

Original Paper

The Present Research and Prospects on Alignment Effects in the Continuation Task

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Abstract

Wang (2012) proposed the “Continuation Task” method to second language learning, which is based on alignment effects that closely integrate language comprehension and output to promote foreign language learning. According to research results, the effect of second language learning is mainly due to alignment effects, and the alignment output is the key to effective language learning. Through searching the keyword “continuation task” of the Foreign Languages and Literatures from 2018 to 2022 in the CNKI, there are 155 journal papers at home and abroad. Based on these journals, this paper makes a review and evaluation of alignment effects in the continuation task from its theoretical research and present research status. It divides the research status into two categories: the continuation task research for Chinese learners of English and foreign learners of Chinese. Besides, this paper looks into the research prospect of alignment effects in the continuation task, especially its implications for second language teaching, which can provide new ideas and directions for foreign language teaching in China.

Keywords

The Continuation Task, Alignment Effects, Foreign Language Teaching, Second Language Learning

1. Introduction

There are two main schools of language acquisition: one is the language innate theory represented by Chomsky, and the other is the usage-based view of language acquisition. Chomsky believes that there is a Language Acquisition Device (LAD) in the human brain that helps learners acquire language naturally through universal grammar; the second view holds that learners acquire language through interaction in specific contexts. The continuation task is also a way of language acquisition that has existed for a long time, but its effectiveness in facilitating the learning of a second language has been

gradually discovered in recent years, and related empirical studies have achieved some results. In 2012, Wang proposed the second language learning and teaching method “the continuation task”, which was later upgraded to the “continuation” theory. The “continuation” theory is the first domestic second language acquisition theory and holds that language is learned and high learning efficiency is realized through “continuation” (Wang, 2016). The main step of “continuation” is to cut off a piece of text at the end of reading material and let the learner continue to write after reading (Wang, 2012). This method is creative in the sense that learners need to imitate the second language they have learned in the process of continuation, use their imagination to create original content and express their own thoughts. Through this continuation to improve their language use and promote second language learning. Although the continuation process seems simple, it mobilizes many positive factors that can promote second language learning, such as interactivity and autonomy. It can facilitate second language learning through completion, expansion and creation of the continuation content (Wang, 2016). Based on the brief introduction of the journal papers and research hotspots of the “continuation task” from 2018 to 2022, this paper focuses on the findings of the empirical research on alignment effects in the “continuation task” from Chinese learners of English and foreign learners of Chinese perspectives. By reviewing the previous research, this paper summarizes the shortcomings, and talks about the prospect of alignment effects in the “continuation task” to the language acquisition theory and language teaching implications.

2. Theoretical Basis

The alignment effect is the main theoretical basis of the “continuation task” in promoting the foreign language learning. Pickering and Garrod (2004) proposed the model of interactive alignment in which alignment comes from interaction and is the key to a smooth interpersonal dialogue. Alignment can occur both at the language level and in the situational mode. When language and situation interact, it will lead to the close combination of language comprehension and language output in the dialogue, and language information can be transmitted through this combination. Based on this model, Wang (2010, 2011) came up with an effective path of foreign language learning: interaction → comprehension → alignment → output → acquisition. In the foreign language learning process, learners’ ability to comprehend the content often exceeds their independent ability to produce their own content, and the difference in ability will produce an alignment effect (also known as leveling effect). Therefore, the language output ability actively “approaches” the content comprehension ability, and the weaker output ability and language proficiency of learners can be improved significantly in the process.

Wang (2016) further refined the interactive alignment theory, arguing that alignment also exists in the comprehension and output of the language learning process, which sheds light on foreign language teaching. In the subsequent research on the alignment effects in the “continuation task”, scholars found that the alignment effect exists in both interpersonal interaction and written tasks. Most foreign language learners in China have less opportunities for oral output of the second language, so they

mainly take written forms like the “continuation task” to improve their foreign language learning ability. Wang elevates the “continuation task” to the “continuation” theory, and verifies its value in promoting second language learning and teaching.

“Continuation” theory has a wide range of applications in second language learning because it can not only make the input and output interact, but also produce a lot of facilitative features on language learning (Wang, 2016):

- (1) Arouse the internal power of expressing ideas, release imagination and cultivate creative thinking ability;
- (2) Provide the context to facilitate language comprehension and the integration between language and context;
- (3) Relieve pressure on language output, and the levelling effect motivates learners to express their thoughts by referring to the language structure mentioned above, so as to reduce the errors in language use;
- (4) Inhibit native language interference. The “continuation” method is aligned with the correct usage of the above, and the native language is inevitably inhibited, resulting in more authentic expressions.
- (5) Provide a coherent writing model. Learners will naturally extend the content through the “continuation” with the structure above, which will enhance the coherence of their writing content.
- (6) Improve attention. “Continuation” can highlight the contrast between former reading material and their writing content, so it makes learners more likely to notice the gap in language proficiency, which can be gradually closed through “continuation”.
- (7) Refine language use in the discourse. “Continuation” creates discourses rich in contextual information.

3. Research Status

In this part, the research status of the “continuation task” from 2018 to 2022 and empirical research on alignment effects in the “continuation task” will be introduced.

3.1 The Research Status of the “Continuation Task” from 2018 to 2022

Through Searching the Keyword “Continuation Task” of the Foreign Languages and Literatures from 2018 to 2022 in the CNKI, there Are 155 Journal papers at home and abroad.

Table 1. Statistics on the Number of the “Continuation Task” on CNKI Journals from 2018 to 2022

Year of Publication	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	Total
Number of Journals	21	33	34	34	33	155

English teaching. In addition, the purpose of the “continuation task” is to improve the language proficiency of foreign language learners. The foreign language mentioned here not only refers to English for Chinese language learners, but also other languages, such as Chinese as a foreign language. Next, the author will introduce the empirical research on the “continuation task” from the perspectives of Chinese learners of English and foreign learners of Chinese.

3.2 Empirical Research on Alignment Effects in the “Continuation Task”

This part will present representative studies on alignment effects in the “continuation task” as well as the latest research from 2018 to 2022 to reflect the promotion effect of the alignment effect on language learning.

3.2.1 Empirical Research on Chinese Learners of English

Wang and Wang (2014) demonstrated the alignment effect between language comprehension and output in reading and writing. This experiment observed the alignment phenomenon of foreign language learners in words, lexical chunks and syntactic structure. The experimental study found that there indeed exist alignment effects in the “continuation task”. When students read English materials and are required to write in English, they would frequently use the vocabulary and structure above, and the errors would be significantly less than when they read Chinese materials but write in English. So, the alignment effect is related to the type of errors, and different language forms have different sensitivity to alignment. However, this conclusion doesn’t have great replication function because it only focuses on the short-term alignment effects and lacks the discussion on the long-term sustainability of this effect.

Zhang (2016) took 58 university students from two classes major in Business English as subjects. One class read an English story without an end, the other read a Chinese story without an end, and both continued to write the story in English. This study found that the “continuation task” has a strong alignment effect on students’ vocabulary, syntax and the coherence of discourse, which helps to arouse students’ imagination, stimulate their learning motivation, and achieve the effect of promoting students’ language learning through writing.

The above two studies can confirm the existence of alignment effects from the initial stage of the “continuation task”. In later studies, how to choose the genre of the “continuation task” to achieve the optimal alignment effect and promote the language learning is a major study focus. Zhang and Zhang (2017) studied the influence of different writing genres (narrative and argumentative) on alignment effects and error types, and found that argumentative writing had a stronger alignment effect than narrative writing, but in terms of language fluency, narrative writing had a better effect. This study enlightens foreign language teachers to consider the features of different genres when they issue “continuation tasks”, so as to better improve students’ learning outcomes.

Wang pointed out that the effectiveness of the alignment effect in the “continuation task” also depends on the strength of the interaction, “if the interaction is strong, the alignment effect is strong; if the interaction is weak, the alignment effect is weak”. In the process of continuation, learners not only need

to fully understand the previous text, but also need to have interactive alignment with the text to quickly improve the efficiency of foreign language learning. The study by Gu and Zhou (2018) intends to investigate the influence of instructive tasks on alignment effects in the “continuation task” of English vocabulary and writing. The experiment divided freshmen students in a university in Xi’an into an experimental group and a control group; students in the experimental group were required to complete instructive tasks after reading the text and then started to continue writing, while students in the control group continued writing immediately after reading. The results of the study showed that instructive tasks could significantly increase the effectiveness of alignment effects at the vocabulary level, strengthen the understanding on the target language of learners who belong to different language levels. Moreover, instructive tasks can enable students of low language proficiency to write with a higher accuracy, suggesting that the way learners interact with the text is closely related to the alignment effect.

In addition to the text genre, the form of language input and the interaction between learners and reading text, the factors that influence alignment effects in the “continuation task” also includes the characteristics of reading text itself. The characteristics of reading text are related to the effectiveness of alignment effects. When choosing the text to write, we need to consider its length, interestingness, difficulty and other factors. Xin and Li (2020) mainly investigated the alignment phenomenon of text complexity and its influence on the accuracy of writing content in the “continuation task”. It is found in the experimental study that there is alignment in the text complexity in the “continuation task”. Alignment in the syntactic structure is selective, and learners are more likely to align with the syntactic structure that fits their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), but the alignment effect of the text complexity does not affect the writing accuracy. Therefore, teachers can choose the syntactic structure that is in line with the ZPD of students as the target structure, so that students can complete the writing tasks independently. For the writing accuracy that is not easy to be improved through alignment, such as tense errors, it can be improved through corrective feedback and other various ways. In addition, teachers can select pre-reading texts with longer length, which can motivate students to write longer content and increase their motivation to write. Wang and Wang (2021) carried out a study between alignment effects in the “continuation task” and second language learning. This study took relative clauses in English as the target structure, and took the alignment output of relative clauses by learners as the measure of alignment effects. The study found that if the reading material contained relative clauses, it could “trigger” learners to produce content with the structure of relative clauses. Alignment output can help learners improve and keep their second language learning effect in a long way. This suggests that the promotion function of language learning in the “continuation task” is mainly derived from its alignment effect, and the alignment output is the key to the efficient language learning in the “continuation task”.

The above studies show that both selecting and processing textual materials and enhancing learners’ interaction with the text can increase alignment effects in the “continuation task”. In addition, the

degree to which learners' comprehension and output are closely integrated also affects the alignment effect. It is because the "continuation task" is a kind of open-ended writing, if a stronger alignment relationship between comprehension and output is not ensured, the learning facilitation effect of the "continuation task" cannot be guaranteed either. The study of Wang and Zhong et al. (2022) compared two groups of English learners whose only difference is whether there is a situational cue, and it found that the situational cue can help learners increase the length of their writing content, enhance the use of words in the pre-text, and reduce errors, but it is easy to produce "Chinglish". This suggests that a cue orientation about the preceding context can strengthen the connection between the continuation content and the reading material, and it can significantly increase the intensity of alignment effects and promote the foreign language learning.

3.2.2 Empirical Research on Foreign Learners of Chinese

The alignment effect in the "continuation task" can promote the language use of foreign language learners. The subjects in above studies are all Chinese learners of English. In fact, this alignment effect is not only limited to studies on English as a foreign language to write after reading, but also can be extended to studies on other languages, such as the related research on the learning of Chinese as a second language.

Wang and Wang (2016) proved that alignment effect also exists in the "continuation task" of Chinese as a second language, and the facilitative effect of continuation is still valid. They conducted an experiment with Korean students who came to China to learn Chinese as a second language. The research result showed that the alignment effect in Chinese as a second language was still very obvious, and the learners were significantly less likely to make errors in lexical chunks, grammar, and syntax when they read Chinese reading material and write in Chinese than read Korean reading material.

Hong and Shi (2016) examined the effect of the "continuation task" on the acquisition of Chinese classifiers with foreign students as subjects. In this study, foreign students were divided into the reading group, the continuation group and the control group. This study conducted pre-test, immediate post-test and delayed post-test on the knowledge about Chinese classifiers of the three groups of learners respectively, and found that the learning effectiveness and persistence of the continuation group was significantly higher than that of the reading group, which further confirmed the alignment effect and its facilitative role in second language learning through the "continuation task".

The study of Wang (2019) set out to examine the effect of two print types on the performance of the "continuation task", with one type exhibiting word-based print and the other presenting the normal character-based print. Subjects of the study were intermediate L2-Chinese (learning Chinese as a second language) learners. Results show that the alignment effect associated with the word-based print was stronger, and it occurred in words, lexical chunks and syntactic structures but its strength varied with different structures. Besides, the word-based print was conducive to enhancing learners' reading comprehension and reducing errors. Therefore, these findings testified the alignment effect of the continuation task in L2-Chinese and pointed to an easy and effective way to the enhancement of this

effect in L2-Chinese learning.

Lin (2019) carried out case study on two Australian L2-Chinese learners with qualitative research approach and methods of think-aloud and semi-structured interviews to describe the details of the thinking process and personal experience when using the continuation task to learn Chinese, and also analyze and discuss the writing results of the two participants. It is found that the changes in the form of continuation tasks can affect the fluency, complexity and accuracy of the continuation content produced by learners, as well as the interaction with the reading material, and further have an impact on the alignment performance in continuation tasks.

3.2.3 A Review of Previous Research on Alignment Effects in the “Continuation Task”

From the above research introduction, we can see that many scholars have conducted a large number of empirical studies on alignment effects in the “continuation task” can promote language learning, and the researches are still in the progress in recent years, indicating that this second language learning theory has gradually entered a mature stage. These studies take the factors influencing alignment effects in the “continuation task” as the starting point, and demonstrate that the strength of alignment effects has a profound impact on the effect of promoting second language learning from different aspects, such as text genre, language input form, the characteristics of text itself (length, interestingness, difficulty, etc.), the interaction between learners and reading text, and the degree to which learners’ comprehension and output are closely combined. The research subject covers a wide range, including not only Chinese learners of English, but also foreign students learning Chinese, which verifies the applicability of the “continuation task” facilitation effect to a wide range of languages. In addition, questions in the test designed based on “continuation task” have begun to be applied in some provinces and cities, with the purpose of examining students’ foreign language competence more effectively. This theory of second language learning has also been applied to the field of translation learning.

However, previous studies do reveal weaknesses. First of all, it is difficult for the design of “continuation task” to coordinate multiple factors that affect the alignment effect, which in turn may affect the learning promotion effect. Wang (2012) once put forward several requirements for promoting learning by “continuation task”. For example, reading materials should be interesting, of moderate length and difficulty. In fact, the actual design of the continuation task is very complex and requires many factors to be considered, so if any of the requirements are not met or if the design is not appropriate, the learning promotion effect may be affected; Second, the research on the learning promotion effect of continuation tasks only stays in the stage of surface verification and case studies, and lacks long-term follow-up observation and replication research. The conclusion that continuation after reading can improve learners’ language learning efficiency and overall ability lacks sufficient reliability. Although some empirical studies have tracked the learning effects of learners, they only last for about a week, so more long-term empirical studies are needed; Third, as for alignment effects in the continuation task, whether learners really comprehend the vocabulary, lexical chunks and syntactic structure in the reading material and apply them creatively in the continuation, or just simply copy the

above, this needs to be further tested; Fourthly, whether continuation tasks can really stimulate students' imagination and creativity is still a controversial view. In the process of writing, students will be largely restricted by the content and ideas of the original reading text, and the space for free creation will be reduced, resulting in a lack of independent thinking and creativity. However, research on the effect of continuation tasks on the development of students' thinking skills is still relatively scarce, and more long-term empirical research is needed to prove the relationship between the two.

4. Research Prospects

Space for the development of the “continuation theory” and Implications from alignment effects for foreign language teaching will be provided in this part.

4.1 Space for the Development of the “Continuation Theory”

While the “continuation theory” is improving and becoming mature, there are still some problems that have not been studied in depth and for a long term, and there is still room for development. At present, “continuation” is mostly regarded as the activity of continuing others' words, but in this activity, we also creatively express our own thoughts, continue writing our own content. The continuation of others can be called “external continuation”, while the continuation of ourselves is called “internal continuation”, and the relationship between the two remains to be studied. The hypothesis of the learning promotion effect of the “continuation theory” still needs more long-term empirical research and teaching practice to test, but it opens up a new point for the study of language acquisition theory and opens the space for the further development of the theory.

4.2 Implications from Alignment Effects for Foreign Language Teaching

Wang mentioned in his speech at the 2018 “Foreign Language Education with Chinese Characteristics in the New Era Symposium” that the “continuation theory” breaks new ground based on the practice of foreign language education in China and an exploration of the localization of foreign language teaching theories, which provides new ideas and methods for foreign language teaching and teaching Chinese as a foreign language. The learning promotion effect of continuation tasks mainly comes from the alignment effect, which mainly comes from the close combination of comprehension and output (also the text and learner). This combination creates the need for communication. The alignment effect can strengthen learners' language representation, help learners apply vocabulary and grammar in reading text to their own continuation writing, and improve their capacity of language use. However, the strength of this effect is still affected by various factors.

Moreover, these findings of alignment effect have some implications for foreign language teaching. First, the design of tasks in foreign language teaching should follow the principle of close combination of comprehension and output to enhance learners' spontaneous alignment. Teachers should regulate the difficulty, length and subject matter of reading materials to be consistent with learners' foreign language level, background knowledge and target structure knowledge, so as to increase the chance of alignment output of target structure as a way to enhance the interaction between learners and text.

Alignment output can also be enhanced by highlighting the target structure (Xin, 2017) or by designing the storyline orientation. Alignment at the language level can reduce errors and improve the quality of learners' language use. Therefore, it is not advisable to separate comprehension and output tasks. Only by closely integrating listening, reading, speaking and writing, and to increase the intensity of alignment effect, can teaching efficiency be improved.

Second, foreign language teaching should enhance learners' conscious alignment. At present, there are many practices in foreign language teaching that are contrary to alignment. It is particularly necessary to raise students' awareness of conscious alignment in a designed way. In traditional intensive reading classes, teachers usually ask students to summarize the general idea of the text in their native language and complete related exercises, but these activities can easily cause alignment in the native language and amplify the interference of the native language. And if learners have to use a foreign language, they are more likely to give up alignment with the language structure of the text in order to describe the content of the text in a brief way, so this easily causes learners to develop the habit of avoiding alignment consciously. Therefore, teachers should foster students' awareness of conscious alignment, which is helpful to strengthen the alignment effect. For example, in the teaching of intensive reading, teachers can consider choosing reading materials with similar theme and genre to texts in the book with an easier language. Teachers can erase the ending of the reading material, ask students to continue writing after reading, remind them to use good sentence structures and new words in the reading material to further improve their ability of language use on the basis of digesting the intensive reading text (Wang, 2016).

5. Conclusion

As a method to facilitate foreign language learning method and second language acquisition theory, the "continuation task" is gradually coming to a mature stage. There is sufficient empirical support for its alignment effect in promoting language learning, but there are still some problems to be considered and solved. Such as, the coordinated design of the continuation task, the sustainability of the learning promotion effect, and the cultivation of students' thinking skills like imagination and creativity in creating their own work all need more long-term and effective empirical research to further prove the alignment effect in facilitating language learning. With the continuous development of the research, this theory will be gradually improved, and make positive contributions to foreign language teaching and learning and many other fields in our country.

If "continuation" is taken as the teaching guide and change our teaching thought, it will help to mobilize the positive factors in promoting learning, overcome the difficulties in language learning and solve language teaching problems. But, the efficiency of "continuation" in promoting learning need more long-term and in-depth empirical research to test. However, a new point for language acquisition theory have been developed, new space has been opened for the language teaching practice, and more effective ways to promote language learning are waiting for researchers to explore. Foreign language

teachers can develop new methods to promote learning effectively, so that foreign language teaching can reach a new height and help more and more learners to better master foreign language skills.

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