

Implications of Tao Xingzhi's Life Education Theory for Teaching Strategies in Junior High School English Writing

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Abstract: Junior high school English writing instruction is a crucial component of English teaching, playing a significant role in enhancing students' language proficiency. Tao Xingzhi's life education theory, which emphasizes "Life as education," "Society as school," and the "Integration of teaching, learning, and doing," provides a fresh perspective for junior high school English writing instruction. Under the guidance of the new curriculum standards, junior high English teaching has improved in aspects such as emphasizing the integrated use of language and focusing on students' central role, thereby raising higher expectations for frontline English teachers. However, current challenges include superficial design concepts in writing instruction, a lack of authentic life contexts in teaching, and insufficient student writing abilities. This paper aims to explore the educational value of applying Tao Xingzhi's life education theory to junior high English writing instruction. It proposes life-oriented writing teaching strategies across three dimensions based on this theory. The goal is to promote the integration of real-life contexts into English writing instruction, stimulate students' learning interest, cultivate their core competencies, and ultimately enhance the effectiveness of junior high English writing teaching.

Keywords: Tao Xingzhi; Life Education Theory; English Writing Instruction.

1. Introduction

Mr. Tao Xingzhi was a renowned modern Chinese educator and thinker. He proposed the Life Education Theory, which emphasizes the intrinsic connection between education and life: education originates from life and serves life in return. This theory holds significant guiding value for modern educational reform and aligns with the teaching philosophy of "learning through experience and applying through practice" [1] advocated in the Compulsory Education Curriculum Standards. With the gradual implementation of these standards, Tao's Life Education Theory offers a fresh perspective for junior high school English writing instruction, updating teaching concepts to be more student-centered and focused on "learning by doing." This approach enables students to use English naturally in authentic contexts, thereby enhancing their core competencies in the language. Through data collection and analysis, I have found that existing research on applying Tao's Life Education Theory to teaching practice primarily focuses on subjects like Chinese Language and Politics, with relatively limited studies in English teaching, particularly concentrated on reading instruction. The innovative aspect of this paper lies in integrating the Life Education Theory with junior high school English writing pedagogy to explore its pedagogical value, analyze the current state of English writing instruction at this level, and provide practical recommendations.

2. Life Education Theory

2.1. Life as Education

The core of Tao Xingzhi's Life Education Theory lies in "Life as Education." This concept is not merely a revision of Dewey's "Education as Life," but rather an enrichment of its connotation based on China's national context. It profoundly reflects the inseparability of education and life. Tao contended

that education must not be divorced from lived experience; instead, it should be closely integrated with life, achieving its purpose through practical life experiences. Its specific implications encompass three dimensions: First, the unity of education and life. "One receives the education corresponding to the life one leads" [1]. Tao argued that life and education are inseparable—two facets of the same process. Thus, education transcends the mere transmission of abstract theoretical knowledge; it permeates every aspect of life, fulfilling its objectives through lived practice. Tao emphasized their fundamental unity: the life one leads determines the education one receives, and the education one desires necessitates a corresponding way of life. Consequently, life and education coexist throughout human existence. Second, life determines education. Education is rooted in and constitutes an indispensable part of life. Life shapes the aims, content, and methods of education. For instance, from oral traditions to written records and now digital information, the forms of education evolve alongside life. Progress in life drives educational advancement, while innovations in education, in turn, transform life—creating a dynamic, interactive process. Thus, to a significant extent, life dictates the direction and form of education. Third, education transforms life. While originating from life, education also propels its progress. Tao asserted that "the fundamental meaning of education lies in the transformation of life." Primarily, education transforms individual lives: it cultivates virtue, enables personal fulfillment, and empowers individuals to achieve better lives. Secondly, it transforms social life by nurturing well-rounded talents who drive societal development.

2.2. Society as School

Tao Xingzhi believed true education should dismantle barriers between the classroom and society, strengthening their connection. He stated: "Wherever there is life, there is

education; the whole society is a place of life, hence also a place of education. Therefore, we may say society is the school” [2]. He criticized traditional education for confining students to narrow classrooms and imparting outdated, rigid knowledge. A “wall” separated school from society; this barrier needed dismantling to make society the primary educational space. First, school education must align with societal needs. Schools should evolve with the times—updating content, reforming methods, and reflecting social changes and technological progress. Traditional schooling prioritized discrete knowledge acquisition. Tao’s “Society as School” demanded pedagogy that connected education to society, thereby “vastly enriching educational materials, methods, tools, and environments, allowing both teachers and students to flourish” [3]. Second, schools and society should develop synergistically. Schools must integrate socially relevant content into curricula, deliver socially engaged education, and cultivate talent that meets societal needs—thus contributing to social development. Simultaneously, societal progress provides better conditions for schools, fostering their mutual advancement. Tao actively promoted Life Education throughout his career, founding influential institutions like Xiaozhuang Normal College, Yucai School, and Social University.

2.3. Integration of Teaching, Learning, and Practice

The Tao formally proposed the principle of “Integration of Teaching, Learning, and Practice” in 1927, a concept born of profound historical context. In traditional classrooms, teachers acted as knowledge dispensers and students as passive recipients, resulting in ineffective instruction and stifled critical thinking. To address this, Tao articulated the interconnectedness of “teaching”, “learning”, and “practice”. First, it redefines teacher-student roles. Teachers should not solely “teach,” nor students merely “learn.” Teaching, learning, and practice constitute three integrated dimensions of the educational process. Second, Tao asserted that “both teaching and learning are centered on practice” [4]. For teachers, instruction must prioritize practical activities—imparting methods for learning and guiding autonomous study. For students, it demands active participation and self-directed learning, emphasizing “learning through practice. “As the methodological core of Life Education, this integration significantly guides junior high English teaching under compulsory education. It addresses the traditional overemphasis on linguistic knowledge at the expense of practical competence, while also responding to the new curriculum’s mandate to respect student agency. In summary, Tao Xingzhi’s Life Education Theory revolutionized traditional pedagogy, injecting new vitality into the field. Its principles resonate, society itself as a vast learning space, and teaching-learning-practice as three facets of a unified process. Under this pedagogical framework, students enhance learning efficiency, ignite intrinsic motivation, and cultivate autonomous learning capabilities.

3. Pedagogical Value of Life Education Theory in Junior High School English Writing Instruction

3.1. Stimulating Students’ Writing Interest and Fostering a Positive Writing Environment

Tao Xianzhi’s Life Education Theory, emphasizing “Life as Education,” offers significant insights for junior high English writing pedagogy. From the junior high level onward, students often experience psychological apprehension toward translation and writing tasks [5]. Cultivating writing interest and helping students overcome low confidence and resistance is crucial. Teachers can effectively stimulate students’ writing motivation and create an engaging, low-anxiety writing atmosphere by designing student-centered lessons grounded in authentic life contexts relevant to learners. For example, using the PEP English textbook (Grade 7, Volume 1) Unit 2 “We are family,” teachers can integrate Tao’s Life Education principles through structured group discussions. Students introduce their family members in English, describing appearances and personalities. This interactive approach not only enhances enthusiasm for English writing but also empowers students to express personalized ideas, providing ample opportunities for oral practice. Thus, Tao’s theory guides topic selection in writing instruction—choosing themes intimately connected to students’ lives ensures they have meaningful content to express, fostering a relaxed writing environment.

3.2. Cultivating Writing Thinking and Integrated Language Application Skills

Tao’s Life Education Theory prioritizes developing students’ observational skills, sensitivity, and critical thinking. In English writing instruction, teachers must shift their role: by designing writing tasks based on real-life scenarios, they can guide students to observe, reflect, and articulate ideas, thereby nurturing their writing cognition. Consider the writing task in PEP English (Grade 7, Volume 2) Unit 3 “Why do you like pandas?” As a national treasure deeply beloved in China, pandas offer rich thematic material. Teachers can spark interest through panda documentary clips, provide basic structural frameworks (e.g. sentence starters), and scaffold the task by asking students to list reasons for liking pandas before composing an essay. During instruction, analyzing three model essays helps students deduce the classic argumentative structure (claim-reasons-restatement), clarifying the organizational framework. Such pedagogy not only activates prior knowledge but also enhances integrated language application skills. Consequently, Tao’s theory innovates activity design: students write not merely for examinations but to articulate authentic perspectives through real-life contexts, systematically training their writing cognition.

3.3. Optimizing Instructional Design and Enhancing Teacher Professionalism

Life Education Theory provides critical guidance for optimizing junior high English writing lesson design. Teachers must abandon conservative traditional approaches, prioritizing innovative writing task design and pedagogical creativity [6]. Conventional writing instruction often follows a rigid cycle: “teacher assigns → students write → teacher grades → teacher explains.” While efficient, this model limits teacher-student interaction and yields modest outcomes.

Informed by Tao's theory, teachers should design engaging, life-aligned writing activities. For instance, using PEP English (Grade 8, Volume 1) Unit 5 "What were you doing when the rainstorm came?", teachers can implement writing circles—a collaborative approach strongly advocated by the Compulsory Education English Curriculum Standards (2022 Edition). The procedure includes: Dividing students into groups of four, allowing them to self-select roles (e.g., Leader, Liaison Officer, Word Spotter, Summarizer) based on interest. Assigning a writing prompt like "What would you do during an earthquake?" to develop critical thinking and teamwork. Furthermore, Life Education Theory elevates demands for teacher professional development. When integrating this theory into English pedagogy, teachers must embrace lifelong learning—participating in training, studying literature, and peer collaboration—to continually update pedagogical concepts, explore innovative methods, and enhance professional competence through practice and reflection.

4. Current Status of Junior High School English Writing Instruction

4.1. Superficial Instructional Design Concepts

The Compulsory Education English Curriculum Standards (2022 Edition) mandates that junior high English writing pedagogy should prioritize developing students' writing skills, encompassing textual organization, paragraph development, and syntactic variation. However, in practice, students receive insufficient systematic training in these competencies [7]. Many teachers focus narrowly on vocabulary and grammar instruction while neglecting explicit writing skill development. Consequently, students often struggle to initiate writing, organize structures coherently, develop paragraphs logically, or vary sentence patterns effectively, resulting in disorganized compositions lacking logical flow and cohesion. Furthermore, an inadequate writing assessment system exacerbates these issues. During the post-writing phase, teachers predominantly rely on numerical scoring, overlooking students' writing processes. Evaluation criteria lack diversity and differentiation, failing to holistically assess students' comprehensive writing abilities and cognitive qualities.

4.2. Lack of Authentic Contexts in Writing Instruction

Research indicates that current writing instruction frequently disregards connections to real-world contexts, hindering students' ability to apply learned knowledge practically. The Compulsory Education English Curriculum Standards (2022 Edition) explicitly identifies enabling authentic communication as a core objective of language teaching. This underscores the critical importance of task authenticity in English writing pedagogy for stimulating student engagement. Nevertheless, many junior high English teachers fail to adequately consider students' actual learning contexts. They mechanically assign writing tasks from textbooks or routine exercises, resulting in prompts disconnected from students' lived experiences [8]. This misalignment between pedagogical goals and instructional practice stifles writing motivation. For instance, after studying PEP English (Grade 7, Volume 2) Unit 7 "What did you do last weekend?", students might be assigned "My Wilderness Forest Trip"—a topic irrelevant to urban learners who have never visited forests. Such tasks compel artificial

imagination rather than authentic expression, violating principles of genuine language use.

4.3. Insufficient Student Writing Proficiency

English writing instruction remains a persistent challenge in junior high education, attributable not only to compressed curricula but also to students' underdeveloped language skills. Traditional classrooms often lack dedicated writing instruction, emphasizing model essay memorization and vocabulary drills instead. Writing practice is frequently relegated to homework, depriving students of guided in-class development. Consequently, students exhibit resistance—unwillingness, anxiety, or perfunctory effort—toward writing tasks. Negative transfer from their native language manifests in recurrent errors: Subject-verb disagreement, incorrect noun pluralization, misuse of non-finite verb forms, omission of prepositions. Limited productive vocabulary further results in unnatural expression. These issues compromise textual accuracy and fluency. Weak foundational skills impede writing speed and efficiency while constraining expressive depth and breadth. Such deficiencies are evident in both routine practice and formal assessments, revealing significant gaps in current language pedagogy.

5. Teaching Strategies for Junior High English Writing from the Life Education Perspective

5.1. Emphasizing "Life as Education": Building Life Bridges through Textbook Content

5.1.1. Fully Exploiting Textbooks to Create Life-Based Learning Contexts

Junior high students are at a critical stage of rapid physical and mental development, exhibiting strong curiosity and desire to explore the world. Research indicates that when writing instruction aligns closely with students' daily lives, they develop learning interest more naturally. With ongoing reforms in compulsory education English textbooks, contemporary materials primarily revolve around three themes: "Human and Self," "Humans and Nature", and "Human and Society." English teachers can skillfully utilize textbooks by establishing deliberate gaps in reading sections and expanding these into writing tasks, effectively cultivating students' imagination and creativity [9]. As English teachers, we should thoroughly analyze textbooks to identify connections between content and real life, adapt materials accordingly, and construct authentic learning contexts that bridge classroom instruction and lived experiences. For example, the reading text in PEP English (Grade 8, Volume 1) Unit 3 "I'm More Outgoing Than My Sister" introduces basic information about friends. Teachers can design a writing task based on this text—self-introduction of personality. During instruction, provide a personalized framework: "What are my personality traits?"; "What hobbies define me?"; "What memorable experiences shaped me?"; "What are my career aspirations?"; "How will I achieve these goals?" Encourage students to integrate personal experiences into their self-introductions to enhance authenticity and engagement. Subsequently, organize a "Self-Introduction Fair" where students read their compositions aloud, creating a life-based context that stimulates learning interest.

5.1.2. Leveraging Life Themes to Strengthen Writing Techniques

Enhancing students' English writing proficiency hinges on mastering effective methods. Writing is a process requiring continuous practice, accumulation, and reflection. Students must not only expand their writing materials but also skillfully apply techniques to produce well-structured and expressive compositions. Junior high English teachers can employ relatable life themes to guide students in analyzing and summarizing different writing techniques, deepen their understanding, and encourage flexible application within specific thematic contexts to improve writing competence. Taking PEP English (Grade 8, Volume 2) Unit 9 "Have You Ever Been to a Museum?" as an example, eighth graders have acquired foundational English knowledge; thus, teachers should prioritize developing students' writing cognition [10]. This unit focuses on travel experiences, requiring students to write a museum reflection that encourages personalized expression. For instance, guide students to: (1) Sequence their museum visits chronologically; (2) Elaborate on key exhibits by describing distinctive features and reasons; (3) Emphasize personal insights, highlighting the importance of reflection to achieve intellectual elevation.

5.2. Implementing "Society as School": Designing Authentic Writing Tasks Using Extracurricular Resources

5.2.1. Guiding Life Observation for Material Accumulation

Material accumulation forms the foundation of writing competence in junior high English instruction. However, traditional teaching often overemphasizes linguistic form imitation, resulting in content vacuity despite students' grammatical knowledge—a consequence of insufficient life experience. English writing originates from life, which provides abundant materials and scenarios. Teachers should systematically guide students to accumulate life knowledge by exploring social and cultural trends through media like social platforms, films, and music [10]. For example, the writing topic in PEP English (Grade 9, Volume 1) Unit 2 "I Think That Mooncakes Are Delicious!" is introducing the Mid-Autumn Festival. During pre-writing, teachers can activate students' memories using question chains: "What preparations did your family make?"; "What activities occurred during the celebration?"; "What reflections emerged afterward?" Simultaneously display festival custom images to reinforce topic-life connections, ensuring authentic content generation rather than fabrication.

5.2.2. Utilizing Extracurricular Resources to Foster Emotional Understanding

Teachers must transcend classroom confines by integrating societal resources into writing instruction. For instance, the writing theme in PEP English (Grade 7, Volume 1) Unit 11 "How Was Your School Trip?" centers on study trips. Schools with resources can organize visits to local zoos or museums. Assign a "Junior Zoo Guide" task: "How would you introduce animals to visitors?" and "How would you advocate for animal conservation?" Through such activities, students interact with the zoo environment—including animals, staff, and visitors—while completing purposeful writing tasks. Guiding students to reflect on environmental protection aligns with English education's ethical dimensions.

5.3. Practicing "Integration of Teaching, Learning, and Practice": Optimizing Design and Teacher Role Transformation

5.3.1. Prioritizing Student Agency: Abandoning Prescriptive Writing

Prescriptive writing prompts constrain students' thinking and language exploration. Teachers should design semi-open tasks with clear themes to foster autonomy in structure planning, lexical selection, and strategy formation [11]. For example, after analyzing Lin Tao's heroic fire rescue (Yilin Edition English, Grade 7, Volume 1, Unit 7 "What a Brave Young Man")—a chronologically structured text detailing discovery, rescue, hospitalization, and interview—assign a continuation writing task exploring Lin Tao's post-recovery actions or emotional evolution. This requires students to maintain content-structure-language-theme coherence with the original text [12], cultivating creativity while respecting student agency.

5.3.2. Demonstrating the Writing Process

The value of teacher-composed models is often overlooked. Echoing Tao Xingzhi's principles—"To teach others is to teach oneself" and "Teachers must learn while teaching"—educators should personally write models to deeply understand writing complexities. Demonstrate the full process (interpreting, conceptualizing, drafting) during class to help students visualize challenges and refine guidance [13]. For instance, in PEP English (Grade 8, Volume 1) Unit 4 "Why Don't You Talk to Your Parents?", present a teacher-written model on parent-child communication, deconstructing its framework and lexical-grammatical choices to scaffold student writing efficiency.

6. Conclusion

Integrating Tao Xingzhi's Life Education Theory into junior high English writing instruction—by consciously linking language learning to students' daily lives—effectively alleviates writing anxiety, enhances engagement, and significantly strengthens practical language application skills. Such an approach, grounded in learners' lived experiences, fosters high receptiveness by prioritizing student agency and addressing authentic learning needs within a contextually rich English environment. Learning becomes an accessible and joyful process, while knowledge acquisition transforms into an intrinsically motivated endeavor. This pedagogical orientation aligns with the core focus of Tao's Life Education Theory and resonates with the student-centered principles advocated in the updated Compulsory English Curriculum Standards. As junior high English teachers, we must strategically utilize textbooks to design authentic writing tasks, actively leverage extracurricular resources, and model best practices to facilitate effective integration of Tao's educational philosophy, thereby advancing students' core competencies in English.

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