

# ***A Practical Study of the Stratified Teaching Model in Rural Junior High School English Writing Instruction: A Case Study of Zhangjiajie Second Middle School***

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**Abstract:** Writing is a comprehensive reflection of language proficiency and humanistic qualities, and the cultivation of writing skills is a focal point in English teaching. However, in rural junior high schools, exemplified by Zhangjiajie Second Middle School, students commonly exhibit issues such as "low interest and a sense of achievement in learning" and "generally low performance" in English writing. Additionally, the large class teaching model is exacerbating the gap in English writing abilities among students. In order to improve the current status of English writing learning in rural junior high schools, the researchers integrated the stratified teaching model into English writing instruction and conducted a 15-week experiment on 45 students from Class 87 in the eighth grade of Zhangjiajie Second Middle School, utilizing a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods. Data analysis of the experimental results revealed that the application of the stratified teaching model in rural junior high school English writing instruction can enhance students' interest, utilization of writing strategies, and writing performance to varying degrees across different levels.

**Keywords:** English writing instruction, stratified teaching model, rural junior high school

## **1. Introduction**

English writing proficiency is not only a reflection of "language application skills" but also a crucial manifestation of humanistic qualities. [1] However, the actual effectiveness of English writing instruction falls short of expectations. On one hand, students lack knowledge of English writing strategies and application skills, coupled with a negative learning attitude. On the other hand, factors such as the limited allocation of time for teacher-led English writing instruction and the difficulty level of English writing learning contribute to students commonly displaying issues of "low interest and a sense of achievement" and "low performance" in English writing learning. Furthermore, the imbalance in the proportion of high-achieving, average, and underperforming students in rural junior high school English classes is pronounced, with over half of the class comprising underperforming students, few high-achievers, and no statistically significant difference between high-achieving and average students. The large class teaching model, with its uniform teaching content and learning tasks, is exacerbating the gap in English writing abilities among students and dampening the enthusiasm for

writing among underperforming students.

To address these issues and improve the current state of English writing instruction in rural junior high schools, this study integrates the stratified teaching model into junior high school English writing instruction, aiming to validate whether this model is an effective approach to enhancing the effectiveness of current English writing instruction in rural junior high schools.

## **2. Literature Review**

Various scholars provide different definitions of differentiated instruction. According to Carol Ann Tomlinson, differentiated instruction involves teachers scientifically grouping students with similar levels of knowledge, abilities, and potential based on factors such as existing knowledge and tendencies. Teachers then provide distinct, level-appropriate instruction for each group, ensuring optimal development and improvement through appropriate differentiation strategies and interactions. [2] Different dimensions categorize differentiated instruction into various types. Based on variations in students' classroom arrangements, it can be classified as departmentalized differentiated instruction and in-class differentiated instruction. Depending on whether students' stratification results are publicly disclosed, the model can be further categorized into explicit and implicit differentiated instruction.

Upon reviewing relevant domestic and international studies, it is observed that the application of differentiated instruction in junior high school English writing instruction raises thought-provoking questions. Firstly, current domestic research on differentiated instruction in English writing primarily focuses on the high school level, with limited attention given to junior high school, especially in rural areas. Secondly, a majority of studies overlook a crucial detail: post-instruction guidance for English differentiated instruction.

## **3. Theoretical Framework**

### **3.1. Optimal Teaching Process Theory**

Vygotsky stated, "Optimizing the teaching process involves organizing control based on comprehensive considerations of teaching laws, principles, modern forms and methods of teaching, characteristics of the teaching system, as well as internal and external conditions, with the aim of ensuring that the teaching process functions most effectively according to established standards." [3] This implies that teachers should design appropriate classroom activities and post-lesson assignments for students at different levels, ensuring that students at all levels can complete tasks within their abilities and gain meaningful learning experiences.

### **3.2. Zone of Proximal Development Theory**

The Former Soviet psychologist Vygotsky introduced and defined the "Zone of Proximal Development" as "the gap between the actual developmental level and the potential developmental level. The former is determined by the ability to solve problems independently, while the latter refers to the ability to solve problems with adult guidance or in collaboration with capable peers." [4] This theory provides insights into two aspects of junior high school English writing differentiated instruction: the application of scaffolding teaching and collaborative learning models.

### **3.3. "SOLO" Taxonomy Theory**

Australian scholars Jhon B Biggs and Kevin F Collis proposed the "Structure of Observed Learning Outcome" (SOLO) taxonomy theory in 1982. [5] This qualitative assessment tool evaluates learners based on their performance in three aspects: Capacity, Relating operation, and Consistency and

closure, when solving specific problems. The theory categorizes students' cognitive development stages and thinking structures into five levels: Prestructural, Unistructural, Multistructural, Relational, and Extended Abstract.

As a qualitative assessment tool, the underlying idea of the "SOLO" taxonomy theory is to measure students' existing levels of thinking in a particular aspect by analyzing their responses to specific problems. Therefore, it can play a multifaceted role in supporting rural junior high school English writing differentiated instruction. It serves as both an assessment tool for students' English writing abilities and a guide for students to enhance their writing thinking levels.

## **4. Research Design**

### **4.1. Research Questions**

This study focuses on the application of the stratified teaching model in rural junior high school English writing instruction, exploring three main questions:

- (1) Can the application of the stratified teaching model in rural junior high school English writing instruction enhance students' interest in English writing?
- (2) Can the application of the stratified teaching model in rural junior high school English writing instruction improve students' ability to use English writing strategies?
- (3) Can the application of the stratified teaching model in rural junior high school English writing instruction improve students' English writing performance?

### **4.2. Research Participants**

This study targets 45 students from Class 87 in the eighth grade at Zhangjiajie Second Middle School in Hunan Province. The class has a balanced gender ratio, similar ages, and historically, around 10 students have passed the mid-term and final exams in English, placing it at an intermediate level among the five eighth-grade classes.

### **4.3. Research Methods**

This study employs a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods.

- (1) Literature Review: The study reviews and analyzes previous research on the stratified teaching model, identifying gaps and providing theoretical support by referencing relevant literature.
- (2) Experimental Research: The stratified teaching model is implemented in daily English writing instruction. SPSS statistical software is used to compare students' pre-test, mid-test, and post-test scores to evaluate the effectiveness of the stratified teaching model in improving the English writing performance and interest of rural junior high school students.
- (3) Questionnaire Survey: Two sets of questionnaires are developed to investigate the current status of rural junior high school writing instruction and students' use of English writing strategies.
- (4) Interview Method: Structured interviews are conducted with teachers and students before the experiment, during the mid-term, and at the end of the experiment to gather firsthand information on students' perspectives and suggestions regarding the stratified teaching model in English writing instruction.

### **4.4. Research Tools**

The study utilized the following research tools:

- (1) Three sets of English writing test papers, designed for pre-test, mid-test, and post-test. The test papers were sourced from the mid-term and final exams in Yongding District, Zhangjiajie City, demonstrating stable difficulty and discriminative capabilities.

(2) Two sets of questionnaires: The first set is the "Survey on the Current Status of Junior High School English Writing Instruction," adapted from Mo's "Survey on the Current Status of College English Writing". [6] It covers basic information, rural junior high school students' attitudes toward English writing, daily English writing learning and exam situations, and opinions on the current junior high school English writing instruction. The second set is the "Survey on English Writing Strategies and Writing Styles of Rural Junior High School Students," adapted from Al Badi's "Survey on Student Writing Strategies and Writing Styles". [7] The questionnaire is arranged in the sequence of before writing, during writing, and after writing, primarily testing students' performance in metacognitive strategies, cognitive strategies, and social-emotional strategies.

(3) Structured interview outlines: One designed for investigating teachers' current status and suggestions regarding English writing instruction, and the other for investigating students' perspectives on the stratified writing instruction model and improvement suggestions. Student interviewees were randomly selected from three different levels, with three students chosen from each level, totaling nine students, ensuring that interviewees did not repeat for the two interview sessions.

(4) Comprehensive Evaluation Form for Students' English Writing Abilities: This form includes four parts: "Name," "Stratification Description," presenting characteristics and requirements of the A, B, C writing levels in terms of writing interest, completeness of information description, and coherence of discourse content; "Evaluation," including self-assessment, peer assessment, and teacher assessment, accounting for 30%, 30%, and 40% respectively; "Comprehensive Evaluation Level." After considering the results of the three evaluations, students from Class 87 in the eighth grade at Zhangjiajie Second Middle School were roughly divided into A-level (7 students), B-level (14 students), and C-level (24 students) in a ratio of 1:2:3.

## 4.5. Research Process

The research spanned 15 weeks, divided into pre-experiment, during the experiment, and post-experiment stages. Pre-experiment tasks mainly involved preparatory research, including the development and reliability testing of research tools, questionnaire distribution, data organization and analysis, teacher interviews, and relevant result analysis. During the experiment, tasks included student interviews, mid-test score grading, and using SPSS to compare pre-test and mid-test scores. Post-experiment tasks primarily involved student interviews, post-test score grading, and comparing pre-test, mid-test, and post-test scores.

## 5. Results and Analysis

### 5.1. Pre-Experiment

The pre-experiment questionnaire survey and interviews served as the starting point of the study, with their results providing crucial foundations for subsequent pedagogical research. In this study, a total of 316 questionnaires were distributed across three grades, and 316 valid questionnaires were collected, each comprising two sets of questionnaires.

#### 5.1.1. Analysis of Questionnaire Reliability and Validity

Questionnaire reliability refers to the consistency of measurement. Using the SPSS statistical software to analyze the reliability of the "Survey on the Use of English Writing Strategies in Rural Junior High Schools," it was found that the Cronbach's alpha coefficients for various research variables were all greater than 0.8. Moreover, the overall Cronbach's alpha coefficient exceeded 0.9, indicating high internal reliability of the questionnaire.

Questionnaire validity measures the degree of effectiveness in measurement. The KMO value for

the survey on the use of English writing strategies in rural junior high schools was 0.962, exceeding 0.6, indicating effective information extraction from the data. The significance of Bartlett's sphericity test was 0.00, less than 0.05, indicating the questionnaire's suitability for factor analysis and demonstrating good structural validity.

### **5.1.2. Discussion and Analysis of Questionnaire Results**

Through statistical analysis of the data from the survey on the current status of junior high school English writing instruction, the study made the following findings:

Firstly, due to a lack of contextual and pragmatic needs, the overall foundation of rural junior high school students' English writing is weak, directly resulting in a lack of interest and confidence in English writing. Secondly, from the feedback on the questionnaire, the school's English teachers implemented daily English writing instruction, and their teaching methods for English writing gained students' approval. Thirdly, concerning rural junior high school students' English writing learning, teachers should focus on mastering students' "vocabulary and grammar," and endeavor to help students overcome difficulties in English writing, thus enhancing their interest and confidence in writing.

Analyzing the results of the survey on the use of English writing strategies in rural junior high schools using SPSS, it was found that in rural secondary schools represented by Zhangjiajie Second Middle School, students seldom use English writing strategies in their writing. However, the frequency of using English writing strategies still exhibits differences between grades and levels. Specifically, students in the third grade use English writing strategies more frequently than students in the second grade.

### **5.1.3. Pre-Experiment Teacher Interview Results**

Three teachers were randomly selected for interviews, including one with rich teaching experience and two younger teachers with two to three years of experience. A comprehensive analysis of the teacher interview results revealed the following issues in current rural junior high school English writing instruction:

Firstly, concerning the allocation of English writing teaching hours, teachers did not allocate sufficient teaching time for writing instruction, with at most one class hour per essay.

Secondly, regarding students' attitudes toward writing, teachers universally reported that students' attitudes toward English writing were not positive, and they often did not engage in writing during class.

Thirdly, regarding students' main writing difficulties, these were concentrated in language knowledge, such as vocabulary, grammar, Chinese-style thinking in English expression, and a lack of logical coherence in essays.

Fourthly, regarding the correction and revision of English writing, few teachers required students to revise their compositions multiple times. They either provided slight guidance for correction or did not correct at all.

## **5.2. During the Experiment**

### **5.2.1. Comparison and Analysis of Pre-Test and Mid-Test Results in Student English Writing**

Looking at the average writing scores, students' pre-test and mid-test scores were 8.244 and 9.281, respectively, indicating a slight improvement in students' English writing scores after approximately 6 weeks of stratified teaching in junior high school. Using paired sample T-tests with SPSS, it was found that there was a significant difference between the pre-test and post-test scores of Class C,

while no significant difference existed between the pre-test and mid-test scores of Class A and Class B. This suggests that students in Class C showed significant progress in English writing scores.

### 5.2.2. Analysis of Mid-Term Interview Results

Mid-term interviews were conducted one week after the mid-term exams. Students were randomly selected from Class A, Class B, and Class C in a ratio of 1:2:3. Two, four, and six students were chosen from each class for interviews, respectively. The interviews were conducted individually between teachers and students in the teacher's office. The entire interview process was recorded on a mobile phone and later transcribed. The insights gained from the interviews are as follows:

Firstly, regarding the design of the guided learning plans, on the one hand, for Class A, the pre-class plans should include not only model essays but also additional related extracurricular vocabulary, phrases, and expressions to meet the higher demands of Class A students. On the other hand, most students in Class C expressed that they found the guided learning plans too difficult. To prevent demotivating Class C students, future plans for Class C should either overall reduce difficulty or specifically divide into C1 and C2 layers. The former can maintain the current difficulty level, while the latter should only require writing simple English sentences if necessary.

Secondly, in future English stratified writing teaching, researchers should focus on cultivating the English writing strategy usage of Class A and Class B students, such as word transformation skills, consulting English dictionaries, and so on.

Thirdly, emphasis should be placed on post-writing consolidation activities. Many students incorporate excellent expressions when writing, but they do not internalize them. Consequently, they complete the same writing tasks without referring to any materials, failing to achieve the desired level of writing. Therefore, researchers should emphasize writing consolidation, encouraging students to memorize and rewrite their completed writing drafts after finishing them.

## 5.3. After the Experiment

### 5.3.1. Analysis of Post-Experiment Student Interviews

Post-experiment student interviews were conducted on December 26th, with the number and format of interviews consistent with those in the mid-term phase. Through the analysis of the interview results, adjustments and improvements should be made in the following areas:

Students from Class B mentioned that "without templates, writing is more difficult." Originally, the intention of the research was to use the Section B 3a passage from each unit in the textbook as a model text. However, due to the uncertainty in teaching time caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in the later stages of the experiment, researchers needed to race against time to complete teaching tasks. This led to the omission of certain teaching elements, increasing the writing difficulty for Class B students. Therefore, in future teaching, researchers should pay attention to not neglecting or skipping any teaching elements, as this could impact the effectiveness of the teaching experiment. Additionally, the suggestion from Class C students regarding "creating sentences in English writing" should also be taken seriously. It is necessary to acknowledge that differences still exist among Class C students. A few students show a serious attitude and determination to make progress, and researchers should not blindly reduce the difficulty of writing, overlooking the elevated writing needs of these students. This can be addressed by continuing to stratify within Class C and setting more targeted guided learning plans and writing tasks.



### **5.3.2. Comparison and Analysis of Pre-Test and Post-Test Results of Student English Writing Strategy Survey**

Using SPSS statistical software to conduct paired sample T-tests on the situation of students' writing strategies before and after the experiment, it was found that after a semester of experimental English writing teaching, students at all levels in the experimental class had overall developed awareness of using English writing strategies, especially in terms of increased frequency in pre-writing and in-writing strategy use. However, awareness and frequency of post-writing strategy use did not show significant improvement.

### **5.3.3. Comparison and Analysis of Pre-Test and Post-Test Results of Student English Writing**

The average post-test score for Class A English writing was 22.1905, compared to an average pre-test score of 21.143, indicating an increase of approximately 1 point. The average post-test score for Class B English writing was 14.4524, compared to an average pre-test score of 13.214, also showing an increase of approximately 1 point. However, there was no statistically significant difference in the English writing scores of Class C students.

## **6. Conclusion and Implications**

### **6.1. Research Findings**

After a semester of experimental English writing stratified teaching, the analysis of questionnaire survey results, teacher and student interview outcomes, as well as pre-test, mid-test, and post-test scores in English writing revealed the following findings:

- (1) Stratified teaching in rural junior high school English writing classes can enhance students' interest and willingness to write in English, particularly noticeable in students from groups A and B, and to a lesser extent in group C.
- (2) Stratified teaching significantly improves students' abilities in using pre-writing and in-writing strategies in English writing.
- (3) Stratified teaching can to some extent elevate students' English writing scores, with a more pronounced improvement in groups A and B compared to group C.

### **6.2. Implications for Research**

This study offers insights for English writing teaching in rural junior high schools:

- (1) English writing instruction in rural junior high schools should provide stratified guidance to stimulate the learning interest and confidence of students in each group, ensuring that all students can achieve progress within their proximal development zones.
- (2) Stratified teaching in English writing in rural junior high schools should focus on the scientific and flexible grouping of students, as this is a prerequisite for achieving optimal results in stratified teaching.
- (3) Stratified teaching in English writing in rural junior high schools should emphasize providing both in-class and out-of-class stratified guidance, along with review and consolidation, to help students firmly grasp the learned knowledge on the basis of understanding and application.

## **7. Research Limitations and Future Prospects**

Due to a range of both subjective and objective constraints, there are two notable limitations in this study on stratified teaching in rural junior high school English writing. Firstly, the lack of a control group in this teaching experiment raises concerns about the rigor and accuracy of the experimental

results, as unrelated variables such as "differences in learning content difficulty" or "differences in exam question difficulty" may impact the study outcomes. Secondly, the limited time for the teaching experiment poses challenges. Due to statutory holidays and disruptions caused by the pandemic, the post-test scores of students were somewhat influenced.

For future research in the realm of stratified teaching in rural junior high school English writing, several areas warrant in-depth investigation. First, the content arrangement of stratified teaching materials should be refined based on the actual needs and writing learning objectives of students in each group. Second, there is a need to explore methods to stimulate and sustain the motivation of group C students in English writing. Third, extending the awareness of stratified teaching throughout the entire English teaching process, including listening, reading, and other components, rather than solely focusing on English writing instruction, should be a future research focus.

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