A CLOZE TEST FOR ADVANCED STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT. *In this article we will propose a language test for an advanced students class. We will regard the main points to bear in mind when designing a test, namely the context, the purpose and the structure of the test itself, and then we will write about how we are going to score the test data.*

Thus, our paper will be divided into four sections: (1) the stimulus material and the context of the test, (2) the task with its purpose and structure, (3) the management of the test data or scoring, and finally, (4) a comment on the reliability, validity and practicality of the test.

RESUMEN. *En este artículo proponemos un ejercicio o* test *para estudiantes avanzados de inglés. Consideraremos los principales puntos que hay que tener en cuenta al diseñar un* test: *el contexto o entorno, el propósito que se persigue, la estructuración de la prueba misma y la puntuación de los datos obtenidos en el ejercicio.*

Ete trabajo, por tanto, estará dividido en cuatro secciones: 1.ª el material de estímulo o enunciado y el contexto del test, *2.ª la tarea a realizar, con su propósito y estructura, 3.ª el manejo de los datos de la prueba o puntuación, y finalmente, 4.ª un comentario sobre si este tipo de* test *es fiable, válido y práctico.*

1. STIMULUS MATERIAL AND CONTEXT

The stimulus material plays an important role in testing because it provides the test with motivation, since the main reason why some tests fail might be found here. Our stimulus material reads as follows,

> Read this article carefully. During the first reading attempt to understand the meaning and the context of the text, and then fill in the blanks with the word(s) which you consider most appropriate.

The test we have chosen is only a part of a series of tests which will make up the final examination for first year university students who are likely to specialize in English Linguistics and Literature. This is our context.

It is taken for granted that these students will have an advanced level of English in terms of the four skills, that is, reading, writing, listening and oral interaction. This year is meant to be a comprehensive refresher course, and it is assumed that at the completion of the first year the students will be tested in the entirety of their knowledge and use of English.

The students are intended to be tested in all aspects of English language: grammar, vocabulary, sociocultural knowledge, etc. This is the main reason why we think a cloze test is most indicative of the students' linguistic abilities. It is necessary for the students to have a full command of the language, comprising the four types of competence: grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic competence[1], if these learners mean to succeed and pass the kind of test at issue, a cloze test.

2. THE TEST: A SAMPLE OF BEHAVIOUR

"Hunt for Sex Abuse Midnight Caller"

A frantic hunt was underway today for a suspected child abuser who announced on radio that he was about to molest his daughter.

The midnight caller to city radio (*station*) Rock 104 rang in to the (*live*) show and (*told*) shocked listeners that he sexually abused his (*child*) –and was going to do (*so*) again. The man first told listeners he (*had been*) abused by his mother.

"My mother (*taught*) me that I was her flesh and blood and she was entitled to do (*what*) she liked", he said.

But it was his next (*words*) that appalled listeners. "I have a little girl. The little girl and I regularly (*have*) sex", he revealed.

"I don't see anything (*wrong*) in it (*because*) the little girl is my flesh and blood".

Radio host Chris Barry told the man that if he was (*asked*) by the Gardai, he (*would*) give them the caller's number.

Gardai immediately (*contacted*) the station at O'Connell Bridge and asked for a tape and transcript of the (*interview*).

Technical (*experts*) at Garda Headquarters (*were*) today planning to examine the tape.

It's known the call was made from a public (*phone box*) in the Stillorgan (*area*).

"The guy rang (*off*), and the Gardai were (*listening*) and phoned us", said operations director, Martin Block.

He said the station was (*taking*) the matter seriously, but didn't know (*whether*) the call was a hoax (*or*) genuine.

Evening Herald. Friday 28, 1992, vol. 101 n° 50.

It is usually said in the linguistic literature that testing must be a reflection of what the learners have been taught. So, for example, in the text we see the difference between 'whether' and 'if' in the last paragragh; the students should be familiar with this point and fill in the blank satisfactorily.

Prior to the examination, during the teaching period, the students are supposed to have become used to cloze tests, so that by the time the test is administered they will feel mentally comfortable.

As authenticity[2] plays an important role in the students' motivation, the text used as the cloze test must be as realistic as possible and its topic, interesting enough for the students. We think that sex abuse is a topical issue for these students and, although the text has been manipulated because of the blanks, it still stays authentic as long as it is an article extracted from the *Evening Herald.*

During the teaching period, these students should have become aware of the grammatical as well as the sociolinguistic aspects of learning a language, and this kind of awareness or "sensitivity" will be tested through the cloze test. Thus what is asked of the students is their ability to carry out a general performance in the target language[3].

When you have to choose an appropriate test for advanced students some problems arise with respect to which type of test is most representative of the students' general performance. These problems lead to the fact that, as test designers, we have to make a series of decisions and always bear in mind what we want to measure with these tests.

The cloze test, as we pointed out above, is only an integral part of the examination itself. The first decision concerns which skills we want to test. Obviously, the four skills (reading, writing, listening and oral interaction) cannot be measured by means of the same test, but as other activities like listening comprehension and an oral interview are to follow in the examination, the cloze test itself intends to measure only the reading and writing skills of the students. So the test activities will focus on written language. This is one of the constraints which we face when we have to work with cloze tests. However, we cannot forget the main advantage of these tests, namely its focus on both receptive and productive skills.

Following Davies (1990), we distinguish between achievement, proficiency, aptitude and diagnostic tests in terms of content and time. The author defines the achievement test as that which refers back to what has been taught through the course syllabus. In other words, Davies (1990: 84) says:

> Achievement test refers back to previous learning and is concerned solely with that; they are typically used at the end of a period of learning. The content is a sample of what's been in the syllabus during the time under scrutiny.

This is precisely the purpose of a cloze test. These students have been taught a series of linguistic items which the test should reflect. This test should cover not only

grammar and vocabulary, but also pragmatic aspects of language which have been signalled in the learning programme the learners have been presented with.

According to Hughes (1989), we should make a difference between direct and indirect testing, discrete point and integrative testing, norm-referenced and criterion-referenced testing, and objective and subjective testing. These differences are based on the purpose which a certain test should fulfill. From this idea it derives that a cloze test may be defined as an indirect testing since it requires the students to perform some specific skills, but also means to measure the abilities underlying the skills which we are interested in. The cloze test attempts to measure certain abilities, but also the students are asked to show competence in other areas which make the test much more comprehensive (in the sense of Canale and Swain 1979).

A cloze test may be integrative because it requires the students to match different language items in the completion of a task. It is also a criterion-referenced testing in the sense that it tells the tester about what the student can and cannot do in the language without comparing him/ her with other individuals of the same group. And finally a cloze test is objective in terms of the scoring of the data.

In short, we can say that the main purpose of the cloze test is to measure the entire knowledge of language which the learners have acquired.

Wesche (1983) points out that there exists a continuum between the opposite tests: discrete point and integrative, indirect and direct, and norm- and criterion-referenced testing[4]. Although we have looked upon cloze tests as an indirect, integrative, and criterion-referenced testing, sometimes it results in a direct test of some specific grammatical point as it happens when the students are tested about the tense in conditional clauses. This can be seen in our text: "[...] if he was ___ by the Gardai, he ___ give them the caller's number". In this sense, it can also be a discrete point test. And finally, if a student's linguistic behaviour is compared with the performance of the rest of the group the test would be nearer the norm-referenced pole in the continuum.

However, as a rule we will consider the cloze test an indirect, integrative and criterion-referenced testing.

3. THE MANAGEMENT OF TEST DATA

Once the students have completed the test it is time for the tester to score the responses. We have run through two test components so far, the stimulus material and the task itself which requires a response by the testee. Now we turn to the third component, namely the management of the test data. We have to decide in what manner we are going to score the students' responses.

Following Baker (1989), two problems should be solved: first, how to manage these data which must be scored as easily as possible, and second, how to interpret the

data with respect to the purpose of the test. In this particular case, the cloze test has twenty-five gaps. We think that the best way to score the responses is to regard each correct answer as being worth four points. If the student has filled in all the gaps correctly he will be given a hundred points. We would suggest the following hierarchical scale of marks, according to the number of correct responses the student might have given:

$$
\begin{array}{lcl}
25 & \underline{\hspace{2cm}} & 100 \\
18 & \underline{\hspace{2cm}} & 75 \\
12/13 & \underline{\hspace{1.5cm}} & 50 \\
11\text{-}0 & \underline{\hspace{1.5cm}} & 49\text{-}0
\end{array}
$$

This will stand only for a part of the overall grade of the examination, which will be assigned a nominal scale in terms of A, B, C and D.

The very purpose of this test was to measure the students' writing and reading skills. So if they have succeeded with 100 or 75 points this will indicate that they are fluent in writing and reading; if they only get 50 points they will be considered to have a good use of the English language, although not completely fluent; and finally, those students who obtain less than 50 points will be viewed as not having assimilated the course contents yet.

4. RELIABILITY, VALIDITY AND PRACTICALITY

Now we will dive into the question of the reliability, validity and practicality of this test. Davies (1990: 126) describes reliability as "consistency of test judgments and results"; and Harris (1969: 14) says that "by reliability is meant the stability of test scores". Two types of reliability are involved: that of the test itself and that of the scoring of the test.

Among the reasons why a test results in being unreliable is the students' lack of motivation which may stem from a poor introduction to the test by the examiner or from the topic itself. That is why, in the stimulus material, we advised the students to establish the context and general meaning of the text; and also that is why we chose a topic like sex abuse in which the learners are likely to be interested.

The scoring of the test may affect the very essence of its reliability in that some gaps could be filled in with more than one possible word. However, if the word used by students is appropriate in context we will consider this response correct although it was not the answer which we would have preferred.

For the issue of validity two questions are asked by Harris (1969): firstly, what precisely does the test measure?, and secondly, how well does the test measure? Here again the point is the purpose of the test. As we mentioned above, the intention is to

examine the entire knowledge which the learner should have after the completion of the course. In this sense the cloze test measures some of the skills which we wish to measure, namely writing and reading. The other two skills are to be tested in subsequent tests. Also in the cloze test the student is encouraged to use his/ her knowledge of grammar, vocabulary, sociocultural elements, etc., which contribute revealing to us his/ her general knowledge and competence. Following this line, we think that cloze tests should almost always be considered valid because it measures what we want to measure and does so in a comprehensive way which is the main objective of the examination.

When one wants to know if the test is practical, one should consider some aspects which lead us to look upon the test as being practical. Of all the considerations we have found in the literature we think that ease of scoring and ease of interpretation play a fundamental role in the test's practicality.

5. CONCLUSION

We have looked at the different components of testing and shown how the cloze test works out as a good means of testing. It comprises several aspects to analyze in the students' linguistic performance (grammar, vocabulary, sociocultural knowledge, etc.) and it emphasizes the important role which authenticity and motivation play in testing. We are conscious of the difficulties that a cloze test involves, especially its impossibility to measure the students' four skills, but, as we have maintained, it constitutes only a part of the overall examination.

In conclusion, we claim that one of the tests which fulfills the three conditions of validity, reliability and practicality is the cloze test.

NOTES

1. For the different learning techniques that strategic competence involves, see O'Malley, Chamot, *et al.* (1985).
2. Authenticity and authentic texts are treated in Little, Devitt and Singleton (1988).
3. Although we cannot test, by means of a cloze test, the four linguistic skills which a student should come up with, this paper is based on the notion of communicative competence; so we have to bear in mind that we are concerned here with the students' linguistic behaviour. A very interesting approach to communicative competence can be found in Singleton and Little (1985).
4. Wesche (1983) carries out a very useful study of these continua. We agree with her in that it is quite difficult to define a given test as, for example, discrete point or integrative. Rather, we think that each kind of test may be viewed as being closer to one pole or another on the scale, depending on what the focus of the test itself is.

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