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## **Mind the gap! Are we over-clozing our learners?**

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Teachers and textbooks writers love a good gap fill – they are simple to correct and learners are mostly familiar with them so there is no time lost on giving instructions. Yet over the years, rarely do I see c-tests (cloze tests where every X<sup>th</sup> word is gapped) or alternatives to the gap besides having a word pool at the bottom or not. Thus, the purpose of the ideas below are to provide the classroom teacher with a few alternatives that can spice up the traditional gap fill.

While professional test-makers such as Cambridge or the ETS or materials writers (e.g. Hughes, 2006) might use various forms of gap fills to test language knowledge, the examples provided here are for use with a basic short text that a teacher might work with, e.g. a paragraph, which might come from a coursebook, a short story, a song text or a listening transcript. Text 1 is a simply introductory A1 level text used with 9 year-old children before getting into more depth on the Code Talkers (and the author possess authentic books and materials from <https://salinabookshelf.com/> which are also used for further work with the students). This topic is relevant in Switzerland and Germany, where many people are fascinated by Indian American and First Nation cultures. This activity starts in the following way and is later used for a variety of gap fill activities:

- 1) The paragraph is cut up into sentences. Each sentence is printed on a piece of paper and hung around the classroom, blank side up. Hang the papers with a piece of tape at the top so students can flip the paper up and read the sentence.
- 2) Learners walk (or dance) around to music. When the music stops, they read the sentence.
- 3) Students repeat step 2 4-6 times individually – walking / dancing and then reading.
- 4) Teacher cleans up the papers hanging around the classroom so students cannot use them for the next steps or for individual work afterwards.
- 5) Students work in groups of 3-5 and try to remember every sentence. For stronger classes, the teacher can insist on the sentences being the exact same as the one written in the text. For beginning classes, the content of the sentence is enough. The rule here is that every student has to write, not just one student.
- 6) Students, after about 8 minutes, then go to another group's work and add any missing sentences or correct any language.

Text 1: Navajo people (Diné) are from the southwestern United States. Diné means “The People” in Navajo. Over 165,000 Diné live on the reservation (Navajo Nation) in New Mexico, Arizona and Utah. On the reservation, there many animals such as coyotes, rattlesnakes and lizards. Some Diné still live in 6 or 8-sided houses called “Hogans”. There are female (to live in) and male (for ceremonies) hogans, and summer and winter hogans. The Navajo language and people helped end World War II – the Navajo Code Talkers are a very important part of history!

This first activity is also a basic information gap activity. However, after this collaborative work, it's time for the traditional gap fill! In my own classes, I will create various worksheets for various students – giving stronger learners a more difficult page and struggling learners a simpler one. A few principles I keep in mind are:

- Never gap the first sentence (although in this example they had already read it).
- Know what your focus is. Are you interested in general reading skills? Then use a cloze with every X<sup>th</sup> word gapped so you get a range of different parts of speech. Are

you focusing on a specific language point? Then only gap a particular part of speech such as verbs or adjectives. Are you focusing on specific content words? Then choose those words to be gapped. I generally tend to stay away from the latter and focus primarily on general skills.

- Allow alternative answers unless you prompt a specific word (e.g. by putting in the first letter of the word). If a student writes “choose” instead of “select”, then who cares.
- Know if you will correct this for reading or writing or both and be careful if you are assigning points (which is perhaps not a good idea anyway) – if spelling should be correct, then this should be stated and alternatives accepted. If both spelling and the correct word are important then separate your feedback – I tend to use two colors – if the word is the right word or makes sense, then I used a pink marker. If the word was spelled correctly, I used a green marker. If the word was spelled correctly but didn't make sense, I circled it. Thus each word had a pink and green tick.

Googling “cloze generator” will lead you to a million different websites that offer such tools, and in the past <http://l.georges.online.fr/tools/cloze.html> was my preferred tool because of the various options for gaps (figure 1). You can decide to gap every X<sup>th</sup> word, the articles, the prepositions, wh- words and more.

#### CLOZE TEST

Paste your text below:

Navajo people (Diné) are from the southwestern United States. Diné means “The People” in Navajo. Over 165,000 Diné live on the reservation (Navajo Nation) in New Mexico, Arizona and Utah. On the reservation, there many animals such as coyotes, rattlesnakes and lizards. Some Diné still live in 6 or 8-sided houses called “Hogans”.

every  words  
 articles  
 prepositions  
 link words  
 auxiliaries  
 wh- words  
 quantifiers  
 modals  
 let me choose

Text only  Interactive  
 Clues  No clues

Submit clue:

There are multiple tools where you can choose the words you want gapped, but if you want to auto generate the gaps based on criteria or replace gaps with underscores, this becomes more difficult. For this article, multiple AI tools were tried out with prompts such as:

- Gap every 5<sup>th</sup> word.
- Gap every 10<sup>th</sup> word.
- Gap every 5<sup>th</sup> word and replace the gaps with an underscore for each letter of the gapped word.
- Scramble every 7<sup>th</sup> word.

Instead of numbers, the numbers were written out, yet no tool gave consistent output – sometimes the counting was incorrect, sometimes the scrambled words did not have the correct letters. However, including the prompt “create a worksheet for 9 year-old children” and then the specific gap fill prompt provided a nice worksheet, with additional questions about the text and even ideas such as „draw a hogan“ thus perhaps as a basic frame, these are useful but the specific gap fill will have to be checked by the teacher. The most consistent results (counting correctly) came from Claude, though newer tools such as Open AI 5 were not attempted.



can get up and look for a short movement break and the additional advantage of keeping the word in mind as they walk back to their seat).

- Scramble the letters of the words in the bank or put wordshapes instead of words in there.
- Create a crossword puzzle with the words that they can do first for fun and to keep the words in mind and use later.
- Add distractors to the word bank, for example content distractors (people or folk) or spelling / sound distractors (code or coat).

### **Add some collaboration**

You can make a gap fill collaborative in the following ways:

- Each student gets the text and blackens out (with a pen or pencil) the 8-10 hardest words. They then swap with a neighbor and that student has to remember and write in the words and then give it back to the original student to be checked.
- The student creates word shapes themselves (as they are easily created by hand) and their partner has to identify the words from the text.
- The missing words are hung around the classroom but hidden. Students work together on the gap fill and when they don't know what's missing, they get up and search for words that could be possibilities. A similar idea is the running dictation which is described in Buechel (2015).
- Create an information gap where student A has different words missing than student B and they sit back to back (so they speak and not just look at each other's papers) and ask each other for words or read the text out loud together alternating sentences.
- Have learners work in small groups with one worksheet and one pen or pencil and the rule is that only one person at a time can fill in a word.
- Bet on the correctness of an answer.
- Turn it into a mad lib (I would do this when the content can get silly, not with content that is serious) where learners ask each other for the part of speech that is missing and then make silly texts. I like to do this with winter songs.

If you search for „making gap fills fun“, you will find many more ideas, but these are generally aimed at single sentences that practice a particular grammar point, thus this article should fill a bit of a void about making gap fills more differentiated and also more varied. We can hope in the future that AI tools will be more reliable, but for the time being, tweaking the gap fill is in the hands of the teacher!

Buechel, L. (2015). Running for your words. ELT Forum. US Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs. (53) 4, pp. 37-42.

Hughes, J. (2006, September). Over to you . . . Gap-fills. English Teaching Professional, pp. 8-9.