

# Promoting the Audience Awareness of EFL Writing in Chinese Communicative Context: A Case Study of “NOTICE”

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## Abstract

It is a heated discussion among researchers of foreign-language teaching on how to enhance the audience awareness through the design, organization and implementation of classroom teaching of EFL writing, which is crucial for effective writing both in mother and in foreign language. And it is widely acknowledged that the cultivation of social context or communicative context is a major factor affecting audience awareness of the learners. Therefore, this study devotes to set up an example of how to promote the audience awareness through the teaching design in Notice writing teaching within the paradigm of communicative language teaching, concentrating on the exploring of the cultivation of communicative context. Contrastive analysis and survey revealed that this kind of teaching design was much more effective in the teaching practice compared to the traditional one in arousing learner's interest and the audience awareness on the chosen genre.

**Keywords:** audience awareness, communicative context, writing performance, Chinese EFL writing

## 1. Introduction

It is widely accepted that writing is a process of interaction between the author and target audience and that writing can be studied from a wide range of perspectives, depending on different theories of language learning and performance. Over the last few decades, there is a strong consensus among writing theorists and researchers that audience awareness of the writer is of great significance in understanding development in writing and therefore it is crucial to effective writing both in mother and in foreign language. Consequently, there have been numerous writing theoretical researches and studies developed to enhance learner's writing proficiency in this aspect. Among them, most writing theorists and researchers agree that social context or communicative context is a major factor affecting writing performance.

It is widely acknowledged that practical writing, which is very useful and important for EFL learners, is a branch of ESP and is very different from academic and literary writing. Nevertheless, almost all Chinese EFL learners find it a daunting task owing to its complexity compared to the other three language skills and that the effect of writing teaching has long been inefficient and time-consuming, of which China is one of the most severe disaster areas according to previous statistics. Furthermore, the writing performance of Chinese EFL learners is far from satisfied upon the textual metafunction in the aspect of coherence, cohesion and accuracy, of which the weak audience awareness is an obvious defect.

### 1.1 Introduction to Audience Awareness

As we know that writing is a process of interaction between the author and target audience, this means the purpose of writing is to convey some messages to target audience, or just to communicate with audience. Holiday et al. (1994) considered audience awareness as a critical component of all good writings. In order to communicate effectively, skilled writers take the expectation and need of the target audience into considering in the whole process of writing. Just as Nystrand (1989) stated that skilled writers “don't merely ‘will’ a text on readers; rather, they mold their text by balancing their intentions and purposes with the expectations and needs of the reader” (p. 71). Skilled writers know the meaning of concerning themselves about audience interests, values, background information, and rhetorical expectations for writing and address these concerns in all processes of writing; whereas less skilled writers do not have the ability and strategic knowledge to achieve this. The consideration of audience of a writer in writing is called audience awareness. It focuses on “write for whom” and

“what is the purpose of the text”, emphasizing the importance of writing context and purpose.

There are many discussions towards the definition of audience awareness in writing. Augustine's (1981) viewed it as that a writer would “engage in a variation of the intention-response exchange by ‘standing in’ for the addressee” (p. 227); Wilderman (1988) held the view that “no matter who/what the audience is (from real people to fictional construct), writers adjust their discourse to their audience” (p. 215); while Holiday et al. (1994) stated that “Effective writers develop an understanding that the language and content they use and create are interactive and that these must be taken into account by analyzing who their audience is (p. 879)”.

Gunel et al. (2009) asserted that audience awareness requires writers to consider the feature of audience before doing any writing. Foster (2010) pointed out that having audience awareness means that writers must “keep in mind the concerns and values of the people [they] want to reach; [writers] should have some knowledge of their educational and social backgrounds, how old they are, and whether they are... liberal conservative about religion, sex, and politics (p. 3).”

In this study, audience awareness means that the writers analyze and bear in mind the feature of potential reader in their writing and consciously builds up an effective relationship by using respective language, contend, tone and rhetoric tact etc.

### *1.2 Introduction to Practical Writing*

Practical English Writing is the course that aims to teach the learner how to convey clear, concise messages and avoid verbosity or flowery on common forms of paperwork writing from letters, notes, notices, and memos to e-mails and other electronic communications. It has a diversity range of knowledge in specific paperwork (summary, employment letters, interoffice memos, news release, report etc.)

### *1.3 Introduction to NOTICE*

NOTICE is a very common form of practical writing, which is used to as signs put in a public place that announce something or warn people about something. The writing of Notices varies in forms from one to another. They may be written on blackboard or bulletin board. They may be written as memos delivered to the desk of officials. They can also be written as letters to notify people of something in detail and they can even be oral statement.

In general, there are two types of Notices: Notices giving instruction of some items to colleagues among or between organizations and institutions, known as “通知” (Notice of announcement) in Chinese, and notices giving information to the public to announce something or search for aid by organizations or individuals, known as “启事” (Notice of message release) in Chinese.

## **2. Literature Review**

The below two theories explain the best teaching design of EFL writing practice must base on the communicative context. Only after experiencing the series of writing process such as conception, writing, modifying, publishing etc. can the learner internalize the tacit knowledge to explicit one, and finish the self-construction of writing knowledge and skills as well.

As to the teaching design of the audience awareness, the author thinks its priority lies in the authentic experience of a specific genre. Only by this way, can the learner internalize its characteristics. Moreover, a genre may have a diversity range of forms, formats and functions. Therefore, the teacher must classify and single out the typical characteristic of a genre before the systematic teaching design and practice. The difficulties points lie in the cultivation of real or simulated communicative context and tasks.

### *2.1 Cognitive Psychological Perspective*

Constructivism, which serves as the outstanding representative of current leading cognitive psychological achievement and becomes as a paradigm or worldview, posits that learning is an active, constructive process in which the learner constructs knowledge and meaning based upon their experiences and current/past knowledge (J. Bruner, 1986). This theory emphasizes on the cultivation of a conducive learning environment (Razak and Asmawi, 2004) and advocates that the learning activities should encompass the real world, worthwhile results and authentic experiences (Mynard, 2003, cited by Maryam Foroutan ).

Constructivism assumes that the learners' writing proficiency can be enhanced through a series of cognitive and interactive activities in the process of writing. It advocates “learning to write through writing”, and the utilization of learning elements such as situation, cooperation and meaning negotiation.

According to constructivism, the cultivation of audience awareness is an active, constructive process in which

the learner constructs knowledge and meaning based on their experience and current/past knowledge, that is to say, the only way to enhance the audience awareness is to practice it in real or simulated communicative context.

## *2.2 Communicative Language Acquisition*

Communicative Language acquisition holds the belief that the aim of writing teaching of EFL is to cultivate the learner's communicative competence, which can be promoted by composing a certain discourse to accomplish specific communicative tasks in real or simulated real-life situation with full feedback with peers other than writing without authentic communicative context and material in this field. It emphasizes that writing skills must depend on the communicative practice, rather than language skills training and the pragmatic, authentic, and functional use of the target language for meaningful purposes (Brown, 1994). Furthermore, it advocates learner-centered and experience-based teaching activity and promotes the fulfillment of communicative tasks in real or simulated real-life situations.

According to this theory, the best teaching design of audience awareness should concentrate on the design of "communicative context" and "communicative task", which is a little hard in Chinese context. Because the common Chinese people are not used to written English especially practical paperwork in daily life apart from academic activities, the learners are surrounded by written Chinese every day and everywhere, therefore, the full exposure to authentic environment is hardly to achieve. Even many English teachers don't have the chance to practice their written English apart from academic purpose. So it is difficult for both teachers and learners to apply this theory in practice because many teachers themselves do not know what the best context a genre should apply in, and what the best appropriate text is since the evaluation of composition is very professional and cannot be measured very concisely or scientifically. As a result, the common practice in the teaching practice of practical English writing goes as followed: Familiarization → controlled writing → evaluation → free writing. Firstly, the learner are required to familiarize the characteristic of a certain genre through the discussion or teacher's explanation of samples. Secondly, the learners are required to carry out controlled writing without concrete context or target audience. Thirdly, only teacher and peer evaluation on learner's works is carried out. At last, the students are told to write freely on the genre. As one can see, this kind of typical practice happens in Chinese communicative context, lacking English learning and application context. This is the reason why the researcher tries to innovate in her practice.

## **3. Statement of Present Problem**

### *3.1 The Present Situation in EFL Writing Teaching in China*

It is widely acknowledged that writing has long remained to be one of the poorest language abilities among Chinese learners according to previous statistics of international and national language test analysis, such as IELTS, TOFEL, CET (a standard test as the nation-wide College English Test in China) band 4 and 6 (Sun Suping et al., 2004.). Li Changzhong (2001) and Shu Xiaoyu (2000) made a sample analysis of students' writing performance on CET-4 and found the overall effect of these compositions was incoherence, while learners' writing proficiency was closely related to their textual coherence. Therefore, a large number of students are tired of English writing and are scared of it; many teachers regard writing teaching as a hard work and are reluctant to do it.

Many scholars and researchers have carried out different studies to find out the reasons for this unsatisfactory condition of writing. Firstly, just as Wang Wenyu and Wang Lifei (2003) point out that the utmost reason is that Chinese teachers largely ignore the audience awareness in teaching practice and focus on knowledge on "what to write" and "how to write". That is to say it is very popular to explain "what a good discourse is like" and skills to develop a good discourse and then little attention is paid on "what is the purpose of the writing" and "write for whom". Secondly, Li (2014) made a survey of Chinese Research on EFL Writing Teaching from 2009 to 2013 and found that the promotion of audience awareness has not gained its due attention, because the hotspot in theoretical focuses on two aspects as "teaching concept and mode" as well as "teaching evaluation", specific hot topics include "writing feedback", "teaching principle", "teaching approach", "teaching mode", "teaching strategy". Thirdly, based on the researcher's own teaching practice and observation, most of the Chinese teachers teach EFL writing without any authentic communicative context, which will result in a lot of mistakes in the aspects of audience awareness such as My attitude, in wrong tone (either too cold or official) and so on, and then may lead to misunderstanding or other results.

### *3.2 Problem of Learner's Performance in Practical Writing in China*

As an experienced teacher in EFL writing for about 10 years, the researcher finds the weak audience awareness contributes greatly to the learner's writing competency and then affecting their discourse performance besides

other writing skills and language knowledge in EFL writing. However, compared to literature and academic writing, the present situation in the teaching of Practical Writing in China is much different because many genres have its own fixed format and patterns, some even have fixed expressions. Therefore, they are less space left to the author to compose freely. Therefore, it is less likely to make errors in teaching practice, for example, if you are very familiar with the format and patters of an English Invitation, all you need to do is to fill in some specific information in a chosen format. Nevertheless, there are also much other paperwork such as Notice, Memo, Letter, Certificate and so on requiring innovation and creativity, where most of Chinese learners' composition seem inappropriate in line with authentic context and tradition.

The researcher finds out in teaching practice and investigation that if taught without various authentic communicative contexts, the learner is commonly to make up the following typical errors in Task 1-3:

Egocentric/author orientation/my attitude - ignorance of the status of the target audience without paying due respect to the audience

E.g. Our company is going to .... We require .... Our product ....

2) In unmatched tone - either too cold or too official or appealing

E.g. I hereby to announce that .... (Task 2)

All the customers are required to .... (Task 3)

3) Organized in parataxis- organized in the thinking mode of Chinese

E.g. Since the coming holiday is very important ..., we will carry out a series of activities to celebrate ... (Task 3)

4) Writing in flowery words - use some very literature or jargon words, which are uncommon to common people e.g. To use "procurement" for "purchasing", "conference" for "meeting", "avenue" for "place", "implement" for "carry out or hold" etc in task 1-2.

To use "commodities" for "goods", "small-fry or the apples" for "children", "make an inventory of warehouses" for "clearance sale" etc in task 3.

#### 4. Countermeasure in Notice Teaching

##### 4.1 Teaching Design

Based on previous observation and investigation, the researcher manages to implement an innovation of cultivation of communicative context in teaching design in 2 classes in grade 2 for successive 5 years. Apart from the usual teaching activities, the following activities are stressed (see Figure 1).

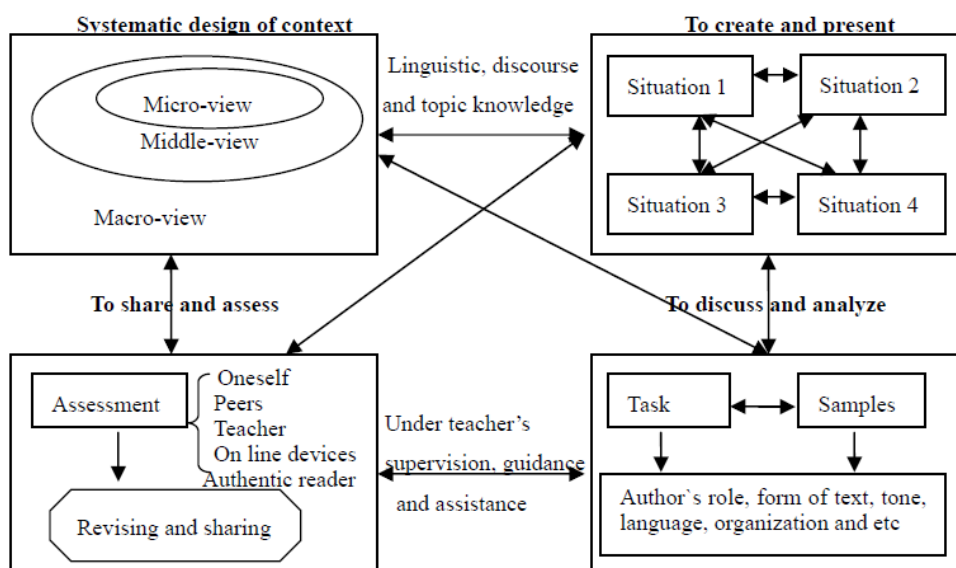


Figure 1. Teaching procedures in cultivation of audience awareness

#### 4.1.1 Step 1. Systematic Teaching Design of Communicative Context

As textbooks seldom provide communicative context, so it is necessary to design it systematically. The researcher presents her thought of design of practical writing in the aspect of macro-view (represents the whole communicative context of a certain genre), middle-view (represents the communicative situation of a kind of the genre) and micro-view (represents the scenario of a specific task of the genre) as shown in table 1.

Table 1. Systematic teaching design of communicative context in Notice writing

Item Aspect	Communicative context	Communicative subject and task	Communicative object
Macro-view	Whole communicative context: to inform or release message accurately to the target audience	Author: message releaser; a clerk or administrative post in all kinds of organization and institution; to convey message accurately to audience Audience: message recipient; various social roles such as all kinds of employees, employers, civil servants and administrative post in all kinds of organization and institution; expected to interpret the provided message accurately	A variety of messages
Middle-view	Situation: to implement the communicative task of a certain kind of Notice such as Notice of message release	Author: message releaser; a clerk or administrative post in all kinds of public relevant organization and institution; to convey message accurately to audience Audience: message recipient; various social roles such as all kinds of employees, employers, civil servants and administrative post in all kinds of organization and institution; expected to interpret the provided message accurately	Public messages
Micro-view	Scenario: to implement a specific communicative task such as a sales promotion Notice of message release	Author : message releaser, potential seller; a clerk in a public relevant organization and institution; to convey sales promotion message accurately to audience Audience: message recipient, potential buyer; various social roles such as all kinds of employees, employers, civil servants and administrative post in all kinds of organization and institution; expected to interpret the provided message accurately and action soon	Specific favorable message of sale promotion

4.1.2 Step 2. Try to create as many contexts as possible in task assignment and present them in pair in order to help the learner experience different roles of author.

In this step, the teacher should have a clear idea that the provided tasks should cover as many as possible situations or contexts into account as to experiencing various feeling (sensation) of difference role. Furthermore, the task and its environment (including communicative environment, interpersonal relationship) should be stated very clearly.

Sample case

#### ***Tasks for students in Notice writing***

*The students are required to compose an English Notice based on the provided information.*

**Task 1-2:** Suppose you are Tom, an office clerk in ABC Company, please write both a written (task 1) and oral Notice (task 2) based on the provided information.

*Types of meeting: board meeting*

*Subject: to review the plan of purchasing office facilities for 2017*

*Time: 9:00 am, March 7*

*Place: Meeting-room No.1*

*Requirements:*

- 1. Hand in the plan quickly before the meeting because any delayed plan will not be accepted.*
- 2. All the members of the Board and relevant staff must be present on time.*

*Notice based on the provided information.*

*Originator of the activity: Children's clothing department in xxx Branch shop of ABC Chain Shop*

*Reason for special offer: to celebrate the International Children's Day*

*Special Offer: 20% reduction for all new arrivals; 50% reduction for some goods (with no replacement or refunding); 100 Yuan cash vouchers and a present (first 300 customers), lucky draw program of 1,000 Award for zero consumption ...*

*Activity Time: from May 31 - June 2*

*Address: 26, xxx Road, xxx district, xxx city*

*Telephone: 6665533*

4.1.3 Step 3. To discuss and analyze the feature of audience awareness such as the tone and the choice of word etc of both the tasks and reference samples.

In this step, the teacher and students should discuss and analyze the communicative tasks, role of author, form of text, choice of words, choice of person of the task and characteristics of model together to sum up the writing structure and language characteristic of the genre/Notice (see Table 2). That is to help the students establish the characteristic of the target audience and the writing purpose of such articles and consider the language region (field, model and tenor) of the article (Richard Badger and Goodith White, 2000).

Table 2. Analyses of writing element of task 1 -3 in audience awareness

	Role of author	Target reader	Form of communication	Purpose	Tone
Task 1	Clerk	Colleague in the same company; acquaintance	Written announcement	To deliver a command to colleague	Official, businesslike, dignified
Task 2	Clerk	Colleague in the same company; acquaintance	Oral announcement	To deliver a command to colleague	Kind, businesslike, dignified,
Task 3	Clerk	Potential stranger	Written sales promotion	To promote sales of product; seeking for potential customer	Persuasive; attractive; appealing

4.1.4 Step 4. Try to share and assess the learner's performance of written text on a full diversification of the reader group.

Firstly, the teacher divides the students into 3 task groups to implement different tasks. Then after self assessment, each student is required to share his/her written text within and out of his/her group to receive peer feedback for further revising in accordance with the Audience Awareness Scale provided by Berrill and Analytic Scoring Scale (see Table 3 and Appendix 1). In this stage, the Audience Awareness Scale is employed to analyze the extent to which the writers demonstrate an understanding of the needs of the audience for their writing and the Analytic scoring scale is employed to evaluate the discourse performance. Thirdly, the teacher and students analyze and discuss the sample works of the students together. Finally, the students test their final version on on-line writing software and then try a trial communication with the authentic readers to implement comprehensive assessments on its communicative effect.

Table 3. The audience awareness scale provided by Berrill (1992)

Level of audience awareness	Characteristic(s) of the writing
Egocentric	Writer assumes that audience share same attitudes and knowledge base.
Cursory awareness of alternative view	Writer anticipates opposing position but does not deal with it.
Acknowledges alternative point of view	Writer recognizes alternative point of view, but does not accept its validity
Appreciates alternative point of view	Writer recognizes validity of alternative view and qualifies initial position accordingly
Accommodates alternative point of view	Writer explicitly acknowledges validity of alternative view and incorporates this view in argument structure

#### 4.2 Participants

This study employs a combination of survey and discourse evaluation to measure the effectiveness of the cultivation of communicative context in teaching design to the audience awareness on the level of composition performance for Chinese EFL learners. The subjects for the study consist about 90 Junior college students for one semester in each academic year from 2009 for Grade two students majoring in Business English in the College of Business Foreign Languages in Hunan International Business Vocational College, with about 7-8 (7.3%) males and 82 (92.7%) females in the last 5 years. The age of the participants ranges from 19 to 21 with an average age of 20.3. All of them have acquired at least grade A and above in PRETCO (Practical English Test for Colleges in China), they can be categorized as competent or modest learners of English in Chinese college students at the same level. They are assigned to two natural classes randomly: there are about 45 students in each class with 42 females and 3 males. The same series of teaching materials are used in all of these classes. Moreover, to avoid variation in teachers, the same teacher (the author) is in charge of the instruction of writing for the two classes alternatively.

#### 4.3 Feedbacks from Practice

After practice of a series of similar cases as above-mentioned, the researcher collects a feedback data including objective and subjective ones, which implies optimistic effects. There are some typical feedbacks towards it as stated below.

##### 4.3.1 Objective Feedback

Since the assessment of teaching effect usually involves discourse and learner evaluation, the researcher employs the Analytic Scoring Scale to evaluate the communicative effect of the discourse, of which the index of “task achievement” is utmost important in order to check whether the learner stands in target – reader’s shoes in provided context. In addition, she combines the Audience Awareness Scale provided by Berrill and observation of classroom performance to evaluate the learner’s performance. Contrastive analysis and survey revealed that this kind of teaching design was much more effective in the teaching practice compared to the traditional one in arousing the learner’s interest and the audience awareness on the chosen genre.

##### 4.3.2 Subjective Feedback

Investigation and surveys reveals the following comment from both the teacher and student: most teachers claim that this practice is comprehensive and effective in spite of it needs much more time and efforts for preparation.

In addition, they mention that this practice is useful for a certain number of genres in practical writing since a large amount of them have little space for individuality, such as many kinds of Certificates, Forms, Invitation, Bills etc. Therefore, they recommend that the teachers should cooperate to cultivate the communicative context of the other genres together because it is a hard task for a single teacher to do so.

Most students regard it as an interesting and good design and state it is helpful and practical to them although the tasks are a little complicated to them. They find out it help broaden their knowledge of writing and society, their writing becomes more pertinent and considerate. Therefore, they recommend that they would prefer to accomplish and evaluate their writing task on internet software with the help of computer resource other than to do it in classroom without electrical devices.

## **5. Conclusion**

In Chinese contexts, where exposure to written English is extremely limited, the acquisition of audience awareness is much more difficult than in mother or first language. Based on the discourse observation and investigation in practice, the researcher contributes most of the Chinese learner's discourse errors to the weak audience awareness in EFL writing teaching especially in the aspect of paperwork composition. Therefore, this study devotes to set up an example of how to promote the audience awareness through the teaching design in practical writing teaching within the paradigm of communicative language teaching, concentrating on the exploring of the cultivation of communicative context. All the general overview of this research and implication for further research are presented in this part.

### *5.1 Summary of the Research*

This research states that the audience awareness is of vital importance in writing competence and that the cultivation of communicative context in the teaching design of EFL writing is helpful to enhance it. Moreover, she demonstrates it is necessary and possible to develop a systematic communicative context in the teaching of practical writing. Taking a genre –Notice as an example, the researcher presents in detail how to organize and implement the systematic teaching design of task-oriented, authentic communicative context.

The intention of the thesis is to provide an optional model and sample case to the teaching design of EFL Writing. Nevertheless, the implementation of this model in teaching practice was not successfully confirmed for the following reasons: firstly, there are great differences between this model and the traditional way and sometimes both the teachers and students thought it was hard to adapt. Secondly, some students' English level is not high enough to carry out all the activity in English, they need the aids of Chinese in presentation and discussion or assessment, etc. Thirdly, some paperwork in practical English is unnecessary to take the reader's reaction into much account, they have its own fixed format and text, such as Certificates, Forms, Invitation and Bills.

Compared the teaching performance of practical writing before and after the cultivation of communicative context, most of the participators agree that the latter is much more practical, logical, authentic and meaningful for the learners. Furthermore, the innovation has been experimented for 5 successive years in contrast bases. Feedback receives from both the teacher and learner reveals that this kind of design is very useful in both teaching and future social communication because it provides the experience of a diversification sensation of audience and a variety feedback, which enhanced their comprehension of paperwork and awareness of reader.

### *5.2 Limitation of the Research*

This research tries to explore the cultivation of audience awareness in a Chinese context in the teaching of EFL writing. The reliability of the findings of this research is limited for the following reasons: Firstly, the experimental content is in narrow range- only taking the practical paperwork into account other than other types of texts such as academic one. Secondly, the subjects of this experiment lack variety, they all come from the same major and college. Thirdly, numerous factors can affect the teaching effect. Fourthly, the findings are presented on descriptive analysis other than qualitative and quantitative analysis. Fifthly, the priority of the research narrows in the teaching design other than teaching implementation, no sample from student's writing presents to demonstrate actual effect.

### *5.3 Suggestions for Further Research*

The limitations of this research leave room for further empirical research. Therefore, further investigation should base on larger variety of subjects and genres, more detailed analyses of correlation of various factors. Moreover, the cognitive or psychological effect of communicative context can be taken into account as well.

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**Appendix 1. Analytic scoring scale**

Task achievement (content)	
20~25	All contents points elaborated without irrelevant or missing information; meet text type requirement.
14~19	Most contents points elaborated; some important information was missing or irrelevant to the content; some inconsistencies in text type requirement.
8~13	Some contents points elaborated; a lot of information was missing or irrelevant, which resulted in insufficient word length (less than half of the word length); many inconsistencies in text type requirement.
2~7	Major information was irrelevant to the task, or insufficient word length (less than one third of the word length).
0~1	The text was neither informative nor relevant.
Coherence and cohesion	
20~25	Transitions were used appropriately; ideas were well-connected; communication was effective.
14~19	A few transitions were used inappropriately, but the ideas were understandable.
8~13	Limited transitions; ideas were not well-connected and subject to misunderstanding.
2~7	Incorrect transitions which led to misunderstanding.
0~1	No coherence at all; sentences were fragmented; or transition was absent.
Grammar and Spelling	
20~25	Wide range of structure; almost no grammatical mistake.
14~19	Good range of structure; minor grammatical inaccuracy that hindered the understanding at lexical level.
8~13	Limited range of structure; Major grammatical inaccuracy that hindered the understanding at syntactic and semantic levels.
2~7	No range of structure; Frequent grammatical mistakes including major and minor inaccuracies.
0~1	Almost all grammatical patterns were inaccurate or no assessable language.
Language	
20~25	Wide range of vocabulary appropriate to its meaning and purpose; no signs of plagiarism.
14~19	Minor inadequacies of vocabulary appropriateness; no signs of plagiarism.
8~13	Moderate inadequacies of vocabulary appropriateness; or minor plagiarism.
2~7	Major inadequacies of vocabulary appropriateness; or excessive plagiarism.
0~1	Almost scatter vocabulary; no assessable language.

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