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A Comparative Study of Application Writing and Continuation Writing Scores in Senior High School English Writing

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Abstract

Application writing and continuation writing are two predominant task types in senior high school English writing instruction, yet empirical evidence regarding performance differences and their interrelationship remains insufficient. This study analysed the mid-term examination writing samples of 90 Grade 10 students from a high school in Sichuan Province. Employing descriptive statistics, paired-sample t-tests and Pearson correlation analysis, it examined the distribution characteristics, significance of differences and correlations between the two types of scores. Results indicated that application writing scores were concentrated with limited discriminability, whilst continuation writing scores were highly dispersed; the score rate for application writing was significantly higher than that for continuation writing, with the difference reaching statistical significance ($p<0.001$); the correlation coefficient between the two types was extremely low, indicating no significant linear relationship. The findings suggest that application writing emphasises format reproduction and information transmission, whereas continuation writing involves integrated reading comprehension, creative conception and logical coherence, representing different levels of cognitive processing. Pedagogical implications including differentiated instruction, scaffolding and diversified assessment are proposed.

Keywords

Application Writing; Continuation Writing; Writing Scores; Senior High School English; Comparative Study; Correlation Analysis

1. Introduction

English writing ability is a key dimension of English subject core competencies and an important indicator of learners' comprehensive language proficiency. A core task of language testing is to design effective and reliable assessment tasks that prompt test takers to perform to the best of their ability, thereby providing valid language samples for evaluating language competence (Douglas, 2010; McNamara, 2019; Hughes & Hughes, 2020). The National English Curriculum Standards (2017 Edition,

2025 Revision) explicitly require that senior high school English teaching cultivate students' written expression ability and incorporate multiple writing task types in assessments.

In current National College Entrance Examination English papers, the writing section typically consists of two parts: application writing and continuation writing. Considerable research has been devoted to teaching strategies for each task type in isolation, yet direct comparative analyses of the same cohort's performance on both tasks remain scarce (Wang, 2012; Jiang & Chen, 2015; Luo & Huang, 2023). Consequently, it remains unclear how the differing cognitive demands of the two tasks affect students' actual performance, and whether there exists an intrinsic relationship between the abilities measured by each. To address these gaps, the present study adopts a quantitative approach to compare the writing scores of 90 Grade 10 students from a high school in Sichuan Province on both tasks. Theoretically, it draws on the cognitive process model of writing (Flower & Hayes, 1981) and the multi-dimensional view of writing ability (Weigle, 2002). Practically, it aims to provide empirical evidence for differentiated instructional design and diversified assessment.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Interpretation of Related Concepts

Application writing is a fundamental genre in senior high school English writing instruction, encompassing practical text types such as letters, emails and notices. Its core characteristics lie in standardised format, clarity of information and communicative purpose (Hyland, 2004). From a cognitive perspective, application writing relies primarily on the retrieval and organisation of declarative knowledge, falling under the category of reproductive writing.

Continuation writing is an integrated task combining reading comprehension with writing production. Its theoretical basis stems from the Interactive Alignment Model (Pickering & Garrod, 2004), which posits that language comprehension and production share the same representational system. Unlike reproductive writing, continuation writing falls under generative writing, requiring students to construct new plot content, maintain stylistic and logical consistency, and flexibly utilise linguistic resources. It involves an integrated cognitive process encompassing comprehension, reasoning, imagination and executive control (Flower & Hayes, 1981; Kellogg, 1996).

2.2. Theoretical Bases

This section introduces three foundational theories relevant to the present study.

2.2.1. The Cognitive Process Model of Writing

Flower and Hayes (1981) proposed a cognitive process model viewing writing as a

recursive activity comprising three core sub-processes: planning, translating and reviewing. In application writing, the organisation sub-process is relatively straightforward due to fixed formats, whereas in continuation writing, both content generation and organisation require substantial cognitive resources. This provides a cognitive explanation for performance differences between the two task types.

2.2.2. The Interactive Alignment Model

Pickering and Garrod (2004) proposed that in conversation, interlocutors achieve alignment across various linguistic levels—phonology, lexis, syntax and semantics—through mutual coordination, thereby facilitating comprehension and production. Wang (2012) extended this model to the continuation writing context, proposing that learners spontaneously generate synergistic effects with the preceding text, bridging the gap between their output and target language input. This theory explains why continuation writing promotes learning, whilst also highlighting its inherent difficulty: students must maintain constant attention to linguistic features and content cues of the preceding text, resulting in cognitive load significantly higher than that of fixed-format application writing.

2.2.3. The Theory of Multidimensional Language Competence

Weigle (2002) emphasised that writing ability is a composite of multiple sub-skills, including grammatical knowledge, lexical knowledge, genre knowledge and strategic competence. Different writing tasks activate different combinations of sub-skills, providing a basis for predicting low or non-significant correlations between the two types of scores.

2.3. Review of Related Research

2.3.1. Research on Application Writing Instruction and Assessment

Research on application writing mainly centres on teaching models, process management and test design. Luo and Huang (2023) proposed a “three-stage, seven-step” integrated reading-thinking-writing model. Zhou (2025) adopted a reader-oriented approach, emphasising consideration of reader factors. Zhang (2025) advocated constructing cognitive scaffolding with question clusters. Gao and Bian (2024) focused on pragmatic knowledge teaching through contrastive teaching and contextual scenarios. These studies collectively indicate that application writing instruction should shift from mere transmission of linguistic knowledge to multidimensional competence cultivation.

In terms of process management, Xia’s (2024) “one text, three drafts” model helps students progressively refine their writing through multiple rounds of feedback. This aligns with Liu’s (2009) recommendations emphasising systematic process management. Regarding test design, Fang (2024) argued for enhancing openness, interactivity and practicality in application writing test items. However, the limited

discriminability of application writing for high-achieving students persists, as corroborated by empirical studies (Wang & Zhou, 2012).

2.3.2. Research on the Learning-Promoting Effects and Instructional Interventions of Continuation Writing

Research on continuation writing has grown rapidly. Wang (2012) provided a theoretical account of alignment effects, and Wang (2015) further proposed three learning-promoting advantages: stimulating expressive motivation, highlighting contextual effects, and leveraging interaction to promote learning. Jiang and Chen (2015), through a longitudinal experiment, found that continuation writing significantly improved learners' grammatical accuracy, lexical complexity and discourse coherence.

At the pedagogical intervention level, Cintrón-Valentín and Ellis (2016) and VanPatten (2002) established that input enhancement increases learners' attention to linguistic forms. On this basis, Qiu and Wang (2022) found that for unfamiliar target forms, teachers should provide explanations or annotations supplemented by focused practice. Ren and Cai (2025) further indicated that incorporating input enhancement techniques—such as highlighting key vocabulary and bolding target grammatical structures—can effectively accelerate internalisation of linguistic knowledge.

2.4. Summary

In summary, existing research has yielded rich findings on teaching strategies for application writing and learning-promoting effects of continuation writing, providing a solid foundation for the present study. However, two gaps remain: first, the lack of direct comparative analysis of the same cohort's performance on both tasks, failing to reveal difficulty differences and effect sizes in actual teaching contexts; second, insufficient empirical testing of the correlation between the two types of scores, making it difficult to answer whether application writing ability can predict continuation writing ability. The present study aims to fill these gaps through rigorous statistical analysis.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Questions

This study aims to address the following questions:

(1) What are the overall distributional characteristics of students' scores on application writing and continuation writing tasks?

(2) Is there a statistically significant difference between students' score rates on the two tasks?

(3) Is there a significant correlation between students' raw scores on the two tasks?

3.2. Data Source

The data were drawn from the mid-term examination writing scores of a randomly sampled group of 90 Grade 10 students from a high school in Sichuan Province. The writing section consisted of two parts. The first part was application writing (15 points), requiring students, in the role of "Li Hua," to write a letter to their foreign teacher Mr Smith seeking help with difficulties in preparing a "Classic English Poems Sharing" event (e.g., selecting poems, rhythm and pronunciation). The second part was continuation writing (25 points), providing a reading passage about a senior high school student who felt lost under academic pressure but regained confidence with encouragement from his teacher Mr Johnson. Students were required to write two paragraphs based on given opening sentences, covering emotional changes during the examination and the scene of checking scores. All 90 students completed both tasks with complete data.

3.3. Statistical Methods

This study employed SPSS 27.0 for three types of analyses. (1) Descriptive statistics: means, standard deviations, medians, modes, minimums and maximums were calculated, and frequency distribution histograms were plotted. (2) Paired-sample t-test: raw scores were converted to score rates (actual score / full score × 100%) before comparison. Effect sizes were quantified using Cohen's d, interpreted according to Cohen's (1988) criteria (d=0.2 small, 0.5 medium, 0.8 large). (3) Pearson correlation analysis: raw scores of the two tasks were used to examine linear relationships. Correlation strength was interpreted following Qin's (2003) criteria (absolute value <0.20 extremely low, 0.20–0.40 low, 0.40–0.70 moderate, >0.70 high).

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Distribution Characteristics of Application Writing and Continuation Writing Scores

Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1. The mean application writing score was 9.54/15 (SD=1.74), with median 10.0, mode 10.0, min 3.0, max 12.0. The mean continuation writing score was 12.97/25 (SD=3.74), with median 14.0, mode 15.0, min 3.0, max 20.0.

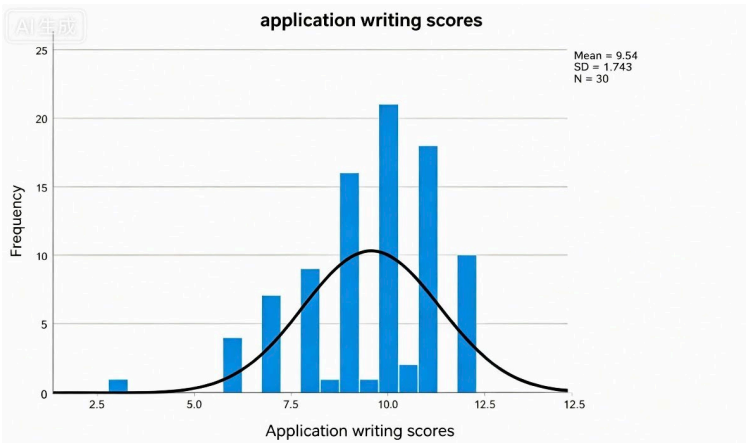
Table 4. 1 Descriptive Statistics for Application Writing and Continuation Writing Scores (N=90)

Score Type	N	Mean	Median	Mode	Max	Min	SD
Application Writing	90	9.54	10	10	12	3	1.74
Continuation Writing	90	12.97	14	15	20	3	3.74

Application writing scores show low dispersion (SD=1.74), with median close to mean, indicating concentrated performance.

The mode coincides with the median, reflecting clustering around 10 points.

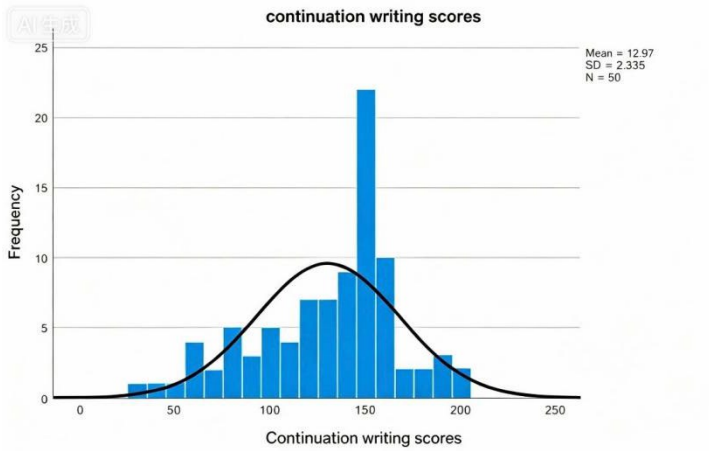
Figure 4. 1 Frequency Distribution of Application Writing Scores



The frequency distribution (Figure 1) reveals that the 10-point band has the highest frequency (21 students, 23.3%), followed by the 9- and 11-point bands with 16 and 18 students respectively; together these three bands account for 61.1% of the total. The low-score band (≤7.0) comprises only 12 students (13.3%), while the high-score band of 12.0 comprises 10 students (11.1%), indicating an overall high level but a limited proportion of top-performing students. The histogram further shows a negatively skewed distribution, with high-score bars concentrated on the right and a short left tail, suggesting that the task was moderately difficult and most students met the basic requirements, though discriminability at the high end is limited. The low dispersion further confirms that the task can effectively identify a very small number of outstanding and weak students but has difficulty subdividing intermediate performers. Pedagogically, this implies that teachers should provide remedial instruction for students scoring 8 or below, while offering advanced challenges (e.g., complex sentence structures and rhetorical devices) for those scoring 12 or above.

Continuation writing scores show significantly higher dispersion (SD=3.74, approximately 2.1 times that of application writing). The mode (15) exceeds the median (14), while the mean (12.97) falls below the median, suggesting negative skew with low scores pulling down the average.

Figure 4. 2 Frequency Distribution of Continuation Writing Scores



The frequency distribution (Figure 2) shows scores ranging from 3 to 20, concentrating in the 14–16 band, with the 15-point band highest (21 students, 23.3%), and the 14- and 16-point bands together with it accounting for 44.4% of the class. The low-score band (≤9.0) comprises 18 students (20.0%), indicating that a considerable proportion of students face significant difficulty with this task type; the high-score band (≥19.0) comprises only 5 students (5.6%), reflecting very few top performers. The positively skewed histogram, characterised by a long left tail and relatively short right bars, indicates that this task type is more difficult and has better discriminability across proficiency levels, effectively identifying both stronger and weaker writers.

4.2. Comparison of Differences between Application Writing and Continuation Writing Scores

Paired-sample t-test results are shown in Table 2. The mean score rate for application writing was 63.63% (SD=11.62%), and for continuation writing 51.87% (SD=14.94%), with a mean difference of 11.76 percentage points. The t-test yielded $t(89)=6.197$, $p<0.001$, indicating a highly significant difference. Cohen's $d=0.653$, representing a medium-to-large effect, suggesting this difference is not only statistically significant but also pedagogically meaningful.

Table 4. 2 Paired-Sample t-test for Score Rates (N=90)

Paired Variables	Mean (%)	SD (%)	t	df	Sig.	Cohen's d
Application Writing	63.63%	11.62%	6.197	89	< 0.001	0.653
Continuation Writing	51.87%	14.94%				

This result indicates that students perform significantly better on application writing than on continuation writing. This may be attributed to differences in cognitive demands. Application writing has relatively fixed formats and common expressions, making it more accessible through template training. Continuation

writing, by contrast, requires creative writing based on comprehension of the original text, demanding higher levels of comprehensive language ability, logical coherence and plot construction, hence lower score rates and larger individual differences.

4.3. Correlation between Application Writing Scores and Continuation Writing Scores

Pearson correlation analysis was conducted using raw scores (Table 3). The correlation coefficient is r=0.098, with p=0.359, far above 0.05, indicating no statistically significant linear relationship. According to Qin's (2003) criteria, absolute value <0.20 falls into the category of extremely low positive correlation.

Table 4. 3 Correlation Analysis between Application Writing and Continuation Writing Scores (N=90)

Variable	Application Writing	Continuation Writing
Application Writing	1	0.098
Continuation Writing	0.098	1
Sig. (2-tailed)	—	.359
N	90	90

This result suggests that the two types of writing tasks may measure relatively independent ability dimensions. Application writing emphasises format norms and information completeness, while continuation writing emphasises reading comprehension, creative expression and logical coherence. The findings are consistent with Wang (2017) in university populations—that correlations across different genres tend to be moderate to low, suggesting genre-specificity of writing ability is stable across educational stages. This study also extends Wang's (2012) theory: although continuation writing has learning-promoting effects, its high difficulty implies considerable score divergence in actual testing. Teachers should provide scaffolding (e.g., structural analysis, semi-open frameworks) at initial stages, gradually releasing responsibility to avoid frustration. Input enhancement techniques proposed by Ren and Cai (2025)—highlighting key vocabulary and grammatical structures—can serve as a low-cost, high-benefit scaffolding strategy.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Major Findings

Through quantitative analysis of 90 Grade 10 students' English writing scores, this study draws the following conclusions: application writing scores are concentrated with limited discriminability, whilst continuation writing scores are highly dispersed with a notable proportion of low-scoring students; application writing score rate (63.63%) is significantly higher than continuation writing (51.87%) with a medium-to-large effect size (d=0.653); the two types of scores show no significant linear correlation (r=0.098), indicating they measure relatively independent writing ability dimensions and cannot substitute for each other.

5.2. Pedagogical Implications

Based on these findings, the following recommendations are proposed.

First, implement differential diagnosis and differentiated instruction. Teachers should administer diagnostic tests covering both task types at the semester's start, categorising students into profiles: "high," "application-dominant," "continuation-dominant," and "low," designing respective instructional plans accordingly.

Second, introduce scaffolded instruction in continuation writing teaching. A four-step progression is recommended: co-reading—deconstruction—imitation—independent creation. Teachers should design reading-writing courses integrating comprehension and production (Wang, 2021). At the reading stage, teachers guide students through timelines, emotional arcs and conflicts; at the deconstruction stage, analyse linguistic features and cohesive devices; at the imitation stage, provide semi-open frameworks; finally transition to independent writing. Input enhancement techniques can be incorporated (Ren & Cai, 2025). Additionally, specialised text analysis toolkits, including character relationship matrices, plot development diagrams and emotional evolution axes, can help learners build systematic understanding of texts (Qin, 2026).

Third, establish a diversified writing assessment system. Given that the two task types measure different abilities, teachers should not make overall judgments based solely on a single task type. Multiple writing genres should be incorporated in formative assessment, with students' performance trajectories recorded to create individualised writing portfolios. Part of the assessment responsibility can be transferred to learners, cultivating self-reflection ability (Xu & Zhao, 2025).

Fourth, implement targeted interventions for low-scoring students. For students scoring below 9 on continuation writing, sources of difficulty should be diagnosed—whether insufficient reading input, inadequate linguistic resources, or lack of writing strategies—and tiered intervention plans designed accordingly.

5.3. Limitations and Future Directions

This study has limitations. First, the sample was drawn from a single grade at one school, limiting external validity. Second, covariates such as overall English proficiency, reading amount and learning motivation were not collected. Third, the cross-sectional design did not track changes over time. Future research could expand the sample to multiple schools and grades, adopt longitudinal designs, and incorporate qualitative methods such as interviews and writing process logs to triangulate findings and provide more detailed evidence for pedagogical interventions.

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