
Using Cloze Passages for Instructional Purposes

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Among veteran teachers of English as a second or foreign language, the cloze test is likely to be a familiar tool of the trade. Originally developed by Taylor (1953) to measure the readability of prose texts used in teaching English courses for native speakers of the language, cloze tests have since become a staple in TESL.

Taylor himself (1956) first suggested their possible use as an index of second language proficiency; in 1959, Carroll et al conducted the first TESL research involving the cloze test. Subsequently, despite an ongoing debate over the validity of the cloze procedure, cloze testing expanded at such a rate that Oller (1973), a leading figure in the development of cloze testing, commented:

Cloze tests are deceptively simple devices that have been constructed in so many ways for so many purposes that an overview of the entire scope of literature on the subject is challenging to the imagination not to mention the memory. (105)

Today, 35 years after Taylor's initial research, cloze tests are regularly used in the assessment of prose readability and second or foreign language proficiency, particularly in terms of reading and writing skills.

Definition

Oller and Inal (1971) provide a succinct

description of the cloze procedure at its simplest level: "A cloze test is constructed by systematically or randomly deleting words from a passage of prose. Examinees are requested to restore the missing items by filling in the blanks" (315). In line with this no frills approach, Aitken (1977) defines a standard cloze test as one in which every seventh word is deleted from a passage of prose approximately 375 words in length, while fifty deletions within a consistent random deletion pattern are considered the ideal number for testing purposes.

However, as Jonz (1976) indicates, cloze tests are amenable to considerable variability:

Alteration of the basic cloze procedure has continued quietly and steadily for some years now. Most alterations involve such considerations as variations of blank size, deletion pattern, deletion rationale, subject matter of the text to be used, difficulty level and source of material, as well as variation in response mode such as multiple choice. (256)

Appeal of the Cloze Procedure

Cloze tests are popular in TESL for three major reasons. The first is their relative ease of construction, which allows TESL practitioners to develop their own tests without having to confront all the

complexities and controversies of language testing, though sensitivity in test construction is still a necessity. Second, as Porter (1976) points out, cloze tests provide measurement of a wide range of relevant concerns, including reading and listening comprehension, language proficiency, knowledge of vocabulary, and the relative difficulty of passages of prose. Third, as Oller (1979) notes, cloze tests demonstrate a high degree of validity relative to other language proficiency tests in the measurement of global skills, thus providing teachers and researchers with reliable and useful data in the assessment of learners.

An Alternative View of the Cloze Procedure

For all that can be said in favor of cloze tests as tools of measurement, there is another application of the cloze procedure which, curiously, is generally unexploited in cloze and TESL methodology: the use of cloze passages as a tool of instruction rather than assessment. In this scenario, cloze passages are perceived, and quite possibly constructed, as cloze exercises designed to enhance, rather than test, learners' knowledge of and ability to manipulate the target language. In short, the cloze exercise is a teaching device.

This approach is made possible by the fact that a cloze exercise designed for instructional use taps the same skills measured by a cloze test, with the added benefit of allowing for development or practice of those skills through appropriate instructional strategies. Certain advantages inherent in the cloze procedure complement instructional requirements perfectly.

Advantages of Cloze Passages

Brown (1980), in discussing the advantages of cloze tests, states:

the ability to supply appropriate words in the blanks requires a number of abilities which lie at the very heart of competence in a language: knowledge of vocabulary, grammatical structure, discourse structure, "expectancy" grammar, and reading ability, to name some. (214)

Oller (1973, 1979) reinforces this perspective when he observes that a learner taking a cloze test must use both productive and receptive skills, test his/her grammar of expectancy, and apply his/her knowledge of linguistic and extralinguistic context. In other words, completing a cloze passage is a highly integrative activity in which the learner's various linguistic resources and capabilities must be flexed to the full in order to satisfactorily fill in the blanks. Geffen (1979) outlines the process in the following way:

Thus a cloze passage is far more than a completion exercise: it is an aspect of controlled composition (oral and written) and demands of a learner a more creative approach to language learning and language use as well as an involvement with the passage as a whole—since the missing word at one slot may be anything from an indefinite article to an abstract noun, while the choice of filler at any one slot influences and is influenced by choices at later or earlier slots. Hence, language has to be seen as an integrated whole, going beyond the sentence to a kind of discourse analysis. (123)

Instructional Use of Cloze Passages

Given the nature of the cloze task and the sophisticated degree of negotiation between learner and text it requires, the cloze procedure is ideally suited for instructional purposes in that all four language skills can be employed in the process of completing the blanks, depending on how the passage is used. In fact, few TESL instructional tools offer such an opportunity for the application of the full range of language skills. When cast in the mold of an exercise rather than a test, the cloze procedure becomes a catalyst for the integrated use of reading, writing, listening and speaking skills.

The easiest, and quite possibly the best, use of a cloze exercise is in a discussion format. For instance, students are assigned a cloze exercise to complete outside of class (allowing them to utilize their skills in a more deliberate, focused manner than the test format allows for; however, completion of the exercise in class also works well). In the next class session the passage is reviewed in depth, from one blank space to the next, with students asked to share their choices for the particular blank space being discussed.

The relative merits of the possible choices are then debated, with the teacher providing as much or as little guidance as desired or required. While in some cases the missing item will be an obvious one, especially where function words are concerned, numerous opportunities for consideration of more than one possible choice will occur, particularly for spaces requiring content words. In many cases the selection of the best among several acceptable choices will have to be made.

Discussion of the distinction—semantic and syntactic—between these items is extremely useful, and generally quite lively. This can also occur in discussion of function words in terms of explaining or reviewing the complexities of necessary grammatical considerations. Throughout this process students are, in my experience over the past several years, quite actively involved in the ongoing discussion, including the otherwise more reticent members of the class who usually are reluctant to emerge from their protective shell.

Student designed cloze exercises where the deletion pattern is not the every nth word approach normally used in cloze construction also serve instructional purposes well. Students can work in groups, for example, preparing cloze exercises which the rest of the class will later complete and discuss under the guidance of the group which constructed the passage. Asking students to discuss the answers to a cloze exercise within small groups also provides an opportunity for meaningful use of language skills.

Numerous other variations are likewise possible. Radice (1978), for example, has written of ways to use cloze passages in teaching business English (writing business letters, explaining and examining special terminology in fields such as commodities markets, banking, and so on) and has described possibilities for student participation in the review of the passages.

Benefits of Cloze Exercises

The benefits of using cloze passages for instructional purposes are neatly illustrated by Harris (1985):

By focusing their attention on a written text, cloze passages help students learn more about how language works—the interaction of vocabulary and syntax, the subtle influence of diction on style, the important grammatical relationships between words in a sentence, and the equally important logical relationships between sentences in a paragraph. (107)

The benefits described by Harris are enhanced by the use of the discussion format described earlier.

Jonz (1976) notes the potential of cloze passages as a "learner-centered teaching device" (255). Cloze exercises, with their emphasis on student participation in not only the completion but also the review of the passages, utilize this potential, and in the process serve TESL's general shift towards learner centered methodology (Stern 1983). As this occurs, particularly in the case of discussion of an exercise, students are, as noted previously, employing all four language skills. Reading and writing skills are necessary for completion of the passage; listening and speaking skills are put to use in the review of the exercise. Such an approach usually produces a spirited, stimulating classroom atmosphere which stands in delightful contrast to the dead world of drills and structured learning which Brumfit (1985:xi) calls "the trivialization of language teaching." For various reasons, students seem to revel in this kind of classroom interaction. This results in a greater degree of interest on their part, thereby enhancing their motivation to engage the target language and increasing the chances for improvement or refinement of their skills.

In keeping with this emphasis on learner centered methodology, the use of cloze exercises also helps to break down the restrictive formality of the traditional teacher student relationship. In my experience, the rigorous and open give-and-take between teacher and students during the review of the passages creates a sense of warm collegiality which is often transformed into a greater willingness on the part of students to ask questions and to engage in conversation outside the classroom. This is especially helpful for those who teach students with backgrounds in which the teacher is perceived as an authority figure who must be kept at arm's length as a show of respect and deference.

In support of the points raised in praise of cloze exercises, I might note an interesting and, I think, significant carry-over effect which has occurred on several occasions in skills courses I have taught: students moving on to literature courses I also teach have frequently asked that the use of cloze exercises in the discussion format be continued. This suggests that students both enjoy and feel they benefit from such exercises.

Conclusion

None of this is meant to suggest the elimination of the cloze procedure for testing purposes. Rather, the intention is to demonstrate the full value of the cloze procedure by describing its instructional properties, which for the most part have been bypassed in cloze-related literature, as a complement to its traditional assessment function.

Remarkably easy to construct, especially minus the pressures of testing considera-

tions, and of considerable benefit within the instructional milieu, cloze passages used as an instructional device deserve a greater standing in TESL methodology than they have hitherto been afforded.

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