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# INSTRUCTIONAL CLOZE: CONFRONTING SOME COMMON CONCERNS

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In the last ten years, the cloze procedure has increased in popularity as a respected and useful teaching tool. Current research indicates that this growing acclaim is warranted. A study by Sampson, Valmont, and Allen (1982) which attempted to explore how effective the cloze could be as an alternative to more traditional reading approaches is one example. The authors found the cloze to be a significant success in improving the reading comprehension and divergent production (the "fine tuning" of vocabulary) of a group of third-grade students who had received 1) sufficient exposure to cloze exercises, 2) ample teacher-guided discussions regarding the purpose and method of using the procedure, and 3) considerable practice using cloze. In the discussion accompanying the exercises in this study, synonyms were not only accepted but encouraged. Pupils soon learned that there are various ways, all essentially "correct," of expressing the same concept. A deeper understanding of the fine shades of meaning in the English language evolved.

After reviewing the literature on the cloze procedure written in the 70s, Jongsma (1980) altered his original dubious conclusions concerning the instructional value of the cloze. He suggested that the cloze procedure, though probably "no better or worse than conventional methods of reading instruction," was indeed a viable supplement—or alternative—to a regular reading program.

The versatility of the cloze in an instructional setting is almost limitless. Besides its obvious, well-sung value in specific reading areas, cloze can become a refreshing English lesson when differing deletion systems are used for particular parts of speech. Cloze can easily be transformed into a science or social studies review lesson when important words or key concepts are deliberately deleted from a text passage previously read and discussed. Deeper understandings emerge. Cloze can also be employed in foreign language study to increase syntactic awareness, or with fewer deletions, to encourage more careful reading of word problems in mathematics. Almost any written subject matter can become an effective cloze exercise which will foster increased understanding of that subject.

The current widespread approbation of the use of cloze instructionally presumes, in order for maximum success, that certain standard features are followed (Bortnick and Lopardo, 1973):

- 1) The students must first read the selected passage in its entirety to themselves, skipping over the blank spaces

- 2) The students must then reread the passage, this time filling in the blanks as they appear
- 3) The students must then engage in a discussion about the deleted words, freely offering their own responses
- 4) The teacher then accepts and praises appropriate synonyms, explaining how unsuitable responses could change the semantics or syntax of the sentence
- 5) The teacher then guides the students in comparing the passage students have jointly completed with the original
- 6) The teacher may then wish to evaluate the correct responses
  - Below 37% correct—frustration level
  - Below 47% correct—instructional level
  - Over 57% correct—independent level

In following the above procedures, much success has been noted by English and reading teachers, yet two major concerns with the approach have consistently been voiced.

The first concern relates to the "impulsive child" of whom there appear to be at least a few in every elementary classroom. This type of child seems reluctant to complete the first step in the execution of the cloze; that is, (s)he tends not to read all the way through the cloze passage first before filling in the deletions, thus missing much important information which might have been gleaned from an initial overview. This situation can often be rectified with a pre-introduction of the cloze via the "musical cloze." Any selection of music with which the students are thoroughly familiar can be utilized for this purpose. A Christmas carol, for example, would be tape-recorded with every third note deleted (leaving no lines intact) to produce a quasi-cloze format. Simply by playing the first several unconnected notes alone, children prone to rash guessing will begin to see that the blank notes are dependent on additional insight—caught by listening to the entire recording. When the whole passage is subsequently played, the students can then employ the process of "closure" to complete the musical piece. While this "musical cloze" is clearly a more perceptual and less a cognitive process than a regular reading cloze exercise, the rough analogy can be useful. The activity may be the "little extra" that is needed to stress the importance of thoroughly reading a cloze passage before attempting to complete the blank spaces.

A second concern with instructional cloze is a frequent lament from teachers that cloze has a tendency to frustrate students who are used to "perfect papers," or others who become devastated by what they erroneously perceive as "failure." These comments can be readily understood when one considers that a student need only get approximately half of the responses correct to achieve what the teacher will call a "good" score—one that would measure the material as instructionally appropriate. Obviously, with students conditioned to the system that 90% or better is a "good" score, a score of 50% on a cloze exercise would not engender a feeling of success.

One solution aimed at avoiding this frustration of students is through a careful emphasis of the discussion phase of the cloze procedure, as in the Sampson, Valmont, and Allen study. Students consistently praised and positively reinforced for certain "rich" words offered as synonyms may learn to view this type of "reward" as a viable trade-off for the more traditional reinforcement of a high score.

Another approach that has proven helpful in combatting the frustration sometimes caused by cloze is a variation of that procedure called "Clozentropy" (Hittleman, 1976). This modification of cloze does not rigidly compare the responses of students to those contained in the original material; instead, all responses are considered "correct" if the members of a criterion group, made up of peers, agree they are correct. Logically, similar words are more apt to be generated by like-minded peers than those words chosen carefully by experienced writers. Thus, students may enjoy a bit more success.

Finally, care must be taken to ensure that students learn to regard the cloze as a non-threatening exercise with a "game-like" challenge, in some ways similar to that of a favorite video game. Students should be guided toward thinking of a cloze exercise not as a "test" with all its negative connotations, but rather as an open-ended "contest" in which the student's aim is to continually better his/her own performance with constant practice.

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