

CLOZE TESTING-- AN ANSWER TO MR. AITKIN'S ARTICLE

by Roger K. Williams

See Volume 8 No.2 Winter 1975 edition, page 9; Volume 7 No.4 Summer 1974 edition, pages 7-9.

I was interested in Kenneth G. Aitken's reply to my article in the winter '75 issue. Hopefully, readers referred back to my article after reading Mr. Aitken's. If they did, they should have discovered that the ideas in each did not necessarily conflict and that each article still makes some valid points. Consider the following:

1. Mr. Aitkin stated, "Williams argues that reading and listening are decoding processes." On the contrary, I said that "reading is *primarily* the decoding of written symbols into meaning" but *also includes* encoding, as when one meets unfamiliar words and anticipates meaning from the context. One then is producing a word to fill in a blank. Just like a cloze test. So on very easy material, a cloze test parallels the reading process. On this point we agree, I think. However, my article went on to say that if the material is *difficult*, if *too many* crucial content words are omitted, then it may become impossible to fill in the blanks. Too much encoding is required. More encoding is required in that situation than is usually required in reading. Therefore, in that situation (reading difficult subject matter with too many crucial words missing) the cloze test only partially parallels the reading process. Mr. Aitken must agree with this point because he states (p.17) that one would be wise to "use an *easier reading selection* to construct the test from "rather than change from the *nth* method deletion to selective deletion. So he is for easy selections. I am for easy selections. No conflict.

2. Mr. Aitken has said he's for the any-acceptable-word method of scoring cloze tests. So am I. But he did not reply to the problem I raised of where to draw the

line of acceptability. Are choices acceptable only because natives would have made them? Natives wouldn't have made the errors I cited on page 7. They are unacceptable grammatically but might be acceptable semantically. The student apparently understood the passage. Should we give him credit or not? It's a problem we both face in our cloze tests and should not be ignored.

3. Mr. Aitken may have a point that the Carroll study was hasty and inexact. My experience has been that some students, good students, often panic on a cloze test, especially one of average difficulty, and leave a lot of blanks or fill in any word whether it makes sense or not. Many students, used to other types of tests, have balked at cloze tests. Results, in these situations, are not too reliable. A way to overcome this problem is to give the group very easy passages at which all or most of them can be very successful. Then gradually increase the difficulty of the tests so that you finally arrive at a test which discriminates the better from the poorer readers. I have also found in my experience that college students (who perhaps have more motivation) have more reliable scores than high school students--although this is simply an impression, not a scientific study. So, in short, the "special talent at cloze tests" might be in part overcome through more adequate preparation of the students for this type of test.

4. In answer to my point that natives should make high or perfect scores on cloze tests designed for non-natives, Mr. Aitken states, "It seems that this would be more of a language proficiency test than a reading test. This is an attractive possibility, but is this what Williams wants to use cloze tests for?" Answer: Yes. Reading is one component of language; most proficiency tests have listening, speaking, reading, and writing sections. Cloze tests could also be used as prognostic, progress, and achieve-

ment tests, but I have used them as a measure of reading proficiency. Perhaps I should have stressed I was referring to *intermediate to beginning* non-natives, not to those whose English is on the advanced or native levels. Obviously, if an ESL student has native fluency in English, his cloze test will be the same test that his native counterpart would have and both could get less than high scores reflecting their reading ability. --Actually this test would not reflect so much *basic* reading ability as experience with topics, ability to gain inferences, analytical skills, evaluation, etc. For beginning to intermediate students, however, it still seems that as a test of *basic reading skill*, a cloze test should do very well (if they are literate.) True, reading is a composite of many skills, but central to these is the ability to derive meaning (the author's intended meaning) from simple, unsophisticated, non-culturally bound, nontechnical prose on one's language level and within one's sphere of

experience. I might add that the native-as-perfect-or-high-scorer seems to be the standard in most ESL listening, speaking, grammar, and writing proficiency tests for beginning to intermediate ESL students. Why should it be unreasonable to expect the same in reading tests?

5. Finally, Mr. Aitken seems to believe that the *n*th word deletion is a more sound and practical method than choosing which words to delete. It's certainly easier. And with good, easy passages some good tests could be made using the *n*th deletion method. I have seen and have made some. But why should this exclude any other approach? It seems to me that a teacher may occasionally wish to test the structural aspect of reading and may wish to choose structural words for deletion. Though the *n*th method can be good and satisfactory, what is wrong with accepting it *and* experimenting with other methods as well?