

The Cloze Procedure as a Teaching Technique to Improve Reading Comprehension

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Although a number of articles that discuss some aspect of cloze testing have appeared in the Forum during the past dozen or so years, a perusal of those issues shows that, as Mr. Bastidas mentioned in his letter to us, we have never presented an article on the cloze procedure itself. We hope, therefore, that the information in this article will be of interest to a number of our readers.

—ED.

Many native speakers of English, and especially typesetters and editors, are surprised at the spelling of the word *cloze*. According to Oller (1979), the spelling is a corruption of *close* as in *close the door*. *Cloze* is a term "gestalt psychology applies to the human tendency to complete a familiar but not quite finished pattern—to "see" a broken circle as a whole one, for example, by mentally closing the gaps. . . . The same principle applies to language" (Taylor 1953).

The Cloze Procedure is a process of systematically deleting words from a passage and replacing them with blanks to be filled by the student. It has been used as a testing technique since its inception (Taylor 1953). Originally concerned with English as a mother tongue, it soon came to be employed as a measuring technique in foreign-language learning (Anderson 1971, 1972; Levine 1971; Oller et al. 1972; Oller and Conrad 1971; Spolsky 1969). It has been most effectively used in testing reading comprehension.

The cloze procedure and the psycholinguistic principles of reading

Goodman (1967) refers to reading as a "psycholinguistic guessing game." The reader is always making guesses, which may be correct or incorrect; the efficient reader is the one who, with some consistency, guesses correctly. In using the Cloze Procedure as a teaching technique, we are training our students to guess. They are encouraged to take risks, to take a chance, and this means that sometimes the guesses will be wrong. As Smith (1978) says, "Reading can be a risky business." But one often gets useful information when errors appear, and they may provide a good opportunity to learn.

Prediction

Another important concept relating to guessing is *prediction*. When we read, we make predictions about meanings to come. These predictions are essential for comprehension, since they make possible "prior elimination of unlikely alternatives" (Smith 1978). The Cloze Procedure encourages the learner to make predictions. The systematic blanks provided in a cloze passage require the student to ask specific questions about

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the words that might fill the blanks. In order to answer those questions and supply the missing words, the student must sample the graphic display, make educated guesses (predictions), and test and confirm hypotheses. This process constitutes the act of reconstructing the writer's message (Goodman 1971).

One way to succeed in reconstructing the writer's message is to take advantage of the redundancy of language—that is, the provision of information by more than one source. This redundancy is realized through various types of contexts, i.e., repetitions, synonyms, antonyms, metaphors, examples, definitions, details, comparisons, facts, interpretations, etc. These contexts make available to the reader alternative sources for the meaning of an unfamiliar word. In the process of completing a passage with systematic deletions, the reader is trained to use all his background knowledge as well as the redundancy of language, which helps him eliminate "unlikely alternatives" and fill in the blanks with the appropriate words. As Smith points out, comprehension of the whole can contribute to comprehension of the parts, and unfamiliar words are often deciphered and even learned in this context.

When using the Cloze Procedure, the student is guided to see the passage as a whole and to refer back or ahead into the text in order to find a clue to meaning. The same process occurs in reading, since when we read, our eyes move in saccades (small, jerky movements) which progress in a forward direction and, when necessary, in regressions in order to get the visual information that goes to the brain.

Using nonvisual information

In addition, and most importantly, the reader must have a knowledge of the language (semantic, syntactic, and graphonemic systems), a knowledge of the story or topic being read, and an understanding of what has happened previously in the story (Goodman 1973). These previously stated factors, plus the knowledge of how to read, are termed by Smith (1978) *the nonvisual information*, which is essential in order to reduce uncertainty in advance and to make decisions with less visual information. In filling the blanks in a Cloze Procedure, the student will be more successful if he has this nonvisual information available. EFL/ESL teachers must encourage their students to do more extensive reading at home, both in their native language and in English, since this will increase their general knowledge, an indispensable factor in becoming a better reader.

In the classroom, the teacher can sequence the cloze passages in such a way that they become progressively more difficult and are based on previously studied passages. This permits the students to make use of prior knowledge in every new cloze exercise. Another important point to emphasize is that the Cloze Procedure may be manipulated in order to reveal a reader's use of se-

mantic, syntactic, and graphonemic cueing systems (Cambourne 1977).

Developing meaning identification

The Cloze Procedure can be used effectively to develop letter identification, word identification, and meaning identification. Since the purpose here is to demonstrate its use in developing reading comprehension in an advanced EFL/ESL class, we will emphasize meaning identification. When working with a cloze passage containing systematic deletions—deletions occurring every fifth, sixth, seventh, . . . or tenth word, the students are being trained to predict the meaning of a phrase in order to identify the missing word or words in the phrase. This meaning identification is immediate in the sense that it does not require individual word and letter identification. The student is working with the contextual cues, which according to Bortnick and Lopardo (1974) are "a powerful word-recognition strategy and basic to the extension of a meaningful vocabulary."

In using the Cloze Procedure, one can see that reading is not a passive activity, but a very active one, in which the student must make a number of predictions or ask specific questions for each deletion. Every time he answers these questions correctly, the process of successful comprehension is taking place.

USING THE CLOZE PROCEDURE TO IMPROVE READING COMPREHENSION IN AN ADVANCED EFL/ESL CLASS

In the previous section, it was shown that the Cloze Procedure is congruent with many important principles of the psycholinguistic approach to reading, which gives it a prominent place among techniques used to increase reading comprehension.

Some ESL/EFL standardized proficiency tests, especially in Great Britain, are already using the cloze test as part of the reading-comprehension section. This means that the cloze technique should become an essential ingredient of our methodology for teaching English; our students should always practice something before being tested on it. If this is not done, they will do poorly when they face proficiency tests that include the cloze variety.

The Cloze Procedure as a teaching technique has been used since about 1970, and since then many studies have demonstrated its effectiveness. Richardson (1980), for example, concludes:

The cloze procedure provides both the teacher and the pupil with a new and stimulating way to acquire and apply skills. The myriad uses of the cloze procedure coupled with the simplicity of construction makes it a very useful tool for each classroom.

I hope that from this brief analysis of the use of the Cloze Procedure in the classroom, the EFL/ESL teacher will be motivated to include it in his teaching. At this

point, I will provide some important suggestions on selecting materials and constructing a modified cloze procedure (MCP), and will give a sample lesson plan using the Cloze Procedure.

Selecting materials

Cloze Procedure passages can be taken from a variety of sources. The selection depends on the objectives you have stated in advance. Following are some useful suggestions made by Richardson (1980):

1. Choose the passages that have a high interest level and are at the reading level of your students.
2. Select interesting stories.
3. Prepare your own materials. They are excellent resources. Write them with specific purposes and students in mind.
4. Use the students' written compositions from the previous courses. They are generally written with an unsophisticated vocabulary, simple structures, and concrete meaning.
5. Prepare word cards to complete the meaning of a short sentence or paragraph.
6. Transfer the passage to a transparency for use with an overhead projector (if available). Once the transparency has been prepared, select words and mark off with masking tape.
7. Select familiar rhymes, jingles, and short stories.

The following are some good additional suggestions:

1. Adapt your materials to the level of difficulty. You can begin by using short sentences, then long sentences; next, paragraphs, and finally, passages or texts.
2. Choose popular songs, comic strips, jokes, sayings, interesting dramas, and poems. However, you must be very careful in selecting such materials, since they contain special language—that of literature, for example.
3. Select passages with pictures at the top, or match pictures and passages, to help the students understand the passages.

Constructing modified cloze procedures

When you construct your materials, do not forget to adapt them for your specific students, purposes, content areas, vocabulary, or concepts; and carefully sequence them according to difficulty and length. The following are good suggestions for constructing different MCPs (Richardson 1980). They are ranked in order of difficulty.

1. Using a sentence as a resource for the modified cloze passage, and taking into account the context clue:
 - a. Delete systematically every nth word, but leave either the consonants or the vowels.
 - b. Delete systematically every nth word, but leave the initial and final letters.

c. Delete every nth word, but leave either the initial letter or the final letter of each word.

d. Delete every nth word, and provide three or four choices.

e. Delete systematically one, two, or three words if the sentence is long.

All these procedures can be modified again, in order to make the exercise easier, if you use different underlinings, as follows:

- *incomplete underlining* (using dashes for each letter):

-----, u -----,
----- s, u ----- s,
u _ e _ _ a _ _ , _ n d _ r s t _ n d s,
for the word *understands*, as an example.

- *complete underlining*: _____, u _____,
_____ s, u e a _____, etc.

2. Using a long passage, and keeping the context, semantics, and syntax in mind:

a. Delete every nth word systematically, and provide three or four choices for each blank. (Adapted from Porter 1976.)

b. Delete every nth word systematically, but leave some letters (apply the procedure used for sentences above and you will have another MCP). (Adapted from Richardson 1980.)

c. Delete every nth word systematically (Richardson 1980).

The following additional modifications can also be used:

a. Systematically delete the words, and put them randomly at the bottom, top, or sides of the passage.

b. Systematically delete nth words, and put these and other words (distractors) in the positions stated above.

c. Systematically delete nth words, and provide a picture closely related to the content of the passage.

d. Delete the words, and write them on word cards to be used individually or in groups during the class.

If you use one of the two types of underlinings mentioned above, you will have still other modifications. Notice that all the suggestions have emphasized the use of systematic deletion in order to retain one of the purposes of the Cloze Procedure: "to test a variety of language items." This also helps to "enhance the pupils' ability to comprehend details or relationships" (Richardson 1980).

In order to emphasize content words (nouns, adjectives, adverbs, verbs) or function words (prepositions, articles, pronouns) and thereby enhance the pupils' ability to understand the main idea or factual information (Richardson 1980), you can also use the gamut of MCPs listed above.

3. Precede the passage with brief, clear directions on how to fill in the blanks.

A sample lesson plan using the cloze procedure

The Cloze Procedure can be presented to students in many different ways, depending on the objectives, level, students' age, size of group, etc. The purpose of this section is to share with the reader a procedure for presenting the cloze technique with systematic nth deletions in an advanced EFL/ESL class. First, the teacher must carefully analyze the cloze passage and predict the possible words for each blank. The basis for prediction is his ability to recognize syntactic and semantic clues for the cloze replacements. In addition, the teacher should look for a better way to guide the students to find the missing words (Jongsma 1980).

Now let's state the procedure:

1. The teacher begins the class by stating the purpose of the activity and announcing the title of the passage. Before distributing the cloze passage, he asks questions about the title. In this way, the students begin to build up some predictions.

2. If the students are not familiar with the Cloze Procedure, the teacher should devote some time to explaining its purpose and how to guess the missing words with the help of the context. The teacher should emphasize that they must not be afraid to take risks and that wrong guesses frequently lead to learning.

3. Then the teacher hands out the cloze passages and tells the students to read quickly and silently the first and last sentences, which do not have any deletions. Again, questions are asked in order to enhance the number of predictions about the passage, and to help the reader discover the main idea of the passage.

4. The teacher now reads the passage aloud, trying to maintain a correct intonation and making the necessary pauses. This will give the students some cues for understanding. During the reading, the teacher can say the missing words mentally in order not to lose the intonation and rhythm, or he can say aloud the word "blank" at the deletions, as Neuwirth (1980) suggests. Meanwhile, the students are silently reading the cloze passage along with the teacher.

5. The teacher tells the students to read the first paragraph again, silently. Afterward, the teacher directs a discussion, with the whole group participating. The teacher reminds the students to look at the ideas that precede and follow the missing words, as well as those that may appear at the beginning, middle, or end of the paragraph. Then the teacher asks them to say aloud possible words for each deletion. The teacher writes these words near the corresponding space on his copy of the passage. He should encourage the students to say the words without any fear of being wrong; however, he

should ask them to justify their choices. This is an important aspect of the instruction, as it involves an analysis of the structure of the language and helps the teacher gather information about the students' needs (Bortnick and Lopardo 1973).

6. The teacher gives some clues to help the students find the correct, or acceptable, words. Here, the teacher has an excellent opportunity to provide information about syntactic and semantic clues (knowledge of how the language works) that will help the students discover the missing words.

7. If, after doing the previous step, there are still some doubtful choices, the teacher can give the first letter of the correct word (Neuwirth 1980).

8. After the class has finished the first paragraph, the teacher asks one student to read it aloud to see whether it makes sense.

9. The teacher shows the class the original paragraph, using an overhead projector (if available), and tells the students to compare it with the one they have just completed. This will give them a sense of achievement in reconstructing the writer's message.

10. In order to provide variety, the teacher divides the class into small groups (three or four students each), and tells them to read the next paragraph and to suggest possible words for each blank. The teacher should emphasize that they must work cooperatively in each group and let all the group members give their answers. But, he must also encourage them to give reasons for their choices. If the teacher finds that some groups are having difficulty with the exercise, he can give them some extra handouts containing the initial letters of the missing words. (These, of course, must be prepared before class.) Or, in place of this, the teacher may dictate these initials and have the students write them on their copies of the passage. In this way, the teacher can prevent frustration and boredom from coming into the activity (Johns 1977).

11. While the students are working in groups, the teacher should interact with each group and work as a facilitator.

12. Then the teacher can ask each group to report their findings, along with reasons. The teacher must be ready to clarify any doubts.

13. Finally, the teacher can again show the class the original passage and compare it with the students' answers.

If the teacher wishes, he can select a short cloze passage to give at the end of the lesson as a homework assignment. But he must be careful not to overuse the Cloze Procedure; it should be utilized judiciously and in combination with other methods (Jongsma 1980) to develop reading comprehension.

SUMMARY

The psycholinguistic principles of reading have contributed to an understanding of the reading process; they do not constitute a "psycholinguistic method" for the teaching of reading (Clarke and Silberstein 1977). However, ESL/EFL teachers can take advantage of these principles and draw inferences that are very important in the preparation and application of materials. The Cloze Procedure appears to be a good example of a technique that can effectively contribute to the realization of the psycholinguistic principles of reading in an advanced EFL/ESL class.

It is advisable to use the Cloze Procedure to increase reading comprehension in an EFL/ESL class, since its use as a testing technique for proficiency in English is becoming popular.

Sequencing materials according to difficulty, length, or purpose provides better results than undifferentiated exercises.

Materials prepared for this technique draw on the language itself, and it deals not with isolated language structures but always with structures in meaningful contexts.

The Cloze Procedure itself cannot do all the work. It requires active participation on the part of both the teacher as a facilitator and the student as a learner, especially since the success of the latter depends in part on how much nonvisual information he has stored in his brain.

The Cloze Procedure must be viewed as a supplement to other techniques for improving reading comprehension, and it must not be overused, since this will lead to frustration and boredom on the part of the students (Jongsma 1980).

The flexibility of the Cloze Procedure as a teaching technique for reading comprehension in the EFL classroom affords an excellent challenge for both teachers and students. It enhances the teacher's ability to make up Cloze Procedure tests, and provides the student with familiarity and confidence in taking them.

It is hoped that future research and application will combine a theoretical basis with practical studies in the EFL/ESL classroom in order to make the Cloze Procedure a powerful testing and teaching technique for reading comprehension. In this way, the usefulness and attractiveness of the Cloze Procedure as both a teaching and testing technique will be strengthened, so that it will become an effective tool in the teacher's methodology.

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