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# The Impact of Practicing on Cloze Tasks in Class on Iranian Undergraduates' Foreign Language Proficiency

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### ABSTRACT

This study attempted to discover whether practicing on cloze tasks could improve Iranian undergraduates' foreign language proficiency. Sixty two Iranian EFL students of Azad University in Rasht served as the EG and the CG of the study and performed on a TOEFL serving as the pre-test of the study. The statistical technique of t-test formula revealed the two groups were not statistically different in terms of their foreign language proficiency at the outset of the study. The EG received thirty cloze tasks of various types during the course. In order to learn whether this treatment was effective or to see whether there was any statistically significant difference in the EFL proficiency between EG and CG after the administration of treatment, the participants were all post-tested on another TOEFL. The statistical technique of t-test formula revealed the EG, which had been equal to the CG before receiving the treatment, came to differ from it after it received the treatment; results showed that regular practice with cloze tasks was a very effective means of improving Iranian EFL proficiency. Therefore, the null hypothesis: There is no relationship between practicing on cloze tasks and improving Iranian EFL proficiency, was rejected.

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### Introduction

Justification for an emphasis on the improvement of the EFL students' language proficiency is not hard to implement. In many countries, foreign languages are learned by thousands of students who have felt the need for employing a technique through which they can express themselves in another language as effectively as possible; how to improve their foreign language proficiency is one of the problems which has long been faced by the Iranian EFL students. Therefore, students should employ a technique that helps them eliminate such a problem. This study was an effort to investigate whether cloze tasks in class can improve the Iranian students' language proficiency or not.

Language proficiency, according to Richards, Platt, and Webber (1989), refers to a person's proficiency in using a language for a specific purpose. Whereas 'achievement' describes language ability as a result of learning, 'proficiency' refers to the degree of skill with which a person can read, write, speak or understand language. Clark (1972) defines proficiency as the use of language for real life purposes without regard to the manner in which that competence was acquired. A cloze task, according to Farhady (1994), is a text of any length in which any word is deleted at any rate.

Through taking cloze tasks in class, students are encouraged to understand more global, and predictive processing. In other words, the learner tries to remember things as a whole; he may not divide a sentence into words, memorize the words, and then combine them again to make sentences; therefore, they become proficient, active information processors, who use a minimum number of semantic and syntactic clues to extract the maximum amount of information from the text. They are actually encouraged to take risks, to guess, and to ignore their impulses to be always correct and consequently to enjoy the characteristic of a good language learner.

### Review of literature

Cloze procedure has been used in English teaching for decades since 1953. It was firstly used as an instrument for assessing the readability of written materials for school children in the United States (Brown, 2002). Then it was used in teaching for different purposes. There are three major purposes for using cloze procedure in English teaching.

Firstly, cloze procedure can measure the difficulty of a text. Rye (1982:12) explains that if the language is too difficult, the task will lead to frustration and an increasing lack of confidence about reading. Therefore, it is necessary for teachers "... to assess the difficulty of the material which they expect their pupils to read" (Rye, 1982). Cloze procedure has turned out to be a subtle instrument measuring readability. It is used to assess the difficulty of textbooks and other reading materials.

Rye (1982) and Kilfoil and Van der Walt (1997) point out how particular cloze scores have been adopted and used as criteria for establishing the readability and comprehension level of texts. The classification of readability level was derived from Betts's (1946) 'reading comprehension level', which has been used by many researchers, e.g. Harris & Sipay (1975), Bormuth (1967 & 1968), Rankin *et al.* (1969) cited in Rye (1982:19) and Legenza & Elijah (2001).

Secondly, cloze procedure is used for testing purposes. It seems that a wide range of skills like vocabulary, grammar, structure, and reading skills are involved in the process of completing a cloze procedure. Many researchers indicate that cloze procedure is a good test of overall English language proficiency. For example, Ahluwalia (1992) claims that cloze procedure is an integrative, global measure of language competence. She explains that cloze tests measure the grammar of expectancy underlying the skills of thinking, understanding, speaking, reading and writing. For Cohen (1980) cited in

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Ahluwalia, 1992) cloze procedure measures global language competence consisting of linguistic knowledge, textual knowledge, and knowledge of the world. As it calls on testees to use knowledge such as vocabulary, grammar, sentence construction, text structure, cohesion and the reader's prior background knowledge. Askes (1991) regards cloze procedure as one of the integrative tests (global tests) that integrate language components into a total language event, which requires an integrated performance from the learner in a meaningful context.

Thirdly, cloze procedure is used as a teaching instrument to help improve learners' language ability. Many researchers and teachers have used it successfully in improving learners' language ability. Helfeldt, Henk and Fotos (1986) mention cloze procedure as 'passage-completion' technique, which is an informal instrument to determine learners' instructional reading level. Knowing the actual reading level of the learners, teachers can adjust and give guidance to the learners more properly. Lombard (1990) describes the use of cloze tests in her English second language classes for junior and senior students. She illustrates how cloze tests help solve reading problems of learners and increase their confidence when they receive immediate and satisfactory feedback. Legenza and Elijah (2001) claim that cloze is effective as a teaching technique. For example, one such method is using teacher-developed cloze exercises to remedy specific error types, e.g. deleting only one part of speech at a time, which students then have to insert so that the sentences are semantically correct. Steinman (2002) describes her use of cloze procedure as a teaching instrument for students to practice using context clues as a reading strategy and to encourage vocabulary improvement in teaching. In her teaching, the methods of teacher-made cloze texts, rational deletion and accepted word scoring were combined with the negotiation of comprehension of the text and discussion of the word choice after the completion of cloze texts.

Gunning (1998) believes that cloze is an essential teaching technique that fosters reading for meaning and use of context, especially effective for students who fail to read for meaning. To fill in the gaps correctly, students must have a good grasp of the meaning of the text as a whole. Processes involved include the use of reading strategies such as previewing (read the whole text before starting the cloze test), predicting (activate background knowledge to make a guess about the information contained in the text), using context clues about the deleted word in the surrounding context, using language knowledge to select appropriate lexical items and proper grammar forms for the gap.

Although there are weaknesses in the reliability of cloze procedure, it is widely used in English teaching. As Legenza and Elijah (2001) point out, many studies have been conducted on cloze procedure concerning the construction of cloze tests, the relationship between cloze and reading comprehension, and the usefulness of cloze as a teaching technique.

Beginning in 1970, the cloze procedure as a teaching strategy has increasingly gained adherents in Teaching English as a Second Language and in Teaching as a Foreign Language. Since then cloze procedure materials have become widely accepted as classroom tools for the improvement of reading comprehension. Donald C. Richardson (1980) demonstrated its effectivity as a technique for the improvement of reading comprehension.

In order to contribute to the clarity of this study, the research question and its hypothesis are as follows. Do cloze tasks in class improve language proficiency of Iranian EFL students? To deal with this question, a null hypothesis is made:

There is no relationship between practicing on cloze tasks and improving foreign language proficiency of Iranian students.

### Methodology

Seventy-one undergraduate students were employed. All of the participants were Iranian EFL students majoring in English at Islamic Azad University in Rasht. Moreover, they were all adults, both males and females. The TOEFL used in this study included three sub-tests with a total of one hundred items. In other words, the maximum score possible to obtain on TOEFL was 100. Different types of cloze tasks or alternative clozes were employed in this study. Seventy one students were employed and assigned into two groups. One group served as the experimental group (EG for short) and the other one functioned as the control group (CG hereafter). In order to find out whether the two groups were at the same level of knowledge of language proficiency or not, or to capture the initial differences, the subjects in each of these two groups, EG and CG, performed on the test of language proficiency, TOEFL. At this stage, the EG consisted of 35 students and the CG 36 students. However, among the CG, there were 4 outliers, that is, one student scored exceptionally high (92), and 3 other students scored exceptionally low (25, 29, 29). These unusual scores could unfavorably affect the result of the analysis, that is, increasing the standard deviation. Thus, these unusual scores were excluded and 32 participants remained to serve as the CG. Moreover, there were 2 outliers in the EG as well, in other words, 2 students scored exceptionally low (27, 29). Thus, in order to reduce the effect of these low scores on the outcome of the study, they were also excluded. Therefore, 33 participants served as the EG. The outliers in the two groups still attended their classes, but their scores were not taken into consideration in the statistical analyses.

Through application of the statistical technique of t-test formula, the two means of the two groups were compared. The two groups received their natural academic procedure during the course. Moreover, as for treatment, the EG received thirty cloze tasks of various types, each requiring ten minutes to be practiced on. EG was given some sets of disconnected sentences each with words of certain grammatical class deleted. Some short paragraphs with the words of certain grammatical class such as article, prepositions, verb forms, etc. deleted were employed. Several passages with certain deletions to be filled in only with one class of words, for instance, only prepositions were deleted. Since the difficulty level of the cloze tasks should not be below or above the students' linguistic ability, the Fog Index Formula was applied to compute the readability grades of both the participants' textbooks and the cloze tasks. The passages made into cloze tasks, were on general knowledge and did not require specialized information. Since familiarity with subject matter improves performance, after examining a number of textbooks, 'Reading Through Reading' was chosen, from which thirty passages were selected and made into cloze tasks. The participants in EG were advised to utilize the context which surrounded the blanks in order to guess at the missing items. They were required to read the passage quickly to get the general meaning, then write one word in each blank, and check their answers through reading the passage for a second time. All of these instructions and pieces of advice were given clearly and orally, and briefly with an example on the whitehead. Ten minutes of class time were spent on each weekly cloze task during the semester. In order to win the participants' contribution, and to motivate them, they were provided with marks, through scoring their performance on the cloze tasks. In order to post-test, and to find out whether practicing on cloze

tasks in class had improved language proficiency of participants in EG, the participants in both EG and CG performed on TOEFL similar to the TOEFL administered at the pre-test stage. The participants were scored one point for each correct answer. They were not penalized, and their wrong answers were considered as incorrect. After the post-test was administered, the results were put under statistical analysis to provide an answer to the research question. Thus in order to answer the question of this study, that is, do cloze tasks in class improve language proficiency of Iranian EFL students?, the two means of the two groups were compared.

#### Data Analysis

Several statistical techniques were performed to determine whether the null hypothesis of the study is confirmed or rejected. The results of the statistical analyses will be presented here in order to shed light on their significance.

##### 1. Analysis No. 1

**Table 1. t-test for the comparison of the performance of the two groups at the pre-test stage**

Group	N	Mean	Std	t-observed
EG	33	58.3	11.5	
CG	32	55.7	10.4	0.96

$p < 0.05$  df=63  
t-critical = 2.000

Table 1 indicates that the mean score for the CG was 55.7 while it was 58.3 for the EG. However, this mean difference could not suffice to claim the group difference. Therefore, an independent t-test was applied to compute the two means of the two groups in order to capture the initial differences.

##### 2. Analysis No. 2

When the instruction period was over, and the post-test was administered, a second comparison of the mean scores of the two groups on the pre-test turned out to be necessary because 3 participants (2 from EG, and 1 from CG) who had taken the pre-test were absent on the day when the post-test was administered. Consequently, all the following comparisons have been on the basis of the scores of the same 62 participants who took part in both pre-test and post-test. The figures are tabulated in Table 2.

**Table 2. t-test for the second comparison of the performance of the two groups at the pre-test stage**

Group	N	Mean	Std	t-observed
EG	31	59.8	10	
CG	31	55.6	10.6	1.61

$p < 0.05$  df=60  
t-critical = 2.000

##### 3. Analysis No. 3

In order to be post-tested, the participants in each of the two groups performed on a TOEFL similar to the TOEFL administered at the pre-test stage. In order to find the answer to the question of the study, that is, do cloze tasks in class improve language proficiency of Iranian EFL students?, the two means of the two groups were compared. In other words, through applying the independent t-test, it was demonstrated whether the two groups scored differently on the final test of language proficiency, the second TOEFL, or not. The result are presented in table 3 below.

**Table 3. t-test for the comparison of the performance of the two groups on the second TOEFL at the post-test stage**

Group	N	Mean	Std	t-observed
EG	31	66	10	
CG	31	57.3	11.8	3.2

$p < 0.05$  df=60 t-critical = 2.000

##### 4. Analysis No. 4

The statistical technique of matched t-test was applied twice. Once, to compare the performance of the EG on the pre-

test with that of the same group on the post-test, and then to compare the same two performances but this time those of the CG. The results are tabulated in table 4 below.

**Table 4. Matched t-test for comparing the performance of each group on the TOEFL tests at the pre- and post-test stages**

Group	Mean		Std	t-observed
	Pre-	Post-		
EG	59.8	66	1.1	5.6
CG	55.6	57.3		

$p < 0.05$  N=31 df=30 t-critical = 1.69

The mean score of the EG rose from 59.8 on the pre-test to 66 on the post-test, giving a gain score of 6.2 points of improvement, and the mean score of the CG from 55.6 on the pre-test to 57.3 on the post-test giving a gain score of 1.7 points of improvement.

#### Discussion And Conclusion

##### 1. Discussion of Analysis No. 1

On the basis of the results in table 1, it can safely be asserted that this study included two groups which were not statistically different in terms of their EFL proficiency at the outset of the study, that is, prior to the instructional phase. Having 63 degrees of freedom, we need at least a value of 2.000 before we could safely reject the null hypothesis at the 0.05 level of significance. In table 1, the observed t-value (0.96) is less than the critical t-value (2.000) with 63 degrees of freedom. Therefore, the difference between the two groups at the 0.05 level of probability proved not to be significant before the experiment.

##### 2. Discussion of Analysis No. 2

The reason why this second comparison was necessary to be made came from the need 1. to make sure whether the two groups remained the same in terms of their foreign language proficiency after the scores of the participants that had not taken post-test were excluded from the list of scores related to the pre-test and 2. to establish a firm basis for the later comparisons to be made between the data collected from the post-test with those of the pre-test because no comparison could be made between the mean score of each group on the post-test unless the very same participants were involved in both pre- and post-test stages.

On the basis of the results presented in table 2, it can be safely asserted that this study included two groups, which were not significantly different in terms of their foreign language proficiency prior to the instructional phase (t-observed = 1.61 < t-critical = 2.000).

##### 3. Discussion of Analysis No. 3

As table 3 indicates, the difference in the foreign language proficiency between the two groups was statistically significant. More specifically, the EG improved much more than the CG from the pre-test stage to post-test stage. In other words, the observed t-value (3.2) is more than the critical t-value (2.000) with 60 degrees of freedom at the 0.05 level of significance. (t-observed = 3.2 > t-critical = 2.000). Therefore, it can be concluded that practice on cloze passages is a very effective means for the improvement of foreign language proficiency. Thus, the null hypothesis of the present study, that is, there is no relationship between practicing on cloze tasks and improving Iranian foreign language proficiency was rejected.

##### 4. Discussion of Analysis No. 4

According to table 4, foreign language proficiency of both groups improved from pre-test stage to post-test stage. In other words, the mean score of the EG rose from 59.8 on the pre-test to 66 on the post-test, giving a gain score of 6.2 points of

improvement, and the mean score of the CG rose from 55.6 on the pre-test to 57.3 on the post-test, giving a gain score of 1.7 points of improvement.

Although the foreign language proficiency of these two groups improved from pre-test stage to post-test stage, the improvement in the EG was much more statistically significant than that of CG. In other words, the experimental group which was equal to CG in terms of foreign language proficiency before receiving the treatment came to differ from it after the instruction. Thus, the interpretation one can have here is that this difference is the result of the instruction that the EG received. In other words, giving Iranian EFL students in EG regular practice on cloze tasks was a very effective means for the development of foreign language proficiency. Hence, once more the null hypothesis of this study, there is no relationship between practicing on cloze tasks and improving FL proficiency, is rejected. The  $t$ -observed for EG = 5.6 >  $t$ -critical = 1.69 >  $t$ -observed for CG = 1.1.

This study was an attempt to introduce a means make students be constructive in the process of learning. Through taking cloze tasks in class, students were encouraged to undertake more global, and predictive processing, that is, they became proficient, active and information processors, who used a minimum number of semantic and syntactic clues to extract the maximum amount of information from the text. They were actually encouraged to take risks, to guess, and to ignore their impulses to be always correct and consequently enjoy the characteristic of a good language learner. In getting involved in such a problem solving activity as cloze task, the participants employed a large number of interrelated skills that form language system or the competence of the participants. Perhaps it is due to this point that Jones (1987) maintains that the cloze procedure challenges universal processing mechanism at all levels from word recognition to concept building and therefore responding to the items of a cloze task requires a great amount of higher order language proficiency. The participants in EC employed several strategies to complete the passages, that is, they made inferences or tested the hypothesis. In other words they made use of linguistic knowledge, textual knowledge, knowledge of the world. According to Rivers and Temperly (1978), these cloze tasks provide the students with thought-provoking exercises which turn them to look carefully at all structural and semantic clues, which is very close to using language normally. This could be why this study revealed that using cloze tasks is a very effective technique in improving students' foreign language proficiency. Therefore, according to Farhady (1994), cloze tasks are versatile techniques to be used for educational purposes. In other words, EFL teachers could find it useful to administer cloze tasks as diagnostic devices, that is, through applying such pedagogical tasks, teachers can detect the strengths and weaknesses of their students on a specific language area. Stafforred (1976) also pointed out the usefulness of regular practice with cloze passages as a means to show the students' ability to anticipate vocabulary and to demonstrate knowledge of structural relationship. Widdoson, cited by Nunan (1988), argues that classroom tasks could be justified, either because they replicate the sorts of tasks that learners would need to carry out in the real world, or because they simulate learning processes.

Farhady (1994) states that as an educational device, cloze tasks can be used to determine text-appropriacy for a particular level. Therefore, text designers can also benefit from administering cloze tasks when they want to produce texts of appropriate level of difficulty. This technique can provide a useful review exercise at the end of a grammatical unit. It can also provide diagnostic information at the beginning of a unit.

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