

Teaching the Untaught: Bridging Textbook Gaps in Gaokao Story Continuation Writing Through Corpus-Informed Materials Design

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Abstract

Story Continuation Writing Tasks (SCWT) are now a mandatory item of the Gaokao English examination. These tasks require test takers to assume a narrator's role, shape characters, make pragmatic decisions, and write logically (Yu, 2020). However, current Chinese high school English classes allegedly remain form-oriented, emphasizing grammar and vocabulary drills while offering limited support for narrative writing skills such as narrative structure construction and contextualized language application. This creates a misalignment between classroom instruction and examination expectations. To address this gap, this study adopts a qualitative analytical approach, examining widely used Chinese high school textbooks, recent Gaokao SCWT tasks, and official Gaokao evaluation reports on student performance. The findings suggested here will inform the design of a corpus-informed SCWT-oriented workbook, accompanied by a structured syllabus for the workbook and teacher notes to support classroom instruction. This study demonstrates how corpus-informed materials bridge textbook gaps and examination demands, providing a practical framework for narrative writing instruction in Chinese high school English contexts.

Keywords: Story Continuation Writing Task (SCWT), Gaokao English, corpus-informed materials design, CLiC (Corpus Linguistics in Context) Corpus, narrative writing

1. Introduction

In the Chinese education system, the Gaokao is one of the most important examinations since Chinese university admission decisions mainly rely on Gaokao scores. As the decisive high-stakes examination for university admission, the Gaokao functions as the most influential gatekeeper in China's education system, serving as national talent selection and providing guidance for teaching (National Education Examinations Authority, 2022). Therefore, the Gaokao provides a strong washback effect on Chinese education: What is tested in the Gaokao can directly influence how textbooks are written and how teachers teach in the classroom. Since the Gaokao not only determines students' access to higher education but also guides the direction of curriculum implementation, it plays an important role in shaping students' educational paths and teachers' pedagogical practices.

Over the last nine years, with the reform of the Gaokao, the writing section of the Gaokao English examination no longer consists solely of practical letter-writing tasks. A new task type, Story Continuation Writing Task (SCWT), first appeared in the Gaokao of Zhejiang Province in 2017, and then gradually expanded and stabilized across the country (Tao, 2022). Under the background of the reform of the Gaokao, SCWT aims to strengthen the connection between education and examination, so as to positively forward the guidance on teaching (National Education Examinations Authority, 2024). In this task, students are given a passage of no more than 350 words and required to continue the story in two paragraphs, writing about 150 words in total (National Education Examinations Authority, 2024). This task aims to assess students' multiple abilities, including reading-writing integration, cohesion, coherence, creativity, logical thinking, and language knowledge (Yu, 2020). Unlike traditional grammar-focused items, SCWT challenges students not only to produce accurate sentences, but also to demonstrate narrative competence and pragmatic appropriateness in their writing.

However, some recent Gaokao evaluation reports indicate that students' overall performance on SCWT was not satisfactory, highlighting the need for more effective preparation. One important factor causing this situation is the misalignment between SCWT's demands and current textbooks used in Chinese high schools. Existing textbooks still focus on grammar and vocabulary instruction, providing limited opportunities for students to develop the narrative and pragmatic competences required for SCWT. Since SCWT is a relatively new task type, there is a lack of targeted supplementary teaching and learning materials, and teachers could only provide students with self-selected materials as supplementary materials, lacking systematic training tasks to enhance student narrative writing abilities. Moreover, many teachers are unsure about how to teach this new task due to the lack of systematic training or supporting resources. Consequently, the current SCWT instructions and guidance are insufficient for students, highlighting the need for developing specific systematic tasks for training students and supporting materials for teacher education of this new task.

Beyond these practical challenges, there also exists a research gap. Although previous studies have examined textbooks, narrative ability, or pragmatic instruction, these studies are relatively fragmented and do not offer an integrated pedagogical framework to support the research of SCWT instruction. Meanwhile, very few studies are related to the task development of SCWT, emphasizing the need of specific research as a reference for future studies. Because of these challenges, there is an urgent need for approaches that can provide more systematic support for SCWT instruction and practice. In this case, corpus linguistics offers such potential by providing access to authentic narrative language patterns that are difficult to observe directly from current textbooks. However, corpus-informed approaches still have rarely been applied to SCWT-related research or task design.

This research has both theoretical and practical significance. Firstly, this study seeks to comprehensively understand the extent to which current textbooks assist students in preparing for

SCWT, recent examination trends, and student performance by conducting a systematic analysis of Chinese high school English textbooks, SCWT from recent years' Gaokao English examination papers, and official examination reports from the education authority. This evidence-based analysis provides foundational prior knowledge that helps prepare and guide corpus-informed task design for SCWT.

Based on this, this study uses CLiC (Corpus Linguistics in Context) (<https://cllc.bham.ac.uk>) as a reference tool to develop a workbook which provides systematic training and supports students to better prepare for SCWT. As many teachers currently lack systematic training and useful reference teaching sources for this new task, this study also aims to develop teaching-supported resources for English teachers to assist their effective teaching of SCWT.

Overall, this research aims to propose a comprehensive corpus-informed framework for developing instructional materials that are aligned with Gaokao SCWT requirements and support the teaching and learning of narrative writing. It addresses the gap between examination demands and classroom preparation by exploring how corpus-informed materials can facilitate the development of students' narrative writing skills.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Textbook Representation: Coverage, gaps, and misalignment

Currently, Chinese high school English textbooks incorporate certain writing tasks, mainly for training grammar, vocabulary, and sentence patterns, which aim at preparing students for writing tasks in examinations. However, such training is largely limited to form-focused language use. While this may align with traditional writing examination requirements, it provides insufficient support for the development of narrative writing skills and the pragmatic use of language in context. In SCWT, students are required not only to construct coherent narratives, but also to make appropriate pragmatic choices in relation to characters, context, and plot development.

From the perspective of pragmatic aspects, Jiang and Deng (2022) found that speech acts included in current textbooks are very limited to basic categories such as thanking, requesting, and suggesting, and more interactive acts such as refusals, invitations, or compliments are barely covered. Most speech acts are presented through fixed sentence patterns (Jiang & Deng, 2022) and lack specific contexts or explanation contents (Li, 2024), which limits students' understanding of contextualized pragmatic usage. Moreover, Li (2024) mentions that some language structures of suggestion speech acts in textbooks are overemphasized, such as *We/You should*, *We/You can*, and *We/You need to*, focusing too much on direct or semi-direct suggestion speech acts, which ignores indirect and polite expressions, lacking variety.

When it comes to perspectives of task design, according to Qian (2022), basic language practice tasks still dominate in current textbooks, while the proportion of narrative or creative tasks is significantly low, indicating limited opportunities for students to engage in narrative writing practice. Although to some extent current textbooks do emphasize communicative competence, the overall pragmatic contents remain undeveloped (Li & Deocampo, 2022).

Overall, SCWT strongly requires students to assume a narrator's role, shape characters, and make pragmatic decisions about cohesion and coherence (Yu, 2020), which needs systematic practices. However, in contrast, current textbooks still rely heavily on decontextualized drills, causing a mismatch between preparation and actual requirements of examinations.

2.2 Approaches to L2 Writing: From Form-Oriented to Meaning-Oriented Pedagogy

For a long time, L2 writing instruction has mainly focused on form-oriented approaches, which emphasizes grammatical rules, sentence structures, and language accuracy, particularly in the context of examination-oriented teaching. This type of instruction uses grammar-based tasks and written corrective feedback, aiming at reducing language errors and improving the standardization of writing. However, although form-oriented writing instruction has certain teaching effectiveness to some extent, its cultivation of writing skills mainly remains at the surface level, which is unable to fully meet the requirements for meaning construction and communicative functions in newly added writing tasks such as SCWT.

2.2.1 Limitations of Form-Oriented Writing Instruction

Existing research suggests that form-oriented writing instruction and written corrective feedback can help to improve language accuracy, but these effects tend to be limited. For example, according to Kao et al. (2025), while unfocused feedback, also known as systematic error correction, may help students to improve their use of articles, in other areas such as prepositions or verb tenses, it has little effect. Moreover, Nguyen and Chu (2024) have reviewed research on grammar-focused writing instruction, especially studies of corrective feedback, and noticed that most of them only measure accuracy-related outcomes such as error reduction, overlooking other aspects of writing competence. These indicate that even though form-oriented instruction may enhance language

accuracy in writing examinations, they cannot help fully prepare individuals for writing tasks that require wider demands such as narrative skills and pragmatic competence.

2.2.2 Meaning-Oriented Approaches to L2 Writing

To address limitations of form-oriented instruction, it is necessary to adopt meaning-oriented approaches to L2 writing. Vandermeulen et al. (2024) demonstrate the effectiveness of process-based approaches by studying specific steps of student writing, finding that those who would pause to think first and make targeted revisions could have higher writing quality, highlighting the importance of teaching writing as a process, not just as a product.

Task-based writing is particularly important in promoting meaning-oriented L2 writing instruction, which can engage students in writing for meaningful and specific purposes, rather than solely focusing on error correction. By using task-based language teaching (TBLT) in writing instruction, it can support the accuracy, complexity, and fluency of student writing, and further shape their long-term writing development in producing meaningful content (Johnson, 2023). When setting tasks, it is also necessary to create tasks at appropriate difficulty levels, which can reduce students' anxiety and increase their writing positiveness, eventually promoting meaningful language output (Wu & Halim, 2024).

2.2.3 Teacher Education and Pedagogical Support

Existing research suggests that teacher education and pedagogical support are essential to transform writing instruction. According to Ishihara and Cohen (2010), when teaching pragmatics, teachers require explicit resources and systematic guidance in order to teach and assess students effectively, and they also need opportunities of conducting classroom observations to learn how to teach more effectively. However, prior studies indicate that many teachers still face challenges in teaching for specific purposes, such as teaching pragmatics (Ton-Nu & Newton, 2025), which is one

of the needs of narrative writing. This highlights the urgent need of systematic teacher training and designed pedagogical-supported materials to cultivate teaching ability and enhance the effectiveness of instruction.

2.3 Research Gap

To sum up, prior studies reveal several challenges in SCWT preparation. To commence with, current textbooks and writing instructions remain form-oriented, offering limited opportunities for students to practice in meaning-oriented ways to support their narrative writing abilities. Additionally, although recent studies have discussed meaning-oriented L2 writing approaches, there are still very few studies specifically discussing how these approaches can be used to support SCWT teaching. Moreover, there still remains a lack of instructional support for Chinese high school English teachers in terms of SCWT instruction approaches as well as supporting resources.

To address these gaps, corpus linguistics has been increasingly adopted to inform the design of teaching materials. Based on large collections of authentic language data, corpus-informed materials provide insights into how language is actually used across contexts. As Friginal and Prado (2025) discuss, such materials can help move beyond artificial textbook language by drawing on real-world language use and common usage patterns. This perspective indicates that corpus tools offer valuable support for instructional materials development in both student practice and teacher education.

Nevertheless, such approaches have rarely been applied to specific SCWT-related research or practice, which highlights the need for conducting relevant studies as a reference for future research.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The design of the study consists of two components: a qualitative analytical component for future pedagogical materials development. The analytical component adopts a qualitative analysis approach, examining multiple data sources to understand how Story Continuation Writing Task (SCWT) is currently represented in textbooks, examination tasks, and students' actual performance in the Gaokao. The findings of the analytical component will be used as prior knowledge to establish foundations for pedagogical materials design. The materials design will include a corpus-informed SCWT-oriented workbook, a syllabus for the workbook, and a series of teacher notes to assist teacher's teaching of SCWT.

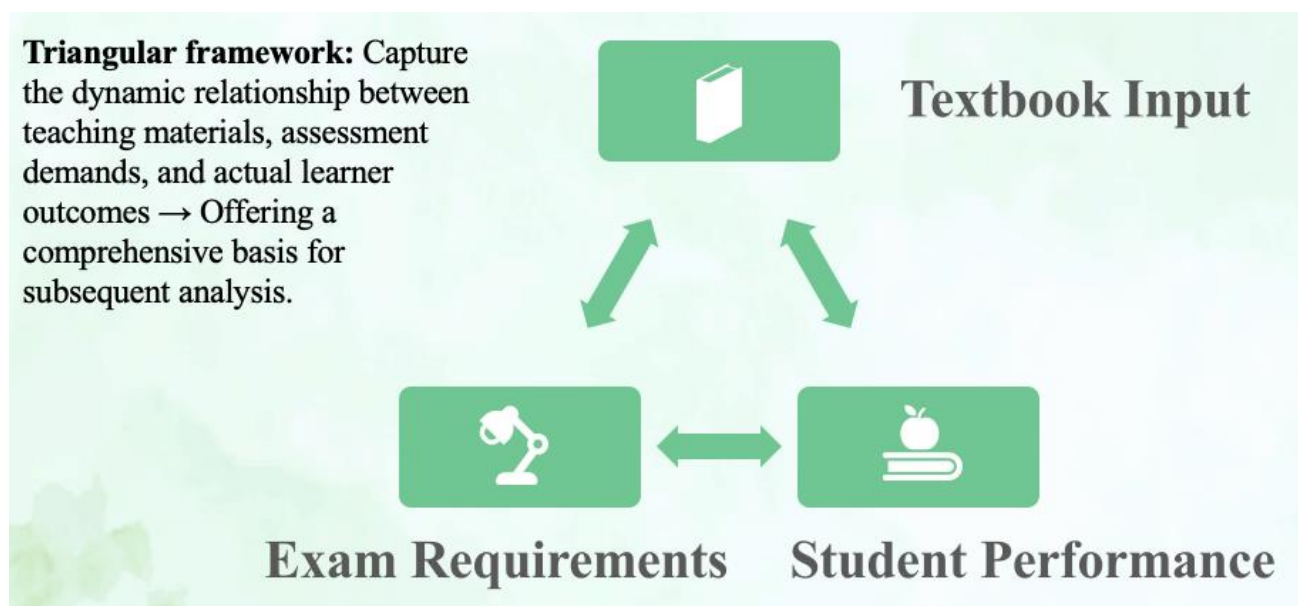
This analysis examines the distribution of four language skills (listening, reading, speaking, writing), the types of activities, the relevance to SCWT, and so on. The findings from this analysis are used to evaluate the extent to which current textbooks prepare students for SCWT, especially in relation to narrative skills and pragmatic competence.

3.2 Data Sources

This study firstly analyzes a series of data sources, which shows a triangular data framework that demonstrates the relationship among textbook input, examination requirements, and student performance in relation to the Gaokao SCWT. These three data sources are interconnected, rather than isolated components.

Image 1

Triangular Framework: The Relationship between Textbook Input, Exam Requirements, and Student Performance

**3.2.1 Textbooks**

This study selected the People's Education Press (PEP) 2019 edition high school English textbooks, including both compulsory and selective modules, together with their accompanying workbooks. The reason for selecting this series of textbooks is because they are the most widely used textbooks in Chinese high schools and directly aligned with the curriculum of the Gaokao.

3.2.2 Examination Tasks

The examination data for this study is SCWT tasks collected from Gaokao English examination papers between 2022 and 2025. These tasks are selected as they represent recent assessment trends and reflect the typical design and requirements of SCWT in the Gaokao. These examination tasks are then analyzed using a qualitative analysis approach, focusing on key features such as story type, theme, conflict, and resolution patterns. Task instructions are also examined to identify constraints on students' writing, including required writing length and continuation format.

A comparison across the four years is conducted to identify the overall SCWT exam trends and demands, providing a reference for further pedagogical SCWT-oriented materials design.

3.2.3 Official Gaokao Evaluation Reports: A Case Study of Fujian Province

The third data source consists of official evaluation reports on Gaokao English examinations. As such reports are only released by a limited number of provinces, this study selects the reports published by the Fujian Provincial Education Examination Authority from 2022 to 2024 as a case study for analysis.

These reports provide information on Gaokao SCWT, including average scores, score distribution, common student problems, and pedagogical implications for teachers. The data are presented across multiple years, offering an overview of how students perform in the task. This case study provides empirical evidence of students' performance and complements the analysis of textbooks and examination tasks.

4. Findings

4.1 Insufficient preparation for SCWT in Existing Textbooks

The analysis of the PEP 2019 edition high school English textbooks indicates that existing instructional materials provide limited preparation for SCWT. In terms of skill distribution, the textbooks strongly emphasize listening and reading, while writing is comparatively underrepresented. Although the textbooks include some writing tasks, they are generally very brief and focus on conventional genres such as letters, reports, and summaries. The attention to storytelling or extended narrative construction of the textbooks are limited and insufficient. As a result, students are rarely guided to develop key skills required for SCWT, such as character development, logical plot construction, and so on. Additionally, while the textbooks contain some conversational expressions, these are largely oriented toward spoken interaction and offer very limited support for the development of written narrative-style language. Overall, the existing textbooks lack systematic training for SCWT.

Table 1*Analysis Findings Summary of PEP 2019 Edition Textbooks*

Aspect	Key Finding	Implication for SCWT
Skill focus	Mainly focus on listening and reading	Limited training for writing
Writing instruction	Have some writing instructions with some genres (e.g., letters, reports, etc.) but rarely focus on storytelling	No instruction and practice for SCWT
Narrative skills	Few activities teach narrative skills (e.g., emotion expression, narrative coherence, etc.)	Key skills required for SCWT are not systematically developed
Language input	Many conversational expressions but limited narrative-style language	Insufficient exposure to written narrative patterns
Learning activities	Some peer review and revision activities	Support autonomous learning but not specifically designed for SCWT

In addition to textbooks, the accompanying workbooks are expected to provide further practice, however, the analysis shows that they also offer limited support for developing and practicing SCWT-related skills. The workbooks mainly focus on the practices of vocabulary and some expressions. There are various vocabulary-related and translation tasks, which contribute to students' language accumulation, helping them to develop their written language. However, most activities remain focused on sentence-level practice, such as fill-in-the-blank, sentence rewriting, and sentence reordering, and still cannot support students' development of narrative writing skills. Moreover, although there are some interesting topics and innovative tasks, they are not specifically designed to develop narrative writing ability or support the demands of SCWT. Even though SCWT has appeared for several years, there are still almost no SCWT tasks for students to practice. Therefore, the workbooks do not effectively support SCWT preparation, and it is very hard for students to practice their narrative writing skills through these workbooks.

Table 2*Analysis Findings Summary of PEP 2019 Edition Accompanying Workbooks*

Aspect	Key Finding	Implication for SCWT
Vocabulary practices	Phrasing and translation tasks support expression accumulation	Helpful for language learning but indirectly related to narrative writing
Exercise types	Activities mainly include fill-in-the-blank, sentence rewriting and recording, etc.	Traditional format, provided limited narrative practice
Writing tasks	Some writing activities included, mainly about writing letters	Nearly no SCWT writing tasks
Topic design	Diverse and interesting topics	Many tasks emphasize discussion rather than storytelling
Overall design	Exercises are generally conventional with limited innovation	Insufficient support for developing SCWT-related writing skills

Taken together, the findings suggest that existing instructional materials lack a systematic approach to training students for SCWT. The absence of sustained narrative instruction and practice results in fragmented language learning, which strains students' ability to construct coherent and contextually appropriate story continuations. This strongly reveals the importance and necessity of designing more systematic and targeted instructional materials to support SCWT teaching and learning.

4.2 Consistent Narrative Demands in SCWT Examination Tasks

The analysis of SCWT tasks from Gaokao English exam papers between 2022 and 2025 reveals a set of consistent narrative demands. Across the four years, all tasks are narrative-based, with contents based on situations related to real life, such as personal growth, interpersonal relationships, and daily life events. The themes are consistently positive and meaningful, including various topics such as courage, persistence, and trust, which require students to make meaningful expressions within an emotional social context.

In terms of task format, SCWT follows a stable continuation writing structure. Students are given a narrative passage and are required to continue the story based on the provided context. The continuation must remain logically connected to the original text in terms of plot development, character creation, tone and style, and overall context. This indicates that SCWT has strong contextual constraints, requiring students to fully understand and interpret the original text before writing. Therefore, this highlights SCWT's nature as a reading-writing integrated task, rather than a simple independent writing task.

When it comes to narrative structure, the tasks present a form of conflict that promotes the development of the story. These conflicts include both internal conflicts such as fear or self-doubt, and external conflicts such as interpersonal problems or real-life problems. Despite the variation in specific contexts, all tasks require students to construct a logical continuation that resolves the conflict in a coherent and meaningful way.

In addition, the resolution patterns show a clear tendency toward constructive and reflective features. Students are expected to guide the story toward positive resolutions, such as overcoming personal difficulties, receiving support from other, or repairing relationships. This indicates that SCWT not only assesses language accuracy but also requires students to develop coherent narratives with appropriate pragmatic expression abilities.

Overall, the findings suggest that SCWT tasks set clear demands for students' ability, including narrative skills, reading-writing integration ability, and the ability to use language contextually sensitively. These requirements go beyond sentence-level accuracy and further highlight the need for systematic training in narrative and pragmatic aspects of writing. More importantly, such abilities rely on students' understanding and use of language patterns in real contexts, such as expressions of character action, emotions, and conversation construction. However,

these features are not sufficiently represented in existing instructional materials, which shows the necessity of incorporating corpus-based authentic language patterns to overcome the limitations of current textbook input and provide a basis for the design of teaching materials, so as to better support SCWT instruction and practice.

Table 3*Analysis Findings Summary of SCWT Tasks from 2022-2025 Gaokao English Exam Papers*

Year	Story Type	Theme	Conflict	Resolution Pattern
2022	Inspirational narrative	Courage and inclusion	Internal struggle (fear of being judged)	Overcoming fear and taking action
2023	Personal growth narrative	Persistence and encouragement	Self-doubt in ability	Growth through effort and support
2024	Real-life incident narrative	Kindness and trust	Realistic problem	Getting help from others
2025	Family relationship narrative	Empathy and reconciliation	Interpersonal conflict	Self-reflection and repairing relationship

4.3 Student Performance in Gaokao SCWT

The analysis of official evaluation reports between 2022 and 2024 from Fujian Province indicates that students' overall performance in SCWT is relatively unsatisfactory and shows a declining trend. Specifically, the average score decreased from 16.36 (out of 25) in 2022, to 13.47 in 2023, and to 13.31 in 2024. Additionally, the distribution of scores is gradually concentrated in the medium and lower bands, with a significant reduction in the proportion of relatively high scores. These changes suggest that students are facing increasing difficulties in dealing with SCWT.

Students' performance reveals several recurring problems. Firstly, some students fail to fully develop the story plot or understand characters and situations inaccurately, which results in weak connections between continuation and the original text. Secondly, students generally have problems such as unclear logical connections and unreasonable paragraph organization, making it difficult to construct a coherent narrative. Thirdly, students frequently rely on limited and repetitive expressions,

producing simplistic sentence structures, or use Chinglish, with basic errors in grammar, spelling, and punctuation.

Although the report puts forward some pedagogical implications for teachers, such as strengthening reading-writing integration, training plot development, and enriching language expressions, which provide important references for teaching practice, different teachers may choose different teaching strategies based on their own teaching experiences and use different teaching materials such as self-selected materials. This diversity may lead to inconsistencies in teaching practices, and the effectiveness and reliability of materials are also hard to be fully guaranteed. This further reinforces the need for developing structured and systematic instructional materials as effective guidance for SCWT teaching and learning.

Table 4*Analysis Findings Summary of Official Evaluation Reports 2022-2024 of Fujian Province*

Year	Average Score	Main Score Distribution	Students' Common Problems	Pedagogical Implications for Teachers
2022	16.36/25	- Mainly concentrated in 17-21 - Peak around 18-19	- Incomplete storyline development - Misunderstanding of characters or plot - Weak logical sequencing - Poor cohesion and paragraphing	- Strengthen story comprehension skills - Train logical plot development - Emphasize cohesion and paragraph structure
2023	13.47/25	- Shift toward 15-19 - Peak around 16-17 - Fewer high scores	- Created plots with weak connection to the text - Use Chinglish - Simplistic language expressions - Grammatical errors	- Enhance context-based language use - Focus on diverse language expressions (e.g., character actions and emotions) - Guide students to analyze and understand story deeply
2024	13.31/25	- Mainly concentrated in 15-20 - Peak around 16-18 - High scores further reduced	- Unclear structure - Insufficient coherence - Spelling and punctuation errors - Repetitive use of same language expressions (limited expressive range) 	- Strengthen reading-writing integration - Develop discourse-level awareness - Improve lexical variety and accuracy - Guide students to imitate classic narrative works

5. Conclusion

This study investigates how SCWT are currently prepared in Chinese high school English education through qualitative data analysis. The findings reveal a clear misalignment between instructional input, assessment demands, and student performance.

As an ongoing project, based on these findings, corpus analysis will be conducted to examine the suitability of CLiC corpus to inform the development of corpus-based instructional materials design, including an SCWT-oriented workbook, a structured syllabus for the workbook to support learning progression, and teacher-supported resources to assist teacher's teaching of this new task.

This study contributes to the development of more systematic and reliable support for SCWT instruction and provides a corpus-informed perspective for future studies, curriculum, and materials design.

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