

An Action Research on Incorporating Multimodal Composing to Facilitate Student Engagement in Continuation Writing Tasks in Chinese High School EFL Teaching

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Abstract

Recently, multimodal composing has become a popular topic in current research on English writing teaching in China. Existing research has rarely delved into student engagement in multimodal composing in Chinese high school English teaching systematically. To address this gap, this study used a mixed-method approach and introduces multimodal composing to investigate its impact on high school students' engagement in English story continuation writing tasks. Findings show that the incorporation of multimodal elements significantly amplifies students' engagement across affective, behavioral, cognitive, and social dimensions. However, students' excessive focus on the graphic elements within multimodal compositions may have a negative impact on the narrative quality. While affirming the positive role of multimodal composing on student engagement, the study also identified the challenges in applying multimodal composing in the Chinese education context, providing insights for future research and pedagogical implementations.

Keywords: multimodal composing, student engagement, story continuation writing task, Chinese high school, English as a Foreign Language

1. Introduction

Multimodality posits that individual employs various modes, including but not limited to language, audio, images, and videos, to convey intended meanings in communication (Kress, 2010). In recent years, scholars have realized that the single-modal reading and writing activities in classrooms were unable to adapt to the rich multimodal literacy experiences in practice (New London Group, 1996). Therefore, multimodal pedagogies are implemented and incorporated into English teaching. In secondary schools, students have been increasingly encouraged to compose multimodal works that make use of both linguistic and non-linguistic resources in contexts where English is learned as a first or foreign language (Nash, 2018; Smith, Pacheco & Khorosheva, 2021). Previous research on multimodal composing in English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) classrooms has primarily focused on qualitative analyses of students' experiences and perceptions during multimodal composing. However, student engagement which refers to students' purposeful and deliberate participation with an active mindset in a learning activity or learning process (Reeve, Cheon & Jang., 2020), was less systematically investigated, especially in Chinese high school EFL contexts.

In China, story continuation writing task as a form of integrated reading-writing task is being vigorously promoted in high schools. It is regarded effective in promoting foreign language learning, requiring students to continue writing logically and coherently after reading an incomplete story (Ye, Ren & Zheng, 2021). In 2016, the National College Entrance Examination in Zhejiang Province included the story continuation writing task for the first time (The National Education Examinations Authority [NEEA], 2015), and it was subsequently adopted nationwide in 2021. While recent studies examining story continuation writing in Chinese high schools mainly focus on EFL students' writing fluency, accuracy, and strategy use (Peng, Wang & Lu, 2018; Shi, Huang & Lu, 2020), less is known about students' psychological factors. Existing research on psychological factors has mainly looked into writing enjoyment or anxiety (Zhu, Zhan & Yao, 2022). For student engagement, it is found that behavioral engagement uniquely mediated good writing performance, suggesting its pedagogical value (Zhu, Yao, Pang & Zhu, 2023). Despite the multimodal composing, the impact of implementing multimodal teaching to

student engagement in story continuation tasks remain under-researched.

To address these gaps, this study intends to incorporate multimodal composition into story continuation writing tasks in Chinese EFL high school classrooms through action research. It aims to address the following research questions: 1) Can incorporating multimodal composing in EFL story continuation writing tasks enhance student engagement? 2) If so, how do students perceive changes in their engagement after incorporating multimodal composing in EFL story continuation writing tasks?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Multimodal Composing in EFL Teaching

In the increasingly digitalized era, there is a growing need for constructing and interpreting multimodal texts (New London Group, 1996), and multimodal composing has been extensively discussed and explored by language and educational scholars. It is generally assumed that multimodal composing is a flexible writing approach that can be adapted to students' literacy experience in real life and applied to almost all learners and learning contexts (Hull, 2003; van Leeuwen, 2015). In recent years, many studies have incorporated multimodal composing into secondary language learning classrooms and discussed its influence on students (Nash, 2018; Smith et al., 2021). However, the implementation of multimodal composing in EFL classrooms has mostly been abroad, and only a small number of existing studies on Chinese EFL students have focused on advanced students, while secondary students have received less attention.

Empirical studies suggested that multimodal composing in secondary English classrooms may benefit students by changing their perceptions and experiences of English writing (Nash, 2018; Smith et al., 2021). According to Jiang (2018) and Smith et al. (2021), multimodal projects in writing instruction engaged students by providing expanded opportunities to explore and express their multilingual and multicultural identities with multiple modes. In a study conducted by Di Zhang and Yu (2022), Chinese EFL students reported finding digital multimodal work more enjoyable than traditional print-based work. They also reported an increase in writing motivation and interest due to the ability to write for authentic audiences. Kim and Belcher (2020) discovered that multimodal composing took much more time than traditional essay writing, which may indicate that EFL students were more engaged in writing or at least willing to devote time to writing multimodally.

However, it has been shown that EFL students may have negative views and experiences with multimodal composing. Studies on EFL multimodal composing failed to find any significant differences between innovative writing and traditional writing in promoting students' writing motivation (Kim & Belcher, 2020) and found the rather limited impacts of multimodal composing on facilitating students' investment in individual cases (Jiang, 2018). Completing multimodal composing projects was also regarded as an excessive learning burden for second-language learners in French classrooms (Hellmich, Castek, Smith, Floyd & Wen, 2021). Regardless of whether negative or positive perceptions and experiences were reported, most studies on EFL multimodal composing have examined how students viewed and what students experienced in EFL writing courses through multiple psychological concepts, such as student engagement and motivation. However, those studies failed to define these concepts within the writing setting where multimodality was incorporated into and apply them into analysis under a complete theoretical framework (Zenouzagh, Admiraal & Saab, 2023).

2.2 Student Engagement in EFL Writing

Engagement refers to a multidimensional construct incorporating affective, behavioral, cognitive, and social components (Alexander, 2018; Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004). According to the scale for assessing writing engagement developed by Parsons et al. (2023), affective writing engagement involves the attitudes and emotions expressed during writing. Behavioral writing engagement refers to the effort and attention put into writing. Cognitive writing engagement includes deep thinking and strategic acting while writing. Social writing engagement, on the other hand, centers on communication and collaboration with others to complete the writing task. Some studies have examined student engagement in EFL writing courses from three dimensions: affective, cognitive, and behavioral engagement (Fan & Xu, 2020; Fredricks et al., 2004; Yu, Jiang & Zhou, 2020). However, they have not always covered other dimensions, such as social writing engagement. Although some researchers have disagreed with distinguishing social engagement from behavioral engagement (Mercer, 2019), it is still of great teaching practical value to separately analyze student social engagement in writing classrooms. For example, teachers have reported that comprehending students' willingness to communicate their writing with peers has a positive impact on adjusting future writing instruction (Parsons et al., 2023).

Empirical studies have showed that EFL students tended to have better writing performance and outcomes when they were actively engaged in writing (Qi & Lapkin, 2001; Fredricks et al., 2004; Tao, Meng, Gao & Yang,

2022). Therefore, educational researchers have long been investigating ways to promote student engagement in EFL writing courses, and innovative institutional approaches have been studied for their potential to increase EFL student engagement (Rahimi & Zhang, 2021; Yu et al., 2020). Among these approaches, the multimodal teaching approach has received considerable attention in recent studies. The incorporation of multimodality into EFL classrooms has been found to enhance students' motivation and engagement in writing (Suwastini, Marantika, Adnyani, Mandala & Artini, 2021). However, most studies of student engagement implemented multimodal teaching by creating a multi-textual and multi-sensual writing environment for EFL students, rather than encouraging them to write multimodally. For instance, the research suggested that students were more engaged affectively and socially in a multimodal computer-mediated writing environment (Zenouzagh et al., 2023). Thus, investigations into the effects of multimodal composing on the engagement of EFL students are necessary. This research uses the concept and dimensions of student engagement by Parsons et al. (2023) to explore the role of multimodal composing in Chinese high school EFL writing classes.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants and Context

The research was conducted in Guangdong Province, China, involving 50 Grade 2 students from a senior high school in Guangzhou. These students, having just entered their second year, had only practiced story continuation writing once prior to the study. With limited knowledge and skills in continuation writing, they were eager to improve and open to trying new writing forms. This openness was facilitated by the reduced exam pressure compared to their final year of high school.

3.2 Research Design

This study employed action research as its methodology. According to Kemmis (2009), action research involves researchers proposing improvement plans for practical problems in social or educational contexts and obtaining results through continuous implementation, verification, reflection, and revision to enhance their understanding of the phenomenon under study. Additionally, this study utilized questionnaires and interviews as research instruments.

The action research followed a cyclical process of four stages: planning, action, observation, and reflection (see Table 1). In the planning stage, the primary tasks were to assess student engagement in traditional continuation writing tasks, understand the current content and format of these tasks, identify existing problems, and formulate hypotheses to address them. An action plan was developed based on data collected and analyzed from pre-tests, pre-questionnaires, and pre-interviews. During the action stage, the study implemented the action plan by incorporating multimodal composition into the continuation writing task to enhance student engagement. Post-tests, post-questionnaires, and post-interviews were conducted to collect data. The observation and reflection stages involved analyzing the data from the action stage, evaluating the effectiveness of multimodal composing in increasing student engagement, reflecting on any challenges encountered, and summarizing the major findings and limitations of the study.

Table 1. The four-step action research procedure

Objective	Planned procedure	Stage
To examine student engagement in the traditional continuation writing task	1) Conduct pre-test; 2) Conduct questionnaire survey and semi-structured interviews;	Planning
To identify the existing problems with the traditional continuation writing task and formulate hypotheses to explain and solve these problems	1) Analyze the data obtained from questionnaire survey and interviews in the pre-test; 2) Develop an action plan to incorporate multimodal composing into the current story continuation writing task;	
To investigate the impacts of the multimodal continuation writing task on students' writing engagement across four dimensions	1) Conduct post-test in accordance with the proposed action plan; 2) Conduct questionnaire survey and semi-structured interviews;	Action
	1) Compare and analyze the questionnaire survey data obtained from pre-test and post-test 2) Compare and analyze the interview data obtained from pre-test and post-test;	Observation
	1) Reflect on the problems presented in the adoption of multimodal composing; 2) Conclude on the major findings and limitations of this study.	Reflection

3.3 Data and Instruments

To investigate the impact of multimodal composing on student engagement in English continuation writing tasks, questionnaires were administered before and after the implementation of multimodal composing. This study adapted the Writing Engagement Scale (WES) by Parsons et al. (2023), which classifies student engagement in writing into four dimensions: affective, behavioral, cognitive, and social. The scale, originally designed for elementary school students, was revised and translated into Chinese to suit Chinese high school EFL students. The adapted questionnaire included 16 items divided into four parts based on the four dimensions of engagement. A 5-point Likert scale was used, where 1 = never, 2 = rarely, 3 = sometimes, 4 = often, and 5 = always. Descriptive statistical analysis using SPSS Statistics 26 was conducted to compare the quantitative differences in students' writing engagement across the four dimensions between the pre-test and post-test. According to Parsons et al. (2023), engagement scores are classified as low (1 to 2.5), moderate (2.5 to 3.5), and high (3.5 to 5).

To further explore students' self-perceived engagement in the continuation writing task, semi-structured interviews were conducted before and after incorporating multimodal composing. The interview outline was divided into five parts: affective, behavioral, cognitive, and social engagement subcomponents, and multimodal composing. A total of 24 students participated in both the pre and post interviews. Each interview lasted between 15 and 20 minutes and was conducted in Chinese. Guided by the research questions, we used NVivo for deductive thematic coding of the interview transcripts, following the six steps for thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). To achieve interrater reliability, we first independently coded the data and then compare our coding decisions to identify discrepancies. All discrepancies were discussed and resolved through consensus. All students quoted in the findings are anonymized.

Additionally, students' multimodal composing works of the continuation writing tasks for the pre-test and post-test were collected. Both tasks were part of the students' monthly tests. The pre-test writing task required the students to write a story about a taxi driver who helps a lonely old lady remember her past in the city. The post-test writing task required the students to write a story about a little girl who wants to buy a miracle to save her little brother. The themes of both stories were about kindness and true love.

3.4 The Implementation of the Action Research

The study conducted a round of action research over four weeks. As the participants were encountering the continuation writing task for the first time in their second year of high school, the pre-test material consisted of rewriting a task from their first monthly test. Following this, students participated in a questionnaire survey and interviews to provide insights into their engagement during the English story continuation task.

The action plan for the implementation stage was informed by data from the preparation stage, especially the interviews. To maintain consistency with the pre-test, the continuation writing task during implementation was based on the midterm test questions from the first semester of the second year. Students rewrote their work after receiving writing instruction, but in a multimodal format instead of traditional text. Identifying specific forms for multimodal composing was crucial. After considering the forms listed in Nash's (2018) study and the suggestions from participants, the study adopted picture books for the multimodal composing task.

Graphic novels, classified under comics by Cary (2004), were used as one of the multimodal text forms, as they have been frequently applied in empirical studies on multimodal composing (Pantaleo, 2013). Students were given three options for creating a graphic novel: using stickers, mobile software, or PowerPoint. The first option involved using paper stickers with text in notebooks (as shown in Figure 1). The second option is to utilize a mobile application called Niannian Shouzhang which enables users to create personalized multimodal products by providing rich templates and tools to record text, pictures, audio, video and other forms of content (as shown in Figure 2). The third option is to use PowerPoint, where students created slides mixing text and pictures (as shown in Figure 3).



Figure 1. A graphic novel composed with paper stickers



Figure 2. A graphic novel composed with a mobile application (Niannian Shouzhang)



Figure 3. A graphic novel composed with PowerPoint

The teaching action plans considered the students' first-time experience with English multimodal composing and their limited learning time. To reduce the difficulty and alleviate pressure, 50 students were divided into 14 groups based on free team formation principles to complete their writing projects: four groups of five students, three groups of four, four groups of three, and three groups of two. A detailed introduction to the teaching action plans for multimodal composing can be found in Table 2.

Table 2. The teaching action plans of incorporating multimodal composing into the story continuation writing task

Stage	Activities
Before the multimodal continuation writing task	1) Review the story content of this continuation writing task, learn how to construct the framework for the subsequent story plots, and accumulate useful vocabulary and sentences; 2) Appreciate and understand the three types of graphic novels, and learn the specific steps for creating these types of graphic novels.
During the multimodal continuation writing task	1) Form groups of 2-5 students freely and choose the type of graphic novel for the writing project independently; 2) Complete the writing project as a group.
After the multimodal continuation writing task	1) Collect the writing works of each group and compile them into a book for all students to read, appreciate, learn, and communicate together; 2) Comment on the outstanding writing works of the groups.

4. Results

4.1 Quantitative Findings from the Questionnaire Surveys

4.1.1 Students' Writing Engagement in Pre-test

The pre-test questionnaire survey revealed that the 50 participants had neutral engagement in affective, cognitive, and social dimensions, with social engagement being the lowest, from 2.62 to 3.44; whereas the engaged learners were only observed in the behavioral dimension, scoring from 3.30 to 3.75. Out of the 16 items on the scale, Item 4 of the affective engagement dimension received the lowest average score of 2.54, while Item 7 of the behavioral engagement dimension obtained the highest average score of 3.86. The data suggests that while most students may not have had a strong direct interest in the story continuation writing task, they still tried to complete it. Additionally, although most students did not actively engage in sharing their writing with peers, they showed a high level of positivity towards Item 15 with an average score of 3.44.

Table 3. Students' writing engagement in pre-test

No.	Items	Mean, $\alpha=0.86$	SD
Affective engagement			
1	When working on this story continuation writing task, I was interested in what I was writing.	3.06	0.99
2	Working on this story continuation writing task was boring.	3.04	0.96
3	When working on this story continuation writing task, I felt good.	3.06	0.93
4	I would like to complete this story continuation writing task like this again.	2.54	1.12
Behavioral engagement			
5	I stayed focused when working on this story continuation writing task.	3.30	0.85
6	I kept trying on this story continuation writing task even if it was difficult.	3.44	0.92
7	I tried hard to do well on this story continuation writing task.	3.86	0.82
8	I worked as hard as I could on this story continuation writing task.	3.76	0.97
Cognitive engagement			
9	When working on this story continuation writing task, I reread to see if I could make it better.	3.16	1.01
10	When working on this story continuation writing task, I thought carefully about the words I used.	3.26	0.96
11	I asked myself questions as I was writing to make sure my writing made sense.	3.06	0.9
12	When working on this story continuation writing task, I reviewed my writing and made changes to make it better.	3.06	0.93
Social engagement			
13	When working on this story continuation writing task, I talked with other students about my writing.	2.72	1.1
14	As I worked on this story continuation writing task, I wanted to share it with others.	2.62	1.07
15	I enjoy it when my parents share their writing.	3.44	0.98
16	I can think of at least one person who would want to read this writing.	2.82	1.11

4.1.2 Students' Writing Engagement in Post-test

As shown in Table 4, compared to the pre-test questionnaire scores, students' writing engagement improved significantly in all four dimensions in post-test, with affective engagement, cognitive participation, and social engagement showing the most significant improvement. Regarding the affective engagement, Item 4 was

noteworthy as its score had increased from 2.54 in the previous survey to 3.62 in the later survey. This might indicate that students' interest in the story continuation writing task had generally increased after the introduction of multimodal composing, and they were therefore more willing to continue writing in a similar form. In addition, as for the significant improvement in the social engagement, Item 13, Item 14, and Item 16 in this dimension showed obvious improvement from the previous survey, with their scores increasing from 2.72 to 3.84, 2.62 to 3.9, and 2.82 to 3.84, respectively. Comparing the results of the questionnaire survey in the pre-test, the students showed not only a strong interest in other writing works, but also a stronger willingness to share and discuss their own work with others in this multimodal continuation writing task.

Table 4. Students' writing engagement in post-test

No.	Items	Mean, $\alpha=0.86$	SD
Affective engagement			
1	When working on this story continuation writing task, I was interested in what I was writing.	3.74	0.96
2	Working on this story continuation writing task was boring.	3.72	0.92
3	When working on this story continuation writing task, I felt good.	3.94	0.88
4	I would like to complete this story continuation writing task like this again.	3.62	0.94
Behavioral engagement			
5	I stayed focused when working on this story continuation writing task.	3.54	0.98
6	I kept trying on this story continuation writing task even if it was difficult.	3.76	0.71
7	I tried hard to do well on this story continuation writing task.	4.06	0.73
8	I worked as hard as I could on this story continuation writing task.	4	0.77
Cognitive engagement			
9	When working on this story continuation writing task, I reread to see if I could make it better.	3.84	0.86
10	When working on this story continuation writing task, I thought carefully about the words I used.	3.9	0.83
11	I asked myself questions as I was writing to make sure my writing made sense.	3.72	0.8
12	When working on this story continuation writing task, I reviewed my writing and made changes to make it better.	3.74	0.82
Social engagement			
13	When working on this story continuation writing task, I talked with other students about my writing.	3.52	1.08
14	As I worked on this story continuation writing task, I wanted to share it with others.	3.56	1.1
15	I enjoy it when my parents share their writing.	4	0.87
16	I can think of at least one person who would want to read this writing.	3.84	0.86

4.2 Qualitative Findings from the Interviews

4.2.1 Affective Engagement

Based on the interview results, most students reported increased interest, enjoyment and sense of accomplishment after the application of multimodal composing. However, some students also found this writing task excessively time-consuming and effort-intensive, with little benefit to improving their writing skills.

During the interviews, six students reported that the multimodal story continuation writing task was intriguing and enjoyable, and inspired their creativity. Additionally, many students felt that after investing significant time

and effort, they had produced a visually appealing written piece that gave them a greater sense of pride and achievement. For instance, two students described their emotions during the process of composing this assignment:

I enjoy the writing process because it is interesting and different from what we did before. Before, we just sat in front of a paper and wrote with a pen, which was really boring. (Int15)

Although there were some difficulties along the way, it felt great to put our works together with other group members. After completing all the works, there was a great sense of achievement. (Int12)

In this multimodal story continuation writing task, a student had some unique ideas and replaced the images of the story characters with her favorite anime characters. This allowed her to combine her passions with the multimodal composing assignment, igniting her unprecedented enthusiasm for English writing. She remarked:

I feel like this story continuation writing task is very fun, mainly because I can create for my interests and hobbies. I can display my preferred anime couple, and it is the most enjoyable. (Int4)

One group utilized online meetings to discuss and create their graphic novel. According to one of the group members, this collaborative environment facilitated multimodal composing and provided an enjoyable experience for the whole group:

We actually did it together on the phone, each person divided tasks to find necessary materials. We discovered a lot of fun pictures and audio, so it was more and more enjoyable as we worked. (Int17)

On the other hand, many students highlighted the impracticality of employing multimodal composing in high school English story continuation tasks, citing excessive time and energy consumption, and the absence of tangible improvements in writing proficiency. For example, when asked to compare traditional writing with multimodal composing, a student gave a neutral response:

I cannot say which form of writing is better, both may be similar. However, if we use this writing form every time, we do story continuation writing exercises, it takes more time, and the efficiency is not so high. Therefore, I think this multimodal composing can supplement traditional writing and deepen our understanding of story continuation writing, so that we can write more confidently in the exam next time. (Post18)

Eventually, it is important to note that for consistency with the pre-test and to account for potential time and challenge constraints faced by students in completing the multimodal composing assignment, the present study required students to collaborate on rewriting the story continuation task from their mid-term exam. However, as a student pointed out during the interview:

I think if we were given a new writing task for this new form of writing, the effect might be better. Because in this assignment, you do not go through the process of creating and writing a story, so everyone might feel less bored. Since we can just use the text we wrote in the previous exam and then add to it, we can basically skip the part of writing the text and focus more on the fun part. (Int8)

4.2.2 Behavioral Engagement

Regarding students' behavioral engagement, the interviews show that almost all students spent more time on this multimodal composing task than on traditional writing task. Additionally, when faced with the new challenges presented by this form of writing, most students were willing to tackle them, remained committed to their graphic novel, and exerted their utmost effort to complete their work.

Nineteen students reported spending an average of 20 to 30 minutes on traditional story continuation writing tasks. When it came to multimodal composing tasks, students responsible for creating graphics typically spent 2 to 3 hours, and in some cases, up to 5 or 6 hours. Students assigned to text creation required an additional 10 to 20 minutes compared to traditional writing forms. For instance, a student who produced her graphic novel using Niannian Shouzhang reflected on the writing process:

I first chose the background color of my graphic novel, and then the image-text layout. After that, I split the composition into several paragraphs, posted them on the page, and then searched for various stickers and pictures, which took me a long time. I think searching for the appropriate images and layout design took the most time. (Int5)

Another student who was responsible for writing the textual part of the multimodal work stated:

I was responsible for writing the story and it took me about 30 to 40 minutes, while normally it only takes about 20 to 30 minutes. I spent more time writing so that the work would be easier for the next student. (Int1)

Additionally, most students reported facing challenges while engaging in this new form of story continuation

writing. These challenges included designing layouts, searching for suitable image materials, and operating unfamiliar software. However, they were able to overcome these obstacles during the actual creation of their graphic novels. For example, a student had some operational issues when using her mobile phone to create her graphic novel with Niannian Shouzhang:

At the beginning, when I was trying to place the images, I felt they did not look good, but I did not know how to adjust them. There are some operational issues... but after becoming more familiar with the operation, it was okay. (Int9)

As a result of investing significant time and effort, the most students who participated in graphic creation believed they remained focused on the task and put forth their best effort to complete their work. However, it was less apparent for students who were only responsible for providing the textual component. One student mentioned:

I just typed out the continuation writing task I did in the exam on my phone. There was no need to particularly concentrate on it, right? (Int6)

4.2.3 Cognitive Engagement

Regarding cognitive engagement, the interview results showed that students generally prioritized the quality of their story continuation writing when conducted in a multimodal form. Specifically, they placed emphasis on the visual aesthetics and organization of graphic novels. Additionally, students were more likely to review and revise their multimodal works. However, graphic creation in this form of writing may have either facilitated or hindered students' text creation.

Eleven interviewed students stated that they paid more attention to the quality of their multimodal works in this continuation writing task. This emphasis was particularly evident among the nine students who mainly worked on graphic creation. The students' primary concern was the aesthetic appeal, harmony, and organization of their final works. For instance, when creating a graphic novel, a student meticulously designed its layout:

In fact, I used various modes of expression in my graphic novel, such as combining large paragraphs of text with accompanying images and presenting the story plots through dialogue. So, I thought that my layout was rich, novel, and thoughtful, reflecting my careful attention to detail. (Int15)

In traditional story continuation writing work, most students tended to neglect reviewing and revising their written works. However, when creating their graphic novels, nearly all students who participated in the design of graphic part reported that they continuously reviewed and made modifications and adjustments to their works throughout the creative process until they were satisfied with the final product. For example, a student recalled:

At the beginning, I did the first part of my work well, but I met a little difficulty in the second part, which was that it did not match the style of the first part, so I kept revising it and finally changed it to this way. (Int16)

Furthermore, some students reported that creating the graphic part significantly motivated them to refine and perfect the text in their works. For instance, one student stated that he spent an hour revising and polishing the written part of his story that he had written during the examination. Another student also commented:

I think if your pictures and layout are already so good, then your article does not write better, you will be sorry for your wonderful pictures. So, I think the picture will also affect the quality of the text. (Int8)

However, the feedback from more students indicated that the picture could have a negative impact on the quality of the written text. For instance, one student was engrossed in creating PowerPoint slides with her group and overlooked the quality of the story's text:

Our focus on making interesting slides meant that we neglected the quality of the written text. (Int17)

4.2.4 Social Engagement

Compared to the interview results obtained from the pre-test, almost all students showed a significant enhancement in their social engagement throughout this multimodal story continuation writing task. The task encouraged students to appreciate each other's multimodal works and facilitated the exchange of opinions and ideas. However, the majority of students also candidly admitted that when reading their graphic novels, they focused more on the presentation of graphic elements than on the story text itself.

During the interviews, eleven students expressed their willingness to share their graphic novels with their peers, as they believed that their work was of higher quality compared to traditional story continuation writing. For instance, a student mentioned how eager she was to share the creative parts of her work with others:

I have done so many creative things in my graphic novel, and I want to share it with others and let them see how

I arranged the graphics and layouts. (Int9)

Furthermore, 17 students reported an increased willingness to read and comment on their peers' graphic novels. However, the main attraction for the students was the visually appealing graphic elements rather than the narrative story content, which was in line with many students' general perception of multimodal composing:

Perhaps most of the time, we mainly focus on the graphic images rather than the written text. (Int2)

5. Discussion

After conducting two rounds of questionnaire surveys and semi-structured interviews, this study found that incorporating multimodal composing into English story continuation tasks significantly and effectively increased Chinese high school students' engagement in writing across affective, behavioral, cognitive, and social dimensions. Additionally, the research examined how the multimodal continuation writing task facilitated students' engagement, revealing its complex and diverse impacts on their involvement in writing.

Multimodal composing had the potential to significantly enhance EFL students' writing engagement and provide them with more positive writing experiences compared to traditional writing, as noted in Nash's (2018) review of multimodal composing in secondary English-as-a-first-language classrooms. EFL students typically encountered difficulties with English expression and plot development in traditional story continuation writing tasks. However, this study suggested that combining pictures with English story creation could inspire students' interest and creativity more. Similar to what Di Zhang and Yu (2022) found, this may be due to students' enthusiasm for graphic novels, which mix text with pictures, reducing the monotony and creative challenges of English writing. Moreover, most students tended to invest more time and effort in producing multimodal works and making more revisions and improvements during the writing process, as observed by Di Zhang and Yu (2022) and Jiang (2018).

Building upon previous research, this study explored students' interactions and communication with their peers during multimodal composing. The findings supported the positive role of multimodal composing in facilitating students' communication and sharing of their written works with others (Harman & Shin, 2018). As with Jiang's (2018) case, students may have greater confidence in their carefully crafted multimodal works compared to traditional text-based works, leading them to seek feedback and suggestions from others. Another possible explanation was the group collaboration used in this study, which significantly reduced students' shyness and anxiety when sharing their graphic novels.

While acknowledging the positive impact of multimodal composing on student engagement in writing across four dimensions, this study also identified negative perceptions and experiences among students regarding their engagement with multimodal story continuation writing. Firstly, there are interpersonal differences among students regarding the enjoyment and perceived burden of multimodal composing (Kim & Belcher, 2020). This variance could stem from varying levels of creativity, or different learning styles and preferences. Such diversity in student responses can lead to unequal levels of participation and benefit from multimodal tasks. Secondly, there were concerns that it may not necessarily enhance their English writing proficiency. This finding corroborated the view of previous research which argued that multimodal composing failed to be appropriate for all learners or learning contexts (Hellmich et al., 2021).

In addition to Jiang's (2018) case study, which reported that multimodal composing consumed significant time and effort without necessarily improving students' second language writing skills, this study found another reason for students' concerns with multimodal composing. Similar to Allagui's (2023) findings, students in this study appreciated multimodal composing less for its potential to enhance traditional writing skills. They tended to focus more on the novel and aesthetically pleasing images in their work rather than the textual narrative. This emphasis on visuals was evident both in the creation of graphic novels and in sharing and discussing their work with peers. Consequently, some students' performance on textual writing declined compared to traditional story continuation writing.

However, similar to Hellmich et al. (2021)'s reevaluation of the advantages of multimodal composing, the underlying factors contributing to Chinese high school students' negative perceptions and experiences with English multimodal story continuation writing task should be attributed to the fact that innovative writing forms challenged their test-oriented mentalities and basic understanding of English learning within the current educational context. Despite the perception of multimodal composing as a method for second language learners to rethink the content and modalities required for meaning construction (Shi et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2021), the current study discovered that students generally viewed multimodal composing as a form of creative writing that could potentially enhance their writing interest and motivation, with few students being aware of its profound

learning benefits and significance. One possible explanation was that Chinese high school students faced the enormous test pressure created by the macro educational environment. Cognitively, they were unable to escape the stereotype of learning English story continuation writing task for exams. Psychologically, they failed to eliminate their anxiety around preparing for exams and obtaining good grades. Behaviorally, they were left with little time and energy to devote to the relatively complex and time-consuming multimodal composing tasks.

These findings prompt educators to reflect on how to effectively apply multimodal composing in China's complex high school English classrooms. Factors that need to be considered include students' interests and preferences, which affect the specific form of multimodal composing, as well as external learning conditions and environments, which affect the scale and frequency of its implementation. Furthermore, while encouraging the use of multimodal composing, it is important to guide students in understanding the fundamental principles of multimodal composing and reflecting on the advantages of using multimodal composition for constructing meaning and learning English. This approach may assist Chinese high school students in overcoming cognitive and psychological constraints in exam-oriented environments, which could significantly enhance their engagement in English story continuation writing tasks.

6. Conclusion

The study addresses the theoretical and practical gaps in the impact of multimodal composing on students' writing engagement by introducing it into Chinese high school English story continuation tasks. Firstly, the comparative analysis of the questionnaire surveys from the pre-test and post-test indicated that multimodal continuation writing task significantly enhanced Chinese high school students' writing engagement in four dimensions: affective engagement, behavioral engagement, cognitive engagement, and social engagement. Secondly, the study analyzed the semi-structured interview data according to four dimensions of writing engagement. For affective engagement, students enjoyed the multimodal continuation writing task but also recognized its limitations for ideal use in high school classrooms in China. For behavioral engagement, most students invested more time and effort, demonstrated greater focus, and exerted more effort in the writing process compared to traditional writing. However, in terms of cognitive engagement, students reviewed and revised their work more frequently than in traditional writing. Nevertheless, the study observed that students tended to focus more on images, neglecting the quality of the written text during the creation process. Similarly, in terms of social engagement, students significantly improved their appreciation and discussions of each other's multimodal works. However, their attention remained predominantly focused on images.

These research findings contribute to an enhanced theoretical comprehension of the specific influence of multimodal composing on students' writing engagement. By delving into a more detailed and professional division of students' writing engagement, the study uncovers how multimodal composing enhances it from four dimensions. Moreover, the action research provides valuable insights for the future implementation of multimodal composing in Chinese high school classrooms, challenging the misconception that multimodal composing can be flexibly integrated into any student or learning context. The research encourages educators to reevaluate and explore effective strategies for incorporating multimodal composing in line with Chinese high school students' learning experiences of, ultimately benefiting their educational development.

However, the study had limitations, including a small sample size of 50 students with generally low self-assessed English proficiency, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, conducting only one round of teaching action research may have led to discrepancies between planned actions and actual implementation. Future research may expand by conducting multiple rounds of action research to provide more comprehensive insights and investigate suitable forms and scales of multimodal composing for Chinese high school story continuation writing tasks.

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