

# A Tentative Discussion on How to Help Junior High School Students Improve Their Writing Skills Through Post-Reading Activities

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**Abstract:** The present situation of English writing in junior high schools includes the following aspects: first, students are weak in English writing because they lack vocabulary and do not use vocabulary appropriately; second, they often make grammar errors in writing; as a result, they do not obtain high scores in English writing; third, they form sentences based on their habit of thinking in their mother-tongue because of the influence of mother tongue transfer; in that case, Chinglish often appears in their compositions, and this is one of the main reasons they do not obtain high scores in English writing; finally, they do not arrange their compositions well, so most of their compositions are loosely organized. As reading and writing are designed as two separated parts in most English textbooks used in China, it is a challenge for teachers to design post-reading activities to integrate reading and writing because it is time-consuming. Based on the present situation of students' English writing and the teaching situation of English writing in junior high schools, this paper will discuss how to utilize post-reading activities to help students memorize vocabulary effectively, use vocabulary and grammar appropriately, avoid the influence of mother-tongue transfer, and build compact structures, so that they can improve their English writing skills. This discussion is based on the awareness of integrating reading with writing and making reading a supportive element of writing by utilizing post-reading activities.

**Keywords:** Post-reading activities; English writing in junior high schools; Writing skills

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## 1. Introduction

English writing plays an important part in the learning of English. In almost all English examinations, English writing accounts for 12.5% of the entire paper. In English learning, English writing is the most difficult part for the majority of students. "For L2 learners, writing is the most difficult skill to master <sup>[1]</sup>." For teachers, it is a challenge to teach English writing effectively. Writing has been taught separately from reading using textbooks, which makes writing even more difficult. However, there is considerable recognition of the need to teach reading and writing as a whole as well as transforming reading into a support for writing through the use of post-reading activities. Different researchers have different ideas about the purpose of post-reading activities. For example, Lin Caihui holds the view that post-reading activities can help teachers check students' reading outcomes and help them consolidate new language knowledge <sup>[2]</sup>. Dai Junrong and Zhen Chunhong believe that post-reading activities are designed to help students internalize language knowledge and later transfer it and use it appropriately <sup>[3]</sup>. Ni Shijun asserts that post-reading activities can be used to help students understand reading materials better and perceive

the structure and sequence of thought in those reading materials <sup>[4]</sup>. Some researchers hold different views about the function of post-reading activities. According to Barnett, some post-reading activities can help students thoroughly analyze reading materials <sup>[5]</sup>. They do not only help students understand the text better, but also prepare them for writing <sup>[6]</sup>. Post-reading activities can help students acquire language and develop the skills of turning input into output as well as turning language learning into language use <sup>[7]</sup>.

This paper discusses how to improve junior high school students' English writing skills by utilizing post-reading activities to help them memorize vocabulary, use vocabulary, grammar, and lexical chunks appropriately, as well as build compact structures. This paper will first discuss the present situation of students' English writing in junior high schools and then the present ways of teaching writing in junior high schools. Finally, several post-reading activities that can be used to help students solve the aforementioned problems and improve their English writing will be suggested.

## **2. Present situation of English writing in junior high schools**

In this section, the present situation of students' English writing in junior high schools will be discussed. Altogether, there are four aspects, namely the lack of vocabulary, grammatical errors, the influence of mother-tongue transfer, and loose structural organization.

### **2.1. Lack of vocabulary**

In English writing, vocabulary is extremely important. Students in junior high schools will not be able to construct sentences that express their thoughts clearly and adequately unless they have a strong command of numerous words. These students learn new words mostly during English lessons and attempt to memorize them after school. However, during the weekdays, most of them do not have enough time to learn a large number of new words since they constantly have too much homework to complete. Some students are unable to recall the words they are attempting to memorize; other students, on the other hand, are hesitant to memorize new words because they are afraid of the challenge in reciting them. As a result, most junior high school students lack vocabulary. This is one of the main reasons they are weak in English writing.

### **2.2. Grammatical errors**

It is well recognized that for junior high school students in China to master and apply basic grammar are challenging tasks. As a result, they often make grammatical errors in English writing. Students are unable to master the usage of singular and plural forms of nouns very well; they often use them interchangeably. Additionally, the use of irregular verbs or tenses also pose a challenge for these students. Therefore, they often use them incorrectly in English writing. They do not have a clear understanding of the basic rule of subject-verb concord. These kinds of errors are repeatedly found in their English writing. It is difficult for teachers to assist every student in correcting all the mistakes made. In that case, it is not easy for students to achieve good results in English writing.

### **2.3. Influence of mother tongue transfer**

Junior high school students tend to use their mother tongue to communicate with their family members, friends, classmates, teachers, and even strangers on a daily basis. It is a habit for them to think in their mother tongue. They have no opportunities to use English in their daily learning and conversations. Most of them only use English when they have English lessons at school. Therefore, when they need to write English compositions, they often construct sentences based on their habit of thinking in Chinese. Therefore, their English compositions are brimming with Chinglish. This is one of the main reasons they do not achieve excellent results in English writing.

## **2.4. Loose structural organization**

The majority of junior high school students find it difficult to organize their English compositions with compact structures in view of the following reasons:

- (1) students are unable to arrange their compositions well;
- (2) students' compositions are incoherent because they do not use appropriate transitional words between sentences and paragraphs;
- (3) students are unable to tightly integrate the language into their compositions;
- (4) students are unable to grasp the continuity and structures of texts as well as the diversity of sentences well.

## **3. Present ways of teaching writing in junior high schools**

In junior high schools in China, writing have been taught independently from reading. The teaching of English writing is a challenging task for many teachers. There are several reasons teachers teach English writing in this way. Firstly, reading and writing are divided into two different parts in most English textbooks used in China. For teachers, it is a challenge to integrate reading and writing by designing and carrying out post-reading activities because they are time-consuming. Secondly, although teachers have attempted to design post-reading activities that are related to writing for students, they do not have enough time to include them in their lessons. This is because all reading and writing tasks in textbooks have to be covered within a certain period of time based on the syllabus.

According to research, many other English textbooks besides those used in junior high schools in China, which provide suggestions on how to teach English efficiently, are usually designed with divided components of "Teaching Reading" and "Teaching Writing." Taking "A Course in English Language Teaching <sup>[8]</sup>" as an example, "Teaching Reading" is in Chapter 10, but "Teaching Writing" is in Chapter 11. Taking "Methodology in Language Teaching" as another example, "Teaching Reading" is in Section 12, but "Teaching Writing" is in Section 13. English teachers may learn specific and useful methods on how to teach reading and writing from these textbooks, but these textbooks do not provide professional suggestions and ideas for integrating reading with writing as well as transforming reading into a support for writing.

However, some people are aware that by integrating reading and writing in a reasonable way, reading may become a support for writing. According to Ferris and Hedgcock, writing is dependent on the writer's purposeful interactions with the readers <sup>[9]</sup>. Therefore, writing cannot and should not be isolated as a cognitive or academic activity. Ferris and Hedgcock proposed that if teachers are interested in L2 learning and teaching, they should understand the relationship between reading and writing, the socio-educational aspects of reading and writing, as well as their implications for classroom instruction <sup>[9]</sup>.

## **4. Post-reading activities for teaching writing**

Renandya and Jacobs suggest that teachers can use post-reading activities to help students consolidate what they have learned from reading and help them make progress in writing <sup>[10]</sup>. For teachers in junior high schools, it is pressing to find solutions to deal with students' problems in writing. In view of the benefits of post-reading activities, teachers can use several post-reading activities to teach writing.

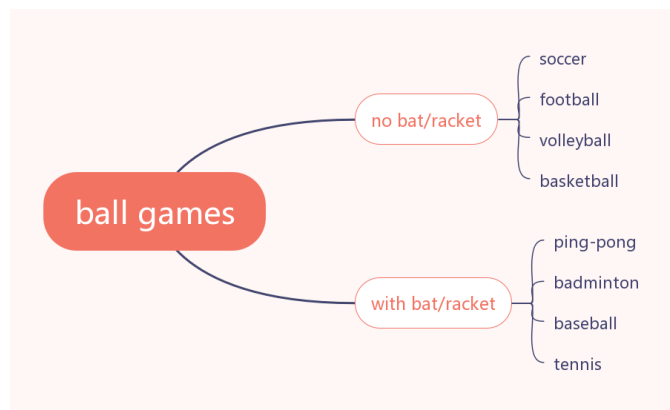
### **4.1. Post-reading activities for vocabulary memorization and its appropriate use**

In order to help students memorize new words, an exercise can be designed for students to match new words with their definitions after reading. Taking the reading passage in 3a under Unit 7 in Book 4 as an example, students can be asked to complete a task, as shown in **Figure 1**.

- |                |                  |   |
|----------------|------------------|---|
| (1) adult      | <del>_____</del> | (a) a situation that something or someone may be destroyed completely |
| (2) bamboo     | <del>_____</del> | (b) the state being excited   |
| (3) endangered | <del>_____</del> | (c) fully developed person  |
| (4) research   | <del>_____</del> | (d) a tall tropical plant with hard, hollow stems                     |
| (5) excitement | <del>_____</del> | (e) try to discover facts about something                             |

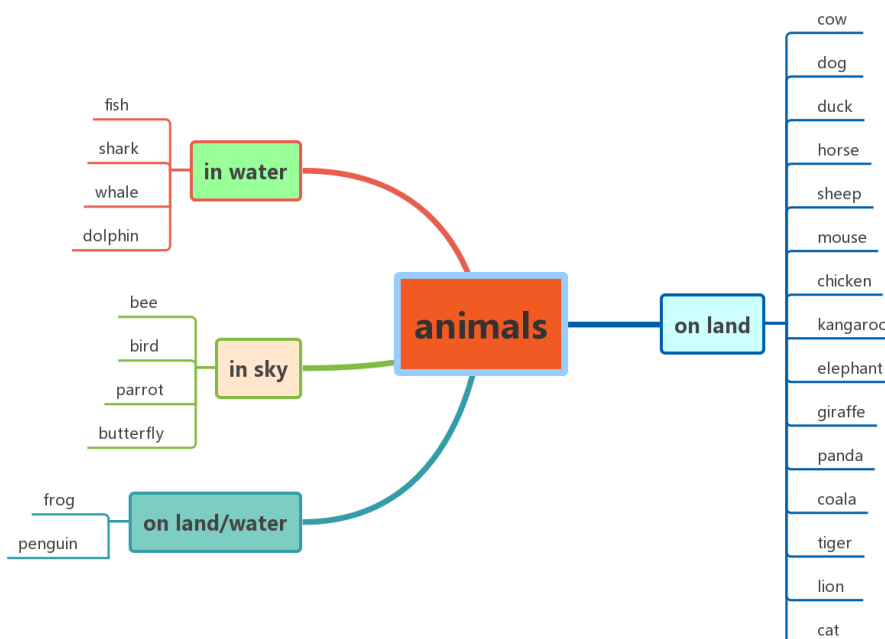
**Figure 1.** Matching words to their definitions

Teachers can also guide students to memorize by using mind maps. Taking Unit 5 in Book 1 as an example, when teaching vocabulary concerning ball games, teachers can guide students to draw a mind map, as shown in **Figure 2**.



**Figure 2.** A mind map of ball games

Taking Unit 5 in Book 2 as an example, when teaching vocabulary concerning animals, teachers can guide students to also draw a mind map, as shown in **Figure 3**.



**Figure 3.** A mind map of animals

In order to help students learn how to use the new words they have learned, an exercise on word collocation can be designed. For example, when students are unable to distinguish the differences between the phrasal verbs of “look up” and “look for,” teachers can design activities based on real-life situations to help students distinguish them; for instance, by asking the students to complete the following sentences by using the correct phrasal verbs:

- (1) “Tomorrow, we will have a look at Section B under Unit 8. Please preview it and \_\_\_\_\_ new words in the dictionary.”
- (2) “We are going to design a mind map on food and drinks. You can \_\_\_\_\_ useful information on the internet.”

In such scenarios, more options can be given to students to choose from, such as “look at” and “look after.” Students should then be guided to think of a similar or new situation that connects to real-life experiences, so that they can consolidate their understanding in using these phrasal verbs. Penny Ur claims that learners remember words better if they have some personal significance or emotional connection <sup>[8]</sup>.

#### 4.2. Post-reading activities for appropriate use of grammar

Filling-in-the-blank tasks can be designed for students after they have finished reading. Taking Unit 2 in Book 4 as an example, students can be asked to complete the following sentences with the correct form of the words given:

- (1) “We need some \_\_\_\_\_ (volunteer) to help clean up the city park.” (volunteers)
- (2) “We are making some signs \_\_\_\_\_ (warn) people not to swim in the river.” (to warn)
- (3) “We have to put off \_\_\_\_\_ (have) the sports meeting because of the bad weather.” (having)
- (4) “I \_\_\_\_\_ (use) to live in Shanghai, but now I live in Beijing.” (used)
- (5) “He expects his friends \_\_\_\_\_ (come) to his birthday party.” (to come)

#### 4.3. Post-reading activities for preventing the influence of mother-tongue transfer

In order to avoid the influence of mother-tongue transfer, teachers can guide students to find and underline or highlight lexical chunks in the passage they read. Taking the reading passage in 3a under Unit 5 in Book 4 as an example (**Figure 4**), after reading the passage, students can be guided to find the lexical trunks in the reading material according to the Chinese meanings that the teachers have written on the white board.

1. What was the weather like before the heavy rain started?  
2. What was the neighborhood like after the storm?


**The Storm Brought People Closer Together**

Ben could hear strong winds outside his home in Alabama. Black clouds were making the sky very dark. With no light outside, it felt like midnight. The news on TV reported that a heavy rainstorm was in the area.

Everyone in the neighborhood was busy. Ben’s dad was putting pieces of wood over the windows while his mom was making sure the flashlights and radio were working. She also put some candles and matches on the table.

Ben was helping his mom make dinner when the rain began to beat heavily against the windows. After dinner, they tried to play a card game, but it was hard to have fun with a serious storm happening outside.

Ben could not sleep at first. He finally fell asleep when the wind was dying down at around 3:00 a.m. When he woke up, the sun was rising. He went outside with his family and found the neighborhood in a mess. Fallen trees, broken windows and rubbish were everywhere. They joined the neighbors to help clean up the neighborhood together. Although the storm broke many things apart, it brought families and neighbors closer together.



**Figure 4.** A reading passage in 3a under Unit 5 in Book 4

After the students have completed their search for these lexical chunks, their answers should be checked, the basic forms of the lexical chunks found in the passage should be explained, and more options and examples should be given to help students understand how to use them. Understanding and memorizing these lexical chunks are not enough; teachers should encourage students to make sentences by using these lexical chunks.

- (1) “feel like” – “I am not feeling very well today, so I don’t feel like eating.”
- (2) “make sure” – “You should make sure you can get to school on time in the morning.”
- (3) “tried to” – “I tried to make a cake by myself yesterday, and I made it successfully.”
- (4) “It is hard/difficulty/easy/... (for sb.)” – “It is hard for Chinese students to learn English well.”
- (5) “at first” – “I didn’t like documentaries at first, but after I watched ‘A Bite of China,’ I love watching documentaries from then on.”
- (6) “fall asleep” – “I argued with my best friend yesterday, and I could not fall asleep last night.”
- (7) “died down” – “After two or three days, the typhoon died down slowly.”
- (8) “wake up” – “I have a meeting at 9 a.m. this morning, please wake me up at 8.30.”
- (9) “in a mess” – “Mom is very angry with us because the living room is in a mess.”
- (10) “clean up” – “If you want to be a volunteer, you can help to clean up the campus.”

Making sentences is a good way for students to learn lexical chunks more quickly and easily. As lexical chunks are combinations of forms and functions<sup>[11]</sup>, they can be memorized and stored as wholes in students’ minds. When students need to use lexical chunks to make sentences, they can retrieve them as wholes from their minds. If a human brain gains familiarity with a certain language task, it will immediately carry out the instructions that have previously been carried out, rather than going through the normal routine of processing the language task<sup>[12]</sup>. It not only helps students save time in processing language, but also in writing English compositions idiomatically. In this way, students can avoid the influence of mother tongue transfer in their English writing.

#### 4.4. Post-reading activities for improving structural organization

Guiding junior high school students to locate transitional words, such as “first,” “then,” “next,” “finally,” “and,” “besides,” “what’s more,” “but,” “however,” “as a result,” and “therefore,” is an effective way to help them build compact structures. Teachers should provide examples to help students better understand how to use these words and then encourage them to use some of these words in their compositions. If students have the awareness of using transitional words in English writing, they will be able to organize their writing in a compact structure.

Another effective way that can help junior high school students build compact structures is to guide them in analyzing the structure of the reading material and in composing imitative writing. Taking the reading passage in 2b under Unit 5 in Book 4 as an example, teachers can design the following post-reading activity to help students analyze the structure of the passage:

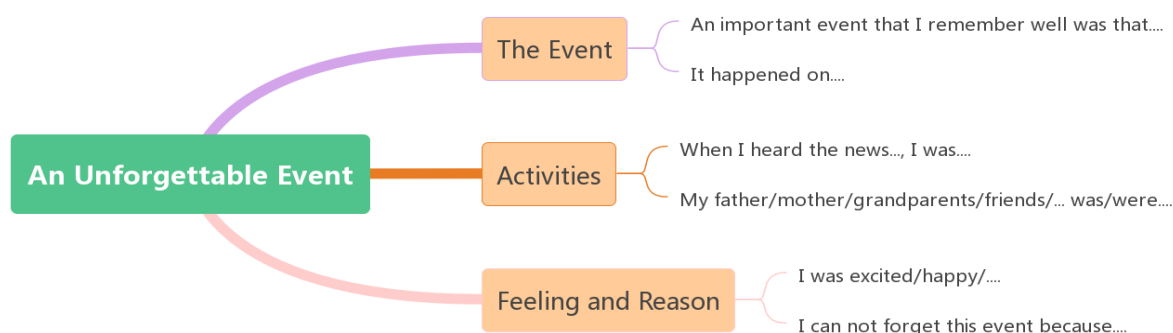
##### “An Unforgettable Event”

[An important event that I remember well was that the terrorists took down the World Trade Center. It happened on September 11, 2001.] – [The Event]

[When I heard the news of this event, I was a school student, and I was having math class. My father was on his way to the office, and my mother was shopping in the market. My grandparents were taking the dog for a walk in the park.] – [Activities]

[I was very frightened. This event is unforgettable because it reminds me that it is not easy to attain safety and peace.] – [Feelings and Reason]

Teachers can help students to find useful sentence structures from the reading material. Before writing, they can draw a mind map that consists of a general outline and useful sentence structures based on the passage they analyzed (**Figure 5**).



**Figure 5.** A mind map consisting of a general outline and useful sentence structures

After completing this task, students should then attempt to write a composition with the theme “An Unforgettable Event” based on the outline and sentence structures in the mind map.

If teachers train their students to analyze text structures via the aforementioned ways, students will be able to perceive the text structures used in the reading material, and they will gain the skill of organizing their writing in similar ways.

## 5. Conclusion

Based on the discussion above, it can be concluded that integrating reading and writing as well as transforming reading into a support for writing by designing and carrying out post-reading activities are effective ways to teach writing in junior high schools. Post-reading activities can help junior high school students memorize vocabulary effectively and use them appropriately. Additionally, these activities can help them learn to use basic grammar properly. Moreover, they will be able to avoid the influence of mother-tongue transfer through these activities. Finally, post-reading activities can also help them to build compact structures in their English writing. Since post-reading activities have positive effects on junior high school students’ English writing skills, English teachers in junior high schools in China should design and carry out post-reading activities on a regular basis to teach writing. On the other hand, junior high school textbook designers should have the awareness of integrating reading and writing as a whole and avoid separating reading and writing; rather, they should attempt to exploit as much reading materials as possible and design suitable post-reading activities that support writing.

## Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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