



Differentiated Instruction for Reading Comprehension: A Study in Summary Cloze

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Among the many reading comprehension question types in the English Language exam, summary cloze is one of the types that many students find they have to struggle with. In fact, a seemingly simple 4-sentence paragraph with just a few blanks can present multiple challenges to students who are still struggling with tenses, voices and parts of speech.

Analyzing the Challenges in the Questions: A Step-by-step Approach

Summary cloze questions test students not only on the comprehension of multiple ideas and the connections among them in one or even multiple paragraphs, but also their grammatical knowledge and inference skills. To approach a summary cloze question, students have to go through the following steps:

1. Understand the main ideas and the supporting details in each paragraph
2. Identify the ideas / parts of ideas given in the question (exact phrasing / reworded)
3. Identify the missing ideas / parts of ideas in the question
4. Analyze the blank and the words around it so as to use a suitable word form for the blank

One of the reasons why students find summary cloze questions daunting is that each of the steps above presents multiple challenges. As early as in Step 1 when students try to comprehend the ideas and the connections among them, unfamiliar words, sentence structures, connectives (or the ABSENCE of any connective!) are obstacles that can leave weak students feeling puzzled and discouraged while their more proficient peers have already moved on to Step 2 or even 3.

Working as a School Development Officer (SDO) and having the privilege of visiting reading lessons of various schools, I noticed that students were often asked to read through the reading passages and then tackle the summary cloze questions right away on their own. The absence of ‘explicit’ skill demonstration and practices meant that Steps 1-4

were taken for granted. In such cases, students sat there feeling puzzled and frustrated; many tended to wait for the model answers. It turned out that students did not gain the intended reading skills. Understanding the difficulties faced by different students can help teachers design materials that act as scaffolding which students can hold onto as support and advance at their own pace.

Collaborative Lesson Planning: Deciding on a Common Target and Discuss Differentiated Strategies

In collaborative lesson planning sessions, SDO guided teachers in discussing the following:

1. What is the target level for their students (with reference to the Curriculum Guide, the requirement(s) of the exam and students’ current language ability)? For example, the target level for S2 students to achieve is to at least be able to locate the word-to-word (direct copy) ideas and present them using the correct tense and plurality.
2. What are the difficulties faced by students with different abilities when they attempt the questions?
3. What kind of scaffolding strategies can be used to help weaker students reach the target level?
4. For advanced learners who can get through Steps 1-4 independently, how can we stretch their abilities and challenge them to exercise higher order thinking skills?

Implementation and their effectiveness I. Make Summary Cloze Authentic and Interesting

When teachers are preparing for the introduction of a new topic or a new skill to our students, it is always important to ask ourselves not only WHAT

and HOW to teach, but WHY we have to teach it. We teach it because it is in the exam, don't we? Yes, definitely. But can we help students see the relevance of what we are teaching to their daily life? When do students actually read or even use a summary? They may do so when they are choosing a book to read or a movie to watch. Introducing a new type of skill in an authentic context can take the boredom out of it (it's not just endless exam drills!) and help students see the value of the language and skills they learn. Pick a movie the class has watched together or one that you know students love and make a few blanks in the synopsis. For students with higher ability, we may even write one with wrong information and have them proofread and make corrections.

II. Differentiated Instructions for Summary Cloze: The Four Aspects to Consider

1. Coverage

Are your students ready to start from a paragraph which often presents multiple ideas in relation with one another? If not, starting from sentence level can help weaker learners identify given and missing ideas without them having to process too many distractors at the same time.

2. Skills required

When students are trying to identify given information and locate missing information, are they ready to tackle synonyms? Given information, when presented in synonyms, present challenges to students with limited language exposure. The synonym chosen can also vary in difficulty and familiarity. Choosing different synonyms ranging in

different familiarity allow teachers to cater to weaker students' lack of exposure to words and challenge higher achievers at the same time. Based on students' abilities, teachers can moderate the degree of rewording.

3. Complexity of sentence structures

Is the paragraph written in S-V-O and S-V-ADJ structures or more complex structures? Are there connectives linking the ideas in the summary cloze question that are not present in the original text? Teachers may vary the complexity of sentence structures and choose to replace connectives (For example, rewriting sentences with 'because' using 'so' to reverse the position of cause and result) to challenge students at an appropriate level.

4. Flow of ideas in the paragraph(s)

Are the ideas presented in the paragraph in the same logical sequence as they are in the text? Are there hidden messages in the text that are revealed in the summary paragraph? Changing the flow of ideas and adding blanks with answers that have to be inferred post additional challenges to students.

III. Maximizing Choices and Providing Support with Challenges

Based on the four aspects above, SDO guided teachers in deciding on a school-based version which could cater for learners of different abilities. While making the decision, designing materials and lesson flow, teachers had two key concepts in mind:

1. Maximize choices and allow students to advance in their own pace

Catering for learners' diversity does not mean

teachers designate a certain level of materials for students based on his/ her own expectations as it may lead to students getting the ‘easier’ version feel that they are labelled as ‘weak’ and rip stronger students off the opportunity to start with the basic, warm-up questions when they are not yet ready for the more challenging ones. Providing and clearly labelling questions of a progressive level of difficulty allow students to start from the level they feel comfortable with and advance in their own pace. In fact, during lesson observations, stronger students were seen skipping the sentence-level questions that required no change in any parts of speech and started from the questions that demand grammatical awareness (changing the tense, plurality and parts of speech) while teachers were guiding the weaker students in locating the answers step-by-step.

2. Supplement notes and drilling exercises for questions that require grammatical awareness when needed

While students may have learned (or in some cases, just ‘come across’) the use of different tenses and when to use a certain word form, having to integrate the knowledge into the process of comprehending the text and locating given and missing ideas can be extremely demanding for some students, especially those without a solid base in grammar. On one lesson, a teacher prepared note cards with parts of speech rules (E.g. a/an/the + noun) for students to retrieve whenever they felt they were not ready to make the decision on their own. On another lesson in a

different school, teachers guided students to take notes on the rules which students could choose whether to refer to while completing the questions. The autonomy allowed students to get the guidance when they needed without forcing the advanced learners to wait dryly while teachers are explaining the rules repeatedly to the weaker students.

Differentiated instruction may not solve all the problems present in the classroom. Students do not get all the answers correct because of this philosophy of instruction, yet that is exactly the point of it. Learners, whether they are ahead of the class, following the guidance of teachers conscientiously or struggling to understand the basics, are given a safe environment where they are respected and given the encouragement and security to take risks. It is not about having all students get the correct answers, but helping students see their own worth and the possibility of using different ways and amount of time to help themselves advance. We are not looking for students to step out of the classroom door as perfect models, we want students to step out of the classroom knowing they have improved from their yesterday-version and have the confidence and means to move forward. On this note, do allow me to conclude the experience in the 4Ss below:

- Start small, fun and authentic
- Step-by-steps skill teaching
- Stretch students beyond their ability
- Support always goes with a challenge



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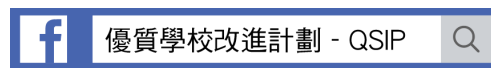
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