

Cloze Tests and Reading Strategies in English Language Teaching in Iran

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Abstract. This study tries to investigate what particular problems Iranian students had with cloze tests and to determine whether these difficulties were associated with inefficient use of reading strategies or not and also what reading strategies are useful in filling cloze tests. This study focused on a group of Iranian students at pre-university level. To conduct the study, 120 students were selected randomly by the researcher. The data were collected through a cloze test completed by the students, a questionnaire distributed to the students, a questionnaire distributed to five English pre-university teachers. The students were divided into three groups of High, Mid and Low achievers based on their cloze test scores. After collecting data, the means of two groups of high and low were compared and there were significant differences between two groups of high and low based on t-test analysis. Then, the priority given to the reading strategies useful in filling the cloze test by students were compared by priorities given by the teachers and some interesting results emerged. The findings of the study revealed that the problems the Iranian students had with the cloze tests were related to the inefficient use of reading strategies as well as unfamiliarity with reading strategies useful in filling the cloze test.

Keywords: Cloze Test, Reading Strategies, Pre-University Level

1. Introduction

One of the main problems that learners of English as a foreign language confront is how to improve their reading comprehension proficiency and how to deal with cloze tests which is one of ways of measuring reading comprehension proficiency. In effect, the present study aims at focusing on reading strategies – especially those which are used in filling cloze tests- related to Iranian EFL pre-university learners since in university entrance examinations and final-term exams a lot of reading comprehension questions can be answered correctly by using these strategies.

2. Review of literature

Taylor (1953) cited in Oller (1979: 350) propose the cloze procedure as a basis for measuring the readability of prose. Aitken (1977) says that teachers of English as a second language are beginning to recognize value of overall language proficiency tests in their programs. Alderson (1979), Farhady (2006) and Jamali (1999) believe that cloze tests are suitable for assessing general language proficiency of EFL/ESL learners. Nuchuy (2004) also says that ‘cloze tests have been widely used in language assessment, particularly for the assessment of reading skills in language tests. According to Oxford (1990 cited in Sheykhiani, 2008), ‘reading strategies are operational learning techniques, behaviours, and problem-solving or study skills that enhance learning more effectively and efficiently. For this study, reading comprehension strategies are the main focus and are seen as comprehension processes that enable readers to construct meaning from the printed page most effectively. According to Rye (1982 cited in Lee, 2008) to fill gaps, a reader has to reason and construct textual meaning based on contextual evidence derived from the text. So a number of studies have been conducted on finding the useful strategies in filling the cloze tests.

A recent study carried out by Sheykhiani (2008) tries to measure the effect of two kinds of reading strategies, namely, contextual guessing and gisting on pre-university students’ ability in comprehending multiple-choice cloze passages and data analysis revealed that contextual guessing is more effective than gisting.

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3. Method

3.1. Participants

The participants were 120 females, 17-19 years of age, selected from pre-university students. At first, 120 students plus 5 teachers participated in the process of administration.

3.2. Instruments and Materials

In this study, a number of instruments were used. At first, the researcher made use of a multiple-choice cloze passage from Fowler & Coe, (1976) whose reliability has been reported. Students' scores from cloze test were used as a base to divide the students into three groups of high, mid and low proficiency. The two groups of high and low were significantly different. After that a questionnaire which was made by the researcher herself was administered to check the reading strategies used by the students. To ensure the internal consistency and the reliability of the questionnaire, it was piloted on 30 pre-university students of the same level in two series of administration. The correlations between the two tests was ($r=0.83$). And finally teachers fill a questionnaire.

3.3. Procedures

At first, the researcher chose the cloze test of 25 blanks from Fowler & Coe, (1976) for the students and they completed it in a limited time: each correct answer in the multiple choice questions received 1 point and each incorrect answer received 0 point with no penalty for wrong answers. After that the researcher chose nearly 1/3 of the students from the top as a high group and 1/3 of the students from bottom as a low group. Just two groups of high and low were considered important in process of thesis. Then, a questionnaire of reading strategies was submitted to the respondents after the completion of the cloze test. The questionnaire consisted of 30 items and it required the students to choose from a 5-point scale to show the degree of the students' attitudes and opinions about the topic. The statements were used to help the students engage in thinking deeply about reading strategies that they chose while reading the cloze tests. Then, a questionnaire was submitted to a group of teachers to find out the strategies they thought students should use during the reading of academic texts.

3.4. Data Analysis

The answers from the questionnaires of the students were coded from 1 to 5 to do statistical analysis. A t-test, was run to know whether there was any statistical difference between students of two groups of high and low proficiency. Then, the two groups of high and low proficiency which were statistically different were compared. Afterwards, the frequency, mean, standard deviation and standard error of measurement of each item were calculated and compared. Then, the outcomes of the students' answers to questionnaire were compared with teachers' to know to what extent the expectations of teacher with students' answers were consistent.

3.4.1. Results and Discussion

Table 1: The students' performances on the cloze test

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid 6	3	2.5	2.5
7	2	1.7	4.2
8	4	3.3	7.5
9	14	11.6	19.2
10	12	9.9	29.2
11	12	9.9	39.2
12	18	14.9	54.2

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
13	16	13.2	67.5
14	14	11.6	79.2
15	4	3.3	82.5
16	4	3.3	85.8
17	10	8.3	94.2
18	2	1.7	95.8
19	3	2.5	98.3
21	1	.8	99.2
23	1	.8	100.0
Total	120	99.2	
Missing System	1	.8	
Total	121	100.0	

3.4.2. Results of Cloze Test

In this section, a cloze test of 25-blanks from Fowler & Coe (1976) was given to students and they were asked to complete the test in 20 minutes. The scores of the students ranged from 6 to 23 as shown in table 1.

3.4.3. Results of the Students' Questionnaires

Table 2: Matched t-tests comparing the performance of two groups of high & low

		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Std. Error Difference	Mean Difference
Score	Equal variances assumed	17.385	72	.000	7.220	.415
Item 8	Equal variances assumed	2.752	72	.007	.794	.289
Item 10	Equal variances assumed	2.258	72	.027	.520	.230
Item 22	Equal variances assumed	2.055	72	.044	.543	.264
Item 24	Equal variances assumed	-2.333	72	.022	-.859	.368
Item 26	Equal variances assumed	2.015	72	.048	.508	.252
Item 27	Equal variances assumed	2.505	72	.015	.641	.256

In this section, the researcher gave a questionnaire to the students to fill in. As I mentioned, students were divided into three groups based on their scores and two groups of high and low were compared. T-test comparison of data is presented in table 2:

As we see, there is a significant difference in scores between two groups and in six items of questionnaire. The students in high group find these six strategies as useful while students in low group don't consider these strategies as useful.

3.4.5. Results of Teachers' Questionnaire

In this part, 5 teachers filled out the questionnaire. They chose some of the strategies as the best strategies which they thought students had to use in process of working on a cloze test. These 5 teachers mostly chose the strategies which are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Reading skills to be used by students in reading the cloze text

Reading Strategies	Number of teachers
1. Skip the unknown words when reading the text	5
2. Use prior knowledge related to the topic of this passage	4
3. Read the text twice or more.	4
4. Find the main ideas of the passage (main idea of every paragraph).	4
5. Review the words immediately preceding or following the blank.	4
6. Review the paragraph(s) immediately preceding or following the one in the blank you are doing.	4
7. Ask himself/herself questions about what the text is about after reading the whole text.	3
8. Read fast for the gist of the text by skipping the blanks before focusing on them.	3
9. Read the first sentence and the last sentence of the text before reading the whole text.	3
10. Use context to figure out the unfamiliar words.	3
11. Picture the people, events and places that he/she is reading about.	2
12. Scan the text constantly when finding answers to the blanks.	2
13. Use the phonic or semantic analysis to figure out the unfamiliar words.	2
14. Ask himself/herself whether he/she understand or not.	2
15. Compare what he/she has just learned from the reading with what he/she already knew.	1
16. Find out the links between the main ideas (links between the paragraphs).	1
17. Stop and reread the confusing sections.	1
18. Predict what would be in the passage when reading the first sentence.	1

As it is clear there was not the same order of importance in selection of the strategies but there was some similarity; for example: teachers no.2 and no.3 enumerated the strategy no.8 (Read fast for the gist of the text by skipping the blanks before focusing on them) as the second most important. And this was the same for teachers no.3 and no.4 in the third rank. This also happened in the fourth rank with teachers no.3 and no.4.

4. Discussion

According to the results of the study, regarding statistical analyses, the answers to the research questions can be discussed in follow:

Question (1): What reading strategies are used by the students while working on a cloze test? Some of the strategies are used more than other strategies by students. In order to find the most used strategies, means of all items are compared. The five most frequently used strategies based on their means by students are as follows:

- Item 30: I activate my world knowledge to enable me to guess the appropriate word for the blank.
- Item 14: I attempt to relate important points in the text to one another to understand the text as a whole.
- Item 23: I try to find out the links between the main ideas (links between the paragraphs).
- Item 22: I use context to figure out the unfamiliar words.

- Item 7: I skip the unknown words when I am reading the text.

Question (2): How frequently are reading strategies used by students while working on a cloze test? To show the frequency of strategies, a bargraph is used. Look at chart 1:

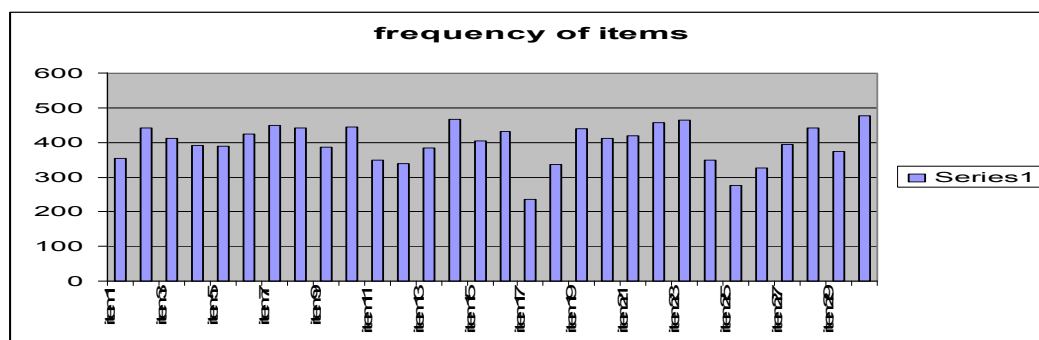


Chart 1: Frequency of all items

Question (3): What reading strategies do the teachers think the students might use while working on a cloze test?

We have five priorities which are given by students and teachers to the strategies useful in filling out the cloze test. Look at Table 4:

Table 4: A comparison of the five most important reading skills selected by the students and the teachers

Rank	Students' choice	Teachers' choice
1	I activate my world knowledge to enable me to guess the appropriate word for the blank.	Skip the unknown words when reading the text
2	I attempt to relate important points in the text to one another to understand the text as a whole.	Use prior knowledge related to the topic of this passage
3	I try to find out the links between the main ideas (links between the paragraphs).	Read the text twice or more
4	I use context to figure out the unfamiliar words	Find the main ideas of the passage (main idea of every paragraph).
5	I skip the unknown words when I am reading the text	Review the words immediately preceding or following the blank

There are a few similarities between students and teachers in the priority given to the strategies. As we see, there are just three similar choices of strategies between students and teachers. The 5th of students' selection of strategies are similar to teachers' 1st respectively. The differences between students and teachers are too much. It seems that students are not so much familiar with useful and practical strategies in filling the cloze tests.

Question (4): Do high achievers and low achievers use the same reading strategies while working on a cloze test?

Based on statistical analysis, we can see significant differences between high achievers and low achievers in using the reading strategies while working on a cloze test. The mean difference between the two groups is high. And as we see in Table 2, there is a significant difference between these two groups in six items.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Limitations of the study

It should be noted that the scope of the study, though statistically validated, is limited to the students at pre-university level.

The techniques chosen to collect the data may not have been sufficient to provide an in-depth understanding of the difficulties Iranian students have with cloze tests. For example, techniques like classroom observation could be helpful.

One cloze test might not fully reflect the performances of the students in other cloze procedures.

This study excludes the biological variables such as gender, race, age, and affective variables such as level of anxiety, motivation, attitudes and types of personality and even learners' outside activities or noise.

6. Conclusions

The findings of this study reveal that the problems the sample population of students had with the cloze test, were to some extent associated with their inefficient use of reading skills. To perform better in cloze tests, the students must learn how to use reading strategies more effectively. As Dreyer (1998:19) states, learners' awareness of their own reading processes plays a significant role in improving reading comprehension, they must be aware of the skills they currently use (Lu, 2006).

7. References

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