

"COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TESTING" AND "CLOZE TESTING" : SOME PERTINENT FACTS AND OBSERVATIONS

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Introduction: What makes a language test a "good test"?

In writing language tests, whether we are testing "communicatively" or "structurally", the general rules of language testing still apply ie. a good language test should incorporate the following four characteristics: the test should be "*reliable, valid, practical, and efficient.*" What then do we mean by "reliable, valid, practical, and efficient" in relation to writing good language tests? Let us look at the factors one by one.

A "*reliable*" language test is a test which measures the language proficiency of a group of students consistently ie. if the test is administered to the same group of students a second or third time, there should be similar test results.

A "*valid*" language test is a test which measures what has been taught. The test should assess what had been taught or studied. This factor of test validity ensures that the testing component effectively mirrors the

teaching component. Conversely, an invalid test is one that does not measure what has been taught.

A "*practical*" language test is a test which is able to be conducted under practical and realistic testing conditions.

An "*efficient*" test, on the other hand, must measure student proficiency efficiently. This, in turn, depends on our interpretation of "efficiency".

From the students' point of view, an objective type of test, such as a multiple-choice test, is an efficient test since students can answer a maximum number of test items in a given length of time.

From the teacher's point of view, however, an essay type of test is more efficient (to write-up) since it can be written-up (by the test writer) much more quickly than a multiple-choice type of test.

A good language test should incorporate all of the above four characteristics.

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Again, whether we are testing “communicatively” or “structurally”, we still need to measure / assess the students’ proficiency in the four linguistic skills namely, “listening / speaking” and “reading / writing.”

In particular, when writing tests communicatively, we need to pay special attention to the following additional factors also.⁽¹⁾

Testing communicatively -

C.W. Weir (*Communicative Language Testing*) adds the following factors which writers of language tests should adhere to when producing communicatively based language tests (in addition to the factors/characteristics of good language tests mentioned above).

Context - In testing communicatively, “context” is very important since context is a determinant of communicative language ability. Language cannot be meaningful if it is devoid of context.

Authenticity of tasks - In order to measure language proficiency adequately in each communicative situation, account must be taken of “where, with whom, when, how”, and “why” the language is to be used, and on what topics. In testing language communicatively, the authenticity of tasks and the genuineness of tests is also regarded as important so that the language tests actually measure the four linguistic skills.

Directness - Tests of communicative competence should be as direct as possible (tests should reflect the real life situation.)

Unsimplified language use - “genuine texts or unsimplified language (undoctored) should be used in communicative language tests” according to Weir.

Both productive/receptive abilities in relevant contexts should be measured by the communicative language tests - communicatively based language tests should focus on “the expression and understanding of functional meaning as against a more limited mastery of form”.

In this article, I shall concentrate on one popular type of language test used by English language teachers, namely, the “cloze test” as outlined by Joseph Foley.⁽²⁾

Cloze Testing: A look at Professor Foley's suggestions

Cloze testing has become a popular and effective method of assessing student performance and is quite *suitable for a communicative teaching/testing environment*. However, as Professor Foley suggests, a few observations in the preparation of cloze tests can help improve the “reliability” and “validity” of such tests as can be seen below.

⁽¹⁾W.C. Weir, *Communicative Language Testing*.

⁽²⁾J.A. Foley, *More Questions on Assumptions About Cloze Testing*.

What Do "Cloze Tests" Test?

The use of cloze procedure in testing English as a foreign or second language is based on measuring a student's control of a language, in particular his mastery of the *syntax, semantics and previous experience with the content*. This will determine the student's ability to encode and decode a message.

One of the real values of using the cloze procedure as a test instrument is to be able to apply it to material which the student is already familiar with or will use it in his study or employment situation. This would also seem to fit with recent approaches to the problems of language testing influenced by the place accorded to usage and use in communication.

The above distinction is important for both testing and teaching as it implies that a *language test cannot be based on a selection of items chosen on linguistic grounds alone*. To devise an effective test, it is necessary to specify how a student will be required to use the language. Traditional – type general proficiency tests are based on *usage*. Cloze tests, on the other hand, can offer the possibility of *assessing communicative performance* because the texts chosen would be part of the student's use of the target language.

Methodology -

Preparation of the texts for testing purposes using the cloze procedure must also have certain constraints. *The following factors*

should be observed if a cloze test is to be reliable and valid.

Selection of the passage (prose only) –

- a. Length of the passage : 250 to 300 words
- b. Begin each sample at the start of a paragraph.

From that point onwards, use as much continuous text as necessary to get a minimum of 30 to 50 deletions.

Preparing the Cloze Test Procedure –

- a. On the normal text a deletion pattern of every *n*th word (*between every fifth and twelfth*) should establish a balance between function words (ie. preposition, articles, etc) and content words (ie. nouns)
- b. Replace each deleted word with a *standard sized blank* (sufficient for the student to write his response).
- c. In a language test, a "battery" of cloze tests should be used (minimum of three texts), and then the same deletion rate should be used throughout.
- d. *Use a short lead-in and lead-out* (one or two sentences... the beginning and end to give sufficient context).
- e. *Most of the blanks should be such that they can be answered with ordinary words*, but there are some exceptions such as the following.

- numbers (2000, 21, 3/4, etc)
- contractions (isn't, wasn't, etc)

- abbreviations (Mr., Mrs. Ms. ADB, etc)
- hyphenated words (desk-bound, etc)
- proper names (Sir Winston Churchill, Albert Namijira, etc)

(Professor Foley also suggests that numerals be deleted as a unit. If they are spelt out (2000 ie two-thousand), then they can be treated as two separate words. Otherwise, students should be informed that contractions, abbreviations and hyphenated words are to be treated as one word (fitting into one blank). As for proper names they can be considered as separate words.)

Administration of the Cloze Test -

a. *A cloze test may be timed or untimed*, but the former can give additional information, such as indicating the slow readers.

b. The instructions should indicate that only one word must be written in each blank; fill in every blank if possible and guess if uncertain. Some blanks will be harder to fill in than others, thus the necessity of reading through the text a number of times. Wrong spellings are not usually counted as being incorrect as long as the word is recognizable.

Scoring -

a. *Exact response (that is, those words which were actually taken out from the original text) should be considered first.* Depending on the purpose of the assessment, it may not be necessary to consider any other form of scoring.

b. *Any - acceptable word which is within the limits of the context* (satisfying both

short and long term constraints) *can also be considered* and may supply more information than the exact word procedure especially for error analysis *as long as the acceptable words are determined beforehand.* (A list can be drawn up by agreement within a group of teachers in the subject areas concerned.)

c. *Do not use raw scores* but convert all scores to percentages.

Analysis of Results -

According to Professor Foley, "cloze tests" are reliable and valid in indicating only the following three levels of difficulty:

- *frustrational level: below 20 %*
- *instructional level: above 38 % - 40 %*
- *independent level: above 57 %,- 60 %*

Foley's partition of the "cloze test" scores (percentages in this case) above into three broad categories of "frustrational", "instructional", and "independent", however, is in-line with the ability of a good test to partition the range of scores (class of examinees) into three broad categories, namely, *poor, fair, and good.*

Conclusion

The cloze test is a "blunt instrument for testing: no exact percentage cut-off can be determined for the various criterion levels but rather an approximation. Nevertheless, in preparing a cloze test, certain variables must be controlled."

To close on a communicative note, we, as language teachers, should note the

following observations by C.W. Weir: *although communicative competence is stressed (in communicative testing), Weir himself accepts that "linguistic competence must be an essential part of communicative competence."* That is, you cannot have one without the other. Moreover, and perhaps interestingly, Weir also adds that *"it is not necessarily the case that communicatively based language tests will look radically different from some existing ones"*. ♦♦

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