

# Strategies and Implementation of Designing Deliberate Gaps in Question Chains for Authentic Occurrence in Middle School English Reading Instruction

Xi Wang

*Jiading New City Experimental Middle School, Shanghai, China*

**Abstract:** This paper explores classroom practices centered on designing and implementing a question chain with deliberate gaps for authentic occurrence in middle school English reading instruction. Through the collection and analysis of student questionnaires and interview data, as well as action research, the author found that in middle school English reading classes, leaving “deliberate gaps” through verbal stimulation, question guidance, and task assignments effectively activates students’ thinking. Carefully designed question chains encourage students to express, experience, and articulate their thoughts and feelings with their own attitudes and ideas, thereby training logical thinking, critical thinking, and creative thinking. This approach promotes the occurrence of authentic learning in reading classes.

**Keywords:** Deliberate Gaps; Question Chains; Reading Class; Authentic Learning; Thinking Skills

## 1. Introduction

The Current Situation and Reflections on the Design of Question Chains in Daily Reading Instruction

Reading is the process of perceiving text, contemplating language, and appreciating emotions. Through reading, students gain understanding, insight, and wisdom. In the current reading instruction, teachers typically design interconnected question chains based on the theme and genre of the reading material, as well as the knowledge structure and intrinsic logical order of the text. However, these question chains often focus mainly on extracting key information from the text, lacking depth in thought and interpretation. Consequently, students miss the opportunity to

engage in an authentic “dialogue” with the text.

The Opinions of the Ministry of Education on Comprehensively Deepening Curriculum Reform to Implement the Fundamental Task of Cultivating Virtue and Morality clearly puts forward the concept of “core literacy”. The core literacy in the English subject mainly includes four aspects: language proficiency, thinking quality, cultural character, and learning ability. The design of “question chains with deliberate gaps” guides students to expand their thinking space, engage in deep thinking, and use imagination and logical inference to “fill in the gaps” [1], thereby enhancing their thinking abilities. In daily teaching, teachers should pay attention to the “gaps” in reading texts and carefully design question chains to explore these gaps, which plays an important guiding role in cultivating students' higher-order thinking skills.

## 2. The Definition of the Concepts of “Deliberate Gaps” and Authentic Learning

### 2.1 Deliberate Gaps

“Deliberate gaps” originally refers to leaving blank spaces in artworks, where the effect lies in creating profound and imaginative spaces in these voids. In other words, these “gaps” serve as channels for thought. In the teaching process, allocating certain time and space to inspire and guide students, giving them ample time to play an active role, and employing their knowledge and skills to engage in self-directed exploratory learning allows students to think independently and explore autonomously.

### 2.2 Authentic Learning

Authentic learning refers to the process where students immerse themselves in the real world or a realistic virtual environment, exploring

and interacting around real-world issues, thereby gaining genuine experiences and developing advanced thinking skills. It emphasizes the training of higher-order thinking skills, pursues the depth of knowledge acquisition, focuses on connections with the real world, values classroom interaction and dialogue, and advocates for creating a conducive atmosphere to cultivate students' practical and innovative abilities.

### **3. Strategies and Practices for Designing Question Chains with Gaps**

The art of leaving gaps in teaching can be woven into every aspect of classroom instruction. Therefore, designing and implementing these “gaps” to promote authentic learning in the classroom requires teachers to wisely create strategies for “question chains with deliberate gaps”.

#### **3.1 Deep Understanding and Creating Emotional Gaps**

emotions are the intrinsic drivers of human behavior. In English reading instruction, teachers can create a multidimensional, three-dimensional, and open emotional expression environment through situational setup, enriching the classroom's emotional experience under the resonance of emotions [2].

##### **3.1.1 Guiding students to reflect on the title through question chains**

The title is the “essence” of an article, summarizing and encapsulating its content, serving as a crucial guide to the entire piece. In the design of a reading lesson, teachers can leave the title blank and use a question chain to guide students through the reading, helping them gain a deeper understanding of the article. In the Oxford English 7B Unit 5 The Happy Farmer and His Wife lesson, the title is The Happy Farmer and His Wife. After reading the story, the teacher guides students back to the title, designing the blank space as “The \_\_\_\_\_ Farmer and His Wife”. The question chain is as follows: Do you think “happy” is the best adjective for this title? Do you have a better one? Can you give an exact reason? This encourages students to use appropriate adjectives to fill in the blank. Students actively think and suggest adjectives such as poor, lucky, and hard-working, providing reasonable explanations. By comparing these, students

realize that the “happy” in the title is the perfect touch, encapsulating the theme of the fable. It not only describes the simple happiness of the farmer and his wife but also conveys their optimistic and positive attitude towards life. Through this process, students express their own views and ultimately reach a consensus, understanding the joy and “happiness” of the farmer and his wife, thereby developing their critical thinking skills.

##### **3.1.2 Encouraging students to integrate their thoughts through question chains**

Teachers often base their reading lesson designs on existing content in the text, lacking a deep interpretation, which prevents students from emotionally engaging with the text. Therefore, in designing reading lessons, teachers can use question chains to stimulate students' deep thinking and exploration, fostering a connection between the reader and the author. In the Oxford English 6B Unit 5 The Dragon Boat Festival lesson, titled Qu Yuan and the Dragon Boat Festival, students are somewhat familiar with Qu Yuan and know that the Dragon Boat Festival involves eating zongzi and dragon boat races. However, they do not resonate with Qu Yuan's patriotic sentiments after reading. Thus, the teacher can design a question chain: Why do we eat zongzi and have dragon boat races to remember Qu Yuan? What do you think of Qu Yuan? If you were Qu Yuan, what's your choice? What would you say to yourself? This encourages students to think deeply, linking zongzi and dragon boats with Qu Yuan based on their existing knowledge and coming up with various answers. Eventually, a student answers, “People threw zongzi into the river to stop fish from eating him. They took their boats to the river and raced to find Qu's body”. The teacher then asks, “Why did he deserve this?” Students combine their historical background knowledge, discussing Qu Yuan's patriotic spirit and his concern for the nation, understanding why he chose to throw himself into the Miluo River. When we revisit the question, “If you were Qu Yuan, what would your choice be?” and look at it from a modern perspective, students are encouraged to enhance their critical thinking. Each student's existing experiences and perspectives are different, leading to diverse answers. Besides recognizing Qu Yuan's patriotism, some

students view him as weak and believe they would continue living because “Tomorrow is another day”. This elevates the discussion to the value of life, allowing for further life education. Thus, by setting temporary “gaps”, teachers ignite students’ thoughts, guiding them to think and explore independently.

### **3.2 Creating Contexts to Explore Textual Gaps**

#### **3.2.1 Guiding students to reflect on illustrations through question chains**

Illustrations in textbooks are created based on the content of the corresponding lessons, aiding students in gaining background knowledge related to the text and helping them better understand the content. Therefore, while exploring the textual gaps, teachers should guide students in reading the illustrations. By integrating the question chains with the illustrations, students can transform visual input into cognitive output. For example, in the Oxford English 6B Unit 5 The Dragon Boat Festival, a question chain could be designed around the illustration: What’s in Kitty’s hand? What does the model make you think of? What festival do dragon boat races remind you of? What does the Dragon Boat Festival make you think of? Through this question chain, students observe the picture and discover that Kitty is holding a model of a dragon boat. This leads them to think of dragon boat races, which in turn reminds them of the Dragon Boat Festival, and finally, they think of Qu Yuan and zongzi. A single image stimulates the students’ understanding of the text theme. Thus, in teaching, teachers should encourage students to develop the habit of reading pictures, improving their ability to infer from the text through practicing their picture-reading skills.

#### **3.2.2 Creating deliberate gaps through question chains**

Sukhomlinsky (1984) once said, “Experienced teachers often only slightly open a window to the vast world of science, intentionally leaving certain things unexplained.” The art of teaching lies not in total impartation but in guidance [3]. Some reading texts end in an open-ended manner, leaving a sense of unfinished business. For instance, in Oxford English 6A Unit 10 Healthy Eating, a story about Mr. Lin and Miss Chen’s different lifestyles illustrates how varying dietary and

exercise habits affect their health, aiming to make students aware of the importance of a balanced diet and regular exercise.

Initially, Mr. Lin’s unhealthy eating habits and lack of exercise leave him overweight and unhealthy. However, after spending a few weeks with his health-conscious cousin, Miss Chen, he becomes fit and healthy. The story concludes with “Mr. Lin became fit and healthy”. While living with Miss Chen in the countryside, he couldn’t access junk food, and physical labor ensured his exercise, helping him regain his health and fitness. But he cannot live with Miss Chen indefinitely; what happens when he returns to the city? The textbook leaves this part open-ended. Therefore, during the reading process, I explored this gap by designing a question chain: What will happen after Mr. Lin returns to the city? Will he become fat again? Why? Students filled in the gap with two scenarios: One, Mr. Lin maintains a healthy diet and exercise routine, continuing his healthy lifestyle. Two, Mr. Lin succumbs to the temptation of delicious city food, reverts to his unhealthy habits, and becomes overweight and unhealthy again. By discussing Mr. Lin’s life after returning to the city, students understood that maintaining good eating and living habits is crucial to health, and that long-term habits cannot be changed overnight. Developing good dietary and lifestyle habits is not easy and requires persistence.

Effectively utilizing each cognitive gap makes the classroom dynamic, varied, and efficient, helping students accurately grasp subject knowledge, emphasize the logic and rationality between things, and significantly enhance their expression abilities and thinking quality [4].

### **3.3 Collaborative Teaching: Designing Evaluation Gaps**

We often say that reading is the input phase of learning English. Therefore, while reading, in addition to helping students thoroughly understand the text, we also use the reading material as a medium to guide students in creating an evaluation form for the text. For example, in the Oxford English 7B Unit 5 A Happy Farmer and His Wife, a narrative text, the evaluation form’s gap is set with a question chain: What is a good story like? What are the key aspects we should consider? How to check it? Students freely express their thoughts,

organizing the story elements and discovering language expressions like the “Although” sentence structure. Through collaboration, students identify points they hadn’t considered before. Eventually, they form an evaluation form and use it to review the story.

Thus, in teaching design, guiding students to regularly evaluate texts helps them focus on how to assess and from which dimensions, thereby enhancing the logical rigor and clarity of their English writing. Classroom gaps should not lead to aimless imagination or irrelevant discussions but should naturally emerge, marking an important shift from the teacher as the leader to the teacher as a listener and facilitator [5].

#### **4. The Impact of Designing deliberate gaps Through Question Chains on Reading Instruction**

##### **4.1 Fostering Empathy with the Reading Text**

Employing the art of “deliberate gaps” in the English classroom breaks the monotony of a teacher-dominated lecture, creating a dynamic and structured pace that opens students’ minds, encouraging autonomous thinking and exploration. By uncovering the “gaps” in the text and using question chains, students are continually prompted to think deeply, leading to a profound understanding of the text. This deep reflection enables students to “converse” with the text and ultimately empathize with the author [6].

##### **4.2 Cultivating Creative Thinking**

English instruction aims not only to develop students’ language skills but also to foster their innovation and creative thinking, equipping them with lifelong development abilities. Sukhomlinsky stated, “The art of education lies in fully developing each child’s strengths and potential.” The art of deliberate gaps in the classroom creates conditions for infinite possibilities. By allowing students room for thought and exploration, an open classroom environment stimulates creative sparks. Without fixed thinking patterns, rigid frameworks, or predetermined answers, students can fully utilize their imagination and creativity, activating their existing language knowledge to express new ideas, making the use of English lively and dynamic.

##### **4.3 Enhancing Teaching Effectiveness**

What constitutes ideal teaching? According to Lenin, it is when teachers consciously choose methods that require the least effort while providing the most significant and lasting results. The effectiveness of teaching is closely related to the level of student engagement. If teachers entirely control the classroom, presenting knowledge in a rote manner, students passively receive information, leading to low engagement and sluggish thinking. While teachers may “speak” the knowledge, students’ understanding, absorption, and internalization remain inadequate. The use of deliberate gaps in the classroom addresses these issues by keeping students’ minds active and their attention highly focused. This approach stimulates intrinsic motivation, enhancing student engagement and participation in classroom activities. Consequently, students can apply the knowledge learned, understand and internalize it, achieving the teaching objectives and improving the effectiveness of instruction [7].

##### **5. Conclusion**

Through the design of question chains, teachers and students collaboratively explore, elevate, and unearth the educational significance within the text. As they fill these “gaps”, they reorganize and integrate the textbook content based on their understanding of the story theme, immersing themselves in the scenarios presented. This process not only creates a lively classroom atmosphere but also fosters profound insights and reflections that impart lifelong wisdom. We believe that ideal teaching is imaginative and exists in an open and inclusive environment. The art of deliberate gaps brings vibrancy to English instruction, enabling students to take ownership of the classroom. It facilitates dialogue with oneself, with others, and with life itself, promoting self-development and ensuring genuine learning experiences.

##### **References**

- [1] Wang Lianhua. Research on the Art Strategy of “Deliberate Gaps” in High School Chinese Teaching. Liaoning Normal University, 2014(05).
- [2] Ye Changwen. On the Art of Teaching Blank Spaces. Curriculum. Teaching

- Materials. *Teaching Methods*, 1999, (11): 13-15.
- [3] Liu Miao. A Study on the Application of "Cognitive Gap" Strategies in Junior High School English Reading Teaching. Shandong Normal University, 2017.
- [4] Zhang Xiaohui. *The Art of Teaching Blank Spaces*. Nanjing Normal University, 2011.
- [5] Zhou Wei. The Practice of "deliberate gaps" in Junior High School English Classroom Teaching. *Journal of Basic English Education*, 2014, 16(04): 48-51.
- [6] Shanghai Municipal Education Commission Teaching Research Office. "Basic Requirements for Junior High School English Teaching in Shanghai", Shanghai Education Press, 2017.
- [7] Zhao Shanghua. Interpretation of "English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education (2022 Edition)". Global Education, 2022.