



## A Study of College English Writing Teaching Based on Dynamic Assessment

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**Abstract:** For a long time, college-level English writing teaching in China has relied mainly on summative tests, which provide a single and rigid evaluation criteria and limit students' all-around development of writing ability. However, with the current reform of college English teaching, the single assessment method cannot cater to the changing needs of the new teaching model, which emphasizes the cultivation of students' ability to use language. To address this issue, this paper proposes introducing the notion of dynamic assessment into English writing classes at the college level. Dynamic assessment emphasizes the assessment of the learning process and feedback of teaching information, which can lead to a comprehensive, scientific, and reasonable assessment system that plays a crucial role in realizing teaching objectives. Based on Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of mind, this paper presents scaffolding strategies for each stage of writing in college English writing teaching and learning. These strategies serve as a foundation for constructing a theoretical dynamic assessment model in Chinese non-English majors' writing classes. By introducing dynamic assessment into college English writing teaching, this paper aims to explore new methods that increase the efficiency of college English writing teaching and promote college students' English writing ability to adapt to the reform of new requirements for college English teaching.

**Keywords:** college English writing, dynamic assessment mode, writing strategies

### Introduction

Writing, as one of the four basic skills of English learning, is essential to English learners. English writing competence is mostly considered as a complex and difficult task for English learners. Among the four language skills, namely listening, speaking, reading and writing, writing skill is considered as the most difficult one and plays an essential part in language acquisition <sup>[9]</sup>. Therefore, the improvement of writing ability is of great importance to promote the comprehensive development of students' listening, speaking and reading ability.

Traditional writing teaching mode is often product-oriented and separates teaching from assessment <sup>[10]</sup>, which neglects the learning process and is of little help for the development of students' cognitive level and writing ability. Teaching assessment is an important part in college English teaching, as stated in "College English Teaching Requirement" issued by the Ministry of Higher Education <sup>[11]</sup>, specifically supplementing the content of the teaching evaluation, which emphasizes the process of evaluation. Dynamic assessment theory refers to the way of exploring and discovering learners' potential developmental ability through the interaction between evaluators and learners in the process of evaluation. Based on this background, it is necessary to explore and establish a new assessment mode in college English writing classes. On the other hand, the undergraduate education of application-oriented universities focuses on cultivating application-oriented talents with strong social adaptability and competitiveness. English writing course should be designed according to the professional needs of students, so that students can better cultivate their writing awareness and improve their language practice ability to achieve the goal of talent training.

From the analysis of some correlative studies on dynamic assessment, it is not difficult to find that overseas studies on Dynamic assessment in second language pedagogy have made great achievements. A case study with three female college students was conducted by Aljaafreh and Lantolf to explore more effective ways of feedback on EFL writing <sup>[1]</sup>. His study is considered as the first attempt to applying the mediation moves in EFL writing teaching. In order to learn the students' language level between current and actual level through intervention and interaction, Anton applied dynamic assessment to placement tests of advanced Spanish courses in universities <sup>[2]</sup>. He assessed the accuracy of the students' language knowledge (phonetics, vocabulary, grammar, etc.). Davin and Donato made use of the prepared intervention list to help students' acquisition in vocabulary and grammar <sup>[3]</sup>.

Compared with overseas studies, the research topics from foreign countries cover a wide range, such as different mediators in dynamic assessment, validity and fairness of dynamic assessment while most related topics in China focus on building up a model of English writing teaching in middle schools. On the other hand, dynamic assessment is still a new research field in China. Han Baocheng discussed in detail on the definitions, theories, models and applications of

[Received 27 Feb 2023; Accepted 07 Mar 2023; Published (online) 31 Mar 2023]



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dynamic assessment, which laid out an overall picture of dynamic assessment for the domestic scholars [6]. Some recent researchers like Kong Wen showed a tendency of exploring different mediators in dynamic assessment [12], which emphasized the central core of mediator. Zhang Yanhong, starting from Vygotsky's social and cultural perspective, constructed a dynamic assessment system for college English writing teaching supported by the network environment [21]. He Ye also carried out a study by applying dynamic assessment to process writing [8]. Intervention of writing strategies, resources and incentive were emphasized to interpret the concrete application of dynamic assessment in different writing processes.

The significance of this study is described in the following sections. First of all, it can help non-English majors who are studying in application-oriented universities to better achieve the writing goals in college English course requirements. Secondly, it provides a practical and effective teaching model for college English teachers who can teach college English writing effectively. Thirdly, it is hoped that this study will enlighten other researchers.

### **Literature Review**

The concept of dynamic assessment was developed by Vygotsky's colleague Luria who first proposed it [15], and this idea was carried forward by Feuerstein and his colleagues [4]. The term was popularized in the 1970s and was adopted by subsequent researchers. Different scholars have designed their own dynamic evaluation models according to their research directions and applied them to different fields. At present, scholars from various countries have conducted a wide range of studies. However, it is not uniform on how to define the dynamic assessment.

Comparing with traditional tests, dynamic assessment is an alternative assessment. It is also called by other scholars as mediated learning [4], learning test [5], interactive assessment [7], or dynamic testing [18]. Dynamic assessment, the learning potential assessment, is a new assessment theory. It was defined as a process of assessing learners real potential in a way that differs significantly from that of the traditional tests [20]. Traditional test stresses learning results while dynamic assessment centers on the process and integrates assessment into the teaching process.

Dynamic assessment is both an evaluation method and a teaching method. By applying a teaching intervention in the assessment process, dynamic assessment reveals the gap between the learner's developed ability and the potential ability. The meaning of "dynamic" is as follows: Firstly, compared with the final evaluation, it pays attention to the evaluation of learning process; Secondly, in the process of assessment, there is a positive interaction between the assessor and the assessed, which aims to promote the development of the assessed's writing ability. Thirdly, the purpose of assessment is to provide a basis for further teaching intervention and gradually realize the development of learners' learning potential.

The dynamic assessment in writing teaching stresses not only on the quality of an essay and thoughts of the author in writing process, but also the feedback from the readers. The teacher should pay close attention to these concepts in the process of teaching and evaluation. Students' language acquisition effect will be reflected through the quality of the essay, which also influences students' academic performance. In addition, the readers' thoughts should be taken into account. Lastly, it is hard for the students who need to modify their essays by themselves without any peer feedback and teacher feedback to access their zone of proximal development.

There are two general models of dynamic assessment: interventionist and interactionist dynamic assessment. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory is the direct theoretical source of dynamic assessment. The theory emphasizes the influence of intrinsic mechanisms of the individual and the sociocultural environment on human development. The theory emphasizes the role of social and cultural influences in shaping human psychological development and the importance of interpersonal and cooperative interpersonal communication for cognitive development. ZPD (Zone of Proximal Development) is used in instructional assessment to understand the children's current developmental status and to predict the children's development trend in the near future. ZPD regards that teaching and assessment are inseparable. Based on this theory, dynamic assessment begins with an assessment of the individual's current level of competence and then gives the individual the same opportunity to learn.

### **A Study of Assessment Methods in English Writing Teaching**

Test and evaluation are indispensable steps in English writing teaching. Therefore, in the study of English writing teaching, a large number of foreign scholars have conducted research on writing testing and evaluation. In the traditional writing teaching method, teachers' evaluation has always occupied an important position.

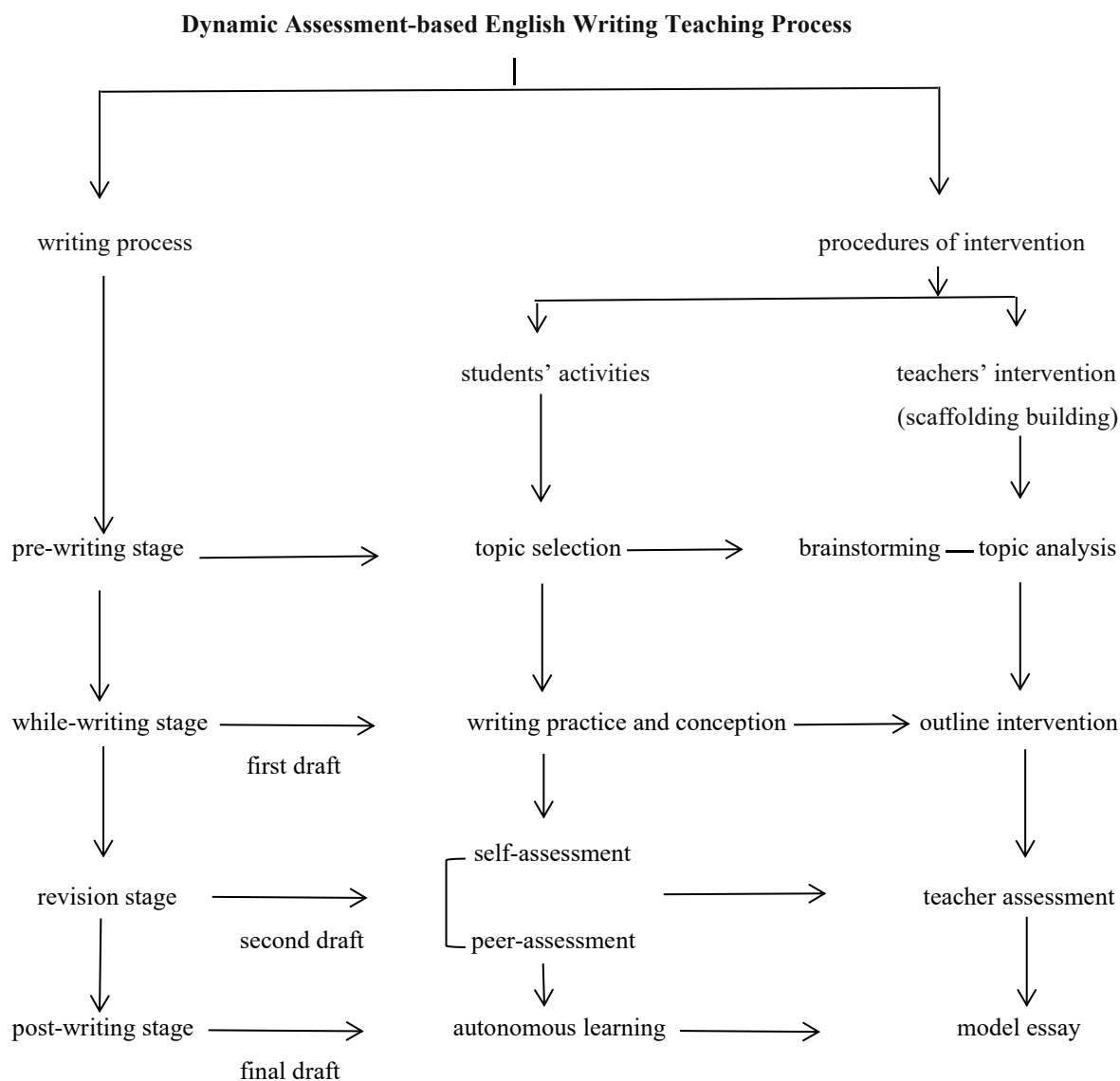
At the same time, some scholars conducted research on whether the evaluation should pay attention to the modification of writing content or form. Ferris believed that the two modification methods would improve the writing level of learners. Proto proposed that the evaluation should be carried out in two steps [16]. First, the writing content should be modified at the level of meaning, and then the writing content should be modified at the level of grammar, language expression, text structure and other forms. Rollinson stated that peer assessment can strengthen the interaction between readers and authors and promote the cooperative communication among students [17]. Through interactive communication, students can easily comprehend the connotation of various topics, and gradually form a congenial learning environment among students.

The research of dynamic evaluation in the field of L2 teaching in China is at an initial stage. Wang Ying and Zou Huiling analyzed the advantages of applying dynamic assessment in middle schools, and then elaborated how to apply

dynamic assessment in English writing teaching in middle schools from two aspects: intervention strategies and dynamic evaluation methods [19]. Liu Xuyang and Guo Xiaoying constructed a study in two college English teaching classes majoring in law. The teaching mode of “reading + discussion + writing” is adopted [14]. The conclusion of the study is as follows: the combination of dynamic assessment and divided class can help learners make fewer language mistakes, enrich the content of thoughts and improve the structure of an essay, so as to greatly improve the overall quality of composition. Lan Xiaoxiao and Liu Yan constructed a dynamic assessment framework in the process of college English writing [13]. The results show that the construction of dynamic assessment framework based on college English writing classroom is helpful to stimulate students’ writing interest and improve their writing ability. This study has a certain guiding effect on college English writing in practice in China.

### Construction of Dynamic Assessment Model in College English Writing Teaching

When applying dynamic assessment, the design of a scientific dynamic assessment model of college English writing teaching should not only record students’ writing activities, but also integrate dynamic assessment into teaching activities, and expand it deeply by means of intervention activities. This paper believes that the writing process of the dynamic assessment model based on the Teaching Requirements of College English Courses includes the following stages. The stages involved and intervention measures at each stage are shown in the figure:



### Strategies for Application of Dynamic Assessment in College English Writing Teaching

The dynamic assessment theory holds that teaching and assessment are two aspects of the learning process and teachers’ proper intervention in the learning process can promote the development of students’ ability. Therefore, when the dynamic assessment theory is applied in college English writing teaching, it is necessary to explore the specific problems existing in students’ writing in combination with the specific process of writing and the specific situation of

students, design the corresponding intervention moves and adopt the corresponding teaching methods according to these problems. Specific intervention activities for each stage of writing might be helpful if designed as follows:

### **1. Pre-writing Stage**

To establish the zone of proximal development for students is the major aim in this stage. Students are willing to obtain more assistance before they start writing. In order to get more materials for writing, the teacher's main task is to organize students to brainstorm. After brainstorming, the interventionist activities from the teacher is to give suggestions on the topic of the writing.

Analysis on the topic. Topic analysis is the first step in writing. It is also the key to ensure a good composition. The teacher guides the class to examine the composition from three aspects: person, tense and content. The teacher guides the students to understand the genre of composition. In this stage, the teacher gives students writing strategy guidance which helps cultivate students' ability to organize writing materials within the schedule time; Brainstorming. The purpose of brainstorming is to allow team members to speak freely, to brainstorm their ideas, and to generate new ideas from the exchange of ideas. In brainstorming, the zone of proximal development of students can be established to the maximum extent. Firstly, the writing difficulties and mistakes can be shown in the free discussion and can be easily solved in the intervention of teachers and interaction of classmates. Secondly, brainstorming can inspire students' thinking, contribute to the formation of a relaxed and pleasant learning environment, and help cultivate students' divergent thinking, so as to maximize the development of each student's zone of proximal development.

### **2. First Draft**

After brainstorming activities, students obtain more helpful suggestions, and they could determine their topics. Subsequent task for students is to list out the basic outline of the topic, and then the teacher's interventionist activity is to give the corresponding suggestions on the outline. After the series of tasks, students will be ready for the first draft. At this stage, the teacher had better combine classroom activities with specific writing topics to help students find the starting point of writing, list the outline, and encourage students to express their ideas completely in accurate form of language. In addition, the teacher should also provide students with key language materials, such as typical paragraph description patterns and relevant key vocabulary and sentence patterns.

Making an outline. Teachers' intervention before writing is also reflected in guiding students to make an outline. Making an outline helps students master basic writing skills. An outline includes the structure and main ideas of the text. Only after the outline is listed can relevant information and the whole article be completed, so making an outline is a prerequisite for completing writing activities. After the brainstorm, the teacher will present the students' ideas and writing outline on the blackboard.

### **3. Peer-assessment and Self-assessment**

After completing the first draft, it is time for students to check the mistakes in the writing by themselves, and then exchange the first draft with their classmates or group members. With the help of the teacher and peers, the second draft will be structured. Before the self-assessment and peer-assessment stage, the teacher needs to give the specific instruction about how to revise the current edition. At this stage, the teacher can intervene in three ways: training evaluation strategies; The establishment of scientific evaluation criteria; Evaluating the essay. On the other hand, students' involvement is mainly reflected in two aspects: self-assessment and peer-assessment.

The duty of teacher at this stage is to organize students to check their writings in the aspects of vocabulary, grammar, linking words, sentence patterns and structure. Self-revision can help students to recognize some mistakes and motivate their curiosity to explore new perspectives in writing. After self-assessment, students are expected to exchange their drafts with peers. Because the majority of students' writing ability is similar, peers just help them find out some simple mistakes that they ignored. Before the peer-assessment, the teacher proposes some mutual evaluation criteria. The teacher clearly points out the deduction standard for each item at the same time, introduces incentives and competition system. The teacher guides students to be objective about their peers' compositions. In the process of students' evaluation, the teacher should be with students, providing timely help and giving full play to the intervention role of teachers.

### **4. Revision**

In this stage, the teacher guides students to write the second draft on the basis of self-assessment and peer-assessment. The main aim is to make appropriate adjustments to the structure and content of the essay, such as: being in accord with the writing requirements, appropriate deletion, avoiding Chinglish expressions. In this stage, the teacher provides reference materials, written expressions commonly used in model essays. The teacher introduces some revision strategies to provide students with a "scaffolding" to improve students' zone of proximal development.

### **5. Teacher Intervention**

The teacher revises individuals' writing to guide students to find mistakes in writing. Students are asked to revise their own compositions after being corrected by their peers. With the teacher's assistance, students' final drafts will be made.

At this stage, teachers mainly intervene by explaining writing strategies to students, explaining specific aspects that need to be modified, giving different feedback based on students' corrections, and providing students with more abundant writing materials. At the stage of teacher' evaluation and final draft, each part of the composition is graded according to the scoring standard of the English composition. At the same time, teachers should refer to students' first draft and evaluate the second draft. Since each student has a different ZPD in writing, the implementation of sub-scoring can better stimulate the ZPD of different individuals.

## 6. Final Draft

After the teacher's intervention activities, students are required to construct the final draft based on feedback from the teacher and peers. The teacher' targeted intervention comments are also called intervention remedial training. The comments mainly include the following parts: error correction, model essays, excellent sentences, and relevant sentence structure recommended. After obtaining the consent of the students, the teacher screens out the excellent composition for other students to learn. Through the teacher's comprehensive comments and interaction with students in the classroom, excellent sentences and commonly-used expressions in writing will be summarized. With the help of the "scaffolding", students' English writing level can be improved. The post-writing stage is a very meaningful stage for students and teachers. With the feedback and help provided by teachers, students' zone of proximal development can be promoted. In this process, teaching activities change from intervention to interaction, then to independent observation and communication, and students' autonomous learning ability will be improved.

## Conclusion

The emergence of dynamic assessment comes from Vygotsky's "zone of proximal development". Vygotsky's theory of zone of proximal development holds that potential developmental levels are different from actual development levels, which means that actual development levels cannot be used to predict potential development levels. This idea is crucial for dynamic assessment. Therefore, it is not enough to use non-dynamic traditional evaluation means to evaluate the actual development area. What is more important is to determine the zone of proximal development of learners. Teaching and evaluation are regarded as dynamic and complementary processes. Dynamic assessment model of college English writing teaching integrates teaching, learning and evaluation.

This paper attempts to construct a dynamic assessment model for Chinese college English writing classes. The purpose of this model is to demonstrate the process concerned by dynamic assessment theory and the integration of intervention and assessment and to make up for the possible negative effect of the traditional ways of evaluation on the students' writing behavior. Students' feedback and teachers' intervention in the writing process are not one-time activity, but a dynamic process of continuous circulation and improvement. The dynamic assessment mode designed in this paper is expected to be improved in the writing teaching practice. How to balance the teacher's intervention and the students' independent learning needs to be studied when applying dynamic assessment model for English writing classes. The teacher needs to make a lot efforts to design each writing activity to meet the requirements of the objectives, and to help each individual who needs different scaffolds when dealing with the same problem in the same class.

**Acknowledgments:** The author gratefully acknowledges the aid of the teachers who work with me. Thankfulness should also be expressed to those anonymous reviewers for their enlightening comments and helpful advice.

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