

TIPS FOR TEACHERS

From Reading Comprehension Dilemma to Classroom Library

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Background

I have taught English at senior high schools in Japan for about 10 years. Sometimes my school has native English speaking assistant language teachers (ALTs). One day, an ALT brought several stories to class, stories that had blanks in them. Students worked in pairs; one asked the other to think of words to put into the blanks. Eventually, they made very funny stories. They enjoyed the activity, but some students could not understand the stories that they had created. I wanted them to understand the stories because they were very funny. At first, I asked students to translate their stories into Japanese, a common way to assess reading comprehension in EFL classes. However, this proved more difficult than I expected. Next, since they like to draw, I asked them to draw pictures based on very careful reading of the words in their stories using a simple mini book format. This was much more successful. What began as a frustration level reading activity became fun in the end. Students used all four language skills, created and appreciated humor in English, and demonstrated reading comprehension by doing something they love—drawing.

Procedure

1. Prepare a short story based on a reading passage from your textbook or another familiar source. It should be just a few sentences and at a level that will be easily readable for your students.
2. Replace several content words in the story with blanks, about one per sentence at first.

3. Below each blank, write the part of speech or another clue for the deleted word, for example *noun, verb, adjective, number, or person's name*. (See Appendix A)
4. If necessary, briefly review the parts of speech that students will need to understand the missing word clues.
5. Ask for a student volunteer to demonstrate the pair work with you.
6. Hide your story behind a book or folder so that your student partner cannot see it.
7. Demonstrate how to elicit words from your partner by, for example, saying: “Number 1, adjective.”
8. When your partner answers, write the word in the blank.
9. Continue for 2-3 more words until students have the idea.
10. End the demonstration and form pairs.
11. Let each pair decide who will elicit the words and who will supply them.
12. Give each pair one copy of the story and time to work.
13. When they finish filling in the blanks, have them read their stories together. Nearly always, they will be very funny.
14. Have them make a picture book based on their story. (See Appendix B)
15. When all the picture books are completed (probably in a later class), give students time to exchange and read their classmates' stories.

Variations, Extensions, and Caveats

- You can complete these steps over several lessons and/or homework assignments.
- If you can prepare two stories, then students can take turns eliciting and supplying the missing words.
- Stories can be created or adapted from a variety of texts to fit the various proficiency levels of your students.
- Of course, the gap-filling story can be a stand-alone activity. However, making and sharing the picture books creates additional opportunities for students to read and reread the same story frame with humorous variations. Each reading reinforces the target sentences patterns and builds fluency and confidence in beginning readers.
- If you repeat this activity periodically, you will create a classroom library of mini books.

- There are many ways to make a mini book. I have large classes and a tight budget, so I used just one sheet of paper for each student and the technique illustrated in this *YouTube* video <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=21qi9ZcQV>. (See Appendix C)

Acknowledgement

This gap-filling activity is modeled on a popular party game called *Mad Libs* which was invented in the United States in the 1950s. *Mad Libs* is a playful variation of *ad lib*. There are many inexpensive thematically-related collections of *Mad Libs* designed for youth, general, and adult audiences available at <http://www.madlibs.com/> or from general book vendors. You may be able to use original *Mad Libs* with your students, but I find it easier to make my own stories since the authentic stories contain colloquial expressions and cultural references that my students do not understand.

About the Author

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Appendix A

Example of story with gaps

Example: A Very _____ Day
(adjective)



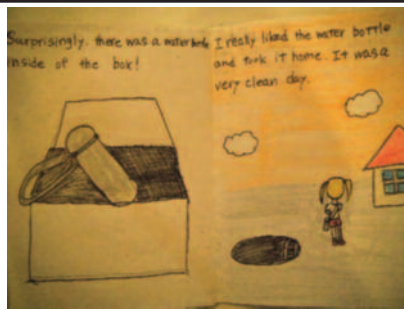
1. There is a/an _____ park near my house.
(adjective)
2. I really like the park because it has many _____.
(plural noun)
3. I often go to the park and I enjoy _____ there.
(verb ending in *-ing*)
4. One day, I found a box on a/an _____ in the park.
(noun)
5. The box was very _____, so I opened it.
(adjective)
6. Surprisingly, there was a/an _____ inside of the box!
(noun)
7. I really liked the _____ and took it home.
(same noun)
8. It was a very _____ day.
(same adjective as in the title)

Appendix B

Example of completed story and picture book

The underlined words below correspond to the gaps in the original story shown in Appendix A.

A Very Clean Day

<p>There is a deep park near my house.</p> <p>I really like the park because it has many seashells.</p> <p>I often go to the park and I enjoy sleeping there.</p>	
<p>One day, I found a box on a bird in the park.</p> <p>The box was very white, so I opened it.</p>	
<p>Surprisingly, there was a water bottle inside of the box.</p> <p>I really liked the water bottle and took it home.</p> <p>It was a very clean day.</p>	

Appendix C

Mini book before folding

This image shows the completed 8-page mini book before it was folded.

