Bridging the Historical Gap in L2 Literature: Misconception Analysis and Process-Oriented Cognitive Scaffolding Model Construction in A Level Chinese Literature Based on *Dragon's Beard Gully*

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Abstract. The 2024 Cambridge A Level Chinese Language and Literature (9868) syllabus introduces "literary-critical literacy" as a core assessment dimension for the first time. Globally, candidates are now required to demonstrate linguistic sensitivity, historical contextual awareness, and critical originality simultaneously within timed writing tasks. This shift significantly increases the level of challenge. The 2024–2025 Examiner's Report highlights a recurring issue of "contextual disconnect," revealing students' struggles to transcend superficial analysis—particularly when engaging with classics such as *Dragon's Beard Gully.* Many candidates focus on plot summarization while overlooking the 1950s Beijing urban-renovation backdrop, thus failing to articulate how the distinctive "Beijing-flavored dialogue" reinforces the text's people-centered theme. This study conducts a qualitative analysis of the 2024–2025 A Level Chinese Language and Literature examiner reports and assessment data. Using the work *Dragon's Beard Gully* as a representative case study, it identifies three key pitfalls: (1) plot retelling without analysis, (2) disconnection from historical context, and (3) failure to link literary techniques with thematic impact. To address these issues, this study proposes the Process-Oriented Cognitive Scaffolding Model (POCSM) as a structured teaching intervention. Its effectiveness was validated through a 14-day teaching intervention across six rounds. This framework offers practical strategies for fostering deeper textual analysis and cultivating cross-cultural literary literacy.

Keywords: A level Chinese language and literature; literary-critical literacy; POCSM; Dragon's Beard Gully; cross-cultural critical thinking.

1. Introduction

In second language education, classic literary texts are traditionally viewed as effective vehicles for both high-quality language input and deep cognitive training [1, 2]. However, despite educators' widespread recognition of its value, current classroom practices often fall short of realizing its potential. Empirical research indicates that literature instruction frequently remains confined to superficial "reading comprehension" (e.g., vocabulary and grammar drills, plot summarization), often limiting the potential for deep interpretation [3, 4]. This traditional lecture-based model not only restricts students' active meaning-making but is also criticized for inhibiting higher-order thinking development [5].

Reading's essence lies not merely in decoding characters but in activating background schemata [6]. When second language learners encounter texts like *Dragon's Beard Gully*, saturated with 1950s Beijing grassroots socio-political context, the predicament of "recognizing every character yet failing to grasp the meaning" often stems from the absence of a historical schema for "1950s Beijing grassroots grassroots socio-political environment" [7, 8]. Although cross-cultural pedagogy has the potential to bridge this gap, in current practice, educators predominantly focus on comparing contemporary communicative etiquette and customs while leaving "past historical forms" and their underlying political-ideological decoding strategies out of view [9, 10]. Consequently, the persistent absence of historical contextualization becomes the primary bottleneck for deep reading of classic literature.

Writing assessments in high-stakes examinations further heightens the impact of this contextual void. Mainstream research—particularly AI-driven automated scoring models—prioritizes metrics of linguistic accuracy and fluency while lacking quantitative tools or diagnostic frameworks to track "deep historical-cultural interpretation" abilities [11, 12]. Simultaneously, the assessment of critical thinking itself has been demonstrated to be highly complex [13]. When rubrics function solely as final judgments rather than formative diagnostic tools, they struggle to reveal students' cognitive gaps in invoking historical schemata [14]. Misinterpretations of abstract terms like "deep analysis" may force students back into rote memorization and entrenched misconceptions [15].

Therefore, even though the A Level ACME standards include an E-evaluation dimension, existing criteria provide limited diagnostic insight into explain "why" students fail to complete the historical-ideological interpretation of Lao She's works.

2. Methodology and Research Background

This study investigates how to teach and assess the narrative structures of historically grounded literary texts in cross-cultural learning environments. In March 2022, Cambridge International Examinations released the 2024–2026 A Level Chinese Language and Literature syllabus, officially renaming the subject from "Chinese Language" to "Chinese Language and Literature." Subsequent supplementary textbooks and workbooks published by the Chinese Language Teaching Press further clarified the learning objectives and expanded the competency framework. The 2024 syllabus marks a decisive shift from a focus on "language proficiency" to an emphasis on "literary-critical literacy," posing considerable challenges for international students who lack the necessary historical background knowledge.

To ensure the timeliness and relevance of the research materials, data collection is limited to sources from 2024 onward. This study employs qualitative content analysis. The primary dataset consists of students' routine assignments and periodic assessments (including mid-term, final, and mock examinations), supplemented by relevant secondary materials. Sampling follows purposive sampling principles. As shown in Table 1, the corpus comprises three Examiner Reports (2024–2025) and 114 authentic student scripts.

Additionally, 245 core narrative texts drawn from the syllabus and teaching materials were included as the primary corpus for examining the teaching and evaluation of historically grounded literary works in cross-cultural settings. These texts serve as the textual basis for analyzing how students interpret historical contexts, cultural symbols, and narrative strategies, and they provide an empirical foundation for curriculum development, instructional optimization, and adjustments to assessment standards.

Table 1. Data Source.

Source	Quantity	Details
Syllabus	2	One for 2024-2026 and one for 2027-2029
Scoring criteria	3	Two in 2024, one in June 2025 (the November standard has not yet been released)
Examiner' s Report	3	Same as above
Student sample paper	114	73 in 2024 and 41 in June 2025
Student assessment test papers	120	30 students ×4 times (mid-term, final, first mock exam, second mock exam)

This study selects the A Level Chinese Language and Literature (9868) syllabus as its case not only because of its global influence, but also due to its distinctive assessment design. Through a four-level gradient for distinguishing proficiency levels, a five-dimensional indicator system for targeting core literacies, and an emphasis on precise textual evidence to support arguments, the assessment framework guides students from basic "understanding" to "appreciation" and ultimately to critical

synthesis, embodying the international evaluation principle of alignment among standards, teaching, and learning.

However, examiners' reports consistently highlight students' weaknesses in textual precision and analytical depth. Therefore, the core aim of this study is to identify the specific barriers preventing students from meeting the higher-order assessment criteria and to summarize the four major misconceptions underlying these difficulties.

Since the renaming of "Chinese Language and Literature", three tests have been held worldwide. In combination with the three examiners' reports published on the Cambridge website in 2024-2025 and students' assignments and papers in daily teaching, we have found that there are four types of typical problems distributed in a stepwise manner in the appreciation writing of *Dragon's Beard Gully*:

2.1. Imbalance between Descriptive and Analytical Thinking

Analysis of student scripts reveals a pervasive tendency toward indiscriminate quotation. Common manifestations include citing lengthy passages irrelevant to the prompt, transcribing entire paragraphs verbatim, or omitting textual evidence altogether. As illustrated in Fig. 1, in a response to the prompt "How the underclass living in Dragon's Beard Gully are oppressed by local tyrants," the student merely recounts plot details without analytical integration and without providing a single direct quotation, resulting in an argument that is hollow and unsupported. Moreover, quotations—when present—are often mechanically inserted without the necessary logical transitions, leaving them disconnected from the argument.

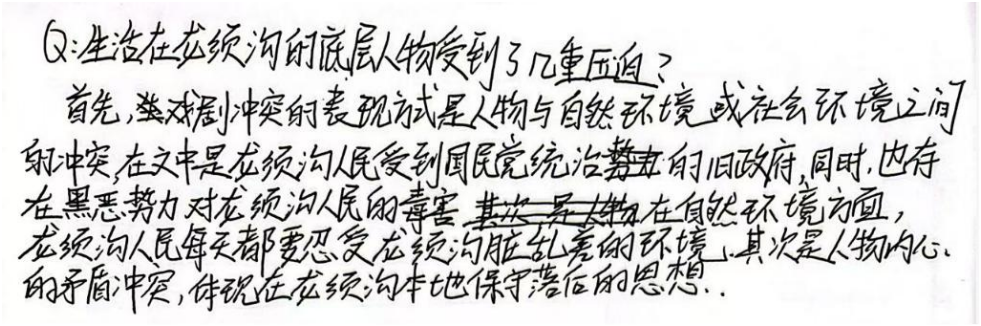


Fig. 1 Student script showing absence of key-quotation evidence

Note. The student wrote: "龙须沟人民受到国民党统治的旧政府的压迫，也存在黑恶势力对龙须沟人民的毒害，每天都要受到龙须沟脏乱差的环境," which translates as: "The people of Dragon's Beard Gully suffered under the oppressive rule of the Kuomintang's old regime and the scourge of local tyrants, while daily enduring the filthy, chaotic, and squalid conditions of the ditch."

In the text-analysis section, the student largely repeats the plot in chronological order rather than transforming narrative content into analytical evidence. As a result, descriptive recounting obscures the argumentative thread. The Examiner Report advises that candidates should "select a brief quotation to illustrate their point and then explain how it supports their discussion," rather than engaging in "retelling and analysis of the plot."

2.2. Flatness of Analytical Dimensions

When analyzing dramatic conflicts, most students focus solely on external conflicts among characters while neglecting internal conflicts and the tensions between individuals and their natural or social environments. As a result, they fail to construct a three-dimensional "individual–society–environment" interpretive model. For instance, when discussing the quarrel between Er Chun and Wang Dama or the discord between Ding Si and his wife, students often overlook the deeper layers of "historical background" and "social systems," thereby rendering their analysis superficial. This pattern aligns with the June 2024 Examiner's Report, which attributes such "limited understanding"

to students' reliance on "narration" and "direct quotations," and emphasizes that an element of "evaluation and analysis" is essential for achieving higher marking bands.

As shown in Fig. 2, when depicting Zhao Laotou's integrity, the student stops at his immediate conflict with Feng Gouzi. The analysis fails to situate the character within the pre-liberation context of rampant gang rule, overlooking systemic oppression and the resulting psychological tension. Consequently, the characterization remains underdeveloped.

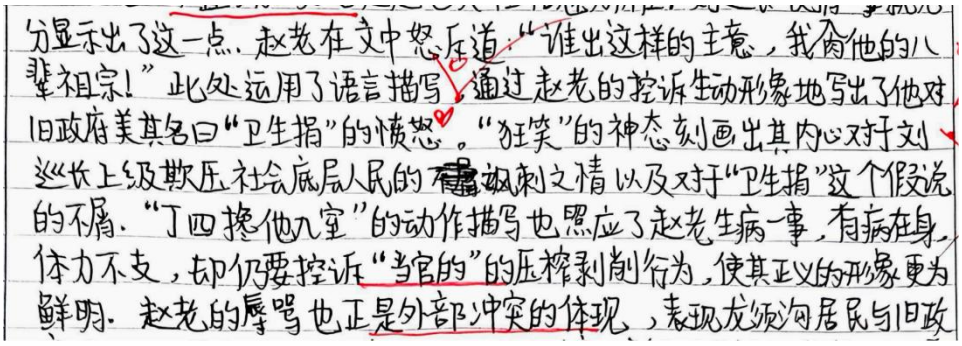


Fig. 2 Student script showing over-focus on plot summary and a single analytical angle

Note. The student wrote: "'狂笑'的神态刻画出其内心对于刘巡长上级欺压社会底层人民的讽刺之情," which translates as: "The wild laugh vividly captures Zhao Laotou's scornful defiance toward Police Chief Liu's superiors who trample on the downtrodden."

2.3. Thematic Misinterpretation in Cross-Cultural Context

When responding to the prompt "The reasons for the misfortunes of the people in Dragon's Beard Gully," which explicitly requires an examination of the darkness and hardships of life in Old China, some students devote substantial space to comparing "old and new China" and praising the superiority of New China, thereby drifting away from the core purpose of exposure and critique. Likewise, when addressing the question "Why was the new Dragon's Beard Gully built?", which calls for an affirmation of the new regime and the improved living conditions, certain students again overemphasize criticism of the old society and neglect the prompt's requirement to acknowledge social progress.

The root cause of this misalignment is not merely misreading the prompt or poor planning. Rather, students' habitual "lamentation about the old society" or uncertainty about "whom to praise" stems from the absence of a cultural schema specific to that historical period, leaving them unable to discern the author's intended stance. This indicates a need for targeted training that integrates keyword identification, contextual schema supplementation, and structured outline practice.

As shown in Fig. 3, when arguing that "Zhao Laotou excels at guiding and teaching others," the student cites Zhao's advice that Ding Si should change jobs. However, the narrative quickly pivots to Ding Si—his grievances, his calculations, and his imagined future—gradually expanding until Zhao fades into the background. The prompt requires a sustained focus on the protagonist's line of action; instead, the analytical lens shifts, causing the main character's role to weaken and the argument to drift off course.

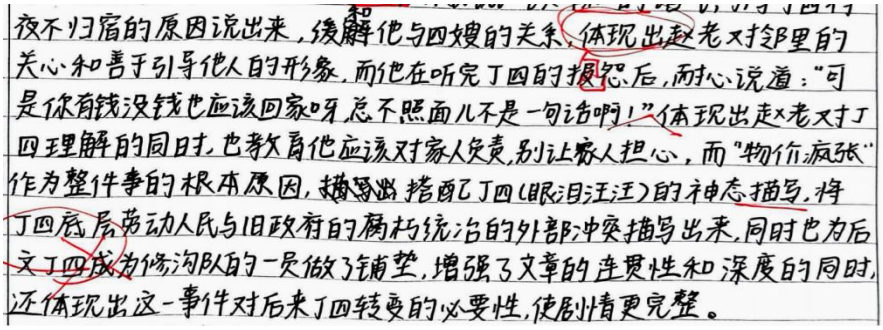


Fig. 3 Student script showing a failure to address the prompt's focus on the main character

Note: The student wrote “为丁四成为修沟队的一员做了铺垫，还体现出该事件对后来丁四转变的必要性”, which translates to “It paves the way for Ding Si to join the ditch-repair team and underscores the pivotal necessity of this event for his later transformation.”

2.4. Insufficiency of Textual Evidence and Logical Gaps

High-quality literary appreciation requires a critical register, a clear academic structure (introduction–body–conclusion), precise quotation and detailed analysis, and the sustained development of ideas in connection with the work as a whole. However, many student responses lack substantive argumentation. References to “governmental indifference” or “social injustice” are often presented as self-evident and unsupported by textual evidence, resulting in suspended claims and weak persuasiveness.

Examiner reports consistently emphasise the need for structural rigour and analytical depth. The June 2025 Report notes that top-performing candidates demonstrate “pre-writing planning” and employ “critical rather than purely descriptive language.” This echoes the June 2024 Report, which explicitly recommends using a “clear essay structure” with an introduction and conclusion, and urges candidates to focus on analysing the author’s “descriptive and expressive techniques.” As shown in Fig. 4, although the student adopts a “general–specific–general” structure, the argument remains superficial. For instance, when discussing Widow Wang, the student merely recounts the teahouse episode during the sudden downpour and attaches the label “conservative.” The analysis stops short of probing the deep-rooted folk anxieties behind her insistence on auspicious timing; it does not uncover her inner tension—hoping for the ditch to be repaired while fearing heavenly retribution—nor does it show how this private conflict mirrors the community’s collective yearning for a better life. As a result, the conflict lacks grounding and the aspiration lacks a causal basis, leaving the analysis hollow and unsubstantiated.

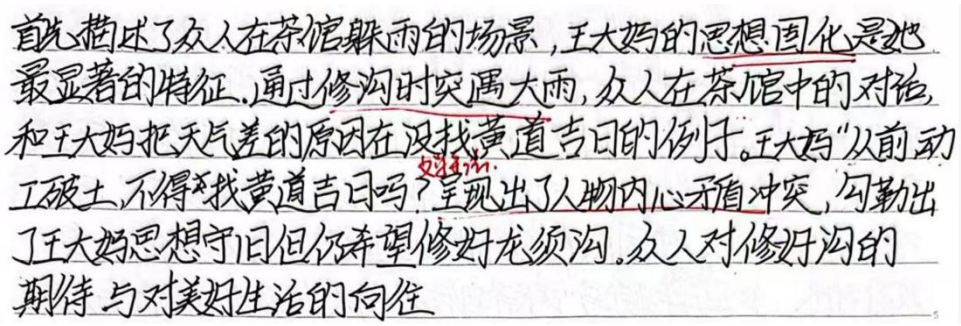


Fig. 4 Student script showing empty argumentation lacking concrete textual support

Note: The student wrote “呈现出人物内心矛盾冲突，勾勒出了王大妈思想保守但不希望修好龙须沟”, which translates to “It exposes the character’s inner conflict, sketching Old Widow Wang as tradition-bound yet genuinely longing for the ditch to be repaired.”

In summary, the primary cognitive deficit is the ability to narrate without argumentation, and to state positions without textual evidence.

3. Process-Oriented Cognitive Scaffolding Model

3.1. The Design of the Process-Oriented Cognitive Scaffolding Model

To address the practical challenges identified in Section 3 and to align with the Cambridge International a Level Chinese Language and Literature assessment criteria, this paper proposes a transferable, process-oriented cognitive scaffolding model. Its aim is to guide students toward producing logically coherent, well-substantiated literary criticism through a structured intervention operating at both the macro and micro levels.

3.1.1. Macro-structure and micro-composition

The model first stabilises the essay's macro-structure by requiring a standard tripartite format: an introduction that directly responds to the prompt; a main body consisting of two to three analytical paragraphs; and a conclusion that synthesises the argument and provides thematic elevation.

The core innovation, however, lies in the micro-composition of the main body paragraphs. Designed to counteract the recurring problems of "narration over analysis" and "topic drift," the model breaks down the high-stakes analytical portion into seven mandatory micro-components. As shown in Table 2, these components must appear in a fixed sequence: Transition Signal → Topic Sentence → Scene Focus → Quotation → Literary Device → Dramatic Conflict → Mini-Conclusion.

Table 2. Outlines the function of each element within this cognitive scaffold.

Step	Main Category	Category Description
1	Transition Signal	Logical markers (e.g., firstly, on the other hand) that re-layer the paragraph and preclude a single-angle approach.
2	Topic Sentence	Rigidly positioned at the paragraph opening; repeats the prompt's key terms to serve as a second-stage task comprehension and to block topic drift from the outset.
3	Scene Focus	Restricts textual evidence to one or two micro-scenes, preventing plot-summary overflow.
4	Quotation	A one-line maximum "short quote" must immediately follow an evaluative verb, converting "mass copying" into "precise slicing" and eliminating room for vague claims.
5	Literary Device	A dedicated slot requiring students to name the technique immediately after the quote (e.g., point of view, imagery, dramatic device), thus shifting attention from what happens to how it is written.
6	Dramatic Conflict	A three-item checklist—external conflict / internal conflict / character vs. natural-or-social environment—requiring at least two items to be ticked before proceeding, thereby guaranteeing multi-layered argumentation.
7	Mini-Conclusion	Each paragraph ends by linking the discussion in the fixed order: character image → dramatic technique → epochal theme, preventing abrupt endings and empty slogans and ensuring every analysis completes a grounding–elevation loop.

3.1.2. Logical flow and language standards

The scaffold enforces a rigorous logical chain: the Topic Sentence locks the viewpoint and guides the selection of the Scene; the Scene requires a precise Quotation; the Quotation provides material for identifying the Literary Device; the Device is then used to explain the Dramatic Conflict; and finally, the Mini-Conclusion grounds the analysis back to the essay prompt.

This mandatory sequence systematically addresses the four major misconceptions identified earlier—paraphrasing instead of analysis, single-perspective reading, topic deviation, and empty argument—by (a) constraining the analytic moves students may take and (b) making the required moves explicit. In addition to structuring argumentation, the model implicitly enforces language quality: students must produce clear, coherent expressions that avoids missing components and logical jumps, so that the rigid structure is supported by fluent articulation.

3.2. Pedagogical Implementation and Effectiveness

To evaluate the model's efficacy, a case study focused on students' analysis of Old Zhao's characterization and his role in the text. Initial student responses were characterised by vague assertions and an absence of textual support. Following a 14-day intensive training using the proposed

framework (delivered in six instructional sessions), a marked shift was observed in students' analytic behaviour.

3.2.1. Pre-Training Analysis

As shown in Fig. 5, the pre-training response exemplifies the typical "narration over analysis" error. The student transcribed a lengthy dialogue scene verbatim—from Old Zhao's furious roar to his confrontation with Feng Gouzi—without adding a single sentence of analytical commentary. The response therefore consisted almost entirely of quoted text and lacked any argumentative framing or interpretation.

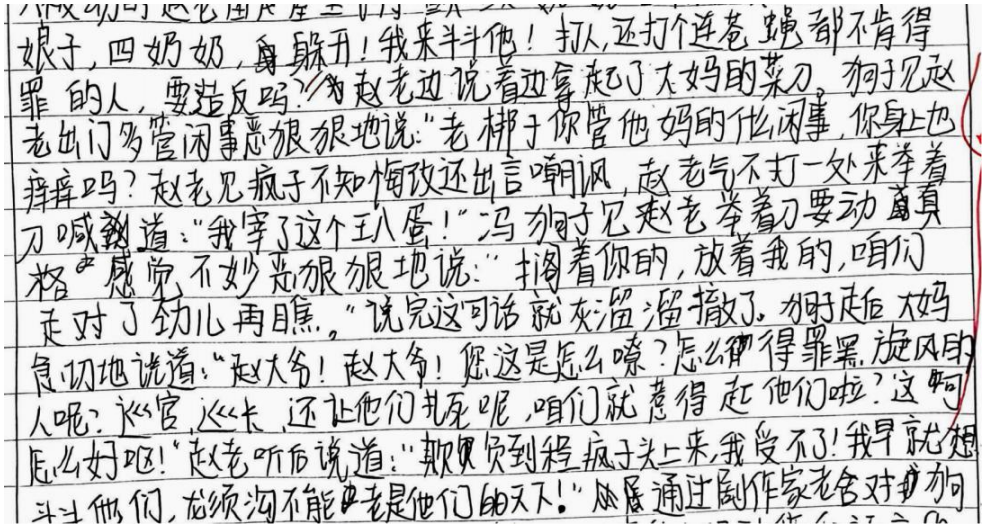


Fig. 5 Sample response prior to training

Note: The student wrote "我来斗斗他！打人，还打个连苍蝇都不肯得罪的人，要造反吗？……欺负到程疯子头上来，我受不了！我就想斗斗他们，龙须沟不能老是他们的天下", which translates to "I'll take him on! Hitting people—and picking on someone even flies won't bother? Are you trying to start a rebellion? ...Picking on Crazy Cheng? I won't stand for it! I'll show them! Dragon's Beard Gully can't always be their turf."

3.2.2. Post-Training Analysis

Post-training assessments (Fig. 6) demonstrated that students successfully transitioned from simple plot narration to structured argumentation. The logical flow markedly improved, and the application of the seven-element framework ensured that quotations were precise, functionally integrated, and effectively deployed within time constraints.

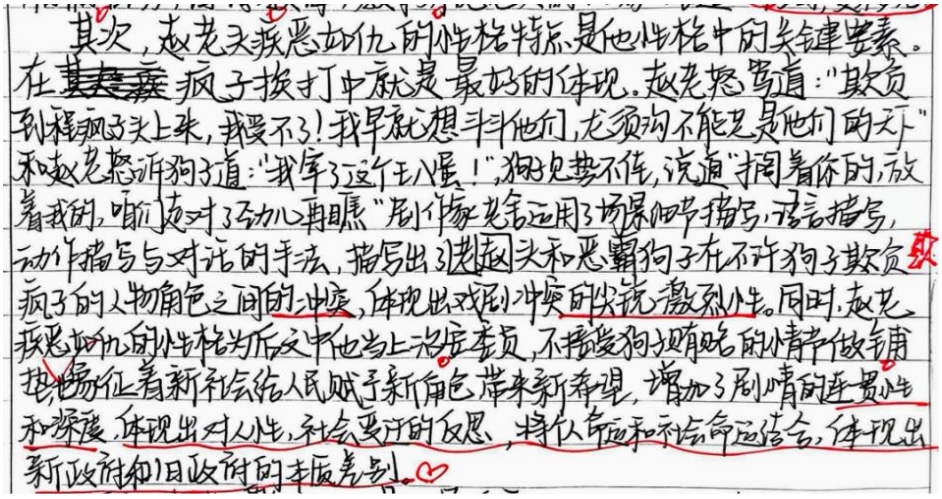


Fig. 6 Sample response after applying the model

Note: The student wrote “其次，嫉恶如仇是赵老头儿性格中的关键要素。……写出了赵老头与冯狗子之间的外部冲突，体现出戏剧冲突的尖锐激烈性……增强了剧情的连贯性和深度……”, which translates to “Secondly, an intense hatred for evil is Old Zhao’s most defining trait, vividly showcased in the incident where the madman was beaten. When Madman Cheng was bullied by the local thugs, Old Zhao immediately stepped forward, roaring with fury: “Bullying Madman Cheng? I won’t stand it! I’ve been itching to take them on—Dragon’s Beard Gully can’t stay their playground forever!” He then pointed at Feng Gouzi and snarled: “I’ll skin you alive!” Seeing the writing on the wall, Feng Gouzi fled in panic. Through vivid scene details, dialogue, and action descriptions—enhanced by rhetorical devices like exaggeration and rhetorical questions—Lao She lays bare the external conflict between Old Zhao and the bully Feng Gouzi, highlighting the sharp intensity of their dramatic clash. It is precisely this fiery temperament that sets the stage for Old Zhao’s election as neighborhood committee member and his refusal of Feng Gouzi’s bribe. His transformation from a lowly laborer into a representative of the working class symbolizes the new roles and significance bestowed upon the people by the new society. This not only enhances the narrative’s coherence and depth but also profoundly reveals the vast differences between the old and new societies, completing a reflection on human nature, society, and history.”

The post-training response demonstrates the precise execution of the seven-element framework. The paragraph opens with the transition marker “Secondly,” which signals the logical progression and connects it to prior discussion. The topic sentence clearly establishes the analytic focus by highlighting Zhao Laotou’s defining hatred-of-evil temperament. The selected micro-scene, “Madman Gets Beaten,” serves to exemplify this trait, while the quotation from the episode is cited precisely to illustrate the character’s decisive action. The student explicitly identifies the descriptive techniques employed—speech and action—shifting attention from mere narrative content to stylistic expression. Furthermore, the analysis examines the dramatic conflict between Zhao and Feng Gouzi, emphasizing both the intensity and cumulative impact of the confrontation. The paragraph concludes with a mini-conclusion, linking Zhao’s temperament to his later appointment and explaining its significance for the overarching theme, thus completing the grounding–elevation loop. Overall, the paragraph integrates all seven elements into a coherent, persuasive analysis, showing a clear move from narrative recounting to structured argumentation.

4. Conclusion

Based on three A Level Chinese Language and Literature Examiner Reports from 2024–2025, 114 authentic exam scripts, and 120 internal assessments, this study identified three major misconceptions through qualitative analysis: plot retelling, historical vacuum, and technique–theme disconnect. Subsequently, the seven-step chained writing intervention derived from the Process-Oriented Cognitive Scaffolding Model (POCSM) demonstrably improved both the number of high-scoring students and the contextual relevance of their analyses within two weeks.

These findings indicate that teaching must transcend superficial approaches focused solely on language decoding or method identification, advocating instead of a context-rich critical paradigm. POCSM is not merely a transferable writing framework; it emphasizes that international Chinese language education should shift its goal from cultivating “fluent speakers” to developing critical cross-cultural thinkers.

However, this study was limited to a single play and a sample concentrated in one school. Whether its conclusions can be generalized to other genres or broader contexts remains to be examined. Future research should validate its long-term effects and universality through multi-regional, full-academic-year, and controlled experiments to establish more widely applicable standards.

Acknowledgements

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