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Research on the Mediating Effect of IELTS Academic Writing Task 2 among Chinese EFL Learners

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Abstract

This study, based on mediation theory of Socio-cultural theory (SCT), carries out a research on IELTS academic writing Task 2 teaching among undergraduate students in the International Cooperation Program of Birmingham University, and compares the teaching effect between experimental group and control group. The 14-week intensive writing course is comprised of seven modules, each with a duration of 2 weeks (twelve periods). The control group continues with traditional instruction while a new teaching model, under the mediation effect of rules, intermediary tools and community, is implemented in experimental group who is required to embark on specific topics in depth, from off-class preparation concerning topic-related sources to in-class presentation, group discussion, peer evaluation and in-class writing (via paragraph continuation, essay continuation, etc.). When the course ends, all subjects are required to take part in the final immediately and the IELTS exam within three months. Data analyses show a significant difference in the final writing scores and IELTS writing scores between the two groups. Data also exhibits the significant positive correlation between students' in-class writing scores and final-exam scores, as well as the IELTS writing scores in experimental group. This study provides practical feasibility and basis for promoting mediation in teaching English writing.

Keywords

Sociocultural Theory, Mediation, Academic Writing, Contrastive Writing Continuation

1. Introduction

The rapid development of information and communication technology has brought

unprecedented changes and opportunities to the innovative teaching and research of foreign languages, and prompted corresponding changes in teaching concepts, methods and models (Zhang, 2018). Legions of educators and researchers suggest teachers' pedagogy should be timely adjusted to suit students' need and facilitate better learning effect. With the increasing frequency of international academic exchanges and cooperation, the traditional spoon-fed or cramming teaching model, which emphasizes constant injection of abstract concepts to students, has been seriously disconnected from the practical needs of society and cannot meet the requirements of the development of modern society (Yan, 2014). Some investigations have also shown that academic writing teaching has exposed problems such as students' lack of autonomy in learning, low enthusiasm and unsatisfactory teaching effect (Zhao, 2018). In view of this, the study reconstructs the teaching design of IELTS academic writing course under the guidance of mediation theory, fully integrates paragraph continuation, essay continuation, contrastive writing continuation and other writing techniques into the course to mediate students' learning effect to its maximum, and investigates and analyzes the teaching effect of the course. The present study contributes a useful reference for the teaching of English writing.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Mediation Theory of SCT

Mediation theory is one of the central notions of sociocultural theory (SCT) proposed by Vygotsky (Vygotsky, 1987). The introduction of this theory provides a new theoretical perspective and method for explaining the process and mechanism of second language acquisition.

According to Lantolf and Thorne (Lantolf & Throne, 2006), mediation theory refers to "the process through which humans deploy culturally constructed artefacts, concepts, and activities to regulate i.e. gain voluntary control over and transform the material world or their own, and each other's social and mental activity". Based on his interpretation, mediation is one of the biggest constructs and the central concept of SCT, and the auxiliary means by which human beings make connections with the social world. According to mediation theory, there are two major tools of mediation: physical tools and symbolic tools, with physical tools outwardly directed and symbolic tools inwardly directed. Language is the most pervasive and powerful symbolic tool and language learning is a socially mediated process in which there are three kinds of mediation. They are other-mediation, self-mediation and the mediation of cultural artifacts (James, 2003). Other-mediation refers to the mediation between specialists and novices, and the mediation in between of peers with a higher language proficiency and lower one. Therefore, great importance needs to be placed on how to supply students with appropriate scaffoldings and supports. Self-mediation concerns the speech to oneself for communication, self-guidance and self-regulation of behavior. In second language acquisition, according to mediation theory, individuals can develop their

cognitive function, improve their capability of using the language and internalize it by speaking to themselves.

2.2. IELTS Academic Writing

Writing for academic purposes is not only an essential skill in English learning, but also an important means of developing critical thinking. However, in China, the teaching of L2 English writing has been limited to the classroom, and the writing task focuses on the training of language skills, which is disconnected from the practical needs of society. After entering the workplace, due to the lack of practical writing ability, students' English writing exhibits some problems like unclear logic, insufficient argumentation, insufficient persuasiveness, to name just a few. In 2004, the Fourth International Conference on English Teaching in China pointed out that a survey of 52 colleges and universities in China found that more than half of the students' academic English writing articles were unreasonably structured and illogical, and their writing scores were low in various English exams (You, 2004). In recent years, an ever-increasing number of Chinese students choose to study abroad. An essential prerequisite for their entry is to provide an English achievement score according to the English language proficiency requirements. The International English language Testing System (IELTS) is one of specific testing systems that are designed to assess the English language ability of candidates who are non-English speakers from four aspects: listening, reading, writing and speaking. The reliability and validity of IELTS are widely accepted by most of the English speaking countries. According to the results from test taker performance in 2019, Chinese students had a rather lower average score in writing sub-test (5.5), ranking the five lowest among the top 40 surveyed nationalities (IELTS, 2019). Because of this, the focus of the present study is to examine the mediating effect on language learning through an extensive IELTS academic writing course.

In recent years, many domestic experts and scholars have conducted a multi-dimensional discussion on the research and teaching of academic English writing, especially how to effectively cultivate writing ability in foreign language classroom teaching environment. Relevant studies have found that compared with the teaching model in which teachers explain knowledge points in isolation, cooperative inquiry teaching based on mediation theory provides students with participation and practice opportunities, which is more conducive to the development of students' writing ability (Zhang & Sun, 2014; Yang, 2015). At present, the empirical research on academic English writing teaching mainly focuses on the construction of writing classroom via the driving force of reading to writing (Xiong & Yin, 2009), the construction of a peer feedback system model for L2 writing (Yu & Lee, 2013), influencing factors of college students' deviant behavior in L2 writing peer feedback (Yu & Hu, 2017), teaching practice of academic English papers for English majors from the perspective of mediation theory (Zhu & Yuan, 2018), the mediating process of college students' development in

blended teaching of creative writing (Li & Zhao, 2021). However, it is not difficult to find that there are almost no empirical studies on IELTS academic writing under the mediating effect, and few existing studies discuss how to construct a feasible teaching paradigm to suit for IELTS intensive academic writing course.

In summary, scholars at home and abroad have carried out some theoretical and empirical exploration on academic English writing under the framework of mediation theory, but further empirical research is still needed to explore the specific process of IELTS academic English writing teaching under the moderating effect and its effect on promoting learning. Based on this, the present study, guided by the mediation theory of SCT, designs the teaching framework of intensive writing course, and carries out the teaching practice. Through quantitative analysis, the study seeks to investigate the effects of mediation in academic English writing teaching. Specifically, the following research questions (RQs) are formulated:

RQ1: Does medication theory have a positive effect on IELTS academic writing?

RQ2: If it does, then is the learning effect sustainable?

3. Study Design

This study selected students in Birmingham University Project of International Cooperation Program at a renowned university in central China. Finally altogether 48 students were involved in this study, comprising 24 students as the experimental group and 24 students as the control group.

Prior to class grouping, a placement test, consisting of sentence making, proofreading and essay writing, was administered in measuring students' language proficiency level, with a total score of 100 points. The test paper was assessed by two experienced and qualified language teachers working at the university, one of whom is a Chinese teacher of eight years' teaching experience and the other is a foreign teacher from New Zealand, also acting as an IELTS writing and speaking examiner in China. Then, one-way ANOVA was performed to find out whether the observed differences in group means were statistically significant. The result was $S = 7.254$, $F = 0.993$, $P = 0.542 > 0.05$, suggesting the English proficiency levels between two groups had indeed no significant difference. And in order to exclude irrelevant variables, the ratio of males to females in each class was one to one.

This intensive writing course is a compulsory course for undergraduates in the International Cooperation program of a key university in central China. The teaching duration is 14 weeks, totaling 84 class periods. The course is categorized into seven modules and topics: education, government, environment, culture, crime, media, and technology. Each module lasts for two weeks (12 periods). The control group continues with traditional instruction while the teaching in experimental group is carefully reconstructed under mediation theory to carry out a variety of activities such as interaction between teachers and stu-

dents, peer evaluation and writing continuation.

Previous studies have shown that the key to the success of teaching lies in teachers and students, especially the relevant guidance and training for students (Sun, Tang, & Cai, 2017). In view of this, one week before the beginning of the course, the course teacher organizes an orientation meeting to elaborate the following items: first, introduce the teaching objectives, curriculum system, curriculum design, teaching model, etc. to help students reduce their worries and anxiety of this course. Also the course assessment needs to be elaborated clearly in advance so as to let students understand their active participation in class discussion and oral presentation are closely related with their course assessment, which would arouse students' impetus in class discussion and participation. Second, divide the 24 students in the experimental group into heterogeneous teams, with 4 students in each, so that students with different personalities and different language proficiencies could complement and promote each other.

Since the design of the seven modules follows the same pattern (See details in Figure 1), the present study only exhibits the detailed instructional design of the first module, without repeating the specific content of each.

Before the commencement of module one, an independent assignment is given in advance to students, requiring them to search for relevant vocabulary, expressions and background materials related to the topic of module one 'education', mainly from CNN, China Daily and BBC.

In the first class (period 1 and 2), under teacher's mediation, students conduct class discussion with their teammates, gathering the information they searched and sorting it into different categories. Through students' discussion, the course teacher can have a better idea on how well students' assignment is. Teacher can sometimes join the team discussion, especially when the teacher signals students' low enthusiasm in discussion. It should be noted here that teacher's support is particularly important at the very beginning of the course in case students are not familiar with the curriculum model. Thus, it is of great need for the teacher to provide a scaffold to students as to how to hold an effective discussion, how to group relevant information in a clearer and more logical way, etc. After that, one
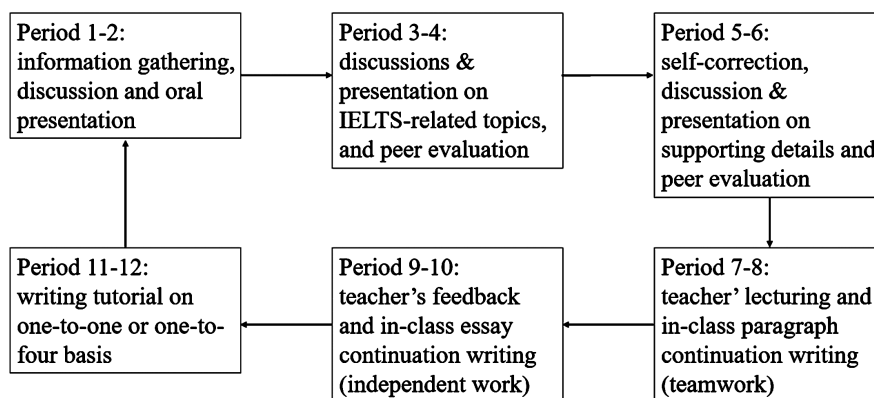

Figure 1. Teaching design of module one.

representative from each team needs to come to the podium and give an oral presentation, sharing and exchanging results. At the end of the sharing session, the teacher needs to give feedback on students' performance, summarize the information during the sharing session and upload it to the class QQ group after class for students' reference.

In the second class (period 3 and 4), the teacher demonstrates education-related sub-topics and organizes students to hold team discussions on bilateral views of each topic. After that, one representative from each team needs to come to the podium and give an oral presentation on their discussion results. In response, peers from other teams and teacher need to give prompt feedback mainly in terms of whether the logic of viewpoints conform to English writing specification and whether there is overlapping in between. Examples of the sub-topics are listed below:

1) Some people think that parents should teach children how to be good members of society. Others, however, believe that school is the place to learn this.

2) Some people believe that it is beneficial for children to spend time on TV, video and PC games, while some hold the opposite view.

3) Many people use distance-learning programs (study material post, TV, Internet, etc.) to study at home, but some people think that it cannot bring the benefit as much as attending college or university.

4) Schools should concentrate on teaching students the academic subjects that will be useful for their future careers. Subjects such as music and sports are not useful.

5) In some countries some school leavers are choosing to work or travel for a period of time between finishing high school and attending university. Discuss the advantages and disadvantages for school leavers' decision.

6) Some countries have schools that focus only on the males or females. Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of unisexual schools.

In the third class (period 5 and 6), students are required to work in teams to make appropriate corrections to the viewpoints discussed in the foregoing periods in accordance with the feedback from peers and teacher. Discussion proceeds and team members embark on brainstorming and providing supporting details for each viewpoint. After that, one representative from each team needs to come to the podium and give an oral presentation on their discussion results. Peers and teachers give timely feedback thereafter. In this phase, teacher is especially pivotal in playing mediating roles to make sure each viewpoint is well grounded and foster students develop a sense of cohesion and coherence as well as diversifying writing techniques in developing an argument.

In the fourth class (period 7 and 8), a deductive teaching method is adopted initially. Through lecture, the teacher shows students how to write an effective paragraph, how to be skillful in incorporating different writing techniques (i.e. comparison and contrast, cause and effect, classification, exemplification) in

forming a persuasive paragraph, and how to employ different cohesive words and/or phrases (i.e. "… is a case in point" showing exemplification, "something pales in comparison" showing comparison and contrast, "take … as an example" showing exemplification, "which can be attributed to …" showing cause and effect) to present arguments. After that, the teacher assigns the task of paragraph continuation to each team, with a topic sentence provided as the beginning of a paragraph. Team members need to add supporting details one by one to make the paragraph coherent, logical and persuasive. Then the teacher mediates teams to exchange their follow-up work with each other, after which a mediating role of each team exerts its significance in peer evaluation on pros and cons concerning four main aspects, namely, grammatical range and accuracy, lexical range, task response, and coherence. Prior to the end of the class, each team needs to hand in the final version of their paragraph continuation.

In the fifth class (period 9 and 10), the teacher comments and summarizes the pros and cons of the paragraph continuation assignment of last lesson. Then a piece of writing with a question, an introductory paragraph and the first body paragraph is provided to each student to begin an independent in-class essay continuation. Students need to complete the writing composition by adding the rest body paragraphs and a conclusion within the designated timing. Their writing continuation thus is looked over be the teacher mainly from four criteria:

1) It fully addresses all parts of the task and presents a fully developed position in answer to the question with relevant, fully extended and well supported ideas.

2) It sequences information and ideas logically, manages all aspects of cohesion well and uses paragraphing sufficiently and appropriately.

3) It uses a wide range of vocabulary fluently and flexibly to convey precise meanings, uses uncommon lexical items and produces rare errors in spelling and/or word formation.

4) It uses a wide range of structures with full flexibility and accuracy (rare minor errors accept when occurring only as 'slips').

In the sixth class (period 11 and 12), a writing tutorial is conducted, during which the teacher explains the typical problems on the one-to-one basis or the common problems on one-to-four basis (usually within the team of four members). In this phase, teacher's mediating role functions greatly in helping students to realize their own writing weak points and to seek ways out. After that, the teacher showcases the high-quality writing pieces by IELTS examiners and previous students. While appreciating those samples, the teacher advocates students to learn and imitate the techniques and styles with the purpose to internalize them into their own. After class, students need to embark on draft 2 writing on their own and submit it via the Internet. This process facilitates students to re-think about their writing and find ways to polish the piece. Accordingly, students' writing ability would enhance significantly. Besides, the teacher, by doing so, can get to know whether students' writing ability has improved and

whether there is room for adjustment or improvement in writing instruction.

After two weeks' instruction, module two teaching begins in the similar course design of module one.

4. Data Collection

In order to ensure the high reliability in students' performance, the same closed-book test paper was administered to both experimental and control groups at the end of this course. All participants were required to write an IELTS-related essay within 50 minutes. The same as the foregoing mentioned placement test, the final exam paper, with a total score of 100 points, was assessed by the two experienced teachers from four aspects: task response, coherence and cohesion, lexical range and grammatical range and accuracy. Since all students in the present study were from the International Cooperation Program of Birmingham University, they need to submit the IELTS exam performance before the deadline specified by Birmingham University. That is to say, after the end of the extensive writing course, all students need take part in IELTS exam within three months. This makes it possible and convenient for the present study to examine the sustainability of teaching effects and mediating effects among experimental subjects. Since IELTS band score was presented in 9 scales with 1 being the modest user and 9 being the expert user, in order to facilitate data analysis, this study converted the 9-scale marking score into the 100-point system for convenience. All of the data were processed by the software for statistics—SPSS 22.0.

5. Results and Discussion

In order to examine the learning effect of mediation on students' writing performance, this study uses SPSS 22.0 to conduct a correlation analysis on the control and the experimental group. As can be seen from Table 1, it presents the means, together with standard deviation, obtained from experimental group and control group for judging their performance in the final writing exam.

The statistical table above clearly shows the average final scores of experimental and control group: 78.325 and 65.125 respectively. The results of paired sample t-test show that based on the variable of the final exam performance from experimental group paired with that from control group, the t-value is 11.755

Table 1. Results of paired-samples t-tests of final writing exam performance by experimental group (A) and control group (B).

Variable	Mean ± standard deviation			t	P	Cohen's d
	Variable 1	Variable 2	Pairing difference (pairing 1-Pairing 2)			
A paired with B	78.325 ± 6.986	65.125 ± 7.575	13.2 ± 0.589	11.755	0.000***	2.4

NB: ***$P < 0.01$.

and the P value of significance is 0.000***, which shows there is a significant difference between the final scores of the two groups. The Cohen's d value is 2.4, which also manifests a very large difference in exam performance between the two groups.

As mentioned before, the same final paper was administered to the control and experimental groups to ensure the validity in data analysis. Two experienced teachers marked the exam papers separately. If the discrepancy was less than 5 points, then an average score was taken as student's final score. Otherwise, the two teachers would proceed a further discussion and re-mark it to determine the final score. Since the marking criteria are based on four aspects which can fully and comprehensively reflect students' writing logic and skills, the scores possess a high reliability in data analysis. From the findings, it is safe to arrive at the conclusion that, to some extent, the significant difference in the scores of the two groups reflects that compared with the traditional teaching model, the IELTS writing teaching under the mediation of teachers, peers and self is more conducive to the improvement of students' writing competence. This research finding is in consistency with the mediation theory mentioned before (Lantolf & Throne, 2006).

In view of the significant difference between the final scores of the experimental group and the control group, this study further conducts Pearson analysis on in-class writing scores, final scores and IELTS scores of the experimental group to examine closely on mediation effect to learning. The results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2 exhibits the significant positive correlation between students' in-class writing scores and final-exam scores, as well as the IELTS writing scores. This means that the extensive IELTS writing teaching under the guidance of mediation theory can help students obviously improve their daily writing scores, and in turn, highly predict the final exam scores and IELTS writing scores. To simply put, this tentative IELTS writing teaching under the mediation theory allows the teacher to fully exert the role of other-mediation to organize various classroom activities, i.e. information-gathering, oral presentation, group discussion, peer evaluation and writing tutorials. It also makes it possible for the occurrence of other-mediation among students within each team and in between. In this case, students with a higher language proficiency can help those with a lower proficiency to

Table 2. The correlation matrix of in-class writing scores, final scores and IELTS scores of the experimental group.

Experimental Group	Final-exam performance	In-class writing performance	IELTS writing performance
Final-exam performance	1 (0.000***)	0.797 (0.000***)	0.787 (0.000***)
In-class writing performance	0.797 (0.000***)	1 (0.000***)	0.84 (0.000***)
IELTS writing performance	0.787 (0.000***)	0.84 (0.000***)	1 (0.000***)

NB: ***$P < 0.01$.

realize self-mediation and finally internalize knowledge and promote the advancement of writing ability.

In order to further test whether the positive effect of mediation on the promotion of writing ability is sustainable or not, three months after the end of the course, this study collected students' IELTS writing scores on the basis of students' consent, and conducted paired sample t-test between the experimental group and the control group.

The results are shown in Table 3. It is manifest that the average IELTS writing scores of experimental and control group are 78.325 and 65.125 respectively (transformed from band 9 to 100 points), and the t-value of the two groups of students is 7.669, and P is less than 0.001, which shows there is a significant difference between the IELTS writing performance of the two groups. The Cohen's d value is 1.566, which also manifests a very large difference in the IELTS writing performance between the two groups. These results, by and large, reflect that the mediating effect from peers and teachers applied to the extensive writing course exerts a long-term effect on students' writing ability and in return, it further verifies the feasibility and applicability value of mediation theory in second language writing teaching.

Table 3. Results of paired-samples t-tests of IELTS writing performance by experimental group (A) and control group (B).

Variable	Mean ± standard deviation			t	P	Cohen's d
	Variable 1	Variable 2	Pairing difference (pairing 1-Pairing 2)			
A paired with B	70.531 ± 6.009	62.438 ± 5.489	8.094 ± 0.519	7.669	0.000***	1.566

NB: ***P < 0.01.

In the process of second language learning, learners will inevitably encounter a variety of learning difficulties, such as how to improve learning efficiency, how to modify learning methods, how to quickly enhance writing skills and so on. Through the constant mediation from teachers, peers, language materials and students themselves, students can adjust and mediate their own writing diction, structure, logic, styles etc. and finally promote the internalization of knowledge. This kind of internalization produces a long-term influence on students' writing competence and promotes further individual mediation and advance of writing ability.

6. Conclusion

This study is a tentative probe on the application of mediation theory to academic writing teaching. The results of present study confirm that through other-mediation, self-mediation and the mediation of cultural artifacts, language

learners can finally realize the internalization of knowledge and this kind of internalization exhibits a preferable learning effect compared with that under the traditional instruction and with a long-term effect to boost writing ability. Therefore, it is highly suggested in language teaching, great attention needs to be put into providing students with appropriate scaffoldings and mediation supports. Nevertheless, the present study leaves much to be desired. It is hoped that this paper can devote its pygmy effort to and provide some suggestive implications and pedagogical reference for the application of mediation theory in current IELTS academic writing teaching.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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