Full Length Review Article

STANDARD CLOZE: TESTING RECEPTIVE AND PRODUCTIVE SKILLS OF LANGUAGE LEARNERS IN CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

Testing has always remained at the core of the language learning because it helps decide the level of the learners. Language Testing has witnessed very significant developments in recent years. This has, in turn, led to a major reconsideration of the way language tests are designed, written, analyzed, administered, scored, and used. World testing bodies, therefore, constantly strive to keep up with such developments so that they can offer more reliable and effective examinations. Wilson Taylor's cloze test is one such work on the testing of reading ability of the target group. The following paper is the upshot of a standard cloze test given to a heterogonous group as a reading comprehension exercise.

INTRODUCTION

Testing always plays a major role in language teaching and learning. Well-made tests can help language learners in several ways. First of all, they can help students master the language. Every test result shows the level of proficiency reached. Students are helped when they study for tests and again when the test performances are marked, returned and discussed. Good language tests can foster learning. They help students learn the language by requiring them to study hard, emphasizing course objectives, and showing them the areas where they need to improve. In addition to this, nifty tests can generate positive attitudes towards the class. Tests of proper quality can give students a sense of achievement and a feeling of satisfaction. However, the methods of testing have always been a controversial area in the field of reading. The controversy has mainly centered round the difficulties and uncertainties of linguistic expression. Tests in schools and colleges have been branded as subjective and therefore, deceptive and unreliable. Unlike other languages, English in India is taught for various purposes: as a library language, as ESP, as ESL, or as EFL and so on. Second language is always learnt as compared to the mother tongue, which is acquired.

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To learn a language, one has to master the conventions centering around grammar and as a result grammar has always remained at the core of English teaching and learning. In such a scenario, it is perceptible that a contextualized test would help the testee and the teacher to learn whether the student can use structural and lexical knowledge of language correctly or not and to see if the students really understand what they read.

Cloze Test: A Succinct Introduction

As a part of the concept of contextualised text, cloze tests were introduced by Wilson Taylor in 1953 as the objective means of assessing both readability and reading ability. A test taker, taking a cloze test, is expected to fill in the gaps that have been left out of a text in order to demonstrate his/her understanding. The greatest potential of this test lies in its use for measuring reading comprehension as an ongoing process, based on the test taker's knowledge of language at that given point of time. This test would not only check the structural knowledge but also lexical knowledge. Today there are different forms of cloze test available to us that have proved to be of great help. One of them is Fixed-rate Deletion which was administered and analysed by Brown, 1980; Bachman, 1985; Hadley, G. and Naaykens, 1987. This fixed rate deletion is also known as Standard Cloze. In the fixed-rate deletion, every *nth* word is deleted after one or two sentences. Words are deleted systematically by counting off, regardless of the part of speech. N is a number between 5 and 10. Usually every fifth

or seventh word is deleted, but Brown (1983) suggested that longer texts with every eleventh or fifteenth word deleted could be used with subjects who have lower levels of language proficiency. The opening paragraph of the story "The Selfish Giant", in the form of a standard cloze test, was given to students to test their reading ability. During the assessment, it was discovered that this type of exercise tests much more than merely comprehension power. Given below is the paragraph used for the exercise. First two sentences of the paragraph are left intact. From the third sentence, one word is deleted and thereafter every seventh word is deleted to form the passage.

Format given to the student

Fill in the blanks with the most appropriate possible word. You are allowed to use only one word to fill in each blank

It was a lovely garden, with soft green grass. Here and there over the grass were flowers like stars. There were about twelve peach

(1)_____that were covered in pink flowers
(2)_____spring season, in autumn they had
(3)_____fruits. The birds sang sweetly on
(4)_____trees, and all the children used
(5)_____stop their games so that they
(6)_____listen to them. 'How happy we
(7)_____!' they cried to each other. One
(8)_____the Giant came back. He had
(9)_____to visit another giant in Cornwall,
(10)_____had stayed with him for seven
(11)_____. When he arrived he saw all
(12)_____children playing in the garden.

Evaluating Cloze Test

There have been traditionally two distinct methods for evaluating cloze tests. In other words, there are two possible ways to score cloze tests.

Exact Word scoring

The Semantically Accepted scoring method

Exact Word scoring

In this method, credit is given only for the exact word from the story. It is called the exact word method. Though, the exact word is easier to score, in this case, the taste takers, to offer them a greater chance of completing the cloze more successfully, were permitted to use any acceptable word. The reason behind this is that the exact scoring method, as the research proves, makes cloze test difficult even for the adult native speaker. The taste taker may well understand the passage but he or she may not be able to offer the same word as offered by the author. It is very much likely that even the author might choose a different word if he or she were to compose the passage again.

The Semantically Accepted scoring method

SEMAC or semantically accepted scoring method is also known as the acceptable word method. SEMAC allows full

credit for equivalent words as well, namely, the acceptable word, ie, any word that is grammatically, semantically and stylistically suitable. SEMAC method of scoring is also one of the methods of testing the productive skill of a testee. Language is known for its dynamism and the same can be spotted in case of cloze test as well. Moreover, one cannot expect a person to think in the same way as the other does as each individual has his own ideas, feelings, and attitude. Thus, the use of language is bound to differ from person to person.

Keys to the words deleted

No of Blank	Answers	Acceptable Answers*	Grammatical Component
1.	trees	-	Noun
2.	in	-	Preposition
3.	rich	tasty, big, sweet	Adjective
4.	the	-	Article
5.	to	-	Infinitive
6.	could	-	Auxiliary
7.	are	-	Form of to be
8.	day	-	Noun
9.	been	gone	Verb
10.	and	-	Conjunction
11.	years	days, weeks, months	Noun
12.	the	-	Article

Analysis and Interpretations of certain conspicuous responses

A glance, at the keys provided, indicates that the deleted words include both, lexical and structural items. In case of structural words, in the test given, generally, there will be only one acceptable answer with always the possibility, as already indicated, of exceptions. However, it should not alter the meaning of the sentence. In case of lexical cloze, one can follow SEMAC method of evaluation, as it is done in this case. What follows are very conspicuous observations which proves that standard cloze can be an effective aid in testing receptive and productive skills of the target language in context. eg. In blank 3, article 'the' was inserted in place of adjective 'rich'. Not many could offer the answer 'rich' instead 'sweet' and 'tasty' were thought of as answers by the testees. Blank 5 has the auxiliary 'to' as the answer and the same was easier for the taste-taker as it was a part of the auxiliary 'used to'. In place of 'could', the correct answer for blank 6, some of the taste takers thought 'can' as the answer bringing surface the fact that they found it tough to use correct auxiliary in context. In case of blanks 9, the students, apart from the exact answer 'been', provided answers like 'gone', 'went' or 'going', from which only 'gone' is acceptable. The incorrect answers also can reveal many things including a taste taker's ability to use the language in context. In the gap 10, very few have been able to provide the correct answer 'and'. It seems that either in a hurry to complete the passage or may be due to lack of the habit to look at the punctuation mark or for that matter ignorance of the same many respondents overlooked comma and gave the incorrect answer 'He'. They considered comma as a full stop so 'He' was the answer. They would have been right had there been a full stop and not a comma. However, interestingly whether it was a comma or a full stop they comprehended the thing correctly. This proves that a student may have receptive skill but lack the productive skill. Punctuation mark can prove a chance factor in the sense that

sometimes ignorance of punctuation does not hinder comprehension process it is only an impediment on the way of productive skill. The correct answer in blank 11 is 'years'. Since there is no context to this answer it is natural for the testees to give varied responses like 'days', 'months', 'weeks' and 'years'. This can be given correct as all other answers already mentioned showing different time spans would not make much difference either in understanding the story or its content. Moreover, to think of 'years' as the gap-filler is quite unlikely, for when you visit somebody, you may stay with him/her for some days or weeks rather than years. Thus, there is sense in the logic of the students. Probably this is the benefit of adopting SEMAC method, which not only welcomes creativity but also allows the respondents to apply their own logic.

Benefits of using Cloze Test

- Since a cloze test has deletions made at random, these deletions would not only include lexical but also structural items.
- Cloze test integrates grammar and comprehension into itself. It can measure the reading ability of a student. A student taking a cloze test needs to go through the entire passage with deletions that may belong to either lexical or structural items. Consequently, it ends up assessing not only the reading ability of the testee but also his/her mastery of grammar.
- Evaluation through a cloze test is an on-going process.

Step suggested to control some undesirable variables

It should be made sure that the topics of the tests are familiar to all the informants, i.e. the content is part of the testees' knowledge of the world. This can avoid a situation where in the testees make mistakes not because they do not know how to read, but because they do not know enough about the subject.

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