

## Testing Listening Comprehension Using Listening Summary Cloze

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This paper discusses the development of a listening summary cloze test which was initially devised in response to demands from tertiary-level teachers in China for a notetaking and listening test that would have a positive washback effect on their teaching. The paper first considers the theoretical implications underlying the development of an alternative testing format and then describes the process of piloting the new test. The pilot was carried out in two phases: initially in an EFL situation in China, and later in an ESL situation in Hong Kong.

### Listening Summary Cloze を使用しての聴解力テスト

当稿は最初中国の大学教師よりの要求に応じて彼らの教授法に対して明確な washback effect が得られるであろうノートの要約と聞き取りテストの為の listening summary cloze test の開発を検討するものである。最初に他のテスト様式 (format) の基本的発展に基づいた理論的考察を行い、次に試験的な新テストのプロセスを述べる。

この試験は最初に中国の EFL のプログラムで、次にホンコンの ESL のプログラムで実施された。

### 1. Introduction

The testing of listening comprehension has a comparatively short history. Prior to developments in technology and the audio-lingual method of teaching, listening tests were limited to tests of dictation. In the last fifteen to twenty years, however, listening tests have not only become much more widespread, but also more varied. Nowadays, it is not uncommon for listening comprehension tests to be made up of a battery of subtests, testing a cross-section of listening skills.

Over the years, changes in test tasks used in large-scale tests have tried to reflect our ever-increasing understanding of the processes involved in listening. When tests of auditory discrimination were introduced, it was commonly believed that the first stage in the understanding of a message was that of understanding the sounds. In other words, it was thought that listening was a one-way, bottom-up process starting with the lower-order skills such as recognising phonemes and morphemes, and ending with the higher-order skills such as inference. Furthermore, it was believed that "if a learner was tested in phoneme discrimination, stress and intonation, the sum of the 'discrete' sub-tests would be equivalent to his proficiency in listening comprehension" (Weir, 1988, p. 55).

It is now thought that listening is a much more complex process which involves simultaneous top-down and bottom-up processing to which no fixed order can be ascribed. To comprehend a message, listeners not only use this knowledge of the sound system, lexis, and syntax of the language, but also their knowledge of the outside world and how it relates to the topic at hand, as well as their knowledge of the culture of the language. In addition, they have to utilize their understanding of what has been said so far to anticipate what will follow. Thus, with a growing acceptance that context plays a very important part in the understanding of spoken discourse, it is not surprising that contextualized discourse is increasingly being used as the basis of listening comprehension tests. Learners are being required to listen to complete utterances, dialogues, and monologues in the form of, for example, mini-lectures, instead of to uncontextualized words or short exchanges. Tests appear to this extent to have caught up with the theory of listening and to reflect demands similar to those placed on learners in the real world.

One result of this change is that an increasing number of listening tests have become more integrative in nature, testing more than one subskill or language element at a time. However, this is not true of all listening tests. Where teachers are responsible for setting their own tests, they often prefer to use test formats that have been tried and

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proven to give statistically reliable results than to try out new test types. Hence, they adhere to the discrete point test based on uncontextualized discourse rather than develop a new test in line with current theory.

### 2. Difficulties of Setting Contextualized Tests

Developing contextualized listening tests is a complex and time-consuming task. Fundamental is the construction and recording of suitable texts. Relevant topics need to be identified and either suitable prerecordings selected or custom-made recordings arranged. Prerecordings, despite having the advantage of being authentic, are often difficult to adapt for testing purposes; they may, for example, be insufficiently clear, too long, or unnecessarily complex. Custom-made recordings, on the other hand, may sound stilted. It is, for example, very difficult to record a written talk or lecture in a manner and at a speed that sounds authentic.

Another area of difficulty for the test writer is that of identifying what is to be tested. When it was believed that the sum of the discrete parts made up the whole, it was possible to sample a range of parts and claim that by testing sound discrimination, recognition of stress, and of intonation, a picture of an individual learner's listening skills could be drawn up. However, with the onset of integrative tests two problems emerged. First, it became impossible to separate the discrete parts since more than one subskill is tested at a time. Second, and perhaps more important, it became more difficult to isolate the skill of listening from the other language skills, since not only are the subskills of listening being integrated but so are the other language skills. The listening test that requires learners to respond in speech or writing is impure in that it tests more than one language skill at a time and thus raises questions of test validity and reliability, even though the tasks required of the learners may be more authentic in nature. As Rost (1990) points out:

The question of reliability and the issue of construct validity present an uncomfortable dilemma for test writers and language teachers. In order to include testing formats that allow for improved face validity and broader content validity, reliability may

be compromised. Specifically, if listening is to be measured in situations of actual use, situations in which intervening variables obviously come into play, reliability of measurement will be compromised. However, it is precisely the integration of information-gathering skills from spoken texts with other pragmatic skills that serves as the basis for listening development. While it is important for pedagogic reasons to identify learner problems with listening, at the same time it compromises educational principles to equate listening ability with information-gathering skill. (p. 180)

Related to the above are problems of test format. The reason discrete point tests have been found to be statistically reliable is they have usually taken the form of objective, true/false or multiple-choice items based on single words or short exchanges, with the tester being able to ask a large number of questions. This type of test has led teachers to base their teaching on low-level recognition exercises such as appear on traditional tests. Such tests, by restricting the practice learners get in understanding longer stretches of discourse, have had a negative washback effect on teaching. If students are to understand spoken language outside the classroom setting, they need to be exposed to samples of such language. They therefore need to be tested on their understanding of discourse which varies in length, mode, and purpose. For the test to have a positive washback effect on teaching, learners need to be asked to do more than merely answer true/false or multiple-choice type questions. They need to produce language in response to what they have heard. In other words, as Bachman (1990) points out, "language is both the object and the instrument of our measurement," and hence "it is extremely difficult to distinguish the language abilities we want to measure from the method-facets used to elicit language" (pp. 287-288).

Contextualization, therefore, makes more difficult not only the selection of the text, but also the setting of the questions that assess students' comprehension of it. This may be the reason why many teachers shy away from developing such tests. They frequently ques-

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tion their own competence in the field of testing, and thus Buck (1988), in the context of Japanese university entrance examinations, comments that “teachers see little alternative but to produce a different version of the tests made in previous years, or imitate the tests of more prestigious institutions” (p. 17). This phenomenon is, of course, also a result of other constraints, such as the time pressures put on teachers to write tests and the difficulty of validating new measures, as well as the scale of the testing procedure with which teachers have to cope.

### 3. The Use of Cloze for Testing Listening

The cloze test, first introduced by Taylor (1953) as a means of assessing the reading ability of native speakers, has since been adapted for use with non-native speakers. It has moved away from the principle of *n*th word deletions, that is true cloze as advocated by Taylor, to selective rational deletion procedures, sometimes referred to as modified cloze or gap-filling. This latter procedure allows testers to select appropriate deletions so as to test not only lower-order skills, but also a range of higher-order skills.

Further changes have been made in the techniques used for the questions and the marking procedure. Originally, every *n*th word was left blank and the testees were required to provide the exact word missing from the text. Adaptations have seen the development of the multiple-choice cloze as well as a more flexible marking scheme, whereby acceptable words rather than only the exact word are marked as correct.

Cloze has also been extended to the testing of listening. In such tests the students are required to fill in the blanks in a written passage based on information they have heard. To avoid the completion of these blanks being done without listening, testers have found it necessary to ensure that the deletions are made on high-information content words or phrases. Yet even this does not guarantee that students are listening to more than just individual words missing from the text. Therefore, modifications have been tried whereby students are given a cloze summary of the original either in the L1 or L2. An example of such a

test is given in Heaton (1983, pp. 82-83) and Buck (1988) describes how this method has been developed successfully in Japan.

#### **4. The Development of the Listening Summary Cloze**

The present study is concerned with an extension of the listening cloze test described above. The test's main difference is that it is made up of two tasks rather than one, and though this format has been described elsewhere (Heaton, 1983, pp. 83-85), it appears not to have been used with summary completion tasks. The first task for the students in this study was that of notetaking, which the students did while listening to a mini-lecture, while the second task, the only one that was assessed, required the students to complete a summary cloze passage with the aid of their notes. The purpose of the study was to see how well a test of this nature performed in comparison with the more traditional type of listening comprehension tests both in terms of reliability as well as validity.

This test, the listening summary cloze, was developed for use with tertiary level students in a foreign language environment in China. It was designed with two objectives in mind: (a) The test was to measure students' ability to listen to longer stretches of discourse such as lectures, and (b) it was to encourage good notetaking both during the test as well as in class. In other words, the test was specifically designed to have a positive washback effect on teaching.

It was felt that notetaking was an important skill for the students to develop and, therefore, had to be tested in some way. Yet a review of the alternative methods of testing notetaking revealed that they were either too cumbersome to administer or would not have the desired washback effect on teaching. For example, having the students write a summary of a lecture was seen as very difficult to assess and the students' success in the task would have been dependent to a large extent on their writing ability. To make the task authentic, the students had to be required to use their notes for a particular purpose, as they would have to in their studies. Therefore the task developed, that of completing a summary of a text through gap-filling, was one that

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limited the amount of writing required and at the same time allowed for objective assessment, since only the summary completion, not the notes taken while listening to the lecture, was assessed.

### 5. Methodology

#### 5.1 Subjects

In the first instance, two versions of the listening summary cloze were piloted at the Guangzhou Institute of Foreign Languages in 1989, as part of a larger battery of proficiency tests.<sup>1</sup> The first, designed for learners majoring in English who had completed their second year at university (GEM 4), was administered to a total of 280 students—173 end of first students and 107 end of second year students. The second (GEM 8), designed for end of final year students, was in fact piloted on 117 end of third year students, since in that year the fourth year students could not be targeted.<sup>2</sup>

The second phase of the pilot study was carried out in Hong Kong, where 92 ESL first year science students were targeted. The listening summary cloze was in this instance part of the final assessment for the course which consisted of both listening and writing tests.

#### 5.2 Texts

In the first phase of the study carried out in China, the lecturettes were purpose written. The texts were different for the two levels of students and the topics considered were ones which it was felt would be of general interest to the target population. These included ones on nature and wildlife, tourism and places of interest as well as holidays and the way these are celebrated. The main criterion for selection was that the subject matter would be accessible to the students, yet not so familiar that they could complete the summary cloze from their general knowledge.

For GEM 4 the topic selected was *The Hummingbird*. (See Appendix A for the tapescript used and Appendix B for the summary cloze. Details of the other topics are not given as they still form part of a test bank. This text was published in full in Fletcher, 1990.) It was felt that

the students would not know any detail about the bird, but would be able to relate to the subject matter.

In the Hong Kong phase of the study the lecturette used was taken from a radio broadcast. It was from a general science programme which was felt appropriate for the students. It was more authentic than the lecturettes written for China, since the only modifications made were those of editing out some of the detail provided in the talk.

### *5.3 Summaries*

In all cases the summaries were written by one of the testers and then moderated by a group of teachers familiar with the students. The summaries were moderated for comprehensibility as well as to eliminate those deletions which could be completed from the students' general or linguistic knowledge.

The number of deletions varied between tests. For GEM 4 and GEM 8 in China, the summaries contained 20 deletions each, whereas for the Hong Kong test, to facilitate moderation, the number of deletions was increased to 25. A further difference between the tests was the order in which the information was presented in the summary. For GEM 4 the summary followed the same order as the information in the lecturette, whereas for GEM 8 as well as the Hong Kong test the order of the summary did not adhere strictly to that of the lecturette, making the task more challenging. It was felt that by changing the order of information in the summary the task would be more authentic as the students would have to scan their notes to find the relevant information in the same way as they would have to use their notes from a lecture to write an academic essay.

### *5.4 Procedure*

The tests were administered in two stages. During the first stage students were asked to take notes on the lecture they heard. In the instructions they received some guidance as to the particular points they should pay attention to and at the end they were given two minutes to tidy up their notes. They were *not* allowed to see the summary until after the notetaking stage was completed. In the second stage the students



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were given the summary and asked to use their notes to complete it. In all cases they were allowed to use a word or phrase to complete the deletion and were informed that they were not required to use the exact words used in the lecturette.

### 6. Results of Piloting

After scoring each of the tests the results were analysed to see how difficult they were for the target population, how the test behaved in comparison to a more traditional listening test and finally how each of the items performed.

The mean scores shown in Table 1 indicate all the tests were of moderate difficulty. A study of comparative difficulty across the tests indicates that GEM 4 was for the year two students of comparable difficulty to the H.K. test for Science students, the mean for the former being 57% while for the latter 56.8%.

**Table 1**  
**Means and Standard Deviations of the Listening**  
**Summary Cloze Tests**

	n	Number of Items	Mean	Std Dev
GIFL				
Yr 1 GEM 4	173	20	8.36	2.76
Yr 2 GEM 4	107	20	11.41	2.85
Yr 3 GEM 8	117	20	9.71	3.67
HKU				
Yr 1	92	25	14.20	3.89

The higher mean score of 11.41 (57%) for year two students as compared to 8.36 (41.8%) for year one students at GEM 4 was to be expected as the test was targeted at year two students. Furthermore, had GEM 8 been administered to end of fourth year students, it is likely their mean scores would also have been higher than the 9.71 (48.5%) achieved by the third years, as they would have completed their fourth and final year of study.

The results of the listening summary cloze were correlated with the other listening subtest administered at the same time. In each case there was a significant correlation: For GEM 4 and GEM 8 they were 0.45 and 0.57 respectively, while for the Hong Kong tests it was 0.48 (all significant at the .001 level), showing that there is some overlap of skills being tested. However, because of the dual nature of the test, it is not surprising that the listening summary cloze test appears to be testing more than listening.

The item analysis carried out on the tests administered in China suggested that only a limited amount of moderation was necessary on both tests. As shown in Table 2, of the 20 items in GEM 4, a maximum of 5 needed to be looked at and possibly changed, whereas for GEM 8 (Table 3) only 2 items were unacceptable.

**Table 2**  
**Summary of Item Analysis for Listening Summary Cloze**

	GEM 4				GEM 8	
	Year 1		Year 2		Year 3	
	Number Items		Number Items		Number Items	
Difficulty	Total	(<.3)*	Total	(<.3)*	Total	(<.3)*
Very Difficult	3	0	2	1	1	0
Difficult	6	0	3	0	5	0
Intermediate	6	1	6	0	10	0
Easy	4	0	5	0	4	1
Very Easy	1	0	4	3	0	0

\*Note: This shows the number of items with a discrimination index of below 0.3, which do not discriminate.

A slightly higher proportion of items, in total 40%, needed moderation after the test was piloted in Hong Kong. This was not seen as disturbing. In fact, it was to be expected on a 25-item subtest that was being used for the first time.

When the item analysis for the listening summary cloze items

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(Section 2 of the Hong Kong test) was compared with that for the 15 items that made up Section 1 of the same test, we found that the listening summary cloze, which proved an equally reliable measure, consisted of proportionately more successful items (60%) than Section 1 (27%). It is worth noting here that the larger number of items in Section 2 was a result of these proving easier to write.

### 7. Discussion

The Hong Kong study confirmed the findings of the initial piloting of the test in China, and the results have encouraged both institutions to develop the test further. In Hong Kong the test type is being extended for use with students of other faculties at the University, while in China it has been retained as part of the test battery which will be administered to all students majoring in English throughout the country.

The advantages of the listening summary cloze which have been discussed elsewhere (Lewkowitz, 1991) can be summarized as follows. The test allows for great flexibility in the choice of topic for the talk/lecture and the extent to which the topic is developed. The test can be made easier or more difficult by adjusting the length of the talk, by the selection of topic, and by the means used to develop the arguments presented, which in turn will affect the density of the propositions being discussed. If a radio broadcast is used, as was the case in the Hong Kong pilot study, the text is authentic, though most probably more difficult for the learners to understand—and take notes on—than a purpose written lecture like the ones used in China, since the test setter has no control over the density of information presented.

As implied above, this test format lends itself to a large number of items being written, thus easing pressures on moderation and also allowing for a spread of marks which is very often difficult to achieve in situations where the proficiency level of the students is similar. However, at the moderation stage it is critical that the setter and moderators take into account the possible interdependence of items and the knock-on effect this may have on other items in the summary. Furthermore, if the validity of the measure is not to be compromised,

it is important that setters take due care in ensuring that deletions are made in a way which samples a balance of both lower and higher order listening skills. After all, it must be remembered that this technique is only as good as the deletions made and if these are testing trivial items, then the test will not be a valid one.

Although the marking of the test is largely objective, the learners are not restricted to the words used in the passage: they can use their own words and can use a single word or a phrase to complete any deletion. They need their notes and therefore have a purpose for taking them and in this way the test limits the extent to which learners have to rely on memory to complete the task. Furthermore, in order to check whether the learners are really able to use their notes, the test writer can vary the order of the summary and not follow the information as given in the talk/lecturette.

This test, like any other objective test, is not easy to write. Setters have to be careful in selecting the listening text to make sure it lends itself to a good summary and that there is sufficient redundancy of information to make the task of notetaking possible. Furthermore, they have to ensure that the deletions are appropriate, neither testing general knowledge nor trivial information likely to be missed by the learners. Finally, they have to devise a system whereby the learners cannot fill in the summary completion while listening to the lecturette, otherwise the learners are likely to miss essential information. This can be achieved, for example, by withholding the summary until after the notetaking phase of the test, or preparing the answer booklet in such a way that the learners are prevented from turning to the summary while listening to the text. Whichever method is used, the setters have to ensure clear instructions are given to both the test takers and invigilators. The latter may at the same time wish to draw the learners' attention to the nature of the points to be noted while listening.

Superficially the listening summary cloze may look like a test of fill-in-the-blanks, but the fact that it is a two stage test that requires good notetaking skills and global understanding differentiates it from other

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cloze tests. It can have a positive effect on teaching in situations where the objective is to improve students notetaking and listening skills, and it has the added advantage of being a reliable testing instrument.

### 8. Conclusion

The extent to which teachers can try out new testing formats when devising tests depends largely on the nature of the test. If the test is one of major importance to the learners, such as a university entrance examination, then caution is necessary in order to ensure that decisions taken are both valid and reliable.

The quality of any test is dependent on the accuracy of the specification of what the learners need to know and this, as Alderson (1988) has pointed out, is subject to judgements made by those drawing up the specifications. Yet, even with appropriate specifications there is no guarantee that the resultant test will match the qualities of a good test. This is because of the tension that exists between validity and reliability. A test such as the listening summary cloze which is valid in terms of face and content, tests students' ability to listen to spoken discourse and take notes on it, is indirect and hence contaminated. Successful completion of the task is dependent on the students' ability to comprehend the summary utilizing their reading skills, and complete it, using their writing skills. It may therefore prove statistically less reliable than other measures—multiple choice tests, for example—even though it will have a positive washback effect on learning in situations where notetaking is a specified learning task.

Teachers therefore need to be aware of the implications of making compromises on test validity and reliability when designing tests. They also need to realise that in striving towards authenticity of task and a positive washback effect on teaching, decisions have to be taken as to the desired level of test purity. Having taken all these factors into account, they can then design tests that are the most suitable for their learners.

*My thanks go to all the member of the testing team at the Guangzhou*

*Institute of Foreign Languages in 1988/89 who helped develop the test described and made this work possible. My thanks also go to Dr. Desmond Allison and Mr. Peter Falvey for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.*

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The proficiency tests were being developed in order to ensure a minimum standard of graduates of English, initially from the Guangzhou Institute of Foreign Languages, but with the view of being used nationwide. The two tests were made up of four papers: Listening & Notetaking, Writing, Speed Reading and Usage which included grammatical accuracy questions as well as reading comprehension.

<sup>2</sup> The tests were ready for administration at the end of the 1988/89 academic year, but were not administered until the beginning of the 1989/90 academic year for political reasons. At the time the Year 3 students were entering their fourth year of study and the Year 4 students had already graduated.

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### Appendix A

#### Tapescript: The Hummingbird

In this talk I will say a little about hummingbirds, a fascinating family of birds which are found in the Americas. There are in all 319 different species of hummingbird in the world. They are characterized by the fact that they weigh so little, only about one-eighth of an ounce, about the weight of a small coin such as a dime. And as the hummingbirds weigh so little, they are, not surprisingly, also only about 2<sup>1/2</sup> inches long, while the largest of the family is only about 8 inches in length. However, they all have an exceptionally long bill or beak which the bird uses to sip nectar from flowers or to catch insects.

An extraordinary fact about the hummingbird is that their energy output is the greatest per unit of weight of any warm-blooded animal. Whereas a man weighing 170 lbs produces 3500 calories of energy per day, the hummingbird produces 155,000 calories per day, that is nearly 45 times as much. In order to fulfil this tremendous need for energy, the hummingbird must consume half its weight in sugar daily. A typical day's supply of food would come from 1000 fuchsia or hibiscus blossoms, so much of the bird's day is spent on feeding. Incidentally, hummingbirds are especially attracted to red. They will buzz at a woman's mouth if she is wearing red lipstick!

Another noticeable characteristic of the hummingbird is that they have larger flying muscles in proportion to their weight than those of any other bird. The movement of their wings is extremely fast - up to 200 beats a second during courtship, 75 beats per second during normal flights when collecting nectar or blossoms. The rapid beating of the wings creates a distinct humming sound which is why the bird is called a hummingbird.

Of the 319 species of hummingbird, most are found in South America but a dozen species live in the U.S.A. Of these 12, only one lives east of the Mississippi River and nearly half favour Southern California. The greatest traveller among these birds is the Rufous hummingbird, spelt R O U F U S, the Rufous hummingbird. It migrates at least 2000 miles from Alaska to Mexico and it is believed that this ruby-throated hummingbird flies non-stop across the Gulf of Mexico, a distance of 500 miles.

Hummingbirds, especially the males, are magnificently coloured, varying from deep metallic greens which tend to be the dominant colour, to intense reds and yellows. Their fairylike beauty is impressive especially in light of their physical capacities. They are sturdy and quick. They are also the only bird that can fly backwards as well as forwards. They average a ten-year life span. And they can live both in the heat of the Mexican desert and the cold of the Andes

Mountains.

So as you can see, it is not surprising that these birds have caught the attention of man and have been the subject of much study and concern.

Let me now summarize the main facts again. There are 319 species of hummingbird in the world and most of them live in South America but a few are to be found in North America. They are extremely small birds, ranging from 2<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> to 8 inches in length. Yet for their size they have a very long beak which they use to collect nectar and catch insects. These birds have strong flying muscles which allow them to fly long distances. And it is the humming noise they make while moving their wings that has gained them their name. Hummingbirds, especially the males, are magnificently coloured and one feature that distinguishes them from other birds is their ability to fly backwards.

### Appendix B

#### Summary Cloze Passage

Using the notes you have made during the lecture, complete the summary below. You may use either a word or phrase to fill in each of the blanks. You do not need to use the exact words that were used in the passage.

There are (1)\_\_\_\_\_ different species of hummingbird in the world of which twelve live in (2)\_\_\_\_\_. They derive their name from the sound they make by (3)\_\_\_\_\_.

These birds, despite their small size, have (4)\_\_\_\_\_ which they use for collecting nectar or (5)\_\_\_\_\_. In order to produce the energy they require, the birds spend much of their day feeding and it is not uncommon to see them (6)\_\_\_\_\_ above blossoms, especially those like the hibiscus that are (7)\_\_\_\_\_ in colour.

The hummingbirds' daily energy output is approximately 155,000 calories, which is (8)\_\_\_\_\_ than that of the average size man. To obtain this, they must consume (9)\_\_\_\_\_ their own body weight in sugar daily, that is about one-sixteenth of an ounce per day.

None of the hummingbird family is large; they range from (10)\_\_\_\_\_ to (11)\_\_\_\_\_ inches in length, yet they are well-built with (12)\_\_\_\_\_ which enable them to travel relatively long distances. The (13)\_\_\_\_\_ hummingbird, for example, migrates 2,000 miles from Alaska to Mexico crossing the (14)\_\_\_\_\_ stretch of the Gulf of Mexico nonstop.

One noticeable feature of the hummingbird is its magnificent colouring. The birds vary from (15)\_\_\_\_\_ which is the dominant colour, to (16)\_\_\_\_\_. As with other birds, the males tend to be more (17)\_\_\_\_\_ than the females. But unlike any other bird the hummingbird can (18)\_\_\_\_\_.

Two further factors worth noting are that the hummingbird has an average lifespan of ten years, and its habitat may be very diverse from (19)\_\_\_\_\_ to the cold of (20)\_\_\_\_\_.

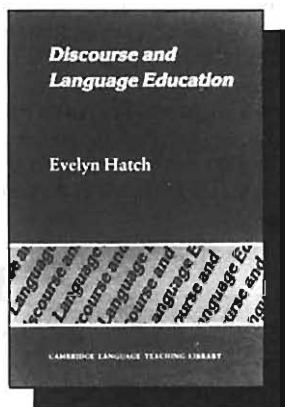


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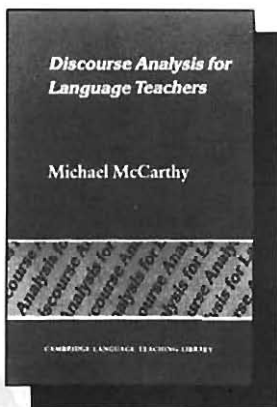


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