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Cambridge Linguaskill preparation: teaching “open cloze” questions with ludic activities

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KEY POINTS

Background: In the French University of Technology where I am currently teaching English, I was able to implement a lesson plan created for the EVO2022 LLP course. Open cloze is one of the tasks on the Cambridge Linguaskill tests. This task in particular is dreaded by my students.

Aim: Show a practical example of how ludic activities can be used for official test preparation, in this case, the Cambridge Linguaskill business test, and help students succeed on the test.

Methods: To make open cloze tasks more enjoyable for my students and make them want to work on them, ludic activities were included in the lessons.

Results: By the end of the lessons, students felt more comfortable with open cloze tasks and results improved.

Conclusion: Ludic activities can be a valuable asset in language test preparation.

Tweet Synopsis

Students at a technical university play quiz games in class to prepare for the Linguaskill business test.

#TESOL #Linguaskill #quiz #LLP #university #testpreparation

Supplementary Materials

All appendix materials are available here:

[van der Velden - SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS](#)

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1. Background

1.1 Who are you?

I am a Dutch native speaker living in France for more than 25 years. I am an English language teacher at the University of Technology of Troyes (UTT) in France.

At the age of 10, I started learning English in primary school. Around that same time, the company my father worked for partially financed the purchase of private computers for its employees, so a couple of months later, towards the end of 1983, my parents bought their first PC.

My father's company also provided software packages (dBase, WordPerfect), running under MS-DOS, to encourage their employees to familiarise themselves with their use at home. As kids, my little brother and I were not so much interested in the software packages, so to encourage us to use the computer, my father regularly brought home video games on 5¼-inch floppy disks for us to play. Being a fervent reader and a huge fan of cartoons, I soon developed a taste for graphic adventure games. In the early 80s, adventure games were something new, exclusively created by American game design pioneers and hence only available in English. "Point-and-click" games did not yet exist and players had to type commands to progress in the game. The commands were simple, consisting of a verb and a noun, such as "open door", "talk man", or "look wall". Game characters came to life through text boxes. With my little brother, we managed to finish the games every time.

At the same time, we were also exposed to English on television, as in the Netherlands, all foreign series and films were (and still are) spoken in the original language. Without realising it we practised English on an almost daily basis, and especially playing video games was a highly enjoyable experience. Although we did not feel like we were learning English, the games we played involved reading a lot of in-game text, and we unconsciously acquired vocabulary and grammar structures. Learning English this way felt very natural as it tapped into our innate curiosity and desire for exploration. By the time I went to high school, English had become my favourite subject. For me it was easy, and although my teachers most certainly must have taught me the grammar rules, I do not recall ever learning them back then; I just knew.

Because I liked languages in general, after high school, I initially studied tourism. After my studies, I moved to France for work. However, in 2003, I decided to go back to school and enrolled in a French university to study English. Having a full-time position with responsibilities and studying at the same time was complicated sometimes, but in the end, it was worth it. After finishing my master's degree, I became an English language teacher in 2010.

Drawing on my own experience of learning English, I decided to integrate games into my lessons. Initially, I used game-related subjects as topics for discussions. Later I added language games to my lessons, but we also played common board games in the classroom and occasionally I let my students play online escape-the-room games in class, encouraging them to collaborate and discuss in the target language. Games tend to capture the attention and enthusiasm of my students in a way that traditional teaching methods often cannot.

1.2 Who are your students?

In the spring semester of 2022, I had three advanced business English classes and in total 53 students took part in the lessons: 13 females and 40 males. While three-quarters of the students spoke French as their first language (40), there were also 13 students with a different language background (see Table 1). Five students indicated that although they were fluent in French, it was their second language.

Table 1 Students' first languages

Student's first language	Number of students
Arabic	3
Brazilian Portuguese	1
French	40
Mandarin	4
Persian	1
Russian	1
Serbian	1
Vietnamese	1
Wolof	1

All students were enrolled in the same advanced business English course and had at least eight years of formal English study but different levels of engineering study: 20 first-year bachelor students, seven second-year bachelor students, 14 third-year bachelor students, nine first-year Master students, one second year master student and two students were enrolled in continuous education. They met three hours a week (a one-hour class and a two-hour class) for 14 weeks in the spring of 2022. The students gave informed consent at the end of the semester.

About one-third of the students were familiar with open cloze tasks. For those who were not, I explained that open cloze tasks are a type of exercise in which a passage of text contains gaps where a word has been removed. Students should complete the gap by identifying the missing word. The example below was taken from the online demo test:

The value of choice

People in an experiment were asked **11** _____ of two laptops they would choose. 32% indicated that they would choose one brand, and 34% opted **12** _____ the other one. But when shown just one option, only about 10% said that they would buy it. **13** _____ to the researcher, David Morrissey of Tuam University, retailers should bear in mind that consumers dislike having a single option. They much prefer **14** _____ offered a choice. Given this fact, it is unwise for retailers to assume that customers will be prepared to buy a product **15** _____ having an alternative for them to consider.

Figure 1 Example of an open cloze task (Cambridge University Press & Assessment)

Open cloze tasks are used in language testing and also occur on the Linguaskill test. After explaining open cloze tasks, all of them agreed they thought this kind of task was extremely difficult.

1.3 Where do you teach?

At the University of Technology of Troyes (UTT), the required English modules consist of three hours of face-to-face lessons every week, usually divided into a two-hour lesson and a one-hour lesson on different days of the week. Each module takes a full semester to complete (14 weeks) and includes additional autonomous work on Moodle as well as in the language lab, where the students have access to *Reflex'English Pro Cambridge* and *Reflex'English Pro Business*.

Among others, I teach an advanced business English class. The full description of this course in the university study unit guide is as follows:

This course is taught at the C1 level, according to the CEFR. The students who are enrolled in this module take the course to prepare for the Cambridge Linguaskill business test, which they take at the end of the semester in June and December. They need to attain a score of 170 (equivalent to a B2+ level on the CEFR) on this test to fulfil one of the requirements necessary for the obtention of their engineering diploma. (Université de Technologie de Troyes, 2020)

At UTT, all language classrooms are equipped with a projector, screen, blackboard, and a computer with internet access connected to a projector. The tables are organised in a horseshoe shape (Figure 2).



Figure 2 Example of a language classroom

Following the agreement of the head of the module, Mr Stephen Le Coche, I implemented my lesson plan, developed during the EVO2022 LLP course, in five subsequent one-hour lessons in March and April of 2022.

1.4 What literature, ideas or experiences influenced or inspired you?

In her research, Annie Tremblay underlines the necessity of assessing language proficiency with an independent test, rather than estimating proficiency based on classroom level or years of study (Tremblay, 2011). At our university, we have chosen the Linguaskill business to ensure our students have the skills to perform effectively in an English-speaking professional environment. Although other tests exist, the Linguaskill business has the advantage of being relatively easy to organise and administer on short notice, which enables us to offer the test year-round. It also provides the students with an immediate result, and they leave the exam room with their test certificate.

At UTT, engineering students need to obtain a minimum score of 170 points (out of 180+) on the Cambridge Linguaskill business test. This is equal to a B2+ level on the CEFR. A B2+ level in English is one of the CTI¹ requirements for the completion of the engineering diploma after five years of university studies. Students enrolled uniquely in a Master's programme, because they enroll in our university after completing a bachelor's degree elsewhere, only need to attain a score of 140 points. This is equivalent to a B1 level on the CEFR. While students can take the test whenever they want, they usually take it at the end of the advanced business English course, which prepares them specifically for this test. To this end, the university organises group sessions in the language lab of a maximum of 25 students per test session in December and June.

The one activity on the Linguaskill business test my students dread the most is the open cloze task. Open cloze tasks evaluate productive skills (Pino, Heilman, & Eskenazi, 2011) and require students to

¹ CTI is a French commission for engineering titles, <https://www.cti-commission.fr/>

understand context and vocabulary to identify the correct words that belong in gapped sentences or a passage without any given options to choose from. Nation divides productive knowledge as follows:

1. Form: spoken, written, word parts
2. Meaning: form and meaning, concept and referents, associations
3. Use: grammatical functions, collocations, constraints on use (register, frequency)

Following Nation's analysis of productive knowledge, we can note that answering open cloze questions involves several of its aspects. To answer questions in an open cloze task, students must produce a word that expresses a specific meaning which suits the context of the text. Some of these words may be related to other words in the sentence. For example, set expressions or phrasal verbs. Moreover, the word should be grammatically accurate, correctly spelled, and the degree of formality should also be appropriate. Also, some parts of speech are more likely to be gapped in open cloze tasks than others, as test creators should avoid having several possible answers for cloze questions (Pino, Heilman, & Eskenazi, 2011). If there were multiple possibilities for each gap, the task would lose its relevance.

The Cambridge Linguaskill is a multi-level test, and open cloze tasks are part of the test at all proficiency levels, as is the case with other Cambridge exams (Felice, Taslimipour, Andersen, & Buttery, 2022). Therefore, our students need to prepare for open cloze tasks. They are aware they need to become familiar with this type of task to increase their chances of obtaining the required score on the test, however they say they find it particularly difficult not to have any options to choose from and to have to "invent words from nothing." They feel lost and therefore they do not particularly like working on this kind of task.

In 2019 I learned about Electronic Village Online (EVO) and started participating in EVO sessions. Among others, I participated in "Escape the Classroom" (Stanley et al., 2019) and "Immersive Language Learning in Virtual Worlds" (Philp & Sadler, 2020), which both dealt with leveraging ludic activities in the language classroom. The CEFR mentions "ludic uses of language" in chapter 4 of the framework. It stipulates that "the use of language for playful purposes often plays an important part in language learning and development" (Council of Europe, 2011) and it is therefore important to include ludic activities in the language classroom. However, as teachers we should be careful in selecting games for the classroom, ensuring they are a valuable addition to a lesson and not merely use them for entertainment. Ojeda defines ludic activities as "a pedagogical activity designed to promote fun, laughter and enjoyment, while attempting to motivate and to engage the learner in a language learning experience" (Ojeda, 2004). The ludic aspects of the before-mentioned EVO courses encouraged fun, laughter, and enjoyment in the classroom, in a meaningful way.

In January 2022, I enrolled in the EVO2022 Ludic Language Pedagogy (LLP) course (York & deHaan, 2022) and was eager to learn more about this approach unknown to me until then. During the course, it quickly became clear that any playful activity can be considered 'ludic'. Hence, we are not limited to developing a lesson plan around one single game, but rather, it is possible to include various ludic activities into a series of lessons around the same theme or topic. Following York's theory, at least some of the ludic activities should be repeated (do it again) to enable students to monitor their progress (York, 2019).

In the fourth EVO2022 LLP course online session on 5 February 2022, one of the participants suggested it was hard to teach exam preparation with or around games because "exams usually have a certain structure." While it is true that we cannot change the structure of official exams or tests, I disagree that it is difficult to use ludic activities while preparing students to take them. For me, any language learning exercise, including more formal tasks such as "open cloze", can be adapted into a ludic experience to make it more engaging and enjoyable. Also, in my experience, when students have fun while preparing for an official test, they are often more motivated and dedicated to the learning process.

At UTT, in the advanced English course, we use a textbook from Cambridge University Press: *Business Benchmark Advanced, BULATS edition*,² which is currently the only coursebook on the market to

² In 2020, BULATS (Business Language Testing Service) changed its name to *Linguaskill*. You can find more information here: <https://www.cambridgeenglish.org/exams-and-tests/linguaskill/>

prepare for the Linguaskill business test. The coursebook is a bit outdated (it was published in 2007), so I often supplement it with more recent material and activities. The lessons developed for the EVO2022 LLP course fit in well with this approach.

While it is true that we cannot change the structure of official exams or tests, I disagree that it is difficult to use ludic activities while preparing students to take them.

1.5 The EVO2022 LLP course

In January 2022 I participated in the EVO2022 LLP course. Until then I was unfamiliar with the concept of Ludic Language Pedagogy, and I discovered there was a whole community of like-minded people, successfully using game-based activities in the classroom. It was exactly what I had been looking for.

Over five weeks, in January and early February of 2022, we discussed and shared our experience with the other participants and the course moderators on the LLP Discord page. The course was very practical and hands-on. We learned about the theory behind the approach through articles, videos and weekly live online discussions and saw multiple examples of how LLP works in practice. In addition, we had the opportunity to experience some of the games ourselves (Gartic Phone, Spyfall, Among Us). It was also a very collaborative course, with regular feedback, comments and encouragement from the course moderators and the other participants. It stimulated me to think about my teaching practices and how I could teach in an LLP way. The course culminated in the creation of ludic activities, in my case, a lesson plan, that we could implement in our classrooms.

2. Design

2.1 Overview of the lesson plan

The lesson plan focused on open cloze tasks, as this is the task my students dread the most on the Linguaskill business test. The aim is to make the open cloze tasks less daunting while improving grammatical awareness and ultimately improving scores on open cloze tasks.

The lesson plan consisted of five lessons, taught in March and April of 2022 during the one-hour lesson for five subsequent weeks (Table 2).

Table 2 Overview of the lesson plan

Lesson 1	Lesson 2	Lesson 3	Lesson 4	Lesson 5
Playing an online quiz	Creation of a word cloud	Methodology	Students create their own open cloze tasks	Playing the online quiz again
Study the different parts of speech	Use of an online concordancer	Open cloze tasks provided by the teacher	Team competition	Open cloze tasks provided by the teacher
	Collaborate in online document			

2.2 Lesson 1

In the first lesson, we started with an online quiz on *Quizicon*.³ This online quiz aimed to find the 100 most used words in English. The list was compiled using the Oxford English Corpus and can also be found in the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* (Soanes, C. & Stevenson A., 2009). Before doing the online quiz, the students discussed with their partners which words they thought might be on the list and started writing a list of these words in their notebooks. The quiz was projected on a screen for all students to see (Figure 3). Students took turns suggesting words, while one student entered the suggested answers on the class computer.

³ The *Quizicon* website no longer exists, but you can use this alternative website instead: <https://www.jetpunk.com/quizzes/most-common-english-words-quiz>

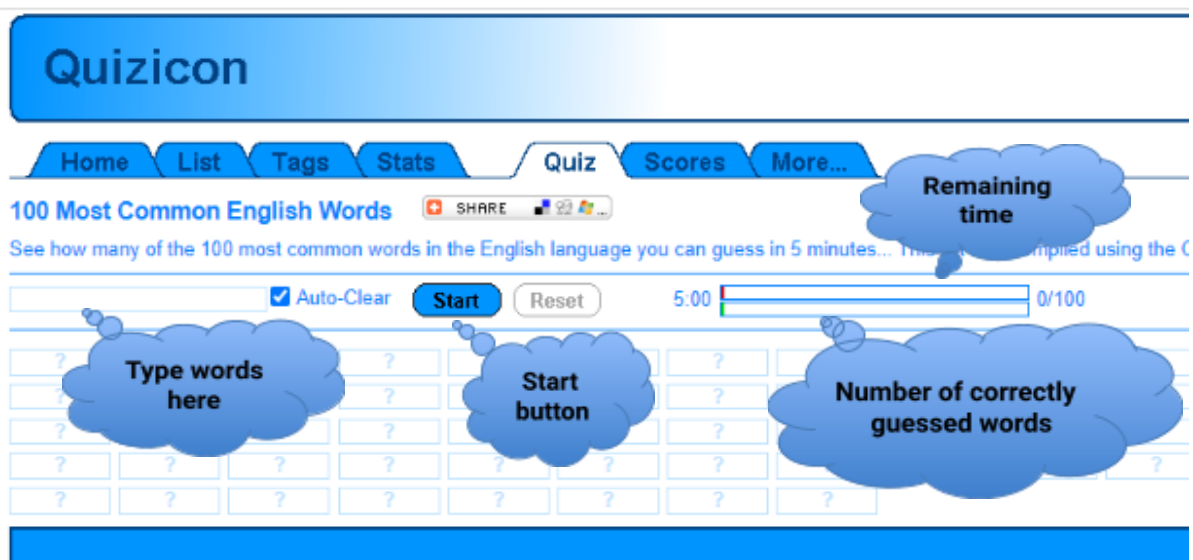


Figure 3 Screenshot of Quizicon's "100 most common English words" quiz

After five minutes the full list appeared, with words found by the students in green and the others in red.

The students discussed the list with their partner; what kind of words are on the list (parts of speech)? They shared their findings with the class and I wrote the suggested parts of speech on the board. At this stage, it was not necessary to cover all parts of speech.

The students studied the parts of speech on the board and the list on the screen. They now needed to classify the different words from the list in their notebooks according to their part of speech. We discussed the classification and I asked students to give one example sentence for each part of speech.

2.3 Lesson 2

At the start of the second lesson, students' memories were refreshed and I asked students which words they remembered for each part of speech.

The students then wrote their personal top 10 English words they thought they used the most in their notebooks.

We used Mentimeter to create a word cloud with the whole class. Students individually entered their top 10 English words on their own devices and the results were shown after they had finished. I asked them if they were surprised by the results and if there were any words they didn't expect.

I explained to the students that some parts of speech on the list of 100 most used words in English appear more frequently in open cloze exercises than others and wrote the following list of parts of speech on the board for students to copy in their notebooks:

- Auxiliary verbs
- Modal verbs
- Prepositions
- Articles
- Relative pronouns
- Object pronouns
- Conjunctions

The students were asked to study the word cloud on the screen and find examples for each part of speech on the board. Whenever necessary, I elicited examples for any parts of speech that were not in

the word cloud and wrote the examples on the board, after each part of speech. The students copied the examples in their notebooks.

Next, the collaborative Word document was displayed on the screen for the students to see. I also shared the link to the collaborative Word document⁴. The students entered the words for each part of speech on their own devices (Table 3). I checked answers while the students were working and corrected them as necessary.

Table 3 Parts of speech example

Modal verbs	<i>can, could, will, would, shall, should, may, might, must</i>

Subsequently, I explained they were going to use an online concordancer; Tom Cobb's *Lextutor* (Cobb, n.d., Figure 4). I showed them how the concordancer worked on the screen but kept it simple. I showed them where they had to enter their words and which corpus to select. As they were enrolled in a business English course, we used the BNC commerce corpus. I emphasised the phrases had to be meaningful and should illustrate how the word functions as the part of speech mentioned above. For example, students could not write down phrases in which "who" functioned as an interrogative pronoun; the phrases had to show how it is used as a relative pronoun (to connect a noun with an adjective clause).



Figure 4 Screenshot of Tom Cobb's Lextutor

The students used their own devices and the online concordancer to find sample phrases and copied/pasted them into the collaborative Word document (see example below). While the students were working on the document, I commented and corrected as necessary.

⁴ As an alternative you can also use Google docs.

Table 4 Sample phrases generated with Lextutor

Part of speech: modal verbs	<i>can, could, will, would, shall, should, may, might, must</i>
For a full equilibrium two conditions MUST be fulfilled [...] [...] the restriction MUST be imposed [...] For example, a firm COULD offer better after-sales service [...] [...] the government COULD reduce its own spending [...] [...] their first impressions WILL be a major factor. [...] the task we are undertaking WILL take a pre-specified and limited time.	

The students were asked to print the collaborative document at home and stick it in their notebooks.

2.4 Lesson 3

The third lesson started with a reminder of why students had been working on parts of speech: to improve their performance on open cloze tasks on the Linguaskill business test.

In the first part of the lesson, the methodology was explained: meaning-function-form. Open cloze tasks are like puzzles, and to find the solution it is necessary to assemble the pieces:

- **Meaning:** Students must first try to understand the meaning of the text; what is the author trying to say? This will indicate the idea we are supposed to express with the missing word.
- **Function:** What is the function of the space? Is the author expressing a wish/regret/advice? Are they talking about the past/present/future? Are they linking ideas? This will help us understand which part of speech we need in the gap.
- **Form:** Once we know the *meaning* and the *function*, we can focus on the *form* or the grammatical rules we should follow to convey the *meaning* and the *function*.

The students were shown the following example on the screen, and I used colours to better visualise the different parts of the sentence:

- “If I ____ n’t have an exam tomorrow, I **would have** lunch with you.”

I highlighted the author is talking about an imaginary future situation. For imaginary future situations, we use the second conditional, and to fill the gap it helps to understand the grammar rules.

The students were reminded of the grammar rules of the second conditional:

- 1) The second conditional consists of an “if clause” **if + past simple** and a “result clause” **would + verb**
- 2) We need the auxiliary **do** because the “if clause” contains the negation ‘not’.

Therefore, the missing word was ‘did’:

- “If I **didn’t** have an exam tomorrow, I **would have** lunch with you.”

After the explanations, I handed out the first open cloze practice and gave students time to find the missing words, using the methodology meaning-function-form, as this should become routine. Students attempted the task on their own first, but they then compared and discussed their answers with their partners after they were done. I insisted on students using the methodology meaning-function-form to familiarise themselves with the process so that it becomes natural after practising a couple of times. Also, I preferred to use an easier open cloze (see Appendix 2: Open cloze practice 1 (Stress)) to focus on methodology rather than difficulty. Once everyone had finished, we corrected the exercise with the whole class, following the methodology, meaning-function-form, and I answered questions as necessary.

After we finished the first open cloze practice, a second exercise (see Appendix 4: Open cloze practice 2 (The Death of the High Street)) was handed out... For this second exercise, I allowed more time to find the missing words than the first task, as the text was longer and the difficulty level was higher.

Again, the students attempted the task on their own first, but they compared and discussed their answers with their partners when they were done. After everyone was done, we went over the answers with the whole class, and I again insisted on the methodology meaning-function-form, as this should become a habit.

Open cloze tasks are like puzzles, and to find the solution, it is necessary to assemble the pieces.

2.5 Lesson 4

For this lesson, the class was divided into four groups of four or five students. The students put their tables into islands to work together as a group and facilitate collaboration.

I explained to the students they were going to work on a text to create their own open cloze task for other students to answer. I asked them to take out ten words from a text I provided them. They could take out any word they liked, but:

- It had to be possible to guess the word from context.
- They needed to make sure the word could not be replaced by any other word.

Once they were done, the other groups had to guess the missing words.

Each group received a different text (taken from the website Breaking News English; see Appendix 6-9):

- Global timber shortage increases house prices
- India to launch \$1.35 trillion infrastructure plan
- Japan to give children under 19 \$880 cash handout
- Job offers \$30 an hour for eating and testing candy

In groups, students discussed their options and took out 10 words. I asked them to highlight the items with a highlighter to make it easier for me to identify the words that should be taken out.

I set a time limit of 10 minutes, to have enough time to create the open cloze on the computer and display the gapped texts on the screen for all students to see and play. The slides with the texts were prepared in advance to gain time in class.

Some groups were faster than others, and as soon as the students were done creating their open cloze task, they gave their texts to me to take out the highlighted words on the corresponding slide.

Playing the game:

The group who created the open cloze did not play when their text was up. One student of this group kept the score on the blackboard, so I could focus on the gapped text and the answers provided by the students.

- Groups could earn one point for each correctly guessed word.
- If students found more than one word for a gap, the group that created the open cloze task lost two points.

2.6 Lesson 5

To start this last lesson, I asked students if they remembered the Quizicon challenge they played in the first lesson and which parts of speech they remembered? The students were asked to give examples for each part of the speech.

I invited the students to do the challenge again and asked a student to type the words on the computer. This time, they had an extra challenge: to beat their previous score!

After playing the challenge again, the results were shown on the screen for students to see. We compared the score with the first lesson, and I praised their progress.

Next, each student received a handout with the open cloze exercises (see appendix 10-13) and an English dictionary (at our university, we have the Oxford Advanced Learners dictionary at our disposal, but students can also use online monolingual dictionaries).

We did the first gapped text together as a class:

- a. Students first read the whole text, ignoring the gaps.
- b. Students looked up any unfamiliar words in the dictionary.
- c. We discussed the **meaning** of the sentence (context).
- d. This was followed by the **function** of the missing word.
- e. We then looked at which word we needed to fill the gap.
- f. Finally, we discussed the grammar rules (if applicable); which **form** should the missing word take?

Students attempted the next three tasks on their own first before discussing them with their partner. I systematically asked students to compare their answers with their partners when they were done.

We checked answers as a whole class and I explained as necessary, using the methodology meaning-function-form.

3. Playtest

The lesson plan was implemented in three groups, with a total of 53 students, all taking the advanced business English course, taught at a C1 level of the CEFR.

At UTT, a full semester is 14 weeks, including the final exams in the last week. The lesson plan was implemented at the beginning of the semester, for five subsequent weeks, from the second week of lessons. This allowed for enough time to do the one-hour lessons before the midterm, which usually takes place in the seventh week of the semester.

3.1 Lesson 1

The students immediately liked the idea of playing a game in class. After explaining the initial challenge, they actively discussed which words they thought would be on the list with their partners and started writing lists in their notebooks or on scrap paper.

To play the game as a whole class, they chose one of their peers to type the answers on the computer, while the others took turns suggesting words for the quiz. All students actively participated, and the lists were very helpful. Many of the students crossed out the words that had already been mentioned from their lists (Figure 5).

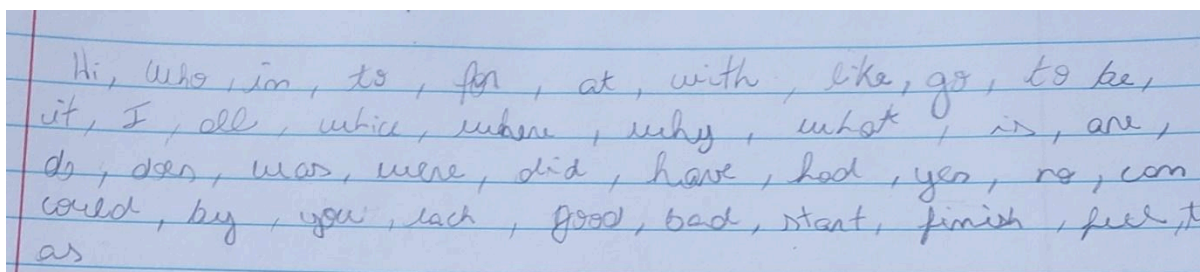


Figure 5 Example of student work

They enjoyed the initial quiz activity on *Quizicon* and respectively scored 55, 40 and 47 points (Figure 6). However, when the 100 words appeared on the screen, some of them were a bit frustrated because they didn't think of some of the more obvious words. I told them not to worry and that we would play it again in another lesson to allow them to improve their score.



Figure 6 Screenshot of the result for the third group

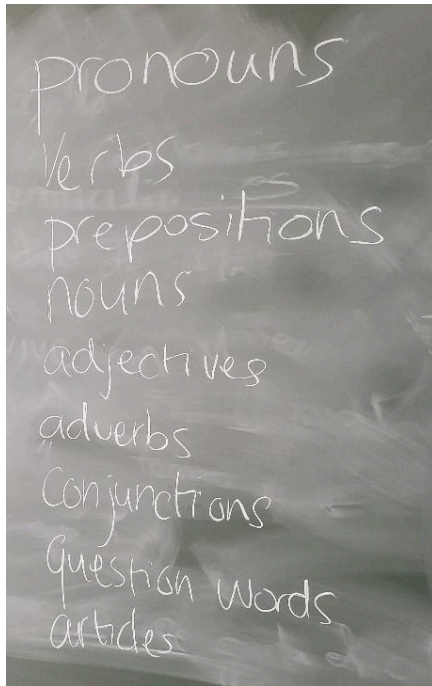


Figure 7 Example of parts of speech identified by students.

For the subsequent tasks, the students worked in pairs.

They discussed the words on the screen with their partners, trying to identify the various parts of speech in the list. After five minutes, I asked them to give me suggestions, which I wrote on the board. At this stage, I accepted any meaningful answers.

After identifying the different parts of speech, they looked at the list again and categorised the words on the list according to the parts of speech written on the board. They also had to write one meaningful sentence for each part of speech to illustrate the use of that part of speech in a sentence. We went over the answers orally at the end of class, giving examples of words and one sentence for each part of speech, and correcting students' answers as necessary (Figure 7).

3.2 Lesson 2

We started the lesson with a recap of the previous course. The students were then asked to individually write the top 10 words they thought they used the most in English. Once they were done writing their lists, they entered the words on their own devices in a word cloud on Mentimeter. The link, voting code and QR code to access the word cloud were displayed on the screen.

After all the students entered their lists, I showed them the results on the screen. Except for a few words, students were not surprised by the results as they confirmed that the words that stood out from the rest were indeed words they often use when speaking and writing in English (Figure 8).

Table 5 Extract from the collaborative document

Part of speech: modal verbs	<i>can, could, will, would, shall, should, may, might, must</i>

This went smoothly and only took the students a couple of minutes. At this stage, I could monitor the students' work, while helping some of them to connect to *Renater* and access the Word document on *Nextcloud* and access the collaborative document. In the previous lesson, I had informed students we were going to work on an online document in the next one-hour class and that they could bring their laptops, which most of them did.

After this initial online task, I explained to the students that they were going to use an online concordancer. None of them were familiar with the concept, so I explained they were going to use an online corpus of texts to look up the words they wrote in their notebooks and in the collaborative document to find examples in context.

I chose to use Tom Cobb's *Lextutor* (Figure 9), as it offers a lot of possibilities and is free to use. However, as it was the first time my students used the online concordancer in *Lextutor*, I kept explanations simple, showing everything on the screen step by step. I introduced them to *Lextutor*, indicating the site offers multiple possibilities but that we would only use the online concordancer. I explained where they should enter the words, which corpus to select and how to get a concordance.

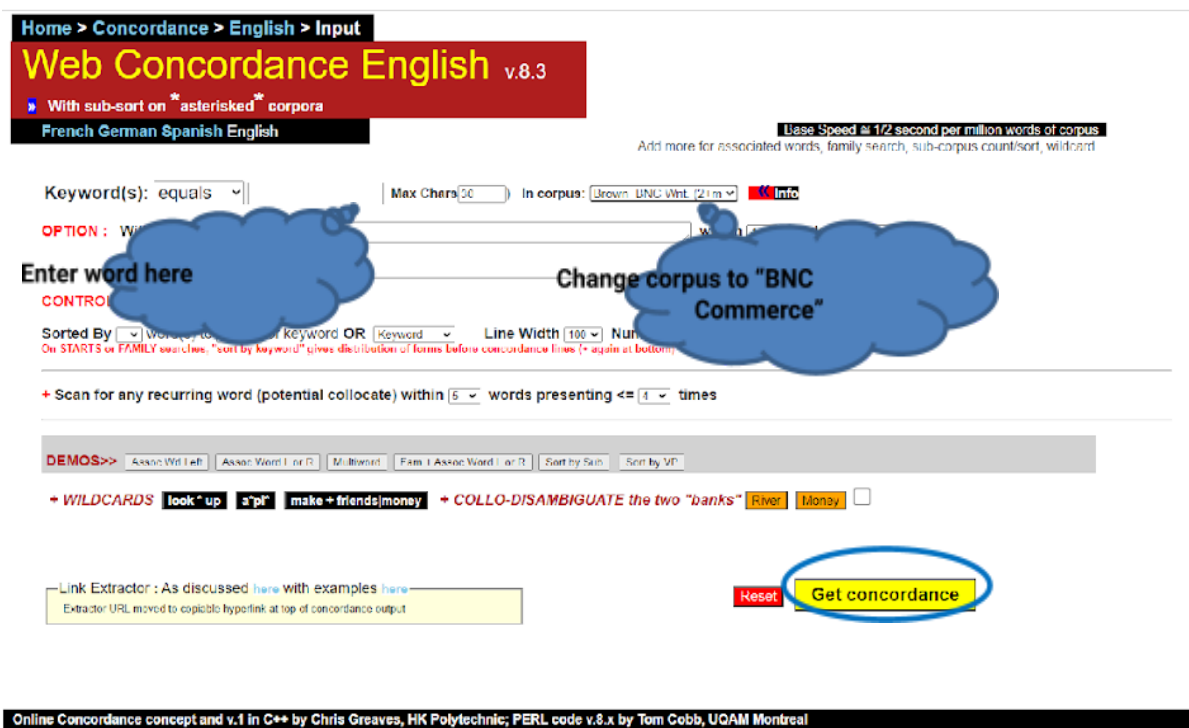


Figure 9 Screenshot of Tom Cobb's Lextutor

As this was a business English class, I asked students to use the "BNC Commerce" corpus, which is part of the British National Corpus. It is a specialist business English corpus that contains 2.2 million words.

Before students started working on the collaborative document, I emphasised that the phrases should illustrate how the words function as the part of speech mentioned in the entries above. For example, students could not copy-paste sentences from *Lextutor* in which “who” functions as an *interrogative pronoun*, the phrases must show how it works as a *relative pronoun*, i.e., to connect a noun with an adjective clause.

After my explanations, I shared the link to the concordancer with the students, for direct access. I expected this task to go as smoothly as the previous one, but the use of the online concordancer and copy-pasting phrases into the collaborative Word document turned out to be more complicated than I anticipated.

First of all, depending on the keyword entered, the site could take a long time before actually returning results. This may have been due to a slow Wi-Fi connection and the fact that many students used the same Wi-Fi access point at the same time. To solve this problem, I told the students to limit the number of lines in the concordancer to 100 lines (rather than the 25,000 indicated by default), showing on the screen where to find this criterion in the concordancer. After this adjustment, none of the students seemed to have any particular difficulties with the concordancer and the 100 results still gave them more than enough examples to choose from.

In previous lessons, I asked my students if they were used to collaborating online on Word documents or Google Docs. I expected this to be the case after the COVID pandemic and many of them confirmed they were, and I was confident this would not be a major problem. I was more concerned about the use of the online concordancer, as they had never used one before. However, when it came to collaborating in the online word document on Renater, some of the students seemed to have trouble copying and pasting phrases into the collaborative document without deleting other students’ work or even completing tables. It was not possible to trace back the origin of the error, and I am not sure the student(s) in question were aware of their own mistake(s), but it was frustrating both for the students and for me:

- students noticed their work “disappeared” in the online document, but as the origin of the problem was unknown, they did not know how to fix it.
- I ended up spending a lot of time trouble-shooting the collaborative document trying to “repair” it rather than helping students with the use of *Lextutor* and correcting their mistakes.

After encountering this problem with the first group, in the other two groups, I made sure to underline the importance of the “undo” button and stressed students should be careful not to erase other students’ work. This seemed to work for the second group, but in the third group, we encountered the same difficulties again. Therefore, for the students to have a significant number of meaningful examples for each part of the speech, I decided to combine the results of all three groups into one single document and send this to the students by email after they all completed the second lesson and asked them to stick it in their notebooks.

3.3 Lesson 3

In the third lesson, we discussed the methodology of answering open cloze questions. I explained that, to answer an open cloze question, we must focus on three things: the meaning, the function and the form.

Meaning

Students should first try to understand the meaning of the text. This understanding should not be limited to the sentence that contains the gapped word, as it often requires a general understanding of a paragraph or sometimes even the whole text. It is important to understand the meaning the author is trying to convey. I always suggest students read the whole text first, ignoring the gaps, before they answer the questions. Doing this will give them an indication of the idea they are supposed to express with the missing word.

Function

The second step is to find out what the function of the gapped word is. What is the author trying to do? Are they for example expressing regret, giving advice, linking ideas, adding additional information, etc.

For this, students should pay particular attention to the words around each gap. This will help them understand which part of speech they need to complete the gap.

Form

Finally, we look at the grammatical rules we should apply to put the gapped word in the appropriate form. The advanced business English course does not include lessons on specific grammar points, as the course is more focused on communicative skills and preparing students to enter the workforce and communicate in a professional international context. However, we do address mistakes when necessary. Also, it is important for students to realise that grammar rules can be helpful in answering open cloze questions. For example, if the author is talking about an imaginary future situation, we should use the second conditional. Consequently, it is helpful to remember the grammar rules of the second conditional. I explained this to the students with an example and by reminding them of the grammar rules for the second conditional combined with a negation:

“If I ____ n’t have an exam tomorrow, I **would have** lunch with you.”

- 1) The second conditional consists of an “if clause” **if + past simple** and a “result clause” **would + verb**
- 2) We need the auxiliary **do** because the “if clause” contains the negation ‘not’.

Therefore, the missing word is ‘did’: “If I **didn’t** have an exam tomorrow, I **would have** lunch with you.”

After this explanation, the students practised the methodology with two open cloze tasks. Both tasks were done individually first, but students were encouraged to compare answers and discuss them with their partners.

The first task (see Appendix 2: Open cloze practice 1 (Stress)) was easier so that the students could focus on the methodology, rather than on the difficulty. I insisted heavily on the methodology meaning-function-form, as it should be something they do automatically (see Appendix 3: Detailed answer key for open cloze practice 1 (Stress)). Although I feel this is necessary at this stage, the extensive explanations made the feedback a bit long.

The second practice task was longer and more difficult (see Appendix 4: Open cloze practice 2 (The Death of the High Street)). Open cloze tasks on the Linguaskill are shorter and contain fewer gapped words. Extracts are typically around 100-150 words (see Figure 1), depending on proficiency level, and always contain five gaps. However, I like to challenge my students and give them longer tasks in class, usually around 200 words with 10-15 gaps.

In class, during the lesson, I had a set of English dictionaries available, and I told my students they were allowed to look up any difficult words, which some of them did. While they initially attempted the task on their own, students actively discussed the task with their partners after they were done. Most of them felt they had more difficulties answering the questions than for the previous task. As I monitored their progression through the task, I noticed many of them tried to apply the methodology whenever they encountered difficulties. Some said they felt that following the methodology helped them focus and made the more difficult questions somewhat look more feasible, or at least it pointed them in the right direction. After 15 minutes we corrected the task as a whole class. I invited students to give me the explanations through meaning-function-form whenever necessary.

To answer an open cloze question, we must focus on three things: the meaning, the function and the form.

3.4 Lesson 4

After having studied the methodology and practised open cloze tasks in the previous lesson, in the fourth lesson, the students created their own open cloze tasks.

At the start of the lesson, I divided each class into four groups of four or five students and asked them to put their tables in islands so they could collaborate more easily as a group.

I explained they were going to create their own open cloze tasks of 10 items with their respective groups, and that after creating the tasks, we would have a friendly competition in class, where other

groups would have to guess the gapped words. I insisted on the fact that they could only take out words that could be guessed from context and that they had to make sure that the gapped word was the only possible option, and that no other word could fit in the gap. As a reminder, I mentioned the parts of speech we had been working on in the past lessons.

All groups received a different text. The texts were all taken from the website *Breaking News English* and business-related. The length of the texts was between 220-240 words. I took texts from level 6, which is the highest level available on the website and corresponds to an upper intermediate level (see appendices 6-9):

- Global timber shortage increases house prices
- India to launch \$1.35 trillion infrastructure plan
- Japan to give children under 19 \$880 cash handout
- Job offers \$30 an hour for eating and testing candy

In their groups, students discussed options together, trying to make the open cloze as difficult as possible for the other groups. I asked students to highlight the gapped words, to make it easier for me to create the open cloze on my laptop. I gave them 10 minutes to create the open cloze, to allow for enough time for me to create the open cloze on my laptop and have the competition all within the one-hour lesson.

I monitored the creation of the open cloze tasks, inviting them to carefully think about certain gaps and modify others if the selected words could not be guessed from context. As soon as the groups confirmed they were done, I collected their texts and started creating the open cloze in a PowerPoint on my laptop, in which I had copied the four texts before the start of the lesson.

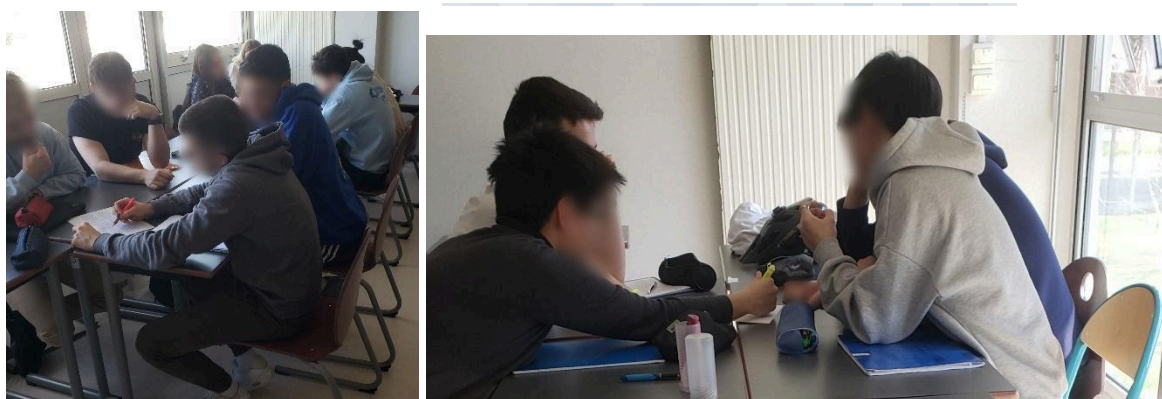


Figure 10 and 11 Students creating open cloze tasks in class.

After creating all open cloze tasks on my laptop, we started playing the game. The group who created the open cloze could not play. One student of this group was invited to keep the score for the other groups on the blackboard so I could focus on the open cloze task on the screen. The participating groups could earn one point for each correct answer. If the students correctly suggested more than one answer for a gap, they received a point for each, and the group that created the open cloze lost two points. As to not penalise them too much, they could only lose two points once for each gap. For each gap, I set a time limit of one minute, as I was afraid to run out of time. I also asked them to raise their hands if they wanted to give an answer, to avoid students shouting answers at the same time.

The students were very enthusiastic and actively participated. They discussed gaps in their groups, trying to find the correct answer. Following answers from students, and to help them and speed up the game, I occasionally confirmed they were on the right track and most of the time, they eventually found meaningful answers themselves, although it sometimes took more than one minute. However, for some gaps, I had to point them in the right direction, asking about the meaning and what part of speech they needed in the gap.

The competition was very intense, and I did not strictly respect the one-minute time limit, but on average, each open cloze task took approximately ten minutes.

3.5 Lesson 5

The fifth lesson was a review of everything we had done in the one-hour lessons so far. We started by discussing the initial challenge they played in the first lesson. The students named the different parts of speech and gave examples for each.

I proposed the students play the initial *Quizicon* challenge again and try to beat their initial score. For each group, the same students volunteered to enter the answers on the computer. This time, their respective scores were 58, 48 and 57 points, which meant an average increase of 7% compared to the first lesson. The third group especially made significant progress, almost equalling the score of the first group. More interestingly, while the students forgot to mention some of the words they suggested the first time, they also suggested respectively 13, 16 and 21 words they had not thought of the first time.

After playing the challenge again, students worked on the open cloze tasks I provided. The tasks were taken from two different books (see Appendix 10-13), both aimed at upper-intermediate students. Most of the words the students had to find were also in the list of 100 most common English words, (except for the words 'let' and 'date') and I told the students to focus on those, while also applying the methodology meaning-function-form we discussed and practised two weeks prior.

We did the first open cloze task together as a whole class and the students explained their answers to fellow students as necessary. Students attempted the three subsequent tasks on their own first, but compared and discussed answers with their partners when they were done. Some of them looked up unknown words in the paper dictionaries available in the classroom, while others preferred to discuss unfamiliar words with their partners after they were done. Throughout the remainder of the lesson students could work at their own rhythm, and we checked answers as soon as everyone was done with a task.

At this point in the semester, the students had learned to be more autonomous, and this enabled me to monitor the weaker students more closely, helping them wherever necessary. With the faster students I quickly checked their answers and suggested they discuss certain answers with their partners (without indicating which of them got it wrong). By explaining their choices to each other, most of the time they found the correct answer.

4. Evaluation

Following the implementation of the five-week lesson plan I had an informal discussion with my students in all three groups to collect feedback on the lessons. During these discussions, I asked them questions about which tasks they preferred, which they liked less, which they thought were particularly useful and why. In this chapter, their feedback is supplemented with my classroom observations and data collected from tests they did in class.

4.1 What was good?

From the first lesson, the students were very enthusiastic. They liked the idea of working collaboratively, doing an online challenge and trying to get the highest possible score. They actively discussed the words that they thought could be on the list with their partners and started writing those in their notebooks. They enjoyed the online challenge, but what was more important is that they said they felt it was useful for them to work on the most common words in English, as they thought it would help them cope with future open cloze tasks.

The quieter students also talked less in the initial discussion tasks. However, as the semester progressed, they seemed to gain confidence. Whereas at the beginning of the semester they sometimes waited for their partners to express ideas, simply nodding to show they agreed and sometimes writing suggestions in their notebooks and showing their partners rather than verbalising them, they became more talkative as the semester progressed and discussed tasks more actively with their partners. Overall, the discussion tasks enhanced student collaboration and boosted self-confidence, which was helpful for the rest of the semester.

While not all students enjoyed working with the online concordancer, they did agree it was a useful tool to study words in context and better understand their meaning and function. They also thought the document that was created with the combined results of the three groups was very helpful. Many of them indicated they might use the online concordancer again in the future.

Students loved to create open cloze tasks for the others in the fourth week. All groups actively discussed options, sometimes with a couple of phrases in French to explain their choices but they would quite naturally switch back to English. They tried their best to make it as difficult as possible for the others. They were very competitive, and all students actively participated (even the quieter ones) in trying to solve the open cloze tasks created by the other groups. Of the five lessons, they indicated the fourth was their absolute favourite. Many students said they thought creating their own open cloze tasks and solving tasks created by other students was very useful. They also told me they did not feel like they were working that much, because they had so much fun, but while they were doing those tasks, they actively discussed their options with the others in their groups in the target language.

They told me they did not feel like they were working that much, because they had so much fun.

4.2 What was bad?

In the second lesson, we used Tom Cobb's *Lextutor*, which did not go as smoothly as I hoped. To start, the first group encountered significant delays before the concordancer returned the requested results. This was frustrating for students, as they sometimes had to wait a long time for the concordancer to return any results. The problem was easily solved by instructing the students to limit the number of lines to 100 (instead of 25.000). This still gave the students more than enough examples to choose from. In the other two groups, I anticipated this problem and included this new restriction in my explanations.

Another problem we encountered in the second lesson was with the online collaboration in the Word document on *Renater*. While all students confirmed they had collaborated online before and most of them had experience collaborating in *Google Docs*, filling out the online Word document in the second lesson did not go as smoothly as I hoped. The initial idea was to gain time through online collaboration and create something together as a class to take away at the end of the lesson. By the time we got to this stage, we had about 25-30 minutes left, and I wanted the students to have a takeaway by the end of the lesson. However, I spent a lot of time troubleshooting the collaborative Word document, repairing the tables to be filled out and making sure everyone could continue working on the document. This was to the detriment of monitoring and helping students with the online concordancer and giving feedback on the phrases they copied/pasted into the tables.

I am still not sure as to why this activity was problematic, as those students I was able to check on during the activity seemed comfortable using the tools. Maybe it was due to a lack of experience collaborating in an online document at the same time; some indicated they had only collaborated asynchronously with other students on *Google Docs* before so this way of working synchronously on the same document was new for them. Another reason could also be that some of them preferred to use their phones for this task rather than a laptop, which, in my opinion, is not as practical to copy and paste phrases from the online concordancer into the online Word document. Or perhaps the students encountering difficulties did not dare to say so or simply did not realise they accidentally deleted sections. Regardless of the origin of the problems, it did affect the work of the whole group, and this was frustrating both for the students and for me.

For the second and third groups, I took more time to explain how to fill out the online document. I also explained they could delete other students' work and that they could "undo" any mistakes with the undo button at the top of their screen. In the second group, this seemed to work. Although it still did not go as smoothly as I hoped, they encountered fewer problems, and I was able to monitor the

students, making sure they copied meaningful sentences into the online document. However, the third group, it was back to square one, and they encountered as many problems as the first group did.

To take away some of the frustration, I decided to combine the results of the three groups into one single document, which I sent out to the students by email at the end of that same week after I carried out the lesson with all three groups (see Appendix 15: Combined results). To avoid this problem in the future, a solution could be to have students work in groups of four or five rather than together as a whole class. The activity can also be done on paper, which would avoid accidental deletions.

In the fourth lesson, we started straight away with the main activity, which, in hindsight, was a mistake. I did not include a warmer in this lesson, expecting the students to remember what we had done in previous lessons. As the planning was very tight, I was afraid we would not have enough time to do everything in the one-hour lesson. A (short) discussion on which words are usually gapped in open cloze tasks to refresh the students' memories before diving into the creation of open cloze tasks would have been helpful and would have avoided some students suggesting gapping words such as "candyologist", which is highly unlikely to appear in an open cloze task on the Linguaskill test, and most definitely would not be gapped.

Also, the students did not have a lot of time to create their open cloze tasks and despite having prepared the PowerPoint with the texts in advance, creating the open cloze task on my computer took more time than I anticipated. Additionally, some open cloze tasks created by the students were more difficult than others and, therefore, took more time. This meant that for two of the groups, the one-hour class was too short, and we only had time to do three of the four open-cloze tasks during the one-hour class. We finished the fourth open cloze task at the beginning of the two-hour class. I do not think it was a major problem for the students, but for me, it was awkward to finish the competition in another lesson as the mood was not the same, and I felt students were less 'into the game'. To me, it just would have made more sense to finish the quiz within the one-hour lesson and be able to wrap up the lesson knowing which group won. To reduce the time necessary for the students to create the open cloze task and for me to transpose their work on my computer, it is possible to reduce the number of gapped words. I asked my students to gap ten words, considering the length of the texts, but this can easily be reduced to eight or even less.

4.3 Final result

After five weeks, students progressed by 11.2%, from 46.6% correct answers to 57.8% correct answers on open cloze tasks. This was measured with open cloze tasks done in class as part of a level assessment test in the first week and the results of the open cloze tasks in the mid-term, which took place in the seventh week of the semester, just after we finished the open cloze lesson plan. After the five subsequent one-hour lessons, many students said they even got to like open cloze tasks, which was a victory in itself.

Of the 53 students who participated in the lessons, 50 took the Linguaskill business test at the end of the semester. The three students who did not take the test had left the university. Of those students who took the test, 43 succeeded (86%) and obtained a score of 170 points or higher. Their average score on the test was 177 points. Almost half of the students who succeeded obtained the maximum score of 180+ (21 students).

Many students said they even got to like open cloze tasks, which was a victory in itself.

4.4 What are the practical implications for other teachers' classrooms?

I realise that I am very lucky to teach in a connected classroom. I do not have to worry about internet access or what equipment will be available in my room. Also, most of my students have laptops they can bring to class. While this was definitely very comfortable and practical for my lessons, I do realise this may not be the case for other teachers. Except for the initial online challenge and Tom Cobb's *lexutor*, which require internet access and at least one computer with the possibility to project the

websites on a screen, the other activities can be done offline. If necessary, it is possible to ask students to do the initial challenge as homework, as a preparation task outside of class. However, doing it in class had the advantage of creating a kind of team spirit from the beginning of the semester.

One thing that can be difficult is finding open cloze tasks at the right level for your students. The tasks must be challenging (after all, we are preparing them for an official test), but they should not be too difficult to prevent students from getting frustrated and giving up. Finding the right balance can sometimes be tricky. I often use tasks from BULATS or Linguaskill preparation books available in our university library at the desired level, alternating more difficult tasks with easier ones. This gives my students enough of a challenge without discouraging them. Using tasks that incorporate vocabulary we studied in class or that are related to a topic we discussed can also make the task easier, as students will struggle less with meaning. I also create tasks myself, using online articles related to the theme we are working on and gapping a particular part of speech (e.g. take out all the prepositions in a text) and asking the students to tell me which part of speech they think is missing before they start working on the task. While this does not necessarily make the task easier, students may feel less lost as they need to focus on only one part of the speech while completing the task.

5. Next steps

Even though the second lesson did not go as smoothly as I hoped, I am still convinced that using an online concordancer is useful for language learners and an important stage in the lesson plan. However, in the future, I will not do this activity as a whole class but rather divide students into smaller groups. For this activity, it is also possible to use one of the computer rooms available at the university (Figure 12). However, those rooms are equipped with only 12 computers, which means that at least some students must work in pairs. Also, these rooms are not equipped with a projector and class computer, so the first part of the lesson (explaining the online concordancer and collaborative document) still needs to be done in a traditional language classroom. In that case, a two-hour slot would be more appropriate because switching classrooms takes time.

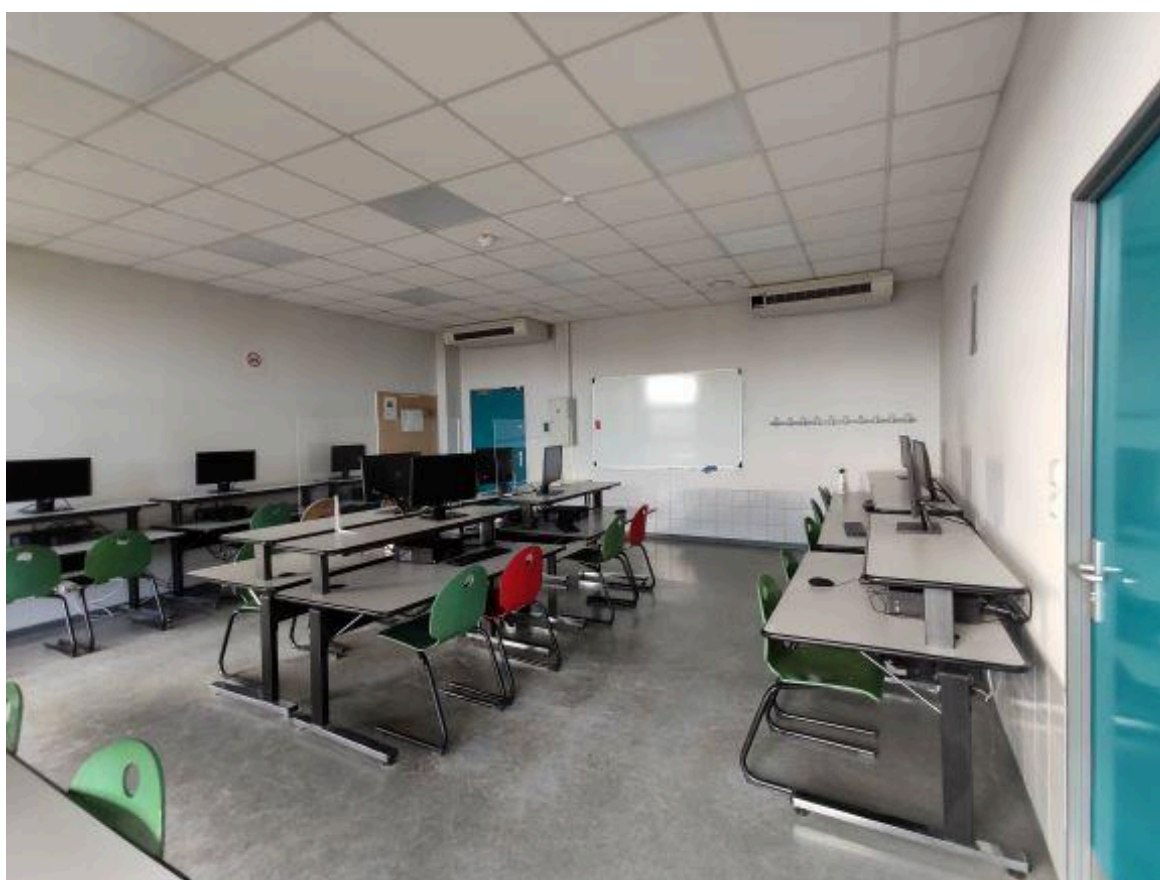


Figure 12 Example of a computer room

The lesson plan was implemented in an advanced business English course, but it can also be adapted for use with general English courses and at lower levels. However, with the level groups at our university, this can be complicated because I teach different levels, and there is a fair chance of having at least some of the same students in a different class the following semester.

Since I first carried out this lesson plan in 2022, the ludic activities have become an integral part of my teaching toolkit and I continue to use them with my advanced students but spread out over the semester. By the end of the semester, students definitely find open cloze tasks less daunting and more fun!

While this lesson plan focussed on open cloze tasks, it can also be used for work with multiple choice gap fill and/or work on specific grammar points.

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