

An Alternative Method for Teaching and Testing Reading Comprehension

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The summary cloze technique, which can be used for both teaching and testing reading and listening comprehension, offers an alternative format to multiple-choice. Summary cloze exercises are prepared by summarizing the content of the original text into a new text about one third the length. The shortened text is then transformed into a rational cloze exercise. The learner, who always has access to the original text, must complete the summary text using the list of choices provided. Research using the technique has shown that it is certainly as good a measure of reading comprehension as the multiple-choice-based format and that it is often more reliable. Considerable experimentation, however, remains to be done concerning the text topic and choice and frequency of deletions.

The most common method for testing (and frequently teaching) both listening and reading comprehension consists of presenting a groups of students with a text followed by a series of multiple-choice (MC) questions to measure their understanding of what they have heard or read. The widespread use of this format is justifiable on many grounds—the tests can be machine or hand scored very easily allowing for the testing of large numbers of people in a short period of time; nonnative speakers can score the tests; well formulated MC questions can be used to test higher order language functions; and, finally, MC questions are reliable from a statistical point of view. Unfortunately, although the MC format is a desirable one, it is difficult to formulate good questions consistently so that the reliability of a subtest does not become an issue. As well, questions could be raised concerning the face validity of the MC format—when one reads a text, not all processing is done in terms of possible choices. One frequently has to process material in other ways, for example, summarizing the information in a text to apply it to another context or to engage in problem solving activities.

To find a more reliable and interesting format for testing reading comprehension, Courchène and Raymond,¹ researchers at the Second Language Institute at the University of Ottawa, developed a new technique: the summary cloze procedure. It was their intention that this testing/teaching procedure would be used as a backup and/or a replacement for MC questions to measure a candidate's ability to comprehend academic texts. In choosing the

cloze format, the authors were aware of the extensive and often contradictory research on the use of cloze as a measure of language proficiency in general and, more specifically, as a measure of reading comprehension (Oller, 1979, 1983; Alderson, 1979; Bachman, 1985, Fotos, 1991, Klein-Braley & Raatz, 1984; Brown, 1989). Although the original claims for the cloze test as a measure of general language competence have been challenged, researchers still maintain that it is a good measure of language skills from the basic to the advanced levels as it correlates highly with reading comprehension, dictation, and composition (Fotos, 1991). What has weakened the original claim has been evidence indicating (a) that rational and random deletion cloze tests vary in reliability and levels of difficulty, (b) that cloze tests often correlate more highly with sentence-level grammatical structures than higher order language skills, and (c) that not all deletions in a cloze test measure the same language abilities—they can measure both grammatical knowledge and textual relationships beyond the clausal level. Despite these difficulties, the cloze procedure, especially in its rational form, can be used to measure reading comprehension if one selects texts of general interest to students, uses a rational as opposed to a random deletion of items, pretests them on both native and nonnative speakers, and uses them in a foreign language context.

In what follows, the summary cloze technique is described and demonstrated through the use of examples from reading; pedagogical applications are discussed; and finally a brief summary of the results of a study (Courchène & Ready, 1993) is presented.

Summary Cloze: Selection and Preparation of a Text

The first step in the preparation of a reading exercise or test is selecting a suitable passage. Although this will most commonly take the form of a standard text drawn from a newspaper, magazine, or book in the case of reading, it can also take the form of an advertisement, a notice, a set of rules for participating in a contest, and so forth. We have used the one-page Canada Food Guide, an advertisement from the National Film Board, an information sheet about a writing contest, along with more traditional texts from magazines such as *MacLeans* and *Psychology Today*. In every case we have been guided by the following general principles in preparing summary clozes.

1. Select a text of an appropriate length, reading level, and interest for your students. In our studies we have worked with texts in the 450-500 word range (e.g., newspaper and magazine articles, but longer or shorter texts could also be used. In fact, the summary cloze can also be used as a summary of story that a child has read or possibly a chapter in a textbook for students at the secondary and postsecondary levels.) As our aim in using the technique both in the classroom and as a measure of reading

comprehension has been to teach or test global comprehension rather than the understanding of simple facts, texts that discuss concepts and ideas are best suited for use with this technique. Although I would not state categorically that one could not use this technique to teach students how to use a bus schedule, I think that other types of reading (e.g., skim and scan) would certainly be more appropriate.

2. Once a text has been chosen, read it carefully and then set it aside; write a summary of the contents or list the most important ideas expressed in the text in your own words. Read the text again to be certain that you have the gist of the text. Next, identify the top level structure of the text or rhetorical pattern: description, sequence, causation, response, comparison. In the written summary it is important to maintain the same rhetorical pattern as that found in the original text. If the original text was organized according to a causation textual structure, the summary should be organized in the same way. In preparing the summary one should use a balance of words and longer expressions found in the stimulus text along with suitable synonyms and alternative phrasing of ideas. By using large sections of the original text in the summary, one provides the students with more clues as to the correct word choices in the summary and thereby makes the summary cloze task easier to complete. This approach could be used if one wanted to use more difficult texts with low proficiency level learners.

In terms of length, the summary for standard articles from newspapers and magazines should be about one third the length of the original. For other types of documents, such as advertisements, the summary in prose form should contain all the key information.

3. Once the summary has been completed, select a number of words to be removed from the text. In doing so, use a rational deletion approach as opposed to every *n*th word. As one's purpose is to test overall understanding of text content, the emphasis should be on the deletion of content words, that is, deleting *health* as opposed to *to* in the phrase "contributing to the health of the nation"; and markers of textual coherence: removing *because* in "nursing women should drink sufficient quantities of milk because it helps to replenish ..." and so forth. As well, try to avoid words that can be predicted on the basis of knowledge of the world (although this is not always possible). Finally, avoid dates, proper names, and numbers unless they can be predicted on the basis of overall understanding of the text. It should be pointed out that the SC technique is not a disguised grammar test although being able to complete it presupposes some grammatical knowledge.

In a summary passage of about 150 words, delete from 13-15 words. Do not decide in advance, however, that all texts must have 15 deletions and then go about creating them even when to do so results in some rather

- questionable choices. Once the choices have been made, add other possible word selections in the ratio of 5:4— for each four blanks, offer the students five possibilities making certain that none of the additional words can be used in the blank. The incorrect distracters in the list should be possibilities, however, from a grammatical and lexical point of view.
4. The first and last sentences should not contain any blanks. As well, the title of the passage should also be included as it could activate a student's background knowledge.

Sample Text

Text: Changes in the Workplace

When John Stevenson came home to tell his parents that he was quitting his job as the manager of a fast-food restaurant to enroll in secretarial school, he caused much anxiety and confusion in his family. The thought of their son becoming a secretary, a job that was usually held by a woman, was a shock to the family's pride. Ten years later, John is an executive secretary for a female vice-president. He is the pride of his family. All the negative feelings and attitudes associated with a man accepting what had been traditionally seen as work performed by a woman have disappeared.

John, however, has not been alone in his experience. Many women who have tried to enter jobs usually filled by men have had to prove themselves every step along the way. For example, in the past, women who wanted to join the police force or become fire-fighters, had to meet the standards (height and physical strength) set for men in these professions. As well, many women who wanted to join the military (army, navy, and air force), were refused many times before finally being accepted by the military. The military kept insisting that they had wanted to protect women from the dangers of going to war. Once the women do get accepted in these positions, they find out that they have to perform better than men to be considered as good.

Both men and women who have decided to go for nontraditional jobs have found that the attitudes of other fellow workers change very slowly. This should not be surprising. At a very young age, boys and girls follow different sets of rules set by their parents and society. For example, it is quite acceptable for little girls to cry, but boys are not supposed to. On the other hand, if boys are angry, they can fight with each other, but this is not acceptable for girls. When these children become adults, they bring these attitudes, these ideas about what is expected of them to the workplace. If we want to change people's attitudes, we must change the way we bring up children. We must show them that boys and girls are capable of anything they want—from being president

of a country to exploring in Canada's North. What should decide their choice of profession should not be their sex but rather their own personal interest and aptitude. (Text adapted from *Ontario Times*)

Summary Cloze Texts

Two possible summaries have been prepared, *Version 1* at a lower level of difficulty and *Version 2* at a higher level. The two versions were prepared using Fry's readability formula along with Bottel and Granowsky's (1972) formula for calculating syntactic complexity. Although such formulas do not ensure that texts that are similar in terms of these two traits will be equally difficult for all readers (other factors such as topic familiarity and cultural content also play an important role: Swaffar, Arens, & Byrnes, 1991; Gunder-son, 1991), they allow the teacher to control a certain number of variables.

Version 1: Changes in the Workplace

From the list of words provided, choose a suitable word for each blank space in the text below. You can use each word in the list only once. There are more words in the list than there are blanks or spaces in the text.

Word List for Version 1

(Place words in alphabetical order)

- | | | | |
|--------------|-----------------|---------------|---------------|
| 1. attitudes | 5. difficulties | 9. people's | 13. sad |
| 2. better | 6. educate | 10. prepared | 14. secretary |
| 3. changed | 7. family | 11. president | 15. women |
| 4. combat | 8. military | 12. rules | 16. work |

Changes in the Workplace

When John Stevenson decided to become a secretary, he shocked his whole family. They were not proud to have a son do female _____. Ten years later, however, his _____ is proud of him; he is an executive _____. But John is not unique. Many _____ who have tried to get jobs that are nontraditional have had many _____, especially in the traditional male professions. At first, women in the _____ were not allowed in any roles that might involve _____ but this has finally changed. When they are accepted, however, women have to show they are _____ than men. Why has it been so difficult to change _____? The answer is that people have different _____ for how boys and girls should behave in society. To change _____ attitudes, we must change the way we _____ our children. Only then will our children be able to make job choices based on personal interest rather than sex.

Version 2: Changes in the Workplace
Word List for Version 2

- | | | | |
|---------------|-------------------|---------------|--------------|
| 1. acceptance | 9. employee | 17. members | 25. soldiers |
| 2. allowed | 10. encouragement | 18. overcome | 26. suffer |
| 3. case | 11. enroll | 19. position | 27. weight |
| 4. changed | 12. enter | 20. positive | 28. women |
| 5. concrete | 13. form | 21. possible | 29. worry |
| 6. combat | 14. impossible | 22. pressure | |
| 7. deal | 15. male | 23. prevented | |
| 8. dominated | 16. manager | 24. roles | |

Changes in the Workplace

Men and women who opt to work in professions or jobs not traditionally held by persons of their gender often encounter opposition. This opposition can take the _____ of social attitudes held by _____ of the society at large or _____ regulations and restrictions that almost make it _____ for them to qualify for the position in question. In the _____ of John Stevenson, a managerial level _____ in a fast food restaurant who gave up his position to _____ in secretarial school, the opposition from his family took the form of negative _____ and shock. They felt that the family's pride would _____ by having a son in a female-_____ profession. Fortunately for John, his family's attitudes have _____ over the last ten years.

For women who have tried to _____ what have been until recently _____-dominated professions—police, fire-fighters, _____ soldiers—the road to gaining _____ has been more difficult. They have had to _____ opposition in terms of society's attitudes; i.e., _____ can be in the military but they should not be _____ to undertake any combat roles. As well, women have had to _____ with concrete restrictions in the form of _____ and height requirements for certain professions.

While there is no simple solution to helping men and women gain easier access to nontraditional professions, one must certainly start by trying to change how men and women are raised and perceived within society.

Prior to using a summary cloze either as a test or an exercise in class, it is always a good idea to field test it with both native (friends and colleagues) and nonnative speakers. If native speakers have difficulty doing the text, or think that more than one word can be used in a given blank, make the necessary changes. With native speakers you might also try it out as an open summary cloze: give them the summary with the missing words and ask them to complete the text. Not only will this generate a good list of choices, it will also give you an idea of the content validity of the summary you have

prepared. Advanced nonnative speakers can also be asked to carry out the above exercises. With open-summary cloze exercises, some of the incorrect answers they suggest can eventually become some of the extra words that you add to your list.

Pedagogical Suggestions

1. When this type of exercise is used in class, the students should be encouraged to take their time. They should be told that they can always refer back to the original text while trying to complete the summary. If it is used in a testing situation, more time has to be given than for passages with MC questions because you are asking the students to undertake a double reading task. More processing is required to complete the summary cloze task than to answer MC questions.
2. As indicated above, it is possible to use the summary cloze technique in different ways:
 - a. reading passage followed by a summary cloze with words provided;
 - b. reading passage followed by an open summary cloze in which students have to supply their own words;
 - c. reading passage followed by two or more versions of a summary cloze at different levels of difficulty and/or with different response formats (words provided/not provided).

Research Study

To determine how SC functions as a measure of reading ability when compared with the MC format, and to determine how SC correlates with other measures of language proficiency (listening, reading, skimming and scanning and canonical cloze), Courchène and Ready (in press)² conducted a study involving students preparing to come to Canada for academic and professional training. For the study, five reading texts controlled for length, syntactic difficulty, and reading level were prepared with both MC questions and SC formats. The subjects were 66 Chinese students at an intermediate to advanced level matched for language ability and then randomly assigned to one of two groups. Each group did two texts in one format and two in the other and both groups did both the SC and MC formats for the fifth text. After reading each text the subjects completed a Reader Assessment Questionnaire focusing on text difficulty, background knowledge, and interest.

From the results it was evident that the SC technique produces tests that tend to yield higher levels of reliability than their MC counterparts. For three out of five of the texts the mean scores for the two tasks were not significantly different from each other although in all cases the mean of the SC task is somewhat lower. The significant differences in mean scores for the first two texts could be accounted for by the fact that the SC task was unfamiliar; it was the first SC exercise done by each group. The fact that the MC group

reported that they found that the first text easier than did the SC group is also probably related to their familiarity with the testing format.

It is worth noting that in spite of the fact that the texts were chosen to be at the same readability level, the first text was much more difficult than the others. This may be because the topic (the question of food additives) would be unfamiliar to the Chinese students. Thus readability is not the only criterion to consider when choosing texts for development as ESL tests or classroom exercises.

The correlations of the task types with general measures of ESL proficiency do provide evidence that there are no substantial differences in the way the tasks behave, and in general the assumption holds that the two task types are both measures of reading comprehension. What is also interesting to note is that the correlation patterns vary widely from one text to another. There is evidently a great deal of variability in the factors that determine success in responding to a text about which at this time the item writer has very little knowledge and, therefore, cannot control.

In general, the results support the author's contention that the SC technique is a viable and very often more reliable alternative to the MC format when testing reading comprehension. What strategies or skills we are actually testing under the aegis of reading comprehension are not so obvious from these results. It would probably be useful in the context of this study to explore via protocol analysis how student approaches differ when confronted with MC and SC tasks, and how the SC technique differs from or resembles the canonical cloze procedure. Evidently a great deal more remains to be understood and in this we echo Alderson (1991) who states, "we have much more work to do before we can claim to have identified what it is that any test tests, and therefore are equally far from being able to claim that we have perfected our tools for test analysis" (p. 12). The SC technique does, however, provide an alternative testing method for the measurement of reading comprehension.

Conclusion

The summary cloze technique was developed to offer language teachers and test constructors another possible format for both teaching and testing reading comprehension. Initial use in the classroom and as a testing instrument have resulted in positive feedback from the students. They see summary cloze as having face validity; they feel that it is a legitimate and effective way to become better readers and to test what they have learned. Finally, summary cloze should not and cannot replace MC questions as the only acceptable way to test reading comprehension. As with any other teaching technique, it should be used judiciously in both the classroom and the testing hall: cranking out summary cloze exercises according to some preconceived

formula will reduce it to a type of mindless drill and, as a result, drain it of any possible pedagogical value.

Notes

¹The technique was originally developed in the context of test development for students in comprehension-based courses. On one of the tests, students had been given an advertisement from the National Film Board of Canada along with a series of True/False questions. Even though the subsequent statistical analyses indicated that the True/False questions were not tapping the content of the text, the test developers still wanted to include such reading texts as part of the test bank. As this point, one of the researchers decided to write a summary of the information in the text and to turn it into a summary cloze. When testing indicated that the technique was reliable, the two researchers then developed a whole battery of texts that were used for teaching and testing (Courchène & Ready, in press).

²For a complete discussion of this study see Courchène and Ready (in press).

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