

THE USE OF THE CLOZE TEST  
IN THE EFL CLASSROOM (1)

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It should be a great help for an EFL teacher to have a valid, adequate tool which grasps the overall English competence of his students. It is particularly so when the students are at post secondary level, i.e., at junior college. Students at this level, not being sheer beginners of English, should be more involved in classroom tasks which require them to integrate their linguistic skills and grammatical knowledge of English they have acquired up to that point. What is needed in this situation is, therefore, a kind of device which measures the total competence in the language, namely, in conventional terminology, a 'proficiency' test.

On language proficiency, paraphrasing the definition of Spolsky (1968), it is the facility with which one can cope with the communication needs in a given situation. In other words, language proficiency is something that is more than mastery of a specific number of linguistic facts and mechanical manipulation of structural units. Simply added-up sum of separate skills and linguistic elements of a language is not equated with global competence in the language.

Oller (1976) claims that in order to assess language proficiency, or 'internalized grammar' in his terminology, one needs a particular kind of device which taps and elicits this global language competence--integrated-skill testing. This integrated-skill testing is different from discrete-point testing in the respect that, while the latter is designated with the aim of measuring one individual and specific structure point or one

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particular skill separately at a time using one test item, the former measures a learner's linguistic ability as a whole. To succeed in this type of testing implies that one has a 'predictive ability' which entails one's full knowledge of the system of a language as one united whole and one's knowledge of how this system functions conjointly.

The cloze test is one kind of integrated-skill testing. It adopts the form of fill-in-the-blank style; it is constructed by deleting words at certain intervals from a prose passage. Testees are asked to supply the missing items by reference to the surrounding context.

Behind the construction of cloze tests, there is the fact that language is by nature redundant and the idea that we use language creatively. With regard to language redundancy, there are quite a few functional overlaps of phonological, morphological, and syntactical devices. Adding to these, people often repeat and paraphrase what they have said or written. This is why two can still get through to each other, for instance, in a noisy place where speech sound is impaired partially. Taking up another example of the relation of redundancy to language performance, it is quite common for people to read a light novel for pleasure, skipping here and there without failing to follow a story line. In order to make up for such information gaps, human beings utilize linguistic clues as well as those taken from the context as much as possible, referring back to their overall language competence and their whole knowledge of the world as well.

Regarding this kind of gap-filling mechanism in relation to language redundancy, Goodman (1971:136) describes his hypothetical process of reading performance as follows:

...the efficient language user takes the most direct routes and touches the fewest bases necessary to get to his goal. He accomplishes this by sampling, relying on redundancy of language and his knowledge of linguistic constraints. He predicts structures, tests them against the semantic context which he

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builds up from the situation and the ongoing discourse and then confirms or disconfirms as he processes further language.

Although this is a hypothesis on one's reading process, it could also be applied to mental process of language usage in general. Oller (1973:105-118) states that the same cyclical process is assumed to take place in productive performance of language.

Thus, the exploitation of this natural redundancy of language actively involves a language user's global language ability. The cloze test is the very technique which controls the degree of redundancy by creating an artificially impaired language situation, so as to affect the operational extent of one's total linguistic ability.

Although some results (Aldersen 1979, for example) seem to point toward the cautious use of the cloze test, there is a general consensus from a substantial amount of testing research results that this test functions as a valid and reliable foreign language proficiency test, and also that they have a high correlation with other language proficiency tests (Aitken 1977; Brière, et al. 1978; Caulfield and Smith 1981; Oller 1973; Stubb and Tucker 1974; Valette 1977).

Another aspect which brings considerable interest to the use of the cloze test in foreign language teaching is its high usability--one important trait of a good test. Cloze tests are quite simple and economical in terms of construction, administration, and scoring in the classroom. Thus, the cloze test positively merits being employed by EFL teachers as a useful evaluative device of English language proficiency.

On adopting the cloze test, there are several important variables to be considered for their influence on the validity of using the test as a proficiency measure. These include: random versus rational deletion of words, and exact-word versus acceptable-word scoring methods, for instance. Besides these, however, the type of passage selected is just as important, perhaps more so, than these factors. A selection of a cloze passage is now to be considered (to be continued).

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