructional objectives. All questions should closely align with the unit's overall teaching goals and the specific requirements of the continuation task (e.g., plot coherence, character consistency, stylistic imitation, linguistic richness). This ensures the progression of the entire question chain mirrors students' gradual approach toward and ultimate attainment of learning objectives.

3.2.2. Logical Hierarchy Principle

The question chain should reflect a clear cognitive gradient, progressing from easy to difficult, superficial to deep, and shallow to profound (X. Wang, 2025). Typically, it follows the hierarchy: factual-comprehension → analytical-inferential → evaluative-creative. This escalates cognitive demands from organizing surface-level textual information, to analyzing internal logic and character psychology, to evaluating themes and engaging in creative imagination.

3.2.3. Scaffolding Support Principle

The question chain itself functions as a pedagogical scaffold. It should operate with-

in the student's "zone of proximal development," providing a cognitive framework and support when students encounter difficulties. As students' cognitive abilities advance, questions should gradually become more open-ended and integrated (Vygotsky, 1978). After completing writing tasks, the question chain can be transformed into a "self-assessment checklist," guiding students in self-monitoring and revision. This facilitates the gradual removal of the scaffold, fostering the development of students' autonomous learning capabilities (W. Wang, 2025).

3.3. Design of the Four-Stage Question Chain Teaching Model

Based on the aforementioned principles of question chain design and analysis of the continuation cognition mechanism, this study constructs a fundamental "four-stage question chain" teaching model applicable to reading continuation instruction. This model comprises the stages of "Guided Reading → Exploration → Conceptualization → Creation," decomposing the teaching process into four interlinked phases, each equipped with specific types of question scaffolding. These four stages unfold sequentially, advancing layer by layer to collectively form a complete teaching cycle.

Stage 1: Guided Reading Stage — Corresponding to the "Reading" Mechanism, Focusing on Information Input

- 1) Cognitive Objectives: Stimulate interest, gain initial text awareness, and complete basic information extraction.
- 2) Application of Question Chain Design Principles:
 - a) Goal-Oriented: Question design aims to guide students in capturing the essential "5W1H" elements (characters, time, place, event, cause, manner) required for continuation, laying a solid foundation for subsequent comprehension and construction.
 - b) Logical Hierarchy: Primarily diagnostic and perceptual question chains progress from "what is seen" to "what is noticed."
 - c) Scaffolding Support: Utilize tools like images, title predictions, and skimming to build foundational scaffolding for text engagement.

Stage 2: Exploration Stage — Corresponding to the "Comprehension" mechanism, driving deep processing

- 1) Cognitive Objectives: Deeply interpret the text, analyzing character traits, plot dynamics, linguistic style, and thematic implications.
- 2) Application of Question Chain Design Principles:
 - a) Goal-Oriented: All exploratory questions aim to establish "original text basis" for continuation writing, ensuring the added section aligns closely with the original in terms of characters, plot, and theme.
 - b) Logical Hierarchy: Employ analytical and inferential question chains following progressive logic: "Analyze characteristics (e.g., character traits) → Infer relationships (e.g., character motivations) → Grasp core elements (e.g., thematic conflicts)."

- c) Scaffolding Support: Facilitate deep thinking by providing textual evidence, organizing group discussions, and creating character relationship maps or plot curve diagrams.

Stage 3: Conceptualization Stage — Corresponding to the “Construction” Mechanism, Building the Content Blueprint

- 1) Cognitive Objectives: Plan the continuation direction, determine plot development, character fates, and emotional tone to complete content construction.
- 2) Application of Question Chain Design Principles:
 - a) Goal-Oriented: The question chain directly serves the opening statement and keywords of the continuation paragraph, guiding students to transform prior understanding into a concrete creative blueprint.
 - b) Logical Sequence: Employ transferable and creative question chains to advance thinking in the order of “clarifying direction → enriching details → ensuring coherence.”
 - c) Scaffolding Support: Provide tools like plot concept maps, character psychological analysis sheets, and peer reviews to help students systematize and organize vague ideas.

Stage 4: Creation Stage — Corresponding to the “Expression” Mechanism, Achieving Language Output

- 1) Cognitive Objective: Transform ideas into precise, vivid, and coherent written language, followed by reflection and revision.
- 2) Application of Question Chain Design Principles:
 - a) Goal-Oriented: Question chains focus on enhancing language expression quality and metacognitive skills, ensuring final works achieve unity in form and content.
 - b) Logical Layers: Form a complete loop from writing to revision, progressing from “creative guidance” to “evaluation and reflection.”
 - c) Scaffolding Support: Provides rubrics, model examples, revision checklists, and other resources to support effective self-assessment and improvement.

The core strength of this four-stage question chain model lies in its alignment of external instructional procedures with intrinsic cognitive processes. The Guiding Stage represents information “input,” the Inquiry Stage involves information “digestion,” the Conceptualization Stage facilitates content “internalization,” and the Creation Stage enables “externalization” of outcomes. The three guiding principles—goal orientation, logical hierarchy, and scaffolding support—function as three pillars. They ensure the problem chain effectively charts the cognitive journey’s course while providing timely assistance, ultimately empowering students to successfully transform from “readers” into “authors”. The three principles—logical hierarchy, scaffolding support, and goal orientation—function as three pillars. They ensure the question chain effectively guides direction throughout the cognitive journey while offering timely assistance, ultimately empowering students to traverse the complete

cognitive pathway from “reader” to “author.” This process genuinely enhances their integrated ability to write after reading.

4. Question Chain-Guided Practice in High School English Continuation Writing: A Case Study of “After Twenty Years”

This study takes O. Henry's short story “After Twenty Years” from Unit 4 “Developing Ideas” of the Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press's High School English Compulsory Coursebook 1 as a case example to elaborate on the practical application of the “Four-Stage Question Chain” teaching model.

4.1. Text Analysis

“After Twenty Years” selected from Unit 4 Developing Ideas in Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press's High School English Compulsory Coursebook 1, centers on the theme of “Friendship and Misunderstanding.” It recounts the story of two friends reuniting after two decades. The excerpt depicts protagonist Bob waiting at the agreed time and place for their reunion. Through the cleverly crafted dialogue between Bob and a police officer, the passage unfolds the events that occurred twenty years prior and throughout the intervening two decades, revealing the complexities of human nature and friendship. The original text features a tightly woven plot, vividly drawn characters, and concise, authentic language. It combines rich emotional portrayals with suspenseful elements, offering ample room for students' imaginative continuation. Teaching students to write sequels based on this text effectively cultivates their logical thinking, emotional perception, and language expression skills, aligning with the core objectives of English subject literacy development.

4.2. Learning Objectives

Through reading the short story, students will be able to :

- 1) Analyze the three essential elements of fiction to identify setting, character traits, emotional development, and the narrative progression
- 2) Recognize the distinctive features of O. Henry-style endings and apply these techniques to complete the abrupt conclusion
- 3) Examine the dialectical relationship between emotion and law, uncover themes of friendship and forgiveness embedded in the text and foster a healthy perspective on friendship

4.3. Implementation Process of the “Four-Stage Question Chain” Teaching Model

Stage 1: Guided Reading Question Chain — Outlining Structure, Grasping the Whole

The core objective of the Guided Reading Question Chain is to guide students toward rapid reading, grasping fundamental story elements, and establishing an overall

perception, rather than remaining at the level of fragmented information acquisition. Question design in this stage follows the principle of “moving from surface to depth.” The first set of questions focuses on the plot outline, the second on key details, and the final set on narrative elements. Primarily employing recall and descriptive questions, these activate students' surface-level cognitive processing. Specifically, teachers may structure three foundational question sets: The first set explores the six elements of narrative writing, such as: “When and where does the story take place?” “Who are the main characters?” “What is the setting?”; the second group addresses plot turning points, such as “What unexpected events occurred in the story?”; the third group guides students to identify foreshadowing, such as “Which details in the text hinted at the surprising conclusion?” These three types of questions form a “whole-to-part-to-detail” loop, ensuring students develop a comprehensive and accurate grasp of the text's fundamental facts and laying a solid foundation for subsequent in-depth analysis.

Question Chain Design:

Q1: When and where did the story take place? (Clarify setting)

Q2: What are the main characters? (Identify key figures)

Q3: What is the relationship between them? (Define character dynamics)

Q4: What was the specific agreement made between Bob and Jimmy twenty years ago? (Focus on the core event)

Q5: What has happened to each of them over the past twenty years? (Outline the characters' current situations)

Q6: What happened to Bob and Jimmy's 20-year contract? (Question the plot twist)

Q7: What details in the text suggest unexpected endings? (Focus on foreshadowing)

Instructional Organization and Intent:

Questions at this stage address factual and comprehension levels. They can be efficiently completed through a combination of individual silent reading and group quick-response activities. The purpose is to help students construct the story's basic framework, acquire foundational information, lay a solid groundwork for subsequent in-depth analysis, and simultaneously stimulate students' interest in reading.

Stage 2: Inquiry-Based Question Chain—Deep Dive, Decoding the Code

The core objective of the inquiry-based question chain is to guide students in close reading of texts, analyzing character traits, appreciating writing techniques, and identifying key foreshadowing. After accurately perceiving the text's content, questions in the inquiry stage should lead students beyond the surface of language to reach the text's logical, emotional, and value-based core. Questions at this stage exhibit greater openness and critical thinking, focusing on three key areas: the plausibility of plot logic, the multidimensionality of character portrayal, and the depth of thematic resonance. For instance, regarding plot logic, one might ask: “Does this character's action align with their established personality logic?” Regarding character traits, follow-up questions could explore: “What psychological state does this ac-

tion reveal about the character?" Such questions lack definitive answers, encouraging students to offer multidimensional interpretations grounded in textual evidence. Through intellectual exchange, they deepen their grasp of the text's internal logic, thereby preventing plot discontinuities or unrealistic character actions in their continuations.

Question Chain Design:

Q1: As a wanted criminal, why did Bob dare to take the risk of going to an appointment? (Plot logic)

Q2: What psychological activities does the 'slow' and 'careful' behavior of a police officer standing under the light imply? (plot logic)

Q3: When the policeman first appeared, he talked with Bob without revealing his identity. Why did he do that? (plot logic)

Q4: What are the personalities of these two people? (character traits)

Q5: What kind of people will have a scar on his face? What happened to him? (Character traits)

Q6: When you use the words "dark and cold," is it a sad or happy story? (Analysis of environmental description)

Q7: How does the author make this ending both surprising and reasonable? (Theme understanding)

Q8: How does the O. Henry style ending deepen the theme of 'loyalty and justice'? (Focusing on thematic understanding)

Instructional Organization and Intent:

This stage constitutes the core and challenge of the lesson. Questions now enter the realm of analysis and inference. Teachers should organize students into collaborative groups for in-depth inquiry, encouraging them to find textual evidence supporting their interpretations. For instance, addressing Q3 requires students to identify details like "You're not Jimmy Wells," he snapped." and the police officer "turned and walked away" after seeing Bob's face in the light. This stage guides students from "what they read" to "what they read into," decoding the text's "cryptic elements" to build a rich "material library" and "style library" for continuation writing.

Stage 3: Conceptualization Phase Question Chain—Creating Context, Sparking Creativity

The core objective of the Conceptualization Stage question chain is to guide students, building on deep interpretation, to reasonably imagine and conceptualize multiple possibilities for continuing the plot. This stage serves as the critical bridge connecting reading comprehension to writing output, yet it is also where students most commonly experience mental blocks. The question chain design here functions as a "thought navigator," guiding students to shift from "understanding others' expressions" to "planning their own expressions." Question design follows a progressive logic from macro to meso to micro: First, explore continuation directions at the macro level. Next, refine plot chains at the meso level—such as "How to design the

protagonist's internal conflicts?" Finally, deliberate scene details at the micro level. These questions break down the continuation task into actionable thinking nodes, guiding students to progressively construct a complete plot framework with clear exposition, rising action, climax, and resolution. This ensures the continuation maintains high consistency with the original text in logic, emotion, and theme.

Question Chain Design:

Q1: What might be Bob's first reaction after being arrested at the end of the story?

What would he say to Jimmy? (Macro level: Considering continuation direction)

Q2: How to handle the ending of a continuation that is both unexpected and reasonable? (Macro level: Mimicking style)

Q3: How to design Jimmy's inner conflicts and contradictions? (Mid-level: Refining plot chain)

Q4: The moment Bob finishes reading the note, what complex emotions would surge within him? (Mid-level: Empathizing with character's inner world)

Q5: How to design prison visitation scenes that intertwine the environment and plot? (Micro-level: Refining scene details)

Instructional Organization and Intent:

Questions at this stage serve as the starting point for evaluative and creative thinking. Employ brainstorming or mind-mapping techniques to facilitate thorough group discussions around each question. Teachers should encourage diverse yet plausible ideas, guiding students to compare their merits and drawbacks. Emphasize that all concepts must be grounded in prior textual analysis (e.g., Bob's character, O. Henry's style). This segment serves as a crucial "converter" transforming reading input into writing output, effectively activating students' creative thinking while ensuring the rationality of their innovations.

Stage 4: Creative Stage Question Chain—Focusing on Expression, Optimizing Output

The core objective of the Creative Stage Question Chain is to guide students in translating their ideas onto paper, focusing on dynamic adjustments during the writing process and reflective refinement after completion. This stage employs a combination of "process-oriented questions" and "summative questions." During student writing, teachers circulate to pose diagnostic questions: "Does your dialogue align with the characters' identities? Do verb choices accurately convey emotional intensity?" After draft completion, evaluative questions guide self- and peer-assessment: "Does the continuation maintain the original narrative rhythm? Which sentences reflect the source text's linguistic style? Does plot development resonate with earlier foreshadowing?" These questions operationalize assessment criteria, providing students with clear reference points during revision and facilitating a shift from mere language production to critical reflection.

Question Chain Design:

Q1: Does the first sentence of my writing seamlessly connect to the last sentence of the original text? (Transition Self-Check)

Q2: Are Bob's actions, dialogues, and psychological activities in my writing consistent with the personality traits we analyzed? (Character Self-Check)

Q3: Have I consciously imitated and applied some of the vocabulary, sentence patterns, and descriptive methods (e.g., descriptions of appearance, action, environment) from the original text? (Language Self-Check)

Q4: Does my ending have a certain dramatic effect or depth, whether it is an arrest, an escape, or another outcome? (Theme Self-Check)

Instructional Organization and Intent:

At this stage, students enter independent writing time. Converting the question chain into a “self-assessment checklist” aims to cultivate students' metacognitive abilities and independent revision habits. By using this checklist to self-question and review during and after writing, students can effectively monitor and optimize their writing output. Teachers circulate for guidance and may organize peer review based on this checklist. This embeds assessment throughout the learning process, achieving consistency between teaching, learning, and assessment.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates through the case of “After Twenty Years” that the model successfully centers student thinking in instruction. Through four logically structured phases— “Guided Reading, Inquiry, Conceptualization, and Creation” —driven by a series of carefully designed, interconnected questions, it achieves this goal. It not only effectively overcomes superficial text interpretation and disconnected continuation writing but, more importantly, builds a solid bridge from deep reading to creative writing. This process fully hones students' thinking—from information acquisition and analytical reasoning to evaluative creation—significantly enhancing their logical, critical, and innovative abilities. In summary, the problem-chain guided continuation writing teaching model offers a practical pathway to enhance students' comprehensive language proficiency within limited class hours. It not only addresses the demand for cultivating critical thinking skills in the era of core literacy but also aligns with the direction of the new college entrance examination writing assessment reform. For educators, mastering the techniques and artistry of question design may well be the pivotal lever for driving transformative change in writing instruction.

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