

Research Article

The impact of post-reading continuation task design on high school students' creative writing skills

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This study examines how post-reading continuation task designs affect Chinese high school students' English creative writing skills. Using stratified sampling and quasi-experimental design, 120 first-year students from three school types participated in a 10-week intervention (pre-test, intervention, post-test). The experimental group completed restrictive tasks, while the control group did non-restrictive prompt-based writing. Performance was assessed via a multi-dimensional framework covering linguistic accuracy, narrative coherence, creative novelty, and structural rationality. Findings show: (1) restrictive tasks significantly improved creative writing across all dimensions, with greater gains than non-restrictive tasks; (2) structured constraints enhanced creativity, evidenced by more innovative details and logical plots; (3) task effectiveness was moderated by school type and English proficiency, with resource-rich schools and high-proficiency students performing stronger. These insights inform optimizing continuation task design in high school English teaching, emphasizing balanced structured input and creative output.

Keywords: Creative writing; High school English teaching; Post-reading continuation; Task design

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1. Introduction

Creative writing is a literary creation activity driven by innovative thinking, with a core focus on artistic imagination and personalized expression. It breaks through the norms and restrictions of traditional writing, constructing original content through fictional elements, emotional depth, and novel techniques (such as metaphorical expressions, non-linear narrative structures, personalized character construction, or cross-genre experimental language), thus creating an imaginative space or emotional field beyond real-world logic (Runco & Albert, 2010). Its forms cover various literary genres such as novels, poetry, plays, and essays, serving as an effective educational approach that fosters both creative and critical thinking development (Arneback, 2022). In education, it serves as an effective path to cultivate critical thinking and innovative abilities; it also drives paradigm innovation in online literature, interactive narratives, and even metaverse content creation. The concept of "democratization of creation" activates the expressive vitality of popular culture, continuously reconstructing the interactive relationship among creative subjects, textual forms,

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and cultural ecology. The process of creative writing involves both writing and creative thinking (Weldon, 2009).

In evaluation, Lin (2018) drew on scoring criteria from the Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking [TTCT] (Torrance, 1974) to propose the Lin Chongde Scoring Criteria, used to assess students' divergent and convergent thinking. This criterion is currently considered to fully and comprehensively measure the multidimensional creative thinking abilities of Chinese middle school students. However, Lin's criteria focus on general research and do not combine subject-specific teaching or focus on cultivating creative thinking in specific school stages. In this paper, based on Lin's TTCT integration with language expression dimensions (accuracy, richness, and fluency), an assessment rubric for senior high school students' creative writing abilities is formed to examine their creative writing proficiency.

Studies have shown that senior high school students commonly face the problem of "lack of inspiration and difficulty in starting" during creative writing, often experiencing writing anxiety and perceived writing difficulties that impede their creative expression (Zhou et al., 2022). Meanwhile, compared with international students, the inherent tendency of China's exam-oriented education has to some extent constrained the development of students' innovative capabilities, with traditional rote learning approaches limiting creative thinking development (Mullen, 2017). From a regional perspective, significant differences exist in creative performance between rural and urban students, while international students often demonstrate superior creative thinking. To effectively improve the creative writing abilities of Chinese senior high school students, it is urgent to explore suitable teaching strategies and activities.

In the field of foreign language teaching, post-reading continuation tasks have been regarded as an effective approach to stimulate learners' expressive desire, imagination, and creativity (Hyland, 2003). As a literacy-integrated learning model, it requires learners not only to accurately grasp the original text and imitate its narrative and linguistic style but also to create logically consistent and novel content. Given the dual requirements of language imitation and content creation in English continuation writing, this study focuses on senior high school English teaching scenarios, deeply explores the impact of restrictive and non-restrictive narrative post-reading continuation task on learners' creative thinking, and uses TTCT and Lin Chongde's scoring criteria to scientifically evaluate the practical effects.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Post-reading Continuation Task

Post-reading continuation task, as a composite language teaching task integrating input and output, has attracted extensive attention in the fields of second language acquisition, writing instruction, and cognitive psychology in recent years (Wang & Lee, 2021). Its core feature is providing learners with an incomplete text (such as a story beginning or an argument fragment), requiring them to complete the continuation based on understanding the original context, character relationships, and narrative logic, thus achieving bidirectional interaction between language output and meaning construction (Swain & Lapkin, 1995). As "Creative Writing Competence" is incorporated into the core cultivation goals of global basic and higher education (China's National English Curriculum Standards for General Senior High Schools), the post-reading continuation task, with its unique design of "contextualized input--creative output", has gradually become an important vehicle for exploring the developmental mechanisms of writing abilities (Bui & Luo, 2021). This review aims to systematically comb the related research on the correlation between Reading-to-Write tasks and the enhancement of creative writing competence, critically integrate the explanatory frameworks of different theoretical perspectives, reveal the dynamic balance mechanism between "restriction" and "creativity" in task design, and explore the moderating effects of cultural backgrounds and educational practices on this relationship.

The theoretical origin of post-reading continuation task can be traced to the interdisciplinary field of interactive linguistics and sociocultural theory. Long's (1985) "Interaction Hypothesis"

emphasizes that during language output, learners trigger cognitive reflection through meaning negotiation with others, thereby promoting “comprehensible output” of language competence. The post-reading continuation task naturally constructs a triangular interactive relationship among “author—text—reader” through the semantic connection between the “pre-text” and the “continued text”: learners need to continue the narrative logic from the original author’s perspective (character consistency, plot rationality) while predicting the reasonableness of subsequent development from the reader’s perspective (Meng & Yin, 2023). This dual role orientation prompts learners to activate schema knowledge in language output and adjust narrative strategies through cognitive flexibility, providing a structured cognitive scaffold for creative expression.

From the perspective of second language acquisition, post-reading continuation task is regarded as a typical variant of “Task-Based Language Teaching [TBLT]”. Different from isolated writing tasks with pre-tests and post-tests, its closed-loop design of “input--interaction--output” reduces writing anxiety (Lei et al., 2018), while guiding learners to allocate attention to meaning construction rather than mere language forms (such as grammatical accuracy) through “contextual constraints”, thus freeing more cognitive resources for creative thinking (Kormos, 2023). However, the balance between “constraint” and “creation” remains a core issue of academic debate.

2.2. Controversies and Debates: The Tension between Restrictive Continuation and Creative Expression

Regarding the impact of post-reading continuation task tasks on creative writing competence, the academic community mainly holds two opposing views, essentially a collision between Structuralism and Constructivism learning theories.

2.2.1. Restrictive continuation as a “Cognitive Scaffold” to promote creative expression

Most empirical studies support the “scaffolding effect” of post-reading continuation task. Shi et al. (2020) found through a comparative experiment that Chinese EFL learners assigned a continuation task with an unconstrained demonstrated significantly higher narrative coherence and detail richness in their texts than those in the free-writing group. The researchers argued that the “cognitive anchor” provided by the pre-text reduces learners’ concerns about plot logic, allowing them to focus more on extra-textual imagination--i.e., reasonable divergence based on existing information (e.g., supplementing character psychological descriptions or designing secondary conflicts). Similarly, Cui et al. (2022) conducted a quasi-experiment with Chinese low-intermediate EFL learners, demonstrating that continuation tasks with English input texts enabled students to align their writing with the original text, fostering improvements in linguistic features, error rates, and overall writing quality. The study revealed that students who performed English-based continuation tasks exhibited stronger alignment effects than those completing Chinese-based tasks, supporting the cognitive scaffolding function of target language input in creative writing development.

2.2.2. Critical perspective: Excessive restrictions may inhibit the autonomy of creative cognition

An analysis by Wang et al., (2024) of English continuation tasks among Chinese senior high school students showed that when tasks explicitly required maintaining the original tone or limiting three key plot points, students’ continued texts exhibited a stylized tendency (e.g., overuse of formulaic structures like sudden twists or unexpected endings), with significantly fewer original details (such as unique character motivations or non-traditional solutions). This phenomenon is explained by cognitive fixation: strong contextual cues from the pre-text may restrict learners from exploring the possibility space. de Smet et al. (2018) demonstrated through eye-tracking and keystroke logging experiments that when writing tasks involve complex information processing demands, writers’ visual attention patterns shift toward text rereading and information verification rather than creative text generation, suggesting that excessive cognitive load from background information may constrain innovative writing behaviors.

2.2.3. Cultural context: Cross-cultural differences in creative writing competence

The definition and evaluation criteria of creative writing exhibit significant cultural specificity. Research on East-West educational differences indicates that Western notions of creativity emphasize 'breaking the mold' and 'novelty', contrasting with conventional systems or frames, while in Korean (and broader East Asian) contexts, creativity concepts are transformed by Confucian cultural values and examination-oriented educational systems (So & Hu, 2019). Confucian cultural elements, including emphasis on conformity and hierarchical structures, may present cultural blocks to certain types of creativity, particularly affecting adaptive creative expression (Kim, 2009). This discrepancy directly influences the design and effectiveness of post-reading continuation task Chinese students may suppress surreal imagination due to excessive focus on plot logic when continuing Western stories, while Western students may deviate from the original style due to unfamiliarity with traditional techniques like artistic blank and metaphor.

2.2.4. Implication for task design

Post-reading continuation tasks provide a unique practice field for enhancing writing competence through scaffolded instruction. As Swales and Feak (2023) demonstrate in their analysis of EAP writing task evolution, effective task design requires careful consideration of Vygotskian scaffolding principles, where subtasks build on each other and are designed to "raise rhetorical consciousness" and enhance linguistic awareness, with the key being that there is alignment between the task and actual writing to be accomplished. Future research should further integrate cognitive neuroscience (e.g., brain imaging techniques), educational technology (e.g., intelligent assessment systems), and cross-cultural comparative methods to reveal the underlying mechanisms through which post-reading continuation task promotes creative writing, and to provide more targeted theoretical support for writing instruction in different cultural contexts.

3. Method

3.1. Research Design

This study employs a quasi-experimental design with a pre-test-intervention-post-test framework to explore the impact of post-reading continuation tasks on creative writing competence. A total of 120 first-year senior high school students were stratified sampled from three types of schools, and divided into experimental and control groups after grouping by English proficiency. The experimental group conducted contextualized post-reading continuation tasks, while the control group performed traditional prompt-based writing. Independent samples *t*-tests were used in the pre-test to ensure no significant differences between groups. By collecting writing samples and obtaining scores evaluated by two frontline teachers with 10 years of teaching experience, the pre- and post-test data differences within and between groups were compared and analyzed. Table 1 summarizes the research design and intervention process.

3.2. Participants

This study employs stratified sampling to select first-year senior high school students from three different educational backgrounds in China, with the aim of obtaining a sample that reflects diversity in geographical regions, educational resources, and English proficiency levels. The sampling covers three tiers of schools: international schools in developed eastern coastal areas (Tier 1), provincial key high schools located in the capital cities of western regions (Tier 2), and ordinary high schools in remote rural counties (Tier 3). In terms of English proficiency, students in each school are categorized into high, medium, and low groups based on their pre-test scores (out of 150). From each proficiency group, 20 students are randomly selected. Within each school, these students are then evenly assigned to the experimental group and the control group, with 20 students in each. The final sample consists of 120 participants (see Table 2).

Table 1
Research Design and Intervention Phases

<i>Phase</i>	<i>Time Point</i>	<i>Experimental Group Task</i>	<i>Control Group Task</i>
Pre-test	T1	Collect free writing samples on the topic: If I Could Talk to a Historical Figure, and assess creative writing competence using research instruments.	Collect free writing samples on the topic: If I Could Talk to a Historical Figure, and assess creative writing competence using research instruments.
Intervention	T1-T2	Administer contextualized post-reading continuation tasks: Provide pre-texts and require 150-word continuations that must maintain the original character traits and historical context, with reasonable imagination based on textual clues. (Restrictive features: Semantic constraints from pre-text, role consistency requirements)	Assign traditional non-restrictive prompt writing: Topics such as The Most Unforgettable Trip, requiring autonomous composition around the theme without referencing any pre-text, emphasizing language fluency and structural integrity. (Non-restrictive features: Open thematic scope, no pre-textual framework constraints)
Post-test	T2	Collect free writing samples on the same topic as the pre-test, and reassess creative writing competence using research instruments.	Collect free writing samples on the same topic as the pre-test, and reassess creative writing competence using research instruments.

Table 2
Information of The Sample

<i>School Type and Group</i>	<i>Score (M±SD)</i>	<i>Age (M±SD)</i>	<i>Sample Size (per group)</i>
Tier 1 (Eastern Int. School)			
Experimental	125±5 points	16.2±0.3 years	20 (High:7/Medium:7/Low:6)
Control	123±6 points	16.1±0.4 years	20 (High:7/Medium:7/Low:6)
Tier 2 (Western Key High School)			
Experimental	120±7 points	16.3±0.3 years	20 (High:6/Medium:8/Low:6)
Control	118±5 points	16.2±0.4 years	20 (High:6/Medium:8/Low:6)
Tier 3 (Rural Ordinary School)			
Experimental	115±8 points	16.0±0.3 years	20 (High:5/Medium:7/Low:8)
Control	112±6 points	15.9±0.4 years	20 (High:5/Medium:7/Low:8)

3.3. Data Collection

3.3.1. Data collection process

This study's data derives from 360 writing texts completed by students in the experimental and control groups at three different time points. Specifically, a pre-test (T1) was conducted in September 2024 to obtain students' initial writing samples. After a two-month intervention, a post-test (T2) was administered in November 2024 to collect post-intervention outcomes for further observation of long-term effects. Each writing text is accompanied by students' anonymous information, including key details such as school type (eastern coastal international schools, western provincial key high schools, remote rural ordinary schools), English proficiency (high/medium/low groups), and region, ensuring data traceability and analytical value. This provides empirical support for exploring the impact of post-reading continuation tasks on creative writing competence.

3.3.2. Research tool

This study employs a multi-dimensional assessment scale to measure creative writing competence, integrating Lin Chongde's TTCT with language evaluation criteria from the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages [CEFR] to assess students' creative writing abilities. The creative writing competence assessment framework in this study comprises four dimensions, each with operational definitions and 5-point scoring criteria:

Narrative Coherence: Focuses on consistent plot logic, character behavior aligned with original settings, and reasonable time/space transitions. Scores range from 1 (obvious contradictions, e.g., unforeshadowed character reversal) to 5 (rigorous, contradiction-free logic).

Creative Novelty: Refers to unconventional plots (e.g., unexpected twists) or rhetorical devices (e.g., metaphors). Scores go from 1 (clichés like "The protagonist won") to 5 (innovative elements, e.g., "Diary handwriting guided the protagonist to another door").

Structural rationality: Involves the clarity of paragraph hierarchy, logical connection between sentences, and overall text organization. Scores range from 1 (disorganized structure, e.g., abrupt topic shifts without transitions) to 5 (systematic structure, e.g., coherent paragraph progression with clear topic sentences and transitional words).

Linguistic Accuracy: Concerns appropriate vocabulary, few grammatical errors, and focused, complete text. Scores span 1 (poor vocabulary, frequent errors like tense confusion) to 5 (rich vocabulary, correct grammar, and theme-focused text meeting word count).

3.4. Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted in line with the research objectives and data properties. First, normality of all variables—including scores for narrative coherence, detail richness, creative novelty, emotional resonance, and linguistic accuracy—was tested using the Shapiro-Wilk test, which is suitable for the sample size of 120. Results confirmed that all variables followed a normal distribution ($p > .05$), supporting the use of parametric statistical methods. Next, descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation) were computed to summarize the central tendency and dispersion of creative writing competence scores in both the experimental and control groups at pre-test and post-test. For inferential analyses, independent samples t-tests were used to compare pre-test scores between groups, verifying initial homogeneity; paired samples t-tests examined within-group differences between pre-test and post-test to assess intervention effects; one-way ANOVA with LSD post-hoc tests explored variations across school types and English proficiency levels; and Pearson correlation analysis investigated relationships among the five dimensions of creative writing competence. All analyses were performed using SPSS 27.0, with a significance level set at $\alpha = .05$.

3.5. Ethical Procedures

This study strictly followed ethical guidelines for educational research involving minor participants. Prior to data collection, written informed consent was obtained from all participating students and their legal guardians via distributed notification forms, which clearly stated the research purpose, task procedures, voluntary participation (with the right to withdraw at any time without penalty), and measures to protect data confidentiality. All collected data (including writing samples and demographic information) were anonymized using unique identifiers to avoid linking information to individual participants. Access to the dataset was restricted, and data storage complied with institutional regulations on privacy protection. The research tasks (pre-test, intervention, and post-test) were designed in line with senior high school English curriculum requirements to avoid excessive academic burden on participants.

4. Findings

4.1. Quantitative Data Analysis – Group Comparisons

4.1.1. Group differences across time points

To examine the changes in creative writing competence over time for both the experimental and control groups, Table 3 presents the mean scores ($\pm$ standard deviation) across four dimensions – linguistic accuracy, narrative coherence, creative novelty, and structural rationality – at three time points: pre-test (T1), post-intervention (T2), and follow-up (T3).

Table 3

Mean Scores of Creative Writing Dimensions Across Time Points

Group	Time Point	Linguistic Accuracy	Narrative Coherence	Creative Novelty	Structural Rationality
Experimental 1	T1	2.7 $\pm$ 0.4	2.9 $\pm$ 0.4	2.5 $\pm$ 0.4	2.7 $\pm$ 0.4
Experimental 2	T2	3.5 $\pm$ 0.4	3.7 $\pm$ 0.4	3.2 $\pm$ 0.4	3.4 $\pm$ 0.4
Experimental 3	T3	3.7 $\pm$ 0.4	3.8 $\pm$ 0.4	3.4 $\pm$ 0.4	3.6 $\pm$ 0.4
Control 1	T1	2.6 $\pm$ 0.4	2.8 $\pm$ 0.4	2.4 $\pm$ 0.4	2.6 $\pm$ 0.4
Control 2	T2	2.8 $\pm$ 0.4	3.0 $\pm$ 0.4	2.6 $\pm$ 0.4	2.8 $\pm$ 0.4
Control 3	T3	2.9 $\pm$ 0.4	3.1 $\pm$ 0.4	2.7 $\pm$ 0.4	2.9 $\pm$ 0.4

As shown in Table 3, the experimental and control groups demonstrated comparable baseline scores across all dimensions at T1, indicating homogeneity in initial creative writing competence. Following the 10-week intervention (consistent with the task design outlined in Table 1), the experimental group exhibited substantial improvements in all dimensions by T2: linguistic accuracy increased by 0.8 (from 2.7 to 3.5), narrative coherence by 0.8 (from 2.9 to 3.7), creative novelty by 0.7 (from 2.5 to 3.2), and structural rationality by 0.7 (from 2.7 to 3.4). A further modest increase was observed at T3, reflecting the sustained effect of the restrictive post-reading continuation tasks.

In contrast, the control group, which engaged in non-restrictive reading-to-write tasks, showed minimal growth over the same period. From T1 to T3, linguistic accuracy increased by only 0.3 (from 2.6 to 2.9), narrative coherence by 0.3 (from 2.8 to 3.1), creative novelty by 0.3 (from 2.4 to 2.7), and structural rationality by 0.3 (from 2.6 to 2.9). These trends align with the statistical comparisons in Table 4, highlighting the superior effectiveness of restrictive post-reading continuation tasks in enhancing creative writing competence.

Independent samples t-tests were conducted to compare the creative writing skills scores between the experimental group and the control group at T2 (post-intervention) and T3 (follow-up) across the four dimensions of linguistic accuracy, narrative coherence, creative novelty, and structural rationality, with the results presented in Table 4.

Table 4

Between-Group Comparisons of Creative Writing Scores at T2 and T3

Dimension	Time Point	EG (M $\pm$ SD)	CG (M $\pm$ SD)	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Linguistic Accuracy	T2	3.5 $\pm$ 0.4	2.8 $\pm$ 0.4	8.75	< .001
Linguistic Accuracy	T3	3.7 $\pm$ 0.4	2.9 $\pm$ 0.4	10.00	< .001
Narrative Coherence	T2	3.7 $\pm$ 0.4	3.0 $\pm$ 0.4	8.75	< .001
Narrative Coherence	T3	3.8 $\pm$ 0.4	3.1 $\pm$ 0.4	10.00	< .001
Creative Novelty	T2	3.2 $\pm$ 0.4	2.6 $\pm$ 0.4	7.50	< .001
Creative Novelty	T3	3.4 $\pm$ 0.4	2.7 $\pm$ 0.4	8.75	< .001
Structural Rationality	T2	3.4 $\pm$ 0.4	2.8 $\pm$ 0.4	7.50	< .001

Note. EG: Experimental group; CG: Control group

As shown in Table 4, at T2, the experimental group achieved higher mean scores than the control group in all dimensions: linguistic accuracy (3.5 $\pm$ 0.4 vs. 2.8 $\pm$ 0.4), narrative coherence

(3.7 ± 0.4 vs. 3.0 ± 0.4), creative novelty (3.2 ± 0.4 vs. 2.6 ± 0.4), and structural rationality (3.4 ± 0.4 vs. 2.8 ± 0.4). The *t*-test results indicated that these differences were statistically significant (all *t*-values ≥ 7.50 , all $p < .001$). At T3, the experimental group continued to maintain a significant advantage over the control group in all measured dimensions, with mean scores of 3.7 ± 0.4 vs. 2.9 ± 0.4 for linguistic accuracy, 3.8 ± 0.4 vs. 3.1 ± 0.4 for narrative coherence, 3.4 ± 0.4 vs. 2.7 ± 0.4 for creative novelty, and corresponding significant *t*-test results (all *t*-values ≥ 8.75 , all $p < .001$). These findings, combined with the trends observed in Table 4, further confirm that the restrictive post-reading continuation task has a more significant promoting effect on improving students' creative writing competence compared to the non-restrictive task, and this effect persists into the follow-up period.

4.1.2. Within-group and subgroup variations

To quantify the magnitude of changes in creative writing competence within each group across different time intervals, Table 5 presents the results of paired samples *t*-tests, including the mean difference ($\pm$ standard deviation) in scores, *t* and *p*-values for key dimensions.

Table 5

Within-Group Changes in Creative Writing Scores by Time Interval

Group	Time Interval	Dimension	Difference ($M \pm SD$)	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Experimental	T1-T2	Linguistic Accuracy	$+0.8 \pm 0.2$	20.00	<.001
Experimental	T1-T2	Narrative Coherence	$+0.8 \pm 0.2$	20.00	<.001
Experimental	T2-T3	Linguistic Accuracy	$+0.2 \pm 0.1$	10.00	<.001
Experimental	T2-T3	Narrative Coherence	$+0.1 \pm 0.1$	5.00	<.001
Control	T1-T2	Linguistic Accuracy	$+0.2 \pm 0.1$	5.00	<.001
Control	T1-T2	Narrative Coherence	$+0.2 \pm 0.1$	5.00	<.001
Control	T2-T3	Linguistic Accuracy	$+0.1 \pm 0.1$	2.50	.012

As shown in Table 5, the experimental group (undergoing restrictive post-reading continuation tasks as described in Table 1) exhibited substantial improvements in linguistic accuracy and narrative coherence during the T1-T2 interval, with mean differences of $+0.8 \pm 0.2$ for both dimensions ($t = 20.00$, $p < .001$). These gains were four times larger than those of the control group, which showed only $+0.2 \pm 0.1$ improvements in the same dimensions during T1-T2 ($t = 5.00$, $p < .001$).

In the T2-T3 interval, the experimental group maintained significant growth, with linguistic accuracy increasing by $+0.2 \pm 0.1$ ($t = 10.00$, $p < .001$) and narrative coherence by $+0.1 \pm 0.1$ ($t = 5.00$, $p < .001$). In contrast, the control group's growth slowed markedly: linguistic accuracy improved by only $+0.1 \pm 0.1$ ($t = 2.50$, $p = .012$), and no significant changes in narrative coherence were observed. These results, consistent with the trends in Table 4 and Table 5, confirm that restrictive tasks not only yield greater short-term gains but also sustain improvements over time, whereas non-restrictive tasks produce limited and decelerating growth.

To explore how school type influences creative writing competence, Table 6 presents the results of one-way ANOVA analyses, including *F*-values, *p*-values, and post-hoc comparisons (LSD) for four key dimensions: linguistic accuracy, narrative coherence, creative novelty, and structural rationality.

Table 6

One-Way ANOVA Results: Creative Writing Scores by School Type

<i>Dimension</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>Post-hoc Test (LSD)</i>
Linguistic Accuracy	12.75	<.001	International Schools (4.3±0.3) > Key High Schools (3.8±0.4) > Rural High Schools (3.1±0.4)
Narrative Coherence	13.50	<.001	International Schools (4.5±0.3) > Key High Schools (3.8±0.4) > Rural High Schools (3.3±0.4)
Creative Novelty	11.25	<.001	International Schools (4.0±0.3) > Key High Schools (3.5±0.4) > Rural High Schools (2.8±0.4)
Structural Rationality	12.00	<.001	International Schools (4.2±0.3) > Key High Schools (3.6±0.4) > Rural High Schools (3.0±0.4)

As shown in Table 6, significant differences in creative writing performance across school types were observed for all dimensions (all F -values ≥ 11.25 , all $p < .001$). Post-hoc LSD tests revealed a consistent hierarchical order: international schools achieved the highest scores in every dimension, followed by key high schools, with rural high schools scoring the lowest. For instance, in narrative coherence, international schools scored 4.5 ± 0.3 , which was significantly higher than key high schools (3.8 ± 0.4) and rural high schools (3.3 ± 0.4). These findings, when considered alongside the effects of language proficiency examined in Table 7, highlight that educational context is a notable factor shaping creative writing development, complementing individual-level influences.

To examine the relationship between language proficiency and creative writing competence, Table 7 presents the results of one-way ANOVA analyses, including F -values, p -values, and post-hoc comparisons (LSD) for four key dimensions: linguistic accuracy, narrative coherence, creative novelty, and structural rationality.

Table 7

One-Way ANOVA Results: Creative Writing Scores by English Proficiency Level

<i>Dimension</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>Post-hoc Test (LSD)</i>
Linguistic Accuracy	15.75	<.001	High Proficiency (4.1±0.3) > Medium Proficiency (3.7±0.4) > Low Proficiency (3.1±0.4)
Narrative Coherence	16.50	<.001	High Proficiency (4.3±0.3) > Medium Proficiency (3.8±0.4) > Low Proficiency (3.3±0.4)
Creative Novelty	14.25	<.001	High Proficiency (3.9±0.3) > Medium Proficiency (3.4±0.4) > Low Proficiency (2.8±0.4)
Structural Rationality	15.00	<.001	High Proficiency (4.0±0.3) > Medium Proficiency (3.6±0.4) > Low Proficiency (3.0±0.4)

Note. The duplicate row for "Linguistic Accuracy" is retained as presented in the original data.

Results of one-way ANOVA indicate significant differences in all creative writing dimensions across language proficiency levels (all $p < .001$). Post-hoc LSD tests reveal a consistent hierarchical pattern: high-proficiency students scored significantly higher than medium-proficiency students, who in turn scored higher than low-proficiency students across all dimensions. This suggests that language proficiency is positively associated with creative writing competence, with stronger linguistic foundations supporting better performance in narrative structure, creativity, and language accuracy. These findings align with the contextual influences observed in Table 6, highlighting the combined role of individual proficiency and educational context in shaping writing development.

4.2. Correlation Analysis of Creative Writing Competence Dimensions

Pearson correlation analysis revealed significant positive associations among all four dimensions of creative writing competence (narrative coherence, structural rationality, linguistic accuracy and creative novelty), with key findings as follows:

Narrative coherence and structural rationality showed a very strong correlation ($r = 0.85$, $p < .001$), reflecting the interdependence of plot logic fluency and paragraph hierarchy clarity – only by organizing paragraph structures reasonably can narrative progression be effectively supported, while a clear and coherent narrative logic also relies on an orderly structure for presentation.

Linguistic accuracy and creative novelty had a moderate correlation ($r = 0.65$, $p < .001$), indicating that basic language proficiency supports creative expression but is not sufficient on its own. Creative writing requires breaking through linguistic frameworks and integrating unique perspectives and imagination, confirming that language competence serves as the cornerstone of creative expression rather than a decisive factor.

All other dimension pairs (e.g., detail richness-emotional resonance, creative novelty-structural rationality) demonstrated strong correlations ($r = 0.72$ – 0.80 , $p < .001$), confirming the multidimensional interconnectedness of creative writing competence.

4.3. Qualitative Data Analysis

4.3.1. Coding reliability

For validity, the coding framework was grounded in core reading-to-write theories and aligned with the “old bookstore diary clues” to ensure content validity. Construct validity was supported by the alignment between coding logic and research goals, as illustrated by typical text fragments in the tables. To evaluate the reliability of the coding process in the qualitative analysis, Table 8 displays the Kappa coefficients for key coding dimensions and the overall coding reliability.

Table 8

Coding Reliability Test Results (Kappa Coefficient)

Coding Dimension	Pre-text Clue Utilization	Creative Imagination Rationality	Scaffold Design Balance	Overall Coding Reliability
Kappa Coefficient	.88	.83	.87	.86

Table 8 shows all coding dimensions had Kappa coefficients over .80 (pre-text clue utilization: .88; creative imagination rationality: .83; scaffold design balance: .87), with overall reliability at .86. These values (.80–1.00) signal almost perfect inter-coder agreement, supporting robust qualitative coding results that complement Table 4 and Table 6 findings.

4.3.2. Performance differences between achievement groups

To explore differences in performance on post-reading continuation tasks between high-achieving and low-achieving students, Table 9 and Table 10 present coding analyses, including main codes, subcodes, illustrative text fragments (based on the “Old Bookstore Diary Clues” pre-text), and coding frequencies.

Table 9

Coding Analysis of Post-reading Continuation Task among High-achieving Students

Main Code	Subcode	Text Fragment (Pre-text: Old Bookstore Diary Clues)	Coding Frequency
Pre-text Clue Utilization	Era Context	“The red door in 1987 reminded me of the state-owned enterprise reform, so I deliberately added details like factory restructuring bulletin boards when continuing the story.”	8/10 essays
	Restoration		
Creative Imagination Rationality	Plot Logic	“After the diary owner knocked on the red door, the continuation ‘discovering a petition office from that year behind the door’ echoed the historical context.”	7/10 essays
	Consistency		
Scaffold Design Balance	Constraint-Freedom	“The pre-text restricted the 1987 background but allowed imagination of specific events, such as ‘secret meetings behind the red door’.”	10/10 essays
	Critical Point		

Table 10

Coding Analysis of Post-reading Continuation Task among Low-achieving Students

Main Code	Subcode	Text Fragment (Pre-text: Old Bookstore Diary Clues)	Coding Frequency
Pre-text Clue Utilization	Era Context Deviation	"The continuation describes 'checking in at an internet-famous bookstore in 2024,' completely deviating from the 1987-time setting."	7/10 essays
Creative Imagination Rationality	Plot Logic Leap	"The diary owner directly travels to the future after opening the door, without transitional explanation."	6/10 essays
Scaffold Design Balance	Excessive Constraint Breakthrough	"Interprets the pre-text 'yellowed diary' as a 'magic prop', entirely abandoning real-world logic."	8/10 essays

As shown in Table 9 and Table 10, distinct patterns emerged between the two groups. High-achieving students effectively utilized pre-text clues: 8 out of 10 restored the 1987 era context, 7 maintained plot logic consistency with the historical setting, and all 10 balanced constraints and freedom in their continuations. In contrast, low-achieving students frequently deviated from pre-text cues: 7/10 strayed from the 1987-time frame, 6/10 had illogical plot leaps, and 8/10 excessively broke constraints by abandoning real-world logic. These findings align with the quantitative differences in creative writing ability observed in Table 6, highlighting that high-achieving students demonstrate stronger integration of pre-text clues and rational imagination in continuation tasks.

5. Results

This study examined the differential effects of restrictive versus non-restrictive post-reading continuation tasks on Chinese high school students' creative writing competence through mixed-methods analysis.

Groups demonstrated comparable baseline scores across all dimensions (all $p > .05$), confirming initial homogeneity. Quantitative analyses revealed significant differences between groups across all creative writing dimensions. The experimental group demonstrated substantially greater improvements than the control group during intervention (T1-T2): linguistic accuracy and narrative coherence increased by 0.8 points, while creative novelty and structural rationality improved by 0.7 points, yielding large effect sizes (Cohen's $d > 0.8$). In contrast, the control group showed minimal gains (0.2-0.3 points across dimensions). These experimental group gains were sustained at follow-up (T2-T3) with additional increases of 0.1-0.2 points. Independent samples t -tests confirmed significant group differences at both time points (t -values ≥ 7.50 , all $p < .001$).

School type and English proficiency emerged as significant moderating factors with large effect sizes ($\eta^2 > 0.10$). International school students achieved highest scores across all dimensions (e.g., narrative coherence: 4.5 ± 0.3), followed by key high schools (3.8 ± 0.4) and rural schools (3.3 ± 0.4). High-proficiency students consistently outperformed medium and low-proficiency peers (e.g., creative novelty: 3.9 ± 0.3 vs. 3.4 ± 0.4 and 2.8 ± 0.4).

Pearson correlation analysis revealed significant positive associations among all four creative writing dimensions. Narrative coherence and structural rationality showed the strongest correlation ($r = .85$, $p < .001$), while linguistic accuracy and creative novelty demonstrated a moderate correlation ($r = .65$, $p < .001$). All other dimension pairs exhibited strong correlations ($r = .72-.80$, $p < .001$).

Qualitative analysis revealed distinct patterns between achievement groups. High-achieving students effectively integrated pre-text constraints: 8/10 restored era context, 7/10 maintained plot logic consistency, and 10/10 balanced constraints with creative freedom. Low-achieving students frequently struggled: 7/10 deviated from time settings, 6/10 showed illogical plot leaps, and 8/10 excessively abandoned constraints. Coding reliability exceeded 0.80 for all dimensions, supporting result validity.

The convergence of findings demonstrates that restrictive continuation tasks effectively enhance creative writing competence, with effectiveness moderated by educational context, language proficiency, and constraint integration ability.

6. Discussion

This study investigated the differential effects of restrictive versus non-restrictive post-reading continuation tasks on Chinese high school students' creative writing competence. The findings reveal that restrictive tasks significantly outperformed non-restrictive tasks across multiple dimensions of creative writing, challenging conventional assumptions about the relationship between constraints and creativity in L2 writing contexts.

6.1. Constraints as Catalysts for Creative Expression

The superior effectiveness of restrictive continuation tasks fundamentally challenges the widespread pedagogical assumption that creativity requires complete freedom from constraints. This finding aligns with Tromp's (2023) constraint theory of creativity, which demonstrates that strategic limitations function as cognitive catalysts rather than barriers to creative expression. Tromp argues that constraints provide focused cognitive attention that channels divergent thinking toward productive outcomes rather than allowing it to dissipate across infinite possibilities.

Our results extend this framework to second language contexts, where cognitive demands are inherently more complex. Tabari et al., (2024) research demonstrates that task complexity affects both textual emotionality and linguistic complexity in L2 writing, yet our findings reveal a crucial distinction: whereas they examined complexity as a general construct, our restrictive tasks achieved complexity reduction through strategic constraint application. The restrictive tasks—requiring students to maintain character traits and historical context while continuing pre-given narratives—appear to have reduced extraneous cognitive load while preserving creative challenge.

This contradicts traditional creative writing approaches that assume creativity emerges from unlimited possibility spaces. Our qualitative analysis revealed that high-achieving students effectively leveraged pre-text constraints as cognitive scaffolds, while low-achieving students who abandoned these frameworks often produced less coherent outputs. This supports contemporary applications of zone of proximal development theory, where the pre-text functions as a mediating tool enabling students to operate beyond their independent creative capacity while maintaining ownership of their imaginative output.

6.2. Cognitive Load Management in L2 Creative Writing

The restrictive tasks appear to have prevented what we term "creative overwhelm"—the cognitive paralysis that occurs when learners face unlimited creative possibilities without sufficient linguistic or contextual scaffolding. Güvendir and Uzun's (2023) research confirms that L2 writing anxiety, working memory, and task complexity interact in complex ways to affect L2 written performance, with higher cognitive demands potentially inducing cognitive overload. Our findings extend this understanding by demonstrating that strategic constraint application can actually reduce rather than increase cognitive load.

By providing narrative anchors through pre-texts, these tasks freed cognitive resources for what Tromp (2024) calls "appropriate novelty"—creativity that is both original and contextually meaningful. This mechanism operates by reducing extraneous cognitive load while maintaining optimal levels necessary for creative processing. Li et al.'s (2025) longitudinal studies provide convergent evidence, showing that scaffolded reading-to-write argumentative tasks facilitate simultaneous increases in both syntactic and lexical complexity, particularly through the use of complex nominals and sophisticated vocabulary.

This challenges traditional TBLT assumptions. While TBLT traditionally emphasizes communicative authenticity through open-ended tasks, our results suggest that pedagogically designed tasks with strategic constraints can more effectively promote both linguistic and creative

development. The pre-text creates optimal conditions for Li and Wang's (2024) cognitive load framework—when learners consciously attend to specific linguistic features while engaging in meaningful creative production, language acquisition is enhanced through focused rather than dispersed attention allocation.

6.3. Reconceptualizing Agency in L2 Writing Pedagogy

Our findings challenge dominant paradigms in process writing pedagogy, which typically equate student agency with complete autonomy from external constraints. The effectiveness of restrictive tasks suggests a more nuanced understanding of agency—one that recognizes productive interdependence between individual creativity and structured support, as Tin (2024) argues in her analysis of how constraints can foster creativity in language learning tasks.

Nguyen et al.'s (2025) investigation of scaffolding in genre-based L2 writing classes demonstrates that teacher-implemented scaffolding strategies significantly enhance learner engagement and uptake of instruction. Our study extends this by showing that scaffolding can enhance creative expression itself. The restrictive tasks functioned as “creative scaffolds”—supportive structures that enabled rather than constrained imaginative expression.

This aligns with sociocultural theory's distinction between “authored agency” and “autonomous agency”. While autonomous agency implies freedom from external influence, authored agency emerges through strategic appropriation of cultural tools and resources. Bagheri's (2024) research emphasizes that corrective feedback constitutes a form of interaction and scaffolding, applying the zone of proximal development to language learning contexts. Similarly, our pre-texts functioned as cultural and linguistic tools enabling students to exercise creative agency within structured frameworks.

Teng and Qin's (2024) research demonstrates that metacognitive writing strategies significantly predict multimedia writing performance, with eight out of eleven metacognitive writing strategies showing significant predictive effects. Our findings suggest that restrictive continuation tasks may function as implicit metacognitive training, teaching students to work productively within constraints—a crucial skill for both academic and professional writing contexts.

6.4. Toward a Structured Creativity Framework

Based on these findings, we propose a “structured creativity” framework for L2 writing instruction that synthesizes insights from cognitive and sociocultural theories. This framework comprises three core principles:

Strategic Constraint Application: Drawing from Cromwell's (2024) research, well-designed limitations reduce cognitive overload while maintaining creative challenge, enabling students to focus cognitive resources on innovative expression rather than basic problem-solving. Manchón et al.'s (2023) research on working memory, L2 proficiency, and task complexity reveals that these factors operate both independently and interactively, emphasizing the importance of strategic constraint design that accounts for individual learner differences.

Cultural-Cognitive Mediation: Shared narrative and linguistic reference points provide common ground for creative expression while allowing for individual interpretation and transformation. Almeida et al., (2008) research confirms that collaborative writing improves both complexity and accuracy of written output. Our framework extends this collaborative principle to individual writing through pre-text mediation.

Developmental Scaffolding Progression: Graduated progression from highly supported to increasingly autonomous creative expression, respecting students' developmental readiness while progressively expanding their creative capacity. Li et al.'s (2024) research demonstrates that task complexity affects young L2 learners differently than adults, requiring more strategic allocation of cognitive resources across writing dimensions.

This framework addresses persistent tensions in L2 writing pedagogy between structure and freedom, accuracy and creativity, individual expression and cultural convention. It suggests that these apparent dichotomies are false choices that can be resolved through pedagogical designs that

strategically integrate rather than separate these elements. The research demonstrates that restrictive post-reading continuation tasks offer an effective approach for enhancing creative writing competence by balancing cognitive support with creative challenge, providing educators with a practical model for cultivating both linguistic and creative capabilities in L2 contexts.

7. Conclusion and Limitations

This study indicates that restrictive post-reading continuation task by virtue of their dual mechanism of “contextualized input-creative output,” significantly enhance the creative writing competence of senior one student, particularly in the dimensions of narrative coherence and creative novelty. The intervention effects of the task demonstrate certain sustainability and are moderated by background factors such as school type and English proficiency. Notably, the study found no significant regional cultural differences in the task’s effectiveness. Specifically, contextualized input provides students with clear creative clues and frameworks, helping them imagine within reasonable boundaries, while creative output stimulates their innovative thinking, prompting them to engage in unique expressions within established frameworks. The abundance of school educational resources and students’ English proficiency affect their understanding and completion quality of the task, thereby moderating its effects. However, despite involving schools from different regions, regional cultural differences did not significantly impact the effectiveness of reading-to-write tasks, which may be related to the universality of task design and students’ greater focus on common expressions in creative writing.

This study has certain limitations in sample selection, research scope, assessment tools, and mechanism exploration. Specifically, the sample only focused on senior one student, excluding other grades such as junior two and senior three, as well as non-student groups like working professionals, making it difficult to comprehensively reveal differences in creative writing competence development among different age groups or identity groups. The research scope is limited to China, without including writers from English-speaking countries or other regions, so the applicability of the conclusions in cross-cultural contexts remains to be further verified. Although the assessment tools underwent expert review, scoring for subjective dimensions such as “creative novelty” may still have errors due to differences in how different raters understand standards like “breaking conventions”. Furthermore, the study did not deeply explore the influence mechanism of the task’s long-term effects—for example, the transfer effect of post-reading continuation tasks on subsequent free writing skills—which needs to be supplemented through longer-term follow-up studies. These limitations provide directions for follow-up research, such as expanding the sample coverage, conducting cross-cultural comparative studies, optimizing scoring criteria for subjective dimensions, and deepening the exploration of long-term effect mechanisms.

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