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English Continuation Writing in China's Senior High Schools: A Systematic Review of Empirical Research

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ABSTRACT

English continuation writing has gained prominence in China's senior high school English education as a pedagogical and assessment tool, following its incorporation into the national *gaokao*. This systematic review addresses the limited understanding of continuation writing by critically examining empirical studies published between 2016 and 2024, focusing on four key dimensions: (1) main focus areas and findings, (2) research designs and methodologies, (3) pedagogical approaches and their impacts, and (4) challenges and limitations faced by students and teachers. A PRISMA-based methodology was employed, reviewing 24 peer-reviewed studies retrieved from Web of Science, Scopus, and Google Scholar. Findings reveal that cognitive and affective factors, including anxiety, cognitive load, and imagination, significantly influence student engagement and writing performance. Pedagogical strategies such as multimodal composing, blended learning, and production-oriented approaches enhance accuracy, coherence, and engagement but face challenges like uneven cohesion improvement and overemphasis on non-textual elements. Quantitative correlational and quasi-experimental designs dominate the literature, while qualitative insights remain underexplored. Teachers grapple with insufficient training, heavy workloads, and resource constraints, while students face challenges like limited vocabulary knowledge, high cognitive demands, and writing anxiety. This review highlights the need for balanced, context-sensitive instructional strategies and greater institutional support. It underscores the importance of diversifying research methodologies and advocates for longitudinal and qualitative studies to deepen understanding.

Keywords: English Language Education; English Writing; Continuation Writing; Senior High Schools; China

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1. Introduction

The English language holds a vital place in Mainland China's education system and serves as a cornerstone of students' academic development and a gateway to opportunities in an increasingly globalized world. Within this context, senior high school education stands out as a critical stage where English proficiency becomes particularly significant. This is due to its central role in preparing students for the *gaokao*—China's highly competitive national college entrance examination—and equipping them with the linguistic competencies necessary for higher education and international communication^[1, 2]. As such, English language education (ELE) at the senior high school level has gained heightened attention, aligning with broader national strategies to cultivate globally competitive talent and promote educational excellence^[3, 4].

In recent years, China's senior high school English education has undergone significant reforms aimed at improving teaching effectiveness and aligning assessment with instruction^[5, 6], with the introduction of policies such as the *General Senior High School English Curriculum Standards (2017 Edition)*^[7] and *China's Education Modernization 2035*^[8]. One notable trend in these reforms is the growing emphasis on integrating assessment with pedagogy^[9, 10], which enables a more comprehensive evaluation of students' English proficiency while fostering skill development. Against this backdrop, a major development has been the introduction of continuation writing tasks into the national *gaokao*. Traditionally, the English composition section of the *gaokao* required students to write a short essay based on a given topic, whereas continuation writing marks a substantial shift by requiring students to continue a story based on a given context, thereby testing their narrative coherence, creativity, linguistic accuracy, and ability to integrate reading comprehension with writing^[11–13].

Despite its increasing prominence, English continuation writing remains a relatively new and underexplored area in the academic literature. While practitioners have begun incorporating this task into classroom practice, there is still a lack of systematic understanding of its pedagogical, theoretical, and methodological dimensions^[14, 15]. This gap limits the ability of educators and policymakers to design effective instructional strategies and assessment frameworks that support student development in continuation writing. Thus, the

purpose of this systematic review is to address this gap by critically examining the existing body of research on English continuation writing in China's senior high schools. Specifically, the review aims to address the following questions: (1) What are the main focus areas and research findings in the literature? (2) What research designs and methodologies have been employed? (3) What pedagogical approaches have been explored, and what is their impact on student outcomes? (4) What challenges and limitations do students and teachers face in developing English continuation writing proficiency?

Each of these areas carries significant importance: understanding the focus areas and findings can offer insights into the priorities and achievements of previous studies and shed light on the broader academic discourse surrounding continuation writing; analyzing the research designs and methodologies can reveal the rigor and innovation of the studies and provide a foundation for improving future research practices; examining pedagogical approaches can offer practical value for educators seeking to optimize teaching strategies and enhance student learning outcomes; identifying challenges and research gaps not only highlights unresolved issues but also paves the way for targeted and impactful future investigations^[16]. By addressing these dimensions, this review aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the field and contribute to the development of a robust evidence base for English continuation writing in China's senior high school context.

2. Literature Review

English continuation writing refers to a type of writing task that requires students to extend a given narrative by continuing the story in a coherent, contextually appropriate, and creative manner^[14]. This task challenges students to build upon the provided storyline, characters, and settings while maintaining narrative consistency, logical progression, and linguistic accuracy^[17]. In China, English continuation writing has emerged as a significant pedagogical and assessment tool, particularly with its incorporation into the *gaokao*. Initially trialed in 2016 in a limited number of provinces^[18], English continuation writing has only recently been widely adopted and practiced in the *gaokao* nationwide. Traditionally, English writing in the *gaokao* focused on students producing a composition based on a given prompt, as mentioned. While

this format was effective in assessing grammatical accuracy and general writing skills, it often limited students' creativity and ability to construct nuanced, contextually appropriate narratives^[17, 19]. Recognizing the need for more comprehensive assessments that integrate language proficiency with higher-order thinking skills^[20], continuation writing was introduced as a core task in the English section of the *gaokao*.

Continuation writing tasks require students to extend or complete a partially written narrative, maintaining consistency in style, theme, and coherence^[21]. This format challenges students to engage deeply with the given text, understand its implicit and explicit ideas, and produce contextually appropriate content that aligns with the original narrative^[13, 22]. The introduction of continuation writing reflects broader educational reforms emphasizing competency-based learning, critical thinking, and creativity^[14], as also outlined in the *General Senior High School English Curriculum Standards (2017 Edition)*^[7]. This shift highlights a growing alignment between instruction and assessment, wherein writing tasks not only evaluate language skills but also foster skills essential for real-world communication.

The theoretical foundation of continuation writing lies at the intersection of cognitive, linguistic, and socio-constructivist theories. From a cognitive perspective, continuation writing engages multiple cognitive processes, including comprehension, analysis, synthesis, and production. Students must decode the original text, infer its intended meaning, and creatively reconstruct it while adhering to linguistic norms and narrative logic^[23]. These processes align with Bloom's^[24] taxonomy, particularly in the domains of analysis, application, and creation, which underpin critical and creative thinking. Linguistically, continuation writing is closely tied to intertextuality and discourse theory. Intertextuality emphasizes the relational nature of texts, wherein the meaning of a new text is influenced by its connection to an existing one^[25]. In continuation writing, students must construct meaning through their interpretation of the given text to ensure that their addition harmonizes with the original^[12]. Discourse theory, proposed by Laclau and Mouffe^[26], further highlights the importance of coherence, cohesion, and pragmatic appropriateness in effective communication, all of which are central to the continuation writing tasks. Moreover, socio-constructivist theories, particularly Vygotsky's^[27] concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), also pro-

vide a framework for understanding the instructional potential of continuation writing. This task challenges students within their ZPD by requiring them to draw on prior knowledge while extending their skills through scaffolded practice and feedback^[21].

After several years of implementation in China's *gaokao*, extensive theoretical literature has examined the feasibility of this type of writing assessment and the teaching of continuation writing for examination preparation. This is exemplified in Yu and Huang's^[28] latest work, which primarily emphasizes the pedagogical strategies that align with the dual objectives of linguistic proficiency and higher-order cognitive skills development. By summarizing previous works, Yu and Huang^[28] outline how continuation writing tasks can be designed to encourage critical thinking, creativity, and cultural awareness. It also offers practical insights into scaffolding techniques, such as breaking down narrative components and using peer review to enhance students' writing processes. Moreover, Yu and Huang^[28] address common challenges in teaching continuation writing, including students' difficulty in maintaining coherence and alignment with given prompts, as well as the time-intensive nature of providing individualized feedback. As such, they propose innovative solutions, such as leveraging technology for automated formative assessment and incorporating collaborative writing exercises to foster peer learning.

However, despite the growing body of theoretical perspectives, there remains a significant gap in the empirical literature that examines the practical implementation of English continuation writing in real classroom settings^[15, 21]. Understanding how this approach functions in practice—its impact on students' language proficiency, cognitive skills, and overall performance—is essential for bridging theory and implementation. This highlights the need for a systematic review of empirical research on English continuation writing to provide evidence-based insights into its effectiveness and inform future instructional strategies.

3. Methodology

The systematic review adhered to the guidelines outlined in the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework, which involved a four-step process: identification, screening, eligibility assess-

ment, and inclusion. These steps are illustrated in **Figure 1**. During the identification phase, relevant documents for the review were identified. Three primary databases—Web of Science (WoS), Scopus, and Google Scholar—were selected to ensure a comprehensive search and retrieval of eligible studies. These databases were chosen due to their extensive coverage of academic literature and relevance to the research topic^[29]. Google Scholar was specifically utilized to address the limitations of full-text searches in WoS and Scopus, and its broader search capabilities allowed for the identification of relevant texts that were not accessible through the other two databases^[30].

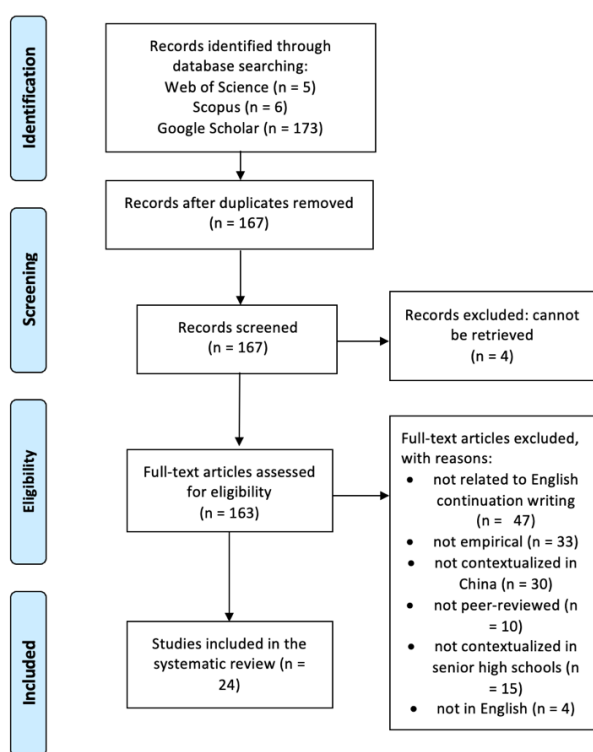


Figure 1. A PRISMA flow diagram for the review.

The review focused on literature published between 2016 and 2024, as English continuation writing was first introduced in China’s *gaokao* in 2016 (18), which marks the beginning of scholarly research on the topic, as mentioned. The search string employed was: (“*senior high school*” OR “*high school*” OR “*secondary school*” OR “*senior secondary school*”) AND (“*China*” OR “*Chinese*”) AND (“*English continuation writing*” OR “*continuation writing*”). This string covered the most important terms and counterparts relevant

for the review. For WoS and Scopus, this string was applied within the categories of article titles, abstracts, and keywords, while in Google Scholar, a general full-text search was conducted using the same string to capture a broader range of relevant studies. Consequently, 5, 6, and 173 records were retrieved from WoS, Scopus, and Google Scholar, respectively.

With duplicates (n = 6) excluded from the initially identified articles and records (n = 4) excluded due to being irretrievable, the remaining records (n = 163) were screened based on their full texts. The inclusion criteria were as follows: the articles must report empirical research, have a primary focus on English continuation writing, be set in the context of Chinese senior high schools, and be published as peer-reviewed articles in English. The exclusion criteria mirrored the inclusion criteria. As a result, 47 records were removed because English continuation writing was not the principal focus; 33 articles were excluded for not reporting any empirical data; 30 records were excluded for being conducted in other social contexts; 15 records were removed for being contextualized within educational levels outside senior high schools; 10 records were excluded due to being non-peer-reviewed as conference presentations, preprints, or theses; and 4 records were excluded because they were not presented in English.

The quality of the remaining articles (n = 24) was then assessed based on two criteria: whether a particular study adequately addressed the research questions and whether the presented evidence was trustworthy given the research methodology, results, and conclusions. A panel of three expert researchers in the field of ELE reviewed these articles and provided a yes or no response for each criterion. The Fleiss Kappa values for inter-rater reliability were 0.92 and 0.87, respectively, indicating a high level of agreement among the reviewers and confirming the rigor of the quality appraisal process for the selected articles. These articles were compiled within Endnote and were then analyzed thematically, in line with the research objectives of understanding the main focus areas and research findings in the literature, the research designs and methodologies employed, the pedagogical approaches explored and their impact on student outcomes, and the challenges and limitations identified in the studies.

4. Results

Following the template provided by Riley-Brown^[31], a matrix summarizing the research purposes, designs, and findings of the selected articles is presented in **Appendix A**. This matrix serves as a structured overview of the systematic review, which allows readers to quickly grasp the scope, methodologies, and outcomes of each study included in the review. All the studies included in this review were conducted between 2020 and the present, aligning with the timeline during which English continuation writing gained popularity following its inclusion in the *gaokao*^[15]. A more detailed analysis of the literature is presented below, aligned with the objectives of this review.

4.1. Research Question 1: Areas of Research Interest and Principal Findings

Research on English continuation writing in China has developed into a multifaceted field. Principally, the cognitive and affective dimensions of continuation writing have been widely explored, focusing on factors such as cognitive load, anxiety, imagination, and feedback-seeking behavior. Wang et al.^[32] demonstrated that cognitive load positively influenced writing anxiety, which in turn mediated its impact on writing performance. Zhu et al.^[33] identified distinct enjoyment and anxiety profiles in integrated reading-writing tasks, with students' imaginative capacity predicting their profile membership. Cheong et al.^[34] highlighted that reproductive imagination contributed to improved writing performance, particularly among female students. Similarly, Zhan et al.^[35] examined feedback-seeking behavior and found that its mediation effects varied across achievement levels, with feedback monitoring and inquiry showing divergent results for mid- and high-achieving students. Zhu et al.^[33] further emphasized that linguistic competence predicted writing achievement and ideal L2 writing selves, with behavioral engagement mediating this relationship.

Pedagogical approaches have played a critical role in advancing continuation writing outcomes. Multimodal interventions were particularly effective in improving performance and engagement. Cai and Huang^[36] reported that text-plus-video modalities enhanced writing accuracy and cohesion, while

text-plus-picture presentations improved situational model alignment. Tian and Deng^[37] found that incorporating multimodal elements significantly amplified student engagement across cognitive, affective, behavioral, and social dimensions, although excessive focus on graphic elements occasionally undermined narrative quality. Blended learning approaches also proved impactful; Zeng et al.^[38] demonstrated that blended learning improved coherence in continuation writing, though its effect on cohesion was limited. Production-oriented and task-based instruction methods were shown to enhance performance, as noted by Peng and Zhang^[39], while Wang et al.^[32] observed improvements in both writing proficiency and positive attitudes toward English learning. Technology-assisted approaches such as the integration of ChatGPT, investigated by Wang^[40], revealed that although it did not significantly outperform traditional instruction, it was appreciated for its technological benefits. Bao^[41] contributed to instructional models by developing a narrative-based framework focusing on theme identification, structure, content planning, and creative expression.

Task complexity, textual features, and writing quality emerged as another significant research focus. Liu^[42] found that task complexity reduced lexical complexity and that students perceived continuation writing as more challenging than traditional tasks. However, Tu et al.^[43] found that students engaged in continuation writing achieved better retention of word meanings and usage while engaging in deeper lexical processing than those receiving regular writing instruction. Shi et al.^[44] demonstrated that prompt types significantly influenced writing scores, syntactic complexity, cohesion, and source-use features. Additionally, error patterns were analyzed by Liu^[42], who found that verb tense errors were most common but decreased as students progressed, while syntactical errors became more prominent in complex tasks. He and Chen^[45] examined textual predictors of writing quality, identifying fluency, grammatical accuracy, and lexical complexity as key indicators. They developed a predictive model showing that writing scores were influenced by word count, accuracy, and the ease of constructing mental images. Chen^[46] further emphasized the role of fine-grained syntactic complexity indices in predicting writing proficiency. Teng^[47] also highlighted that continuation writing tasks improved the quality of content, structure, and language use.

Teacher and student perspectives provide further insights into the practical implementation of continuation writing. Fang^[48] explored feedback practices and reported that students received more teacher feedback during classroom instruction but desired greater peer assistance. Teachers' challenges were identified by Shi and Deocampo^[49], who highlighted issues such as students' insufficient vocabulary and grammar knowledge, heavy teaching workloads, inadequate training, and a lack of teaching materials. Student perceptions were also investigated, with Liu^[50] noting that while students found continuation writing tasks difficult, they appreciated the value in developing their skills. Zhu and Duan^[51] explored situational model alignment, revealing the role of the pan-indexicality model in decoding linguistic signs to construct a coherent continuation narrative.

The findings across these studies provide a comprehensive understanding of English continuation writing in China's senior high schools. Cognitive and affective factors such as anxiety, imagination, and feedback influence performance and engagement, while pedagogical interventions, including multimodal and blended learning approaches, enhance writing accuracy, coherence, and attitudes. Task complexity and textual features play a critical role in shaping writing quality, while continuation writing tasks support vocabulary acquisition and deeper lexical processing. Teacher challenges and student perspectives highlight practical barriers and opportunities for improving instructional practices. Collectively, these studies underscore the pedagogical potential of English continuation writing, offering valuable insights into its implementation while identifying areas for further research and development.

4.2. Research Question 2: Research Designs and Methodologies

The research designs employed in previous studies on English continuation writing in China demonstrate a variety of methodological approaches, reflecting the complexity of this emerging research area. Quantitative research with correlational designs has been widely utilized, particularly for examining relationships between variables and identifying predictors of writing quality. Studies such as those by Wang et al.^[32], Zhu and Duan^[51], and Cheong et al.^[34] employed correlational designs to investigate factors such as cognitive load, ideal L2 writing selves, and imagination on

writing performance. Additionally, quasi-experimental designs were frequently adopted to test the effectiveness of instructional interventions and assess student outcomes, as demonstrated in Teng^[47] and Wang^[40]. These studies provided robust statistical evidence on the impacts of specific teaching approaches, multimodal elements, and technology integration on students' writing proficiency and engagement. Qualitative research, while less common, offered in-depth insights into student and teacher experiences, challenges, and processes. Case study approaches, such as those employed by Zhu and Duan^[51] and Shi and Deocampo^[49], explored situational alignment in writing tasks and the challenges faced by teachers. These studies revealed nuanced aspects of continuation writing that are often difficult to capture quantitatively, such as cognitive processes, alignment strategies, and the practical difficulties encountered in teaching. Effectively combining the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative approaches, mixed-methods research has gained prominence in recent studies. Studies such as Tu et al.^[43], Cai and Huang^[36], and Tian and Deng^[37] adopted sequential mixed-methods designs, incorporating quasi-experiments with interviews or case studies. This approach allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the learning processes, intervention effects, and student perceptions.

4.3. Research Question 3: Pedagogical Approaches Used in Writing Instruction

The reviewed studies explored a range of pedagogical approaches to English continuation writing in Chinese senior high schools, systematically highlighting their diverse impacts on student outcomes. These approaches included input enhancement, multimodal composing, the production-oriented approach, blended learning, feedback strategies, and task complexity considerations.

Input enhancement and genre-based approaches received significant attention for their effects on writing performance. Meng and Yin^[52] reported that input enhancement significantly improved accuracy but had no discernible effect on complexity or fluency. In contrast, the genre-based approach positively influenced all three dimensions of writing performance, suggesting a broader pedagogical benefit. Multimodal composing, involving the integration of text with other media such as videos and pictures, emerged as another innovative strategy. Studies by Cai and Huang^[36] and Tian

and Deng^[37] demonstrated that text-plus-video and text-plus-picture modalities enhanced writing accuracy, cohesion, and student engagement. However, an excessive focus on graphic elements sometimes detracted from narrative quality, indicating the need for a balanced application of multimodal approaches.

The production-oriented approach also yielded promising results. Peng and Zhang^[39] found that this approach improved students' writing performance more effectively than traditional methods. By emphasizing practical, contextualized language production aligned with real-life communication needs, this method fostered a more functional application of language skills. Blended learning environments were explored for their potential to improve coherence in student writing. Zeng and Zhang^[38] noted that blended learning facilitated more structured writing processes, though its impact on cohesion remained limited, pointing to a need for targeted interventions to address this aspect. Feedback strategies, particularly those incorporating teacher and peer feedback, played a crucial role in writing instruction. Fang^[48] highlighted that while teacher feedback dominated classroom practice, students expressed a desire for more peer support, which fostered a collaborative learning environment. Additionally, Wang^[40] examined the integration of ChatGPT with teacher feedback, which led to moderate improvements in writing proficiency and positive perceptions of technology-assisted learning. Finally, task complexity significantly influenced student outcomes. Liu^[50] observed that continuation writing, being cognitively demanding, challenged students' lexical complexity and was perceived as more difficult compared to simpler writing tasks. This finding underscored the importance of scaffolding and targeted support to help students navigate the complexities of continuation writing effectively.

Overall, the reviewed studies highlight the multifaceted nature of pedagogical approaches to English continuation writing, encompassing elements of technology, task design, and feedback strategies. While many approaches positively impacted students' writing accuracy, engagement, and coherence, challenges such as cognitive overload, reliance on superficial features, and limited improvements in specific areas such as cohesion suggest the need for further refinement and balanced implementation of these strategies.

4.4. Research Question 4: Challenges of Developing English Continuation Writing Proficiency

The challenges and limitations faced by students and teachers in developing English continuation writing proficiency, as reported in the reviewed studies, span various aspects related to cognitive, instructional, and resource-related factors. For instance, students face significant linguistic challenges, including insufficient vocabulary and grammar knowledge, which hinder their writing quality and fluency^[42, 49]. Errors in verb tense are particularly common, although they decrease as students advance through grade levels, while syntactic errors remain prevalent, especially in more complex tasks like continuation writing^[50]. Furthermore, cognitive challenges such as high cognitive load and writing anxiety negatively influence student performance^[32]. Task complexity adds another layer of difficulty, as students perceive continuation writing to be more challenging than traditional writing tasks, often leading to reduced lexical complexity^[50].

Pedagogically, feedback mechanisms and instructional strategies pose notable challenges. Students often desire more peer assistance but rely heavily on teacher feedback, which can be insufficient outside classroom settings^[48]. In terms of multimodal composing, while it enhances engagement, an excessive focus on graphic elements can undermine narrative quality^[37]. Moreover, task-specific strategies, such as input enhancement, show uneven outcomes—improving accuracy but not fluency or complexity^[52]. Teachers, on the other hand, face substantial workload pressures, inadequate training, and a lack of appropriate teaching materials tailored for continuation writing instruction^[49]. These resource and instructional constraints limit their ability to deliver effective guidance and address students' diverse needs.

5. Discussion

The findings from the reviewed studies offer a nuanced understanding of the challenges and opportunities associated with English continuation writing in China's senior high schools. A critical analysis reveals key areas of significance, as well as gaps that require further exploration. For example, the role of cognitive and affective factors, such as anxiety, cognitive load, and imagination, is pivotal in shaping

students' writing performance and engagement. Studies highlight how anxiety can mediate performance outcomes^[32, 53], which signals the need to address emotional barriers that hinder progress. While the importance of imagination in enhancing writing quality is evident^[34], its gendered effects warrant further investigation into whether such differences arise from pedagogical practices or social factors. Notably, these findings reflect a broader need for strategies that balance cognitive demands with emotional well-being. However, research has yet to explore practical interventions to mitigate anxiety and enhance imagination systematically over time, which could offer more actionable solutions for classroom implementation.

Pedagogical approaches, including multimodal, blended learning, and production-oriented methods, have emerged as another key area of research and demonstrated significant potential in improving students' writing outcomes. Multimodal approaches effectively enhance engagement and specific textual features such as cohesion and accuracy^[35-37], but their limitations—such as students' overemphasis on non-textual elements—indicate a need for careful instructional balance. Similarly, blended learning's limited effect on cohesion suggests that pedagogical innovations must be refined to address all aspects of writing quality^[38]. While technology-assisted methods integration shows promise, their modest impact compared to traditional instruction underscores the importance of integrating technology as a complement rather than a replacement for teacher feedback. A critical gap here lies in the scalability and sustainability of these methods, particularly in under-resourced contexts.

Task complexity is another common theme of existing research but presents a dual challenge: it can hinder lexical diversity while fostering deeper cognitive engagement and vocabulary retention^[46, 50]. This paradox highlights the importance of scaffolding complex tasks to enable students to manage cognitive load effectively. Additionally, textual features such as fluency, grammatical accuracy, and syntactic complexity emerge as key predictors of writing quality^[45, 46], suggesting that targeted instruction focused on these elements could enhance performance. However, the predictive models developed in some studies remain limited in their generalizability, as they primarily rely on isolated variables rather than holistic assessments of writing.

The perceptions of teachers and students of English continuation writing are also a significant theme of existing

studies. While the stakeholders generally hold positive attitudes to this kind of writing task and assessment^[48-50], they may face challenges such as insufficient vocabulary knowledge, heavy workloads, and a lack of appropriate materials^[49], which remain significant barriers to the effective implementation of continuation writing. As such, the need for more student-centered instructional models is highlighted. Potential pedagogical approaches emerging from the review include enhancing input through genre-based approaches^[52], providing multimodal text to facilitate writing^[35, 37], using blended learning^[38], adopting a production-oriented approach^[39], and providing more scaffolding^[40, 48] to reduce the heavy cognitive load caused by the complexity of continuation writing tasks^[46, 50].

However, these approaches, while promising, require careful adaptation to address the contextual realities of Chinese senior high schools. However, these approaches, while promising, require careful adaptation to address the contextual realities of Chinese senior high schools. The successful implementation of continuation writing pedagogy depends on aligning innovative strategies with the demands of standardized assessments, curricular constraints, and diverse student proficiencies. For instance, while multimodal and blended learning approaches enhance engagement and writing coherence^[38], their integration necessitates access to technological resources and teacher competence in handling these tools—challenges that are often exacerbated in under-resourced schools^[54]. This raises concerns about equity, as students in rural or lower-tier schools may have fewer opportunities to benefit from such advancements, thereby widening achievement gaps. Furthermore, the cognitive and emotional burdens of continuation writing, such as high cognitive load and writing anxiety^[32, 46], indicate a need for incremental scaffolding and differentiated instruction. Teachers must strike a balance between pushing students to engage in complex writing tasks and ensuring they are equipped with the foundational linguistic and cognitive skills to succeed. Without adequate scaffolding and support, low-achieving students risk disengagement, while high-achieving students may struggle to realize the full potential of feedback and task complexity^[35, 50]. This highlights a critical tension: continuation writing is inherently demanding, yet its pedagogical effectiveness relies on mitigating these challenges to maintain inclusivity and accessibility.

Another important consideration is the limited professional development and heavy workloads faced by teachers, as underscored by^[49]. While strategies such as peer feedback, production-oriented tasks, and genre-based approaches offer pathways to improved outcomes, their success hinges on teacher expertise and sustainable workloads. Without institutional support, including high-quality instructional materials, continuous training, and reduced administrative burdens, these pedagogies may remain underutilized^[55]. Equally important is the question of how pedagogical approaches are evaluated in the literature. Many studies emphasize short-term gains in writing proficiency, engagement, or linguistic accuracy^[39, 52], yet fewer address the long-term impact of continuation writing on students' broader language acquisition or critical thinking skills. Moreover, the predominance of short-term studies also raises concerns about the sustainability and transferability of pedagogical interventions. While immediate improvements are promising^[37, 38], it remains unclear whether these gains translate into long-term language development or practical language use beyond the classroom. Continuation writing tasks, with their potential to foster higher-order thinking, creativity, and linguistic integration^[23], require longitudinal research to evaluate their broader impact on students' academic and professional outcomes.

Despite a lack of longitudinal studies, the analysis also demonstrates that the quantitative research approach, especially correlational designs with questionnaires and writing tests, has underpinned most previous studies. While these studies offer valuable insights into relationships among variables^[32, 35], they often fall short of explaining the underlying mechanisms or contextual factors influencing these outcomes. Quasi-experimental designs, which have been employed in some studies^[36, 37, 43], provide stronger evidence of intervention effects on writing outcomes but remain constrained by short timeframes and limited sample diversity. These studies have demonstrated promising outcomes, such as improved accuracy, engagement, and lexical processing, yet they cannot fully account for long-term impacts or the variability of student responses in real-world classroom settings.

Furthermore, while mixed-methods research has been attempted in recent studies^[39, 51], the qualitative components are often used to supplement quantitative findings rather than provide a rich, standalone exploration of the complexities inherent in continuation writing. This imbalance underscores

a missed opportunity to capture the lived experiences of students and teachers, which could shed light on the emotional, social, and cognitive challenges associated with the continuation writing tasks. Qualitative approaches, such as case studies or ethnographic methods, could provide deeper insights into why certain pedagogical strategies succeed or fail and how students' linguistic and non-linguistic attributes evolve over time.

The findings from this systematic review carry significant implications for multiple stakeholders. For educators, the review highlights the importance of implementing carefully balanced pedagogical approaches to address cognitive, emotional, and practical challenges associated with English continuation writing. Teachers need to provide incremental scaffolding to mitigate cognitive overload and task complexity while ensuring students develop foundational linguistic competence. Strategies such as blended learning, genre-based instruction, and multimodal tasks can enhance student engagement, coherence, and accuracy, but their successful application depends on teachers' ability to balance creativity with academic rigor. Professional development programs are essential to equip teachers with the skills to integrate technology-assisted approaches and manage tools like multimodal texts effectively. Peer feedback and collaborative activities should also be encouraged to foster a supportive learning environment, particularly for students struggling with writing anxiety or insufficient vocabulary knowledge. For researchers, the review highlights gaps in current research methodologies, particularly the need for longitudinal and qualitative studies. While correlational and quasi-experimental research has provided valuable insights into short-term outcomes, further studies are needed to explore the long-term impact of continuation writing on language acquisition, critical thinking, and academic success. Mixed-methods studies should place greater emphasis on qualitative inquiry to capture students' and teachers' lived experiences, providing deeper insights into the emotional, social, and contextual factors influencing writing performance.

A holistic approach to implementing continuation writing is necessary to maximize its pedagogical potential while addressing the challenges faced by teachers and students. The integration of innovative instructional strategies must be supported by institutional infrastructure, teacher training, and equitable access to resources. Simultaneously, future research

should prioritize methodological diversity to provide robust, contextually grounded evidence that informs policy and practice. By addressing these critical areas, continuation writing can serve as a transformative tool for fostering creativity, critical thinking, and comprehensive language proficiency among Chinese senior high school students.

6. Conclusion

This systematic review synthesizes research on English continuation writing in Chinese senior high schools, offering insights across four key dimensions. The findings highlight cognitive and affective factors in influencing writing performance and engagement. Pedagogical approaches, including multimodal composing, blended learning, and production-oriented methods, demonstrate potential in enhancing writing accuracy, coherence, and engagement, though challenges such as excessive reliance on non-textual elements and uneven improvements in cohesion persist. Quantitative correlational designs dominate the research landscape, complemented by quasi-experimental and mixed-methods studies that assess intervention effectiveness and explore student perceptions, though the limited use of longitudinal and qualitative approaches restricts deeper understanding. Challenges faced by students include inadequate vocabulary and grammar knowledge, high cognitive load, and writing anxiety, while teachers contend with heavy workloads, insufficient training, and a lack of resources, highlighting the need for institutional support and equitable resource allocation.

Despite these contributions, the study has certain limitations. One significant shortcoming is the exclusion of Chinese-language databases such as *Wanfang Database* and *China National Knowledge Infrastructure*, which contain a wealth of studies published in Chinese. This omission may have led to a limited understanding of the full research landscape and overlooked context-specific findings. As such, future research should address these limitations by incorporating Chinese-language literature. By doing so, a more comprehensive and contextualized understanding can be achieved to pave the way for effective instructional strategies to support English continuation writing in China. Another limitation lies in the time-bound nature of the review, which concentrated on studies published from 2016 to 2024. While this timeframe aligns with the introduction and evolution of continuation writing in

the *gaokao*, it may exclude earlier studies that could offer additional theoretical or methodological insights. Future research could address these gaps by incorporating broader temporal scopes and including literature in both English and Chinese. This would enable a more comprehensive understanding of the interplay between local educational policies, pedagogical practices, and the development of English continuation writing proficiency.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, X.D.; methodology, X.D.; software, X.D.; validation, N.A.S., W.W. and S.S.S.; formal analysis, X.D.; investigation, N.A.S., W.W. and S.S.S.; resources, X.D.; data curation, X.D.; writing—original draft preparation, X.D.; writing—review and editing, N.A.S., W.W. and S.S.S.; supervision, N.A.S., W.W. and S.S.S.; project administration, X.D. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declared no conflicts of interest.

Appendix A

Source	Indexation	Research Purpose	Research Design	Main Findings
Bao ^[41]	Google Scholar	to develop a continuation writing instruction model based on the Narrative Analysis Model	quantitative descriptive design (writing samples)	1. The findings highlighted key processes, including grasping the article's theme and structure, identifying essential information, organizing and planning content, and improving stylistic quality and creative expression.
Cai and Huang ^[36]	WoS/Scopus/Google Scholar	to examine the effect of multimodal presentations on English continuation writing	Mixed-methods (sequential) design: quantitative quasi-experimental inquiry (writing tests) with qualitative case study inquiry (interviews)	1. The text-plus-video modality enhanced writing accuracy and cohesion. 2. The text-plus-picture modality improved situational model alignment. 3. Students had very differing perceptions of multimodal presentations.
Chen ^[46]	Google Scholar	to explore the syntactic complexity indices that can predict English continuation writing proficiency	quantitative correlational design (writing samples)	1. Fine-grained measures provide more accurate predictions of the writing quality in English continuation tasks.
Cheong et al. ^[34]	WoS/Scopus/Google Scholar	to investigate the effect of the exertion of ideal second language writing self and imagination on English continuation writing and the role of gender in the effects	quantitative descriptive/correlational design (questionnaire, writing test)	1. Reproductive imagination could contribute to continuation writing performance. 2. The effects of ideal second language writing self and imagination on writing were more significant among female students.
Fang ^[48]	Google Scholar	to study students' perceptions of teacher and peer feedback in learning English continuation writing	quantitative, descriptive design (questionnaire)	1. More teacher feedback was provided in classroom instructions than after-class instructions. 2. Students desired more peer help than teacher assistance in continuation writing.
He and Chen ^[45]	Google Scholar	to explore the textual features that could influence English continuation writing quality	quantitative correlational/comparative design (writing samples)	1. Continuation writing quality was positively correlated with fluency, grammatical accuracy, lexical complexity, and cohesion. 2. The study developed a predictive model for writing quality, indicating that writing scores were influenced by three key factors (i.e., the number of words, grammatical accuracy, and the ease of constructing mental images for content words).
Liu ^[50]	Google Scholar	to explore the effect of task complexity on English continuation writing performance	quantitative correlational design (writing tests, questionnaire)	1. Continuation writing as a complex task could lead to a lower degree of lexical complexity. 2. Students believed continuation writing was more difficult than traditional writing tasks in English examinations.
Liu ^[42]	Google Scholar	to investigate the frequent errors made by students in English continuation writing and the relationship between error types and writing tasks	quantitative descriptive/correlational design (writing tests, error correction checklist)	1. Errors in verb tense are the most common but tend to decrease as students advance through grade levels, whereas syntactical errors become more prominent in more complex tasks like continuation writing.
Meng and Yin ^[52]	WoS/Scopus/Google Scholar	to investigate the effects of input enhancement and genre on English continuation writing performance, as indicated by complexity, accuracy, and fluency	quantitative correlational design (a two-factor mixed experimental design, writing test)	1. Input enhancement improved accuracy but had no effect on complexity or fluency, while genre influenced all three dimensions. 2. An interaction between input enhancement and genre was observed for accuracy.
Peng and Zhang ^[39]	Google Scholar	to examine the effect of using the production-oriented approach on English continuation writing	mixed-methods action research: need analysis (classroom observation, interviews, questionnaire) and implementation and evaluation (quasi-experimental inquiry, writing tests)	1. Students instructed by the production-oriented approach performed better in continuation writing than those receiving regular instruction.

Source	Indexation	Research Purpose	Research Design	Main Findings
Shi and De-ocampo ^[49]	Google Scholar	to identify the challenges faced by teachers when teaching English continuation writing	qualitative case study design (interviews)	1. The challenges identified include students' insufficient English vocabulary and grammar knowledge, an overwhelming teaching workload, inadequate training, and a lack of appropriate teaching materials.
Shi et al. ^[44]	WoS/Scopus/Google Scholar	to investigate the effect of prompt types on the proficiency of and strategies used for English continuation writing	quantitative casual-comparative design (writing test, questionnaire)	1. The type of prompt had a significant impact on participants' overall continuation writing scores, syntactic complexity, cohesion, source-use features, and their use of monitoring strategies.
Teng ^[47]	Google Scholar	to examine the effect of continuation writing tasks on students' English writing quality	mixed-methods design: quasi-experimental inquiry at the quantitative stage (writing tests) and case study inquiry at the qualitative phase (interviews)	1. Students engaged in continuation writing tasks could significantly improve their English writing, especially content, structure, and language use. 2. Students had positive perceptions of English continuation writing tasks.
Tian and Deng ^[37]	Google Scholar	to investigate if incorporating multimodal composing in English continuation writing tasks enhances student engagement and to explore how students perceive changes in their engagement after the inclusion of multimodal composing	mixed-methods action research design: quasi-experimental inquiry at the quantitative phase (questionnaires, writing tests) integrated with case study inquiry at the qualitative stage (interviews)	1. Incorporating multimodal elements significantly enhances students' engagement across affective, behavioral, cognitive, and social dimensions. 2. An excessive focus on graphic elements may negatively affect the quality of their narratives in writing.
Tu et al. ^[43]	WoS/Scopus/Google Scholar	to examine the learning outcomes and cognitive processes of vocabulary acquisition in the context of English continuation writing	mixed-methods design: quasi-experimental inquiry at the quantitative phase (writing tests) and case study inquiry at the qualitative phase (post-intervention interviews)	1. Students exposed to English continuation writing performed better in vocabulary learning, especially in knowledge retaining in word meaning and use. 2. These students also engaged in deeper lexical processing than those receiving regular writing instruction.
Wang ^[40]	Google Scholar	to examine the impact of ChatGPT and teacher feedback on high school students' writing proficiency and motivation in English continuation writing tasks.	mixed-methods design: quasi-experimental inquiry at the quantitative stage (writing tests) and case study inquiry at the qualitative phase (interviews)	1. The intervention of combining ChatGPT use and teacher instruction did not exert outstanding effect than regular teacher instruction. 2. Students appreciated the use of technology in class.
Wang et al. ^[32]	WoS/Scopus/Google Scholar	to analyze the relationships students' cognitive load, anxiety, and English continuation writing performance	quantitative correlational design (questionnaires/writing test)	1. Cognitive load positively impacted writing anxiety, which impacted English continuation writing performance. 2. Anxiety mediated the effect of cognitive load on writing performance.
Xie ^[56]	Google Scholar	to investigate the effect of English continuation writing on students' English writing proficiency and attitude	quantitative, quasi-experimental design (questionnaires)	1. Students exposed in English continuation writing tasks achieved better writing proficiency and higher attitudes to English learning than those receiving regular writing instructions.
Ye et al. ^[57]	WoS/Scopus/Google Scholar	to investigate the relationship between China's Standards of English Language Ability with language use in English continuation writing and to develop an inventory	quantitative correlational design (questionnaires)	1. Exploratory factor analysis identified various factors perceived by students as important language use, but only the strategy of connecting-and-generating predicted learners' English continuation writing scores.
Zeng et al. ^[38]	Google Scholar	to examine the effect of blended learning on coherence and cohesion in continuation writing	mixed-methods design: descriptive inquiry at the quantitative phase (writing samples) and case study inquiry at the qualitative phase (open-ended questionnaires, teacher journals)	1. Blended learning could significantly improve students' overall continuation writing proficiency, especially coherence. 2. Blended learning had little effect on cohesion in continuation writing.

Source	Indexation	Research Purpose	Research Design	Main Findings
Zhan et al. ^[35]	WoS/Scopus/Google Scholar	to examine the mediating effect of feedback-seeking behavior (FSB) on the relationship between ideal L2 writing self and continuation writing performance	quantitative correlational design (questionnaires/writing test)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Low-achieving students: No indirect effect from ideal L2 writing self to writing performance via FSB. 2. Mid-achieving students: Feedback monitoring positively mediated the relationship; feedback inquiry had a negative mediation effect. 3. High-achieving students: Feedback monitoring showed a negative mediation effect; feedback inquiry had a marginally positive effect.
Zhu and Duan ^[51]	Scopus/Google Scholar	to examine how a test-taker of the English continuation writing test enhances her alignment of situation models and identify the factors that contribute to her development of situational alignment	qualitative (case study)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Test-takers can develop their alignment of situation models. 2. The pan-indexicality model plays a crucial role by enabling test-takers to decode linguistic signs at the overall sense level.
Zhu et al. ^[53]	WoS/Scopus/Google Scholar	to identify enjoyment and anxiety profiles related to integrated reading-writing tasks through a person-centered latent profile analysis and to examine how these profiles are associated with imagination and task performance	quantitative correlational design (questionnaire, writing test)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The latent profile analysis revealed four distinct groups: (1) moderate enjoyment with moderate anxiety, (2) moderate enjoyment with low anxiety, (3) high enjoyment with moderate anxiety, and (4) low enjoyment with high anxiety. 2. Students' imaginative capacity was a strong predictor of their profile membership.
Zhu et al. ^[33]	WoS/Scopus/Google Scholar	to investigate the relationship between linguistic competence, ideal self, learning engagement, and English continuation writing performance	quantitative correlational design (questionnaires/writing test)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Linguistic competence was the direct predictor of both writing achievement and ideal L2 writing selves. 2. Ideal L2 writing selves contributed significantly to learning engagement. 3. Behavioral engagement mediated ideal L2 writing selves to writing performance.

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