

## *Implications of a Cloze Response Analysis for Instruction in EFL Classroom*

Saisawath Ketchart

English Department

Nakornratchaseema Teachers' College, Thailand

### **Introduction**

In recent years, a change in the study of language and language teaching and learning has been directed from a formal to a functional approach. The signs of this change can be seen in some current issues in language teaching or linguistics such as Communicative Competence; new language teaching methods like the Silent Way, Individualized Instruction, English for Special Purposes, Interlanguage and Error Analysis.

In foreign language teaching and learning, the major aim is to develop the learner's competence to communicate creatively and purposefully through the target language. The teaching and learning focus on meaningful language usage for the purpose of communication, stressing the importance of the content of the message which an individual wants to convey. DeCamp (1977) points out that the new approaches are functional and stress communicative competence.

*The student is required to communicate real information and to understand what his teacher and his fellow students are saying. The ability to understand the meaning of a question and to communicate a meaningful response takes priority over acquisition of perfect pronunciation and grammar.... The teacher's job is to push the student, to feed in new vocabulary and sentence structures, to create meaningful situations which require the student to talk and listen, and to make the student feel that he is really using the language, not just practicing to use it. Even in courses for adults, games and situation modules are rapidly replacing formal drill.*

Concomitant with this change, research in language teaching has shifted to focus on the learner and his process in acquiring the second language (see, for example, a book entitled *Focus on the Learner : Pragmatic Perspectives for the Language Teacher*, edited by John W. Oller, Jr. and Jack C. Richards, 1973)\*

Prominent among the many diverse areas being investigated in search of second language acquisition are two relevant fields namely error analysis and proficiency tests of which one is 'the cloze test.'

### **The Analysis of Error**

Emerging as a result of controversy over contrastive analysis, error analysis has become a significant field in the area of second language acquisition involving the learner's unacceptable utterances. Richards (1973) characterizes the field as

*"dealing with the difference between the way people learning a language speak, and the way adult native speakers of the language use the language."*

To an error analyst, an error represents a systematic deviance from the native speaker's competence. Corder (1973) points out that errors are indicators of the imperfect knowledge of the target language or indicators of the knowledge to date of the target language possessed by the learner.

Schachter and Celce-Murcia (1977) state that error analysis proponents hold that

*....a careful study of a large corpus of errors committed by speakers of the source language attempting to express themselves in the target language provides factual empirical data--rather than theoretical speculation--for developing a syllabus or a model of second language acquisition. (Schachter and Celce-Murcia, 1977, P. 441)*

### **The Cloze Testing Procedure**

Developed in 1953 by Wilson Taylor, the cloze procedure was initially used as a measure of the readability of prose passages for native English speakers. Typically, cloze tests are constructed by deleting every nth word (every fifth, every seventh, etc.) from passage and substituting a standard-sized blank. Subjects are required to fill in the blanks with words which satisfy the syntactic and semantic constraints of the context. They must use context clues and must pay attention to the remaining words in the passage in order to replace the deleted words.

The cloze procedure became prominent during the reign of the cognitive-code learning theory because its overall meaning emphasis concurs with the basic tenets of the cognitive learning theory. In contrast to the audio-lingual learning theory which emphasizes the basic task of establishing automatic nonthoughtful responses to language stimuli in pattern drills, the cognitive learning theory emphasizes

understanding, meaningful practice and expression of meaning. In doing the cloze task, the students must read the entire paragraph or passage in order to get some idea of the total meaning.

Within the past decade the cloze procedure has become a possible measure of second language proficiency test with promising results. It has been used to elicit second language research data and to improve students' use of context in vocabulary and structure work. Cloze tests appear to be valid, reliable language proficiency tests that can easily be constructed and used by any ESL/EFL teachers (Oller, 1973; Stubbs and Tucker; 1974; Aitkin, 1977). Recently, Hinofotis (1976) has validated the cloze test as a measure of overall language proficiency of non-native speakers.

Oller (1975) points out that with respect to learner characteristics, the cloze technique is applicable to the study of so-called errors or interlanguage phenomena.

#### **Justification**

The writer of this study used the cloze procedure as a device in obtaining data for the analysis on the justification that in making word predictions in performing cloze tests, the subject depends upon prior experience, knowledge of the world, knowledge of the language,.... i.e., linguistic (syntactic and semantic) cues, word usage, contextual meaning and general meaning of the reading cloze passage. He has to search for the appropriate word that fits the context syntactically and semantically.

The nature of the cloze task concurs with the characteristics of the psycholinguistic view of the reading process proposed by Goodman (1967) and Smith (1971). Goodman (1967) call reading "a psycholinguistic guessing game" whereby the reader uses simultaneously the three information cues, i.e., graphophonic, syntactic and semantic cues to anticipate the words. In performing the cloze task, the subject has also to guess the deleted words reasonably, knowledgeably and intellectually in order to predict the deleted word as closely to the original word as possible. For this reason, the writer has conducted this study with expectation that the analysis of the subjects' cloze responses will reveal the types of errors made by Thai students which will serve as an excellent source of information concerning the learner's strengths and weaknesses in English usage. The analysis of errors with the diagnostic purpose in mind will be of value in improving the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language.

#### **Implications for Instruction in EFL Classroom**

The detailed analysis of cloze responses can be of great use to the teacher because of the specific and general insights it provides about the learner's strengths

and weaknesses, for example, the information on the relative difficulty poses by the various parts of speech to students tested. Their unacceptable responses revealed their control and use of the reading process. The use of error analysis of cloze test performance can identify syntactic and semantic problems the student has at present. This type of information will be useful to teachers and consultants in their planning and development activities to the language curriculum. The analysis also has value in second/foreign language teaching, primarily as a reading diagnostic tool. The information can be used by the teacher in preparation of materials or activities designed to solve problems students are having. For example, a student whose responses are grammatically acceptable but nonsensical needs to be encouraged to attend to meaning. A student whose answers show good comprehension but poor control of syntax could be provided with supplementary grammar work.

In order to take advantage of the information provided by a detailed analysis of response patterns, the teacher should relate test results to classroom activities. In other words, the teacher must be able to use test results as a source of information for diagnoses as well as in making decisions about classroom techniques and strategies.

### **Diagnoses**

Teachers can obtain diagnostic information from students' responses on a cloze passage by examining the patterns of incorrect responses to figure out the kinds of errors. Errors should be checked for logical, syntactic and semantic consistency. If the student has made bad guesses which result in nonsensical responses, the teacher should find out the causes. For example, perhaps he lacks sufficient awareness of the relationships between the elements within the sentence which are signaled by word order, function words, and inflectional endings. Or the problems might be semantic rather than syntactic suggesting that the student needs the skill in vocabulary development. Based on Bortnick & Lopardo (1973)'s suggestions on diagnostic analysis, The following table illustrates the analysis and instructional implications for incorrect cloze responses.

Diagnostic Analysis of a Thai Teacher College Student's  
Incorrect Cloze Responses

---

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| 1. Inflectional errors                               |   |
| *...and many large <i>village</i>                    | Teach students the agreement  |
| *...and which books the<br>people there <i>wants</i> | or concord between words in the<br>sentence, e.g., a plural adjective<br>signals a plural noun, or subject.<br>verb agreement, etc.                     |
| 2. Wrong choice of vocabulary                        |   |
| *...talking in a very low <i>noise</i>               | Teach students the  |
| *Like a competitor in a motor <i>match</i>           | semantic feature of   |
| *...driving at full <i>rate</i>                      | words in the same<br>semantic domain, point<br>out the superordinate<br>and hyponyms, e.g.,<br>voice-noise-sound.                                       |
| 3. Violation of grammatical rules                    |   |
| *The collision has injured two<br>of the <i>cars</i> | Teach syntactic/<br>semantic restrictions<br>of the co-occurrence<br>of elements in the<br>Utterance, e.g., some<br>verbs require an<br>animate object. |
- 

### Instruction

The analysis of cloze responses in this study reveals that Thai teachers college students are inefficient in using context clues for prediction. This indicates that students need the skill of lexical, syntactic, and semantic predictability. They need to know the associations of particular words, the restrictions about what can follow particular structure word as Chomsky (1965) call "selectional restrictions" or "restrictions of co-occurrence"

Lexical restrictions deal with the co-occurrence of wholly lexical items; they rule out the co-occurrence of some words with others because of the incompatibility of pairs of words. Grammatical restrictions determine the occurrence of items in grammatical contexts; they do not permit certain words to enter at all into certain grammatical constructions.

Elias (1975) emphasizes that the students need to be aware of these grammatical expectations because "if students can identify the pattern of organization from the structure words used, they can predict the train of thought and where the main idea will probably be found, "The students need practice in vocabulary

development in which the main emphasis should be on guessing the meaning of words from context. Teachers can develop skill in the effective use of the context clues for gaining meaning of unknown words by preparing cloze passages deleting certain structural words such as noun markers, verb markers, phrase markers, clause markers or certain lexical items to focus instruction on the syntactic/semantic constraints of the language. In the teaching procedure, students suggest words which might fit into the blank. The teacher asks students to offer reasons for their choices and then discuss some important points by pointing out the cues which immediately surround the blank as well as cues which may appear at the beginning, middle, or end of the passage. Discussion of the reasons for selecting responses is the essential part of cloze procedure as an instructional technique.

In dealing with cloze response discussion, Jonz (1975) points out that responses to the various items on the cloze test are made within the framework of both formal and contextual constraints functioning both separately and conjointly. He states

*You must, in short, figure out not only what specific formalities are in operation but you must also figure out the nature of the influence of the meaningful contexts in which you find those formalities in operation. (Jonz, 1975, p. 11)*

The cloze procedure provides the context. The contextual clues surrounding the blank give the student apparent clues to determine the missing words. For example, if the deleted word occurs between other words separated by commas, the student will realize that it might be a word explaining certain key words in the passage. Words preceding or following a blank space might serve as syntactic or semantic clues which suggest the type of word that is required, i.e., adjective, verb, article, preposition, noun or pronoun. For example, a blank space preceding a noun suggests that the student fill in an article or an adjective, e.g., a *small* desk.

Inflectional agreement and function words or structural words also play an important role in cuing the missing word. For example, a verb stem+an-s inflection suggest that the preceding deleted subject must be a singular noun, e.g., The *boy* plays football. Function words are the articles, auxiliary verbs, prepositions, and conjunctions of traditional grammar. Lefevre (1967) calls these words noun markers, verb markers, phrase markers, and clause markers respectively. For example, the presence of verb markers (e.g., "has," "will,") cues the student that a verb follows, e.g., She will *arrive* tomorrow.

The following are samples of the explanation of some of the rules that generate cloze responses allowed as correct :

Cloze Item	Context
“little”	A person who sits at a _____ desk.

**Formal Constraint :** This blank requires a word functioning as an adjective.

**Contextual Constraint :** The article “a” preceding the blank indicates that the word “desk” which follows the blank is a noun. The missing word which will appear between a noun marker “a” and a noun “desk” must be an adjective or a word functioning as an adjective. The responses “little,” “small,” “big,” “front,” “high,” “new,” and “reading” are accepted as well as “library” which is a noun functioning as an adjective modifying “desk” since their different meanings do not change the whole contextual meaning because this deleted word is not the key word of the passage.

Cloze Item	Context
“them”	....taking books from people who bring _____ back.

**Formal Constraint :** This blank requires an object pronoun.

**Contextual Constraint :** (1) The context cues that the antecedent of the deleted word is “books” which is a plural noun, thus, according to the concord between the pronoun and the referential noun, a plural pronoun is needed; (2) the word “bring” preceding the blank is a verb which requires an object. Thus, the correct response is a plural object pronoun “them.” However, “some” can also fit the context. The accepted word “books” seems to fit the context meaningfully but seems awkward or unusual for native speakers. It can be grouped into Oller et al.’s (1972) third response category, which is describe. as containing responses which “violate no obligatory restrictions in the immediate phrase structure context but do violate some broader constraints.”

### Evaluation

A cloze test can be a good instrument of assessing language proficiency or reading comprehension especially as a supplement or as a part of a battery of tests. For the application in the classroom, it can be used as an evaluation tool to measure readability of the material and a student’s performance on the material.

Owen (1971) suggests a simple way of estimating reading difficulty by taking one or two paragraphs from the book and deleting every fifth word or every seventh word and having the students attempt to replace the missing words. He concludes that if the majority of the class can make out the meaning of the passage with a higher number of words omitted, then the whole class should be able to read

that book without much difficulty when the missing information is added again. To rank a number of passages in order of reading difficulty, the cloze score for each passage must be converted to a percentage. The passage with the higher percentage is considered the easiest to read. Bormuth (1968) suggests that a score of 38 percent on a cloze test is the equivalent of a score of 65 percent on a multiple choice type test and equals frustration reading level (that which is too difficult even with a teacher's help); and 44 percent is the equivalent of 75 percent and equals the instructional level (that can be used for reading with an instructor's help). A high score of 57 percent on the cloze would be compared with 90 percent on a multiple choice test and would indicate material at the individual's independent reading level (that which is suitable for independent or recreational level). In other words, if the average score reveals a percent below 44, the text may be determined as too difficult for those students tested. On the contrary, the average score of 57 percent or higher would indicate a text too easy for those students.

Pack (1973) suggests that students should read materials on the last two levels (i.e., instructional and independent levels). The second level for challenging work within class, the third level for enjoyment and information outside the classroom. The first level should be avoided as it will discourage both the student and the teacher. As students progress in their reading comprehension they will move to more advanced materials.

In addition to using cloze for obtaining diagnostic information, for instruction (Plaister, 1973) and for indicating readability and performance, teachers can also prepare a cloze file to be used in the individualized reading program in the English-as-a-foreign language center such as the one proposed by Vattanukul (1977). The cloze file contains cloze passages at three levels, beginning, intermediate, and advanced, in order to permit learners to progress at their own pace. The passages can be made from newspaper articles, book excerpts, magazines, teacher-written stories or even student-written stories. Students read the passage and fill in words they think fit the blanks and then check their own papers with the key answers which are provided with both original words which were deleted and synonyms. By giving synonyms or acceptable words and allowing students to decide whether their answer is close to the key word, the emphasis is on comprehension. In this way, students can develop skill in using context clues to guess meaning from unknown words. In the individualized reading program, students work at their own level of ability and at their own rate of speed. This individualized approach gives the students a feeling of responsibility for their progress and a sense of accomplishment which are necessary for reading improvement.



## REFERENCES

- Aitken, Kenneth G. "Using Cloze Procedure as an Overall Language Proficiency Test," *TESOL Quarterly*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (March, 1977).
- Bormuth, John R. "The Cloze Procedure--Literacy in the Classroom," *Help for the Reading Teacher--New Directions in Research*, ed. William D. Page. Urbana, Illinois: ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills, 1975, 60-89.
- Clarke, Mark A., and Linda Burdell. "Shades of Meaning: Syntactic and Semantic Parameters of Cloze Test Responses," *On TESOL' 77 Teaching and Learning English as a Second Language: Trends in Research and Practice*, eds. H. Douglas Brown, Carlos A. Yorio, and Ruth H. Crymes. Washington D.C.: Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, 1977, 131-143.
- Corder, S. Pit. "The Significance of Learner's Errors," *New Frontiers in Second Language Learning*, eds. John W. Schumann & Nancy Stenson. Rowley: Newbury House Publishers, Inc., 1975, 100-113.
- Decamp, David. "Language Study (Field of Study)," *International Encyclopedia of Higher Education*, ed. Asa S. Knowles. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, Vol. 6, 1977, 2427-2434.
- Hinofotis, Francis Ann Butler. "An Investigation of the Concurrent Validity of Cloze Testing as a Measure of Overall Proficiency in English as a Second Language." Unpublished PhD dissertation, Southern Illinois University, 1976.
- Jonz, Jon, *Teacher's Guide for Poor Simpleton, MC Format*. U.S., Educational Resources Information Center, ERIC Document ED 135258, April, 1976.
- Ketuchart, Saisawath. "An Analysis of Thai Teachers College Freshmen's Cloze Responses in EFL Reading." Unpublished PhD dissertation, The University of Texas at Austin, 1978.
- Oller, John W., Jr. *Research with Cloze Procedure in Measuring the Proficiency of Non-Native Speakers of English: An Annotated Bibliography*. U.S., Educational Resources Information Center, ERIC Document ED 104154, April, 1975.
- Owen, R.J. "Selecting a Suitable 'Reader'," *RELC Journal*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (December, 1971), 29-34.
- Plaister, Ted. "Teaching Reading Comprehension to the Advanced ESL Student Using the Cloze Procedure," *RELC Journal*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (December, 1973), 31-38.
- Schachter, Jacquelyn, and Marianne Celce-Murcia. "Some Reservations Concerning Error Analysis," *TESOL Quarterly*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (December, 1977), 441-451.
- Vattanukul, Patcharee. "Strategies for the Development of an Individualized Instruction Program for the Teaching of English in a Thai University." Unpublished PhD dissertation, The University of Texas at Austin, 1977.