

# Writing Task Clustering: “Task Cluster” Toward Greater Authenticity in Writing

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## Abstract

Writing task clustering is a method to promote authenticity in writing, whose strategies and ways are discussed through Californian writing textbooks as an example. Specifically, “communicative context” is adopted to set backgrounds for authentic writing; then exercises can be done through searching for and applying key writing-related knowledge; progressive design, accurate guidance and quantitative evaluation are vital to greater authenticity during writing and in comments.

## Keywords

Writing task clustering; Authentic writing; Communicative context; Key knowledge of writing.

## 1. Focus

According to the definition of “learning task clustering” in curriculum standards and further explanations by experts, task cluster is featured by “integration”, “context” and “actions”. Professor Wang Ning points out that “learning task clustering” refers to the cultural theme relevant to students’ core Chinese literary qualities and defined in real situations, which can be based on to organize learning resources and design tasks, leading students to complete tasks and gain improvements through self-directed learning. In Teaching design of the Chinese curriculum based on learning task clustering by Cai Ke, “integration” plays a key role. [1] That is to say, task cluster can integrate several single tasks, and furthermore, writing is an structured, integrated and interdisciplinary action to complete task clusters in real situations. Through “writing task clustering”, writing further approaches to meaningful communication in the real context rather than simply creating articles. Namely, out of communication needs, real situations(or problems) and actions are raw materials to create authentic and useful verbal products.

Inspired by Californian writing textbooks, the author applied writing task clustering into teaching practice and summarized corresponding strategies.

## 2. Case

“Writing your own story” is a part of Californian writing textbook, which designs 2 activities of 8 tasks that covers the whole teaching process. [2]

### 2.1. Activity : Listen to An Example Gloria

Key elements are also introduced. “Your story” should describe something that really happened to yourself plus following tips.

Using “I” and “me” to write only one incident with enough details. A favorable structure is firstly, an interesting start; then, the story goes; and finally, the story ends naturally or with your feelings.

## 2.2. Activity : Write Your Own Version

This part designs 8 tasks.

Task 1: choose a topic, then list 3 situations from personal experience and discuss individual theme with partner(s).

Task 2: use writing skills to add enough details under the theme

Task 3: organize the story and make a table following the example, including details of “5W” to show how the story develops.

Task 4: write the story: one sentence for each detail, or many details in one sentence. Utilize the table to enrich different parts the story.

Task 5: read draft and make own evaluations according the following levels. “Excellent”: an intriguing start, abundant details on “5W”, well-organized sentences under one topic, feelings in the end and little spelling mistakes; “To be improved”: a better beginning or ending, more details on “5W”, sentences to be polished up, off the topic, or many spelling mistakes.

Task 6: revise the draft and reflect discussions. Here are some advice by the teacher. (1) Wording: better wording expresses clearer ideas in more details. Please find exact words from “My First Dictionary” to add a detail in the story. (2) Smooth flow: use different ways of starting a sentence. Please underline the first word of every sentence and make changes if two or more starts with the same word.

Task 7: check the draft though a list or marks. A checklist is available by the teacher, including initial letter, correct punctuation, name and action as well as spelling.

Task 8: show the story, better with photos, through an email, a picture-story book or reading.

## 3. Experiment

### 3.1. Writing Class: Defamiliarization, Adding New Radiance -- Toward Novelty

Novelty is one dimension of literary grace. To achieve it, defamiliarization is adopted to upgrade writing skills in a cluster of five specific tasks as follows:

Task1 : caption the given picture in Memories

The class was given beside Xiuhu Lake in the blooming spring. Firstly, a task was to caption the picture prepared to be posted on Memories.

After full discussions by students, the teacher summarized and commented on their highlights. Then came some words from Waiting for the Spring by Dong Hua’ao: “literally “Birds’ chirping drenched in the drizzle falls on the river, slightly rising the water. The willows cut by the breeze on the river banks sway gracefully.” According to this example, students exchanged ideas on how to optimize expressions of the same thing.

Consequently, a key writing method was introduced. Defamiliarization, the artistic technique of presenting common things in an unfamiliar or strange way, is a way to novelty. Simply speaking, it adds unfamiliar “individuality” to known “stereotypes”. Similarly, Ge Zhaoguang points out in Characters of the Rubik’s Cube that, it is necessary to “creatively” challenge those commonplace or standards, so as to present more newness, innocence and vitality to readers.

Task 2: summarize defamiliarization methods

The task moves forward specific methods as students understand the defamiliarization concept. Students should pick 1-2 sentences below and talk about what impresses them most(how to describe familiar things in an unfamiliar way), or the effects created by artful rhetoric.

Alternatives are as follows. Li Jinfa writes in Reflection: Life is just the smile on Death’s lips/ Under the dying moon/ I drink and sing to my fill/ The throat-cracking tone/ Drifts away with the north wind. Yu Hua’s Going on a long journey at the age of 18 reads, “I just walked through it in the morning, and now entering the end of the afternoon, and see the hair of the dusk.” Wang

Yifei writes that “the cry of insects that weakened by the autumn wind sorrowfully strikes my heart”. In Lao Wang, he is described “to be inlaid in the door frame, rigid and stiff”. what’s more, In Lu Li’s Retain the greenness, “ I use green to decorate my humble room and my depressed mood.” In Cui Hu’s Inscription at a Village South of the Capital, “Nobody knows where the face disappeared to, leaving the peach blossoms in the vernal breeze smiling still.” Li Shixiong writes in literally morning departure towards next destination that “the cock-crow seems awakening me gives me an illusion of white frost, while the joyful chirp against the rising sun brings me a glow of red.” Words from Lao She’s Old tragedy of the new era goes, “After a few polite words with his guests, he bowed to everyone, straightened up immediately, and walked out like a memorial archway”. In his another work The crescent moon, “I can bet that there is not a single rice grain when she delivers me a small bag. Our cooking pot is sometimes as clean as a decent widow.” Concerning the above examples, diverse styles are available, including modern poetry, prose, novel and ancient poetry. That is to say, defamiliarization is a common thing in literature rather than only in modern poetry.

After reading and discussing examples, two effective methods can be summarized. One is to give concrete descriptions to abstract parts. According to Russia’s Viktor Shklovsky, art is lively due to real feelings of life, enabling people recover feelings of things, for instance, to understand the quality of stones. In addition, the other one is to defamiliarize, or to express common things in an unconventional way, specifically transferred epithet, synaesthesia, metaphor and personification in terms of rhetoric.

Task 3: apply the methods to revise

This task is designed to utilize defamiliarization methods to revise captions. For example, words can be visualized through adding details to abstract parts, or the rhetoric such as transferred epithet, synesthesia, metaphor and personification are alternatives to achieve individuality and beauty.

Here are some works from students: “All those painful memories fall into the spring soil and nourish the earth for new blossoms.” “Eagerly yearning melts snow and ushers in the next season.” “The water ripples with a smile.” “There are full of reflections of sturdy bamboos in the green water and flowers kissed by the color red.” “When will the chill to the bone be overwhelmed by the warm current.”

Task 4: further polish up defamiliarized sentences

Defamiliarization mainly pursues accurate expressions of feeling rather than flowery language. It originates from focus on details, free associations, bold imagination, unique discovery, individual perception and sensitivity to language. All in all, logic matters most. Therefore moderate defamiliarization is a better choice.

Task 5: post the picture with caption

After students posted the final revised version, the teacher collected screenshots of comments and evaluated writing tasks.

## 4. Strategies

The above two cases integrate “multiple” writing tasks to create a task cluster and embodies specific strategies and methods of writing task clustering. Through completing assigned tasks, students can gain more expertise in core writing skills.

To be noted, “writing in communicative context” is a reader-oriented, communication-driven and context-centered theory that empowers task cluster to promote authenticity. Under this theory, the author can choose and create writing content and expression forms if with direct or potential objects as well as elements of communicative context.[3] That is, “communicative context” is the “cradle” of writing elements, such as content, material, genre, structure and

language. In this way, writing is authentic, concrete, dynamic and meaningful to authors, which is a vital skill for students to gain from pragmatic language ability and real (specific) context.

On the contrary, the “article creating” exercise relies more on “imitation” to complete fake stories and gain relevant knowledge or skills. With fake motivation, situation or result instead of communicative context, authenticity is hard to realize.

However, textbooks in the United States and Singapore do a better job in this aspect. Their strong sense of reader, author (character) and communication pays more attention to creating out of real experience.

In light of above examples, the methods and strategies of writing task clustering are discussed below.

#### **4.1. Set Context to Generate Communication Needs**

Writing should be authentic. In this aspect, Mr. Li Hailin is a pioneer believing that it answers why, to whom and how to write. More specifically, such writing delivers meaningful content and demonstrates its value. So that, students should have a clear idea of where are real feelings from and who will be target readers. Afterwards, Professor Rong Weidong proposes the concept of “writing in communicative context”. Five elements are necessary to set context, namely author, reader, topic, motivation and language. “Author” explains “who to write”, which means students should understand the identity of dominating writing process. What’s more, “reader” is the answer to “to whom”, “topic” to “what to discuss” and “language” to “specific content out of what motivation”.

In the American textbook case, the author is oneself and target readers are partners or acquaintances. Students are motivated by making accounts on themselves, especially details of personal experience through e-mails or picture-story book. Another case by the paper author describes the situation to post pictures onto Memories. The author can then read relevant comments to check whether students balance both literary grace and novelty. Similarly, the two cases both lead students to focus on themselves, so as to approach to “authenticity”.

These contexts inspire students to clarify their communicative needs, therefore motivating them to complete task as well as fulfill communicative methods and content while selecting out proper expression ways. Consequently, authenticity can be realized instead of merely duplication.

#### **4.2. Search for Relevant Information to Enrich Key Writing Knowledge**

George Hillocks, a professor in the Department of Education at the University of Chicago, argues that in terms of teaching, writing should refer to “searching” - to select out right questions and corresponding answers. This idea is still applied in America’s “The National Writing Project (NWP)” to promote “searching-based teaching”. [4] That is, resources collected should be evaluated and analyzed to figure out similarities and differences, then be used to support or challenge one idea, so as to propose a hypothesis with clear logic starting from both one’s own and others’ perspectives. In practice, teachers should advise students to carry out searching, so as to build their knowledge pool and better support their writing.

Specifically, a certain field can be decided first, including “domain knowledge” or “prior knowledge” related to texts or topics, as well as the interaction of reading and writing. In addition, “topic knowledge” and stylistic features are favorable, which means “content” and the knowledge of morphology, syntax, structure, paragraph or text respectively.

In addition to the United States, Japan and Singapore equally emphasize the importance of searching and providing “writing-related knowledge”. For example, Gloria can give a basic impression of style and topic. So that students can follow or apply with the support of organizing the aforementioned table in task 3. Certainly, self-evaluation and revision also play

a vital role to finish the writing task. Thus the experiment case mentions defamiliarization, the knowledge background to transfer into pragmatic ability through revision exercises.

Moreover, definitions mainly describe features that are not accessible instantly. Therefore, more specific knowledge of how to master these skills progressively should also be offered, which explains the core of finishing tasks one by one and completing the cluster.

Another point is that students should summarize their own writing knowledge through searching and reading, finally building the knowledge network.

### **4.3. Progressive Design to Connect Task Chains**

“Writing tasks” rather than fixed skills or knowledge points should be applied to classes on authentic writing. A writing task is a specific scenario that provides specific targets, purposes, occasions (place, time, media conditions, etc.) or problems, etc. In the above two cases, the respective contexts have already been set ahead. It is a key step to originate from or simulate real world, so as to reflect real conflicts to motivate students. Certainly, this step is complicated as well that involves multidisciplinary knowledge. Here is another case. In Singapore’s Advanced Chinese textbook, the task to explore ancient Chinese inventions consists of literature inquiry, interview, planning, visiting and investigations, an indeed interdisciplinary integration of various learning activities.

In addition, the major task should be supported by simpler ones and develops into a task cluster. There are 8 and 5 tasks respectively in above two cases. However, a task cluster doesn’t equal to a single combination, but a logical and progressive chains to develop students’ understanding of writing and relevant skills. Simply speaking, under a learning object, writing can be divided into different levels and each level is quipped with corresponding exercises, finally enabling students to master all the necessary expertise in writing.

In the experiment case, context outweighs attempts and dominates in the content, language or final results. Then defamiliarization is introduced to empower writing plus timely reflections and revisions. According to Kahlil Gibran’s *On Self-Knowledge*: “the soul walks not upon a line”. It halts to reflect, think silently - like a lotus to unfold countless petals. Similarly, completing tasks and building up ability also belong to such growth, prudent and effective.

### **4.4. Guide the Process to Develop Writing Ability**

Traditionally, advice during the writing process is not a focus. But it should be interactive and creative part based on cognitive theory, humanistic theory and a process diagram. Teachers can advise students to make progress and fulfill 4 steps of previous preparation, draft, feedback and revision, creating meaningful writing and enjoying the fun through each step, and finally building up the ability. In the above American case, an example is ahead of writing and following steps are topic selection- conception- draft- revision- check- publish; and in the experiment case, the process is ended with one more step, comments. To be noted, interactions between teachers and students, students and students, knowledge and writing attempts is a great highlight throughout the latter case.

Pragmatically, teachers should evaluate according to students’ performances, find out the key points and major difficulties, so as to give accurate feedback and corresponding advice towards better results.

### **4.5. Quantitative Evaluation to Improve Training Quality**

Traditional evaluation methods are not adequately effective as teachers comment on writing or typical weakness rather than advice students to revise accordingly. This one-way feedback cannot actually grow students’ ability. However, in the American case, apart from relevant knowledge and strategies from the teacher, students should also read their drafts and make self-evaluations.



This strategy is crucial to cultivate students' critical thinking through self-examination and metacognition. According to researchers of American "6 + 1 (elements)" writing mode, this strategy enables students to write and evaluate independently to gain more valuable feedback on their performances. [5] Those students with average or weak writing ability can self-guide, sort out and self-check the process according to the items on the list, thus activating their reflective thinking and developing a good habit of checking and revising one their own.

However, feedback are made based on likes, reactions and comments from Memories in the experiment case. Afterwards, reflections remind that such comments are not highly relevant to individual performance, so a quantitative measurement table should be designed previously to conduct a new step of mutual evaluations by students.

Certainly, evaluations have diverse sources, including students themselves, partners and from teachers. But one common thing is that clear measurement strategies and standards as well as follow-up efforts should be in place.

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