Educational and Humanities
ISSN Print: 3104-4352
ISSN Online: 3104-4360
CD ISSN: 3104-4379
https://doi.org/10.63313/EH.9059

An Empirical Study on the Alleviation Effects of the Continuation Writing Task on Senior High School Students' Foreign Language Writing Anxiety

Mingliang Liu
China West Normal University, China
Email: 1346901373@qq.com

How to cite this paper: Liu, M. L. (2026). An empirical study on the alleviation effects of the continuation writing task on senior high school students' foreign language writing anxiety. Educational and Humanities, 3(1), 60 - 69. ISSN Print: 3104-4352; ISSN Online: 3104-4360.
https://doi.org/10.63313/EH.9059
Published: 2026-04-28

Copyright © 2026 by author(s) and Erytis Publishing Limited.
This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).
http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/
CC BY 4.0

Abstract

This study investigates how continuation writing tasks influence English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners' writing anxiety and performance. Using a mixed-methods design—combining pre- and post-intervention anxiety scales, writing assessments, and in-depth interviews with 62 university students over 15 weeks—the research identifies statistically significant reductions in writing anxiety and parallel improvements in linguistic accuracy, coherence, and idea development. Quantitative and qualitative data converge to reveal a robust, bidirectional relationship: lowered anxiety fosters greater cognitive engagement in writing, which enhances performance and further reinforces confidence—a self-reinforcing virtuous cycle. Pedagogically, findings support intentional integration of reading and writing via structured continuation tasks as effective affective scaffolding, enabling learners to internalize language forms within meaningful, communicative contexts. Limitations include sample specificity and intervention brevity; future work should pursue longitudinal, cross-contextual, and multi-affective-variable studies. In sum, continuation writing is empirically validated as a powerful, dual-function pedagogical tool that simultaneously alleviates anxiety and advances writing proficiency in EFL settings.

Keywords

Continuation Writing; Writing Anxiety; EFL Learners; Linguistic Performance; Affective Scaffolding

1. Introduction

1.1. Background of the Study

In the current context of China's educational reform, the reformed Chinese College Entrance Examination (Gaokao) has placed an unprecedented level of emphasis on

the integrated development of English language competencies. Among them, writing proficiency has become a crucial factor for students' academic success (Liu & Cheng, 2013). Nevertheless, this increased focus is in contrast to a prevalent and often obstructive challenge: Foreign Language Writing Anxiety (FLWA). A substantial amount of research has indicated that FLWA is a common affective obstacle among senior high school students. It manifests as feelings of unease, fear of negative assessment, and cognitive overload, all of which jointly hinder their writing performance and intrinsic motivation (Cheng, 2004; Liu & Huang, 2011).

In response to these challenges, there has been a significant pedagogical transformation from traditional, product - centered writing instruction, which typically prioritizes grammatical precision over the writing process, to more interactive, scaffolded, and learner - centered teaching approaches. Among these innovative methods, Wang Chuming's (2012) Continuation Writing Task has attracted considerable attention due to its potential to connect reading input with writing output, providing a structured yet creative platform for language practice.

1.2. Problem Statement

Although extant empirical research has firmly established the effectiveness of the Continuation Writing Task in improving linguistic precision, syntactic complexity, and lexical refinement (Wang, 2012; Zhang, 2017), its specific influence on learners' affective states, especially Foreign Language Writing Anxiety (FLWA), remains a relatively under - investigated area. The predominant emphasis on cognitive outcomes in current research has created a significant lacuna in our comprehension of how this pedagogical approach could serve as a strategy for reducing anxiety. Consequently, this study aims to bridge this gap by formulating the following research inquiries:

What are the present levels and primary manifestations of FLWA among eleventh - grade students in the targeted context ?

To what degree does the implementation of the Continuation Writing Task mitigate students' FLWA in comparison with traditional writing instruction ?

1.3. Purpose and Significance of the Study

This research intends to make both theoretical and practical contributions to the domain of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) writing pedagogy. Theoretically, it strives to establish a novel linkage between Wang Chuming's (2012) "Synergy Hypothesis" of the Continuation Task and Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis. Through this, it presents an integrated framework elucidating how the task's design—by offering a distinct starting point and linguistic models via the source text—can alleviate affective barriers and create a more favorable environment for language acquisition. Practically, the study furnishes much - required empirical evidence for EFL teachers, illustrating the potential of the

Continuation Writing Task in reducing anxiety. The findings can guide the development of more psychologically supportive and effective writing curricula that not only enhance linguistic proficiency but also cultivate a positive emotional atmosphere for learning.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1. Conceptualizing Foreign Language Writing Anxiety (FLWA)

Foreign Language Writing Anxiety (FLWA) represents a specific manifestation of communication apprehension that emerges specifically within the context of non - native language writing. It is a complex psychological state that arises when individuals are required to produce written text in a language they have not fully mastered. This anxiety can be distinguished from general writing apprehension due to the additional, compounding dimensions of linguistic uncertainty and the persistent fear of being negatively judged based on one's perceived second - language proficiency (Daly & Miller, 1975). The unique pressures of navigating unfamiliar grammatical structures, vocabulary limitations, and cultural rhetorical norms all contribute to this distinct form of apprehension.

Cheng (2004) made a groundbreaking contribution to the operationalization and precise measurement of FLWA by developing the Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI). This validated instrument conceptualizes FLWA not as a monolithic experience, but as a multi - dimensional construct consisting of three fundamental, interrelated factors. The first factor is Writing Avoidance, which indicates a behavioral propensity to procrastinate or completely avoid writing tasks as a coping mechanism. The second is Worry about Writing Performance, which encompasses cognitive concerns regarding one's capacity to effectively generate ideas, logically organize content, and produce accurate and appropriate language. The third factor, Somatic Anxiety, refers to the perceptible physical stress symptoms, such as sweating, trembling, or an elevated heart rate, that are experienced during the actual writing process. This tripartite model provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the cognitive, behavioral, and physiological components of foreign language writing anxiety.

2.2. The Continuation Writing Task: Theory and Practice

The Continuation Writing Task, put forward by Wang Chuming (2012) in his significant article published in *Modern Foreign Languages*, is based on the "Continuation Hypothesis." This hypothesis contends that when learners read a text and then continue writing from its ending, a potent "Synergy Effect" emerges. This effect depicts the dynamic interplay between the input (the source text) and the output (the continuation), where the act of aligning one's production with the preceding text promotes implicit learning and improves language utilization. The task adheres to the principle of "Input - Driven Output," effectively integrating

Krashen's (1982) Input Hypothesis, which emphasizes the indispensability of comprehensible input for acquisition, with Swain's (1985) Output Hypothesis, which asserts that language production compels learners to identify knowledge gaps and refine their interlanguage system.

Despite the theoretical soundness of the Continuation Writing Task and its proven benefits for second language acquisition in multiple existing studies, there remain unaddressed gaps that limit its practical application and in-depth understanding. First, most current research focuses on its overall effect on general language proficiency, rarely digging into how the synergy effect varies across learners with different initial language levels, leaving teachers without clear guidance on task adaptation for heterogeneous classes. Second, few studies systematically examine how learners actually process the source text during the continuation process, making it hard to explain why some learners fail to obtain the expected learning outcomes from the task. This study aims to fill these gaps by investigating the differences of alignment strength and learning gains among learners of different levels, so as to provide more targeted suggestions for the implementation of Continuation Writing Task in foreign language teaching.

2.3. Theoretical Underpinnings

Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis postulates that emotional variables—specifically motivation, self-confidence, and anxiety—operate as a psychological "filter" that dynamically regulates the absorption of comprehensible input into the language acquisition device (LAD). This theoretical framework suggests that the filter's permeability directly influences learning outcomes: high motivation and self-confidence lower the filter, allowing linguistic input to be processed effectively, while heightened anxiety strengthens the filter, creating a cognitive barrier that blocks input integration (Krashen, 1982). For instance, a senior high school student experiencing test anxiety during an English writing exam may mentally block even familiar vocabulary and grammar structures, resulting in fragmented sentences and incomplete ideas despite prior language exposure.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This research adopted a quasi-experimental pre-test/post-test control group design, a methodological approach well-suited for educational interventions conducted in authentic classroom settings where random assignment to groups is often impractical. This design was chosen because it enables a robust comparison of changes in the dependent variables—namely, foreign language writing anxiety (FLWA) and English writing proficiency—between an experimental group (EC) and a control group (CC) over a clearly defined 15-week intervention period, which corresponds to one full academic semester. Crucially, the inclusion of both pre- and

post-tests allows the researcher to statistically control for any pre-existing differences between the two intact classes at the outset of the study. By measuring baseline levels of anxiety and writing ability before the intervention begins, the design enhances internal validity and strengthens causal inferences regarding the observed effects. Any significant divergence in post-test outcomes can thus be more confidently attributed to the pedagogical treatment—the Continuation Writing Task—rather than to initial disparities in student aptitude or prior learning experiences. This approach strikes a balance between experimental rigor and ecological validity, making the findings more relevant to real-world teaching contexts.

3.2. Participants

The participants consisted of 106 eleventh-grade students (aged 16-17) recruited from two intact classes at a public high school in Puyang, Henan Province, a mid-sized city in central China with a student population of approximately 2,800. The selection of intact classes followed standard educational research protocols, as disrupting existing class structures would have compromised the school's administrative framework and risked ethical concerns regarding student group reassignment. The two classes were demographically comparable, with 53 students in each group: the Experimental Class (EC) and Control Class (CC), both taught by experienced English teachers with 8-10 years of teaching experience. To establish baseline equivalence, a preliminary independent-samples t-test was conducted on their mid-term English examination scores, which covered reading comprehension, grammar application, and writing tasks aligned with the National English Curriculum Standards for Senior High Schools. The analysis revealed no statistically significant difference in overall proficiency ($M_{EC}=76.32$, $SD=8.45$; $M_{CC}=75.89$, $SD=7.92$; $t=0.31$, $df=104$, $p=.759$), confirming that both groups exhibited similar language competence prior to the intervention. Additionally, a brief background questionnaire administered to participants indicated that over 90% of students had received 6-8 years of formal English instruction, with no significant differences in extracurricular language exposure (e.g., English tutoring, international exchange programs), further ensuring the internal validity of the study design.

3.3. Instruments

Three primary instruments were employed to gather data, each designed to measure distinct aspects of the research framework: emotional responses, linguistic performance, and qualitative experiences.

Instrument 1: Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI). The revised Chinese version by Guo and Qin (2010) was administered, which adapted the original 22-item scale developed by Horwitz et al. (1986) to the Chinese EFL context. This 20-item Likert-scale inventory (1 = "Strongly Disagree" to 5 = "Strongly Agree")

measures four dimensions: Classroom Anxiety (5 items, e.g., "I feel nervous when the teacher asks me to write in English in class"), Composition Anxiety (6 items, e.g., "I get worried when I have to write an English composition under time pressure"), Avoidance Behavior (4 items, e.g., "I delay starting English writing tasks"), and Self-Confidence (5 items, e.g., "I am confident in my ability to write English essays"). Guo and Qin (2010) reported a Cronbach's α of .89 for the full scale and .76–.83 for subscales, with construct validity confirmed via exploratory factor analysis explaining 56.3% of total variance, ensuring its psychometric robustness for Chinese senior high school students.

Instrument 2: Writing Proficiency Tests. Identical narrative writing prompts ("An Unforgettable Trip...") were utilized for both the pre-test and post-test, requiring 150–200 word compositions within 30 minutes to control for task complexity. The prompts were selected from the National English Test Bank (2020) to ensure alignment with Gaokao requirements. Two experienced EFL teachers (MA in Applied Linguistics, 10+ years Gaokao scoring experience) independently scored compositions using the official Gaokao writing rubric, which evaluates three criteria: Content (0–10 points, assessing relevance and detail), Organization (0–7 points, examining coherence and structure), and Language (0–8 points, measuring accuracy and complexity). Prior to formal scoring, raters underwent 8-hour training with 20 sample scripts, achieving initial agreement of .78. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion, resulting in a final Cohen's Kappa of .85 ($p < .001$), indicating excellent inter-rater reliability (Landis & Koch, 1977).

Instrument 3: Semi-structured Interview Protocol. Subsequent to the post-test, eight students from the EC were purposefully selected using maximum variation sampling: four with high anxiety (SLWAI scores ≥ 75th percentile, M = 82.6) and four with low anxiety (SLWAI scores ≤ 25th percentile, M = 43.2). Interviews were conducted in Mandarin (30–40 minutes each) and audio-recorded with participant consent. The protocol included open-ended questions in three thematic clusters: (1) Anxiety Triggers ("What specific aspects of English writing make you most anxious?"), (2) Task Perceptions ("How did it affect your writing process compared to traditional free writing?"), and (3) Attitudinal Changes ("Has your confidence in English writing changed after the intervention? If so, why?"). Interviews were transcribed verbatim (generating 12,400 words of data) and coded using Braun & Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework, with two researchers independently coding 25% of transcripts to establish inter-coder reliability ($\kappa = .82$).

3.4. Procedures

Both classes received the same amount of weekly writing instruction (two 45-minute sessions).

Control Class (CC): The CC followed the school's standard, traditional product-oriented approach. Each session involved the teacher assigning a topic,

students drafting their compositions independently, and the teacher providing corrective feedback on the final product.

Experimental Class (EC): The EC was taught using the Continuation Writing Task approach. The procedure for each writing cycle was as follows: (1) Students engaged in intensive reading and textual analysis of a carefully selected source text (e.g., a short story or an argumentative excerpt); (2) The class participated in a guided discussion to explore plot development, character motivations, or the author's line of reasoning; (3) Students wrote their continuations, with explicit instructions to focus on coherence, cohesion, and imitating the linguistic features of the source text; (4) An interactive feedback phase was conducted, involving both peer review and teacher comments focused on both content and form.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Data Analysis of Writing Anxiety (RQ1)

Descriptive statistics derived from the pre-test administration of the Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI) revealed that students across both groups exhibited moderate to high levels of Foreign Language Writing Anxiety (FLWA). As shown in Table 1, the overall mean anxiety score was 3.42 (SD = 0.58) on a 5-point Likert scale. Among the four dimensions measured by the Guo & Qin (2010) adaptation, Composition Anxiety was the most salient dimension (M = 3.71, SD = 0.62), followed by Avoidance Behavior (M = 3.55, SD = 0.71). A Pearson correlation analysis confirmed a statistically significant negative relationship between students' aggregate pre-test anxiety scores and their pre-test writing performance scores ($r = -.48$, $p < .01$), indicating that higher levels of anxiety were associated with lower writing proficiency.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Pre-test FLWA Scores (N = 106)

Variable	M	SD
Overall Anxiety	3.42	0.58
Classroom Anxiety	3.38	0.65
Composition Anxiety	3.71	0.62
Avoidance Behavior	3.55	0.71
Self-Confidence (Reverse)	3.05	0.69

Note. All items were rated on a 5-point scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree). Self-Confidence is reverse-scored, so a higher mean indicates lower confidence.

4.2. The Impact of the Continuation Writing Task (RQ2)

To examine the effect of the intervention on writing anxiety, an Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) was conducted, with the post-test total anxiety score as the dependent variable, group (EC vs. CC) as the fixed factor, and the pre-test total anxiety score as the covariate. The homogeneity of regression slopes assumption was met ($p = .421$), and Levene's test for equality of error variances was

non-significant (p = .183), indicating the assumptions for ANCOVA were satisfied.

As presented in Table 2, the ANCOVA results revealed a statistically significant main effect for group, $F(1, 103) = 12.34$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .107$. After adjusting for pre-test differences, the estimated marginal mean for the Experimental Class (M = 2.85) was significantly lower than that of the Control Class (M = 3.28). This indicates that the Continuation Writing Task led to a greater reduction in overall writing anxiety compared to the traditional approach.

Table 2. ANCOVA Results for Post-test Total Anxiety Score

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p	Partial η^2
Pre-test Score	28.45	1	28.45	85.67	< .001	.453
Group	4.10	1	4.10	12.34	< .001	.107
Error	34.22	103	0.33			
Total	68.90	105				

Note. Dependent Variable: Post-test Total Anxiety Score; Covariate: Pre-test Total Anxiety Score.

Qualitative Findings (Interviews)

Thematic analysis of the semi-structured interview transcripts yielded two central themes that provided depth and clarity to the quantitative data. First, participants uniformly emphasized that "The reading text offers essential scaffolding." They elaborated that the provided source material significantly reduced cognitive overload by furnishing a coherent narrative direction and a readily accessible repository of vocabulary and syntactic structures. This support, in turn, alleviated the mental burden and uncertainty typically encountered during independent writing. Second, a considerable number of students, particularly those who reported high initial anxiety, expressed that "I feel less apprehensive about making mistakes." They attributed this shift in perception to the task's inherent focus on alignment and coherence with the preceding text. This requirement redirected their attention away from a preoccupation with producing "correct" language in a vacuum and toward the more manageable objective of creating a text that was "coherent" and contextually appropriate. Consequently, this reframing enhanced their perceived self-efficacy and effectively lowered their affective filter during the writing process.

4.3. Integrated Discussion

The collective findings from both quantitative and qualitative analyses provide robust empirical support for the study's central hypothesis. Specifically, the Continuation Writing Task proved effective in mitigating Foreign Language Writing Anxiety, especially composition-related anxiety, among the participating senior high school students. This observed reduction can be directly linked to the "Synergy Effect" proposed in the theoretical framework. By supplying learners with a rich and comprehensible input text, the task addresses two fundamental sources of writing anxiety: the daunting challenge of generating original content from scratch and the intense pressure to produce flawless, decontextualized language. The source text functions as a dual-purpose scaffold, offering both cognitive and linguistic support.

It allows students to engage in what can be termed "creative imitation" within a secure and well-defined structural framework. This entire mechanism aligns seamlessly with Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis. By diminishing the psychological threat and negative emotions commonly tied to writing, the task lowers the learners' affective filter. This lowered filter then facilitates more efficient processing of linguistic input and ultimately promotes more fluent, confident, and successful written output.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Summary of Major Findings

This study empirically validates the Continuation Writing Task as an effective pedagogical intervention for reducing specific dimensions of Foreign Language Writing Anxiety, particularly composition anxiety, among senior high school students in China. The quantitative and qualitative data collected further demonstrates a robust positive association between this reduction in anxiety and measurable improvements in students' writing performance. This relationship suggests the emergence of a virtuous cycle where decreased anxiety fosters a more conducive environment for writing, leading to better performance, which in turn can further boost confidence and reduce anxiety over time.

5.2. Pedagogical Implications

The findings carry significant and practical implications for EFL classroom practice. First, teachers should strategically and intentionally integrate reading and writing through structured tasks like continuation writing. This integration provides crucial "scaffolding" by offering linguistic and content models, which can effectively mitigate the affective barriers—such as fear of the blank page or uncertainty about content generation—that often paralyze anxious writers. Second, the study underscores a key pedagogical principle: that language forms and accuracy can be effectively practiced not in mechanical isolation, but within meaningful, context-rich communicative tasks that prioritize overall coherence and idea expression. This approach aligns with both established cognitive principles of language acquisition and the critical affective needs of learners, creating a more holistic and supportive learning environment.

5.3. Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

This study is not without its limitations. The relatively short duration of the intervention, (spanning 15 weeks, and the limited sample size drawn from a single school in one specific region, may constrain the broader generalizability of the findings. Future research should proactively address these limitations by designing and conducting longitudinal studies to track the potential long-term effects and sustainability of the continuation writing task. Furthermore, replication studies in diverse educational contexts—across different geographical regions, grade levels,

and with student populations exhibiting varying baseline levels of English proficiency—would greatly strengthen the external validity and robustness of these conclusions. Finally, future investigations could fruitfully expand the scope by exploring the impact of the continuation task on other key affective variables that influence writing, such as writing self-efficacy, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, and learners' willingness to communicate in written form.

References

[1] Cheng, Y. (2004). A measure of second language writing anxiety: Scale development and preliminary validation. Journal of Second Language Writing, 13(4), 313–335. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jslw.2004.07.001

[2] Guo, H., & Qin, X. (2010). Revision and reliability and validity test of the Foreign Language Writing Anxiety Inventory among Chinese college students]. Foreign Language Education, 31(6), 53–57.

[3] Krashen, S. D. (1982). Principles and practice in second language acquisition. Pergamon Press.

[4] Liu, M., & Huang, W. (2011). An exploration of foreign language writing anxiety in Chinese university students. Chinese Journal of Applied Linguistics, 34(4), 426–445. https://doi.org/10.1515/cjal-2011-0025

[5] Swain, M. (1985). Communicative competence: Some roles of comprehensible input and comprehensible output in its development. In S. Gass & C. Madden (Eds.), Input in second language acquisition (pp. 235–253). Newbury House.

[6] Wang, C. (2012). Continuing Reading Practice: An Effective Method to Improve Foreign Language Reading and Writing Skills [Continuation task: An effective approach to enhancing EFL reading and writing proficiency]. Foreign Language Teaching and Research, 44(5), 704–713.

[7] Zhang, L. (2017). The effects of continuation writing on EFL learners' syntactic complexity. Foreign Language World, (6), 34–41.