

The Effect of the Modified Cloze Procedure on the Writing Proficiency of Iranian Intermediate EFL Learners

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ABSTRACT

The present study was conducted to investigate the effect of modified cloze procedure on writing proficiency of Iranian intermediate EFL learners. To fulfill the purpose of the study, 110 participants studying at Semnan University majoring in English literature were tested on CELT proficiency test. 65 participants who were found to be homogenous were selected and assigned randomly to two groups of 32 and 33, one as experimental group and the other as a control group. Then, both groups were tested on a composition as a pre-test in the first session. During 15 minutes of each session the students in both groups were provided with explicit explanations about methods of paragraph development. After instructors teaching, the experimental group was provided with a cloze passage as a prewriting activity. Then they were asked to write their own paragraph similar to the cloze passage in terms of topic and method of development. On the other hand, the participants of the control group had no treatment. They were given a topic each session about which they wrote a composition. The given topics were similar to those of the experimental group. At the end of the term, the two groups were post-tested given the same topic of the pretest to write a composition (post-test). The papers of both groups in pre-test and post-test were assessed by the researcher and two other raters. In order to estimate the degree of relationship between the scores given by the raters to the first and last compositions of both groups, a correlation coefficient test (the Pearson product moment correlation) was adapted. Then the means of both groups were compared through the application of a t- test. The result indicated that there is a statistically significant difference between the performances of both groups. It was concluded that the participants who received cloze passages on writing, outperformed those who did not in writing.

Keywords: modified cloze procedure, cloze test, writing proficiency

Introduction

Second and foreign language writing is a complex process particularly for elementary and intermediate language learners. According to Li (2000), this complex process may be attributed to the information -processing constraints of second or foreign language writing which require learners to allocate attention to one of the aspects of syntactic complexity or grammatical accuracy, etc. at the expense of the other one. As a matter of fact, second or foreign language learners find it difficult to attend to form and meaning simultaneously.

Producing successful written text is a complex task which requires simultaneous control over a number of language systems as well as an ability to take into consideration the ways the discourse must be shaped for a particular purpose (Celce-Murcia 2001). On the other hand, cloze procedure has been extensively investigated from both theoretical and methodological perspectives. Cloze is now one of the most popular testing techniques, especially for assessing general language proficiency of EFL/ ESL learners.

Heaten (1990) states, "performance on cloze test correlates highly with the reading, writing and speaking abilities" (p.17).

Hughes (2003) declared, "In doing cloze test, learners make use of the abilities that underlie all their language performance. In this study cloze passage is considered as prewriting activity."

Carter and Nunan (2001) found strong relationship between testers' performance in integrative tests (such as cloze test) and in the sub-components of various other test batteries, testing other language skills, such as writing and speaking (p.139)

According to Celce-Murcia (2001) cloze procedure is one of the Grammar-based exercises which focuses attention on the flow of information across sentences and requires students to use the discourse context to select words that best fit and create effective cohesion. Students usually enjoy exercises based on their own writing; they could even create their own cloze passages from a paragraph they have written and exchange them with a classmate. Cloze passages based on student texts can serve as an error correction technique.

Whatever the source, cloze passage can provide an excellent context for discussing syntactic, semantic or pragmatic features across sentence boundaries, and may influence writer's selections of such grammatical items as articles and pronouns.

Objectives of the study

Anyone who has taught second language writing would probably find themselves nodding in agreement with Casanave's (2004) recent assertion that "perhaps the most consuming of all dilemmas for L2 writing teachers is how to best help their students improve their writing" (p.64). English writing is gaining great attention and having an important role in learning and communication. However among other skills, writing remains the most difficult. Therefore some new methods and activities are needed to maximize the efficiency of traditional methods and keep students interested in writing. Thus, different kinds of competence have come into play, and cloze is one of them.

Cloze tests, because of their specific nature, have attracted the students' attention more than other tests. Most of the writing teachers raise a question about a particular subject and discuss it with students in class and then ask them to write a pas-

sage with that background knowledge. They are not quite involved with the specific grammatical details, special orders and coherence of text. In this regard, cloze tests are the easiest instruments available for covering all the various aspects and points in a paragraph and also for activating the student's background information

Since writing is a skill which requires different kinds of components together, an integrated approach that teaches language abilities holistically is the most appropriate. Cloze test is an example of integrative test which assess various sub-skills all at the same time.

These issues gave rise to a new idea; the idea of devising new techniques and activities for teaching writing. Although some valuable attempts have been made to improve writing proficiency of learners, but yet, the outcomes, have been unsatisfactory. It seems quite necessary to change the method of teaching writing by using enjoyable techniques. One of the so called activities is the application of cloze test as a complementary practice in the classroom. Cloze tests because of their specific nature have attracted the students' attention more than other tests. Especially, an alternative form of cloze procedure which is modified cloze procedure is more suitable for the teaching purpose and grammatical focus.

Consequently, the purpose of the present study was to investigate the effects of the modified cloze procedure on the writing proficiency of Iranian EFL learners.

Research Question and hypothesis

The major objective of this study was to verify the use and possible effect of modified cloze procedure on writing proficiency of Iranian EFL learners. For this purpose, the following research question was addressed:

Q: Does modified cloze procedure have any significant effect on writing proficiency of Iranian EFL learners?

And to take the safe side to achieve the aim of the study and to find the crucial answer to the above question, the following null hypothesis was proposed:

H0: Modified cloze procedure does not have any significant effect on writing proficiency of

Iranian EFL learners.

Methodology

Subjects

The participants in this study were 110 Iranian intermediate EFL learners. They were all native speakers of Persian with the age range of 19 to 27 majoring in English literature.

Instrumentation

Four instruments were used to collect the data needed for this study: two compositions (as a pre-test and a post-test), cloze tests and a standard test of CELT. CELT was used as a standardized measure to check the homogeneity of participants in terms of their language proficiency level. Two compositions were assigned to the experimental and the control group, one in the first and one in the last session of the semester. The subjects were required to write their compositions in one paragraph. The other test that the teacher administered was a teacher made cloze test. Ten cloze passages were prepared and presented to the experimental group during ten sessions of treatment.

Procedure

In order to conduct the research to verify the research hypothesis the following steps were taken:

In order to homogenize the students, 110 participants were tested on CELT proficiency test. Sixty five subjects were selected. In other words those who scored one standard deviation above and one standard deviation below the mean were selected 65 subjects were selected and assigned randomly to two groups of 33 and 32. One of which was considered as the experimental group and the other as the control group.

The subjects in both experimental and control group were tested on a composition as a pre-test in the first session. The first compositions of both groups were assessed analytically by the researcher and two experienced English teachers with M.A. degrees who were familiar with the writing module. The raters read each composition independently; then for the ease of assessing and following the same scale of scoring, they followed the same proposed index. This index was Jacobs et al.'s (1981) scoring profile. In order to

check the inter-rater reliability of the rater's judgment, a correlation coefficient test (the Pearson Product Correlation) was adapted. The means of the three raters' scores were considered as the subjects' scores on the composition.

In the following 10 sessions of the semester, the subjects in the experimental group were provided with ten cloze passages. The readability level of texts was calculated using fog index of readability. In order to evaluate the students' understanding of the text, a text with readability index of 16 because of the level of students was selected and piloted to a group of students who were similar to the participants of the study in terms of age, sex, level of proficiency and field of study. After piloting, the test was analyzed using item analysis. It was then decided to select 10 other cloze tests with the same or nearly the same readability index. During 15 minutes of each session the students in both groups were provided with explicit explanations about methods of paragraph development. The instructor taught the participants different methods of paragraph development such as cause and effect, comparison and contrast, analogy, exemplification, etc. in each session. After the instructor's teaching, the experimental group was provided with a cloze passage as a prewriting activity. Then they were asked to write their own paragraph similar to the cloze passage in terms of topic and method of development.

On the other hand, the participants of the control group had no pre writing activity. They were given a topic each session and they wrote a composition. The given topics were the ones similar to those given to the experimental group. The teacher also allocated ten minutes for discussing the topic to the control group to establish fair time for both groups. At the end of the course, the participants in both the experimental and control group were given the same pre-test topic to write a composition (post-test). These final compositions were corrected in exactly the same way as the pre-test by the same raters.

Results

In order to make sure that the two control and Experimental groups did not differ significantly or in other words, they were homogeneous, at the first phase of this study, a CELT test was administered which included structure, vocabulary and reading tests. Those subjects who scored within

the range of one standard deviation above and below the mean were selected as homogenous. The results are illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for CELT test

Test	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	std. Deviation
CELT	110	65	155	88.00	24.751

As the table 1 indicates, the minimum of selected scores was 65 and the maximum 155. Subjects whose scores were within the range of 63.249- to 112.751 were chosen as homogenous participants of the study. The others were excluded. After administering the pre-test, the mean score and standard deviation of the experimental group were 14.03 and 1.62 respectively and the mean score and standard deviation of the control group were 14.06 and 4.692 that were very close to each other.

These numbers, which differ slightly, indicate that subjects in both groups are approximately homogenous. A t-test was run between pre and post tests which is indicated in table 2.

The T-observed is lower than T-critical. Since the T-observed is 0.056 and the T-critical is 2.000 for df. 55, it can be concluded that the performance of the two groups were at the same level before the treatment. After the treatment was administered for 10 sessions to the experimental group, a posttest, another composition test which

was the same as pre-test, was taken by the students of control and experimental groups. The mean of control group is 15.20, while the mean of experimental group is 16.05.

To see whether the treatment was effective or not, the means of two tests were compared through and the t-test (Table 3).

According to the table 3 t-critical with 62 degrees of freedom (df) for 0.05 level 2.000. Therefore, the t- value which is 4.745 is high enough that we can safely reject the null hypothesis. Hence, the researcher's interpretation is that the treatment the experimental group has received served the intended purpose.

Conclusion

The main concern of this study was to test whether or not Modified Cloze Procedure can make any significant effect on the writing proficiency of intermediate EFL learners, and whether this effect would be equal on both groups.

To assure and determine if any significant change appeared in the writing proficiency of our groups of subjects, in general, and the experimental group, in particular, after receiving the treatment, the results of performance of each group at the pre-test was compared with the results of its performance at the post-test stage applying t-tests.

A t-test was run which is presented in the table 2.

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means					
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference
									Lower Upper
SCORE of pre-test	Equal variances assumed	.029	.867	.056	55	.956	.02415	.43127	-.84014 .88844
	Equal variances not assumed			.056	52.07	.955	.02415	.43045	-.83959 .88789

Table 3: Comparing means in the post test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means					
Group2		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference
									Lower Upper
SCOR Post-test	Equal variances assumed	0.117	0.733	-4.745	62	0.000	-2.01563	0.424833	-2.864854 -1.166396
	Equal variances not assumed			-4.745	61.56514	0.000	-2.01563	0.424833	-2.864973 -1.166277

Running t-tests revealed a significant increase in the performance of subjects in the experimental group; this means that the subjects in the experimental group benefited significantly from their special treatment with cloze procedure. In addition, the results of the t-test made the researcher reject the null hypothesis and answer the research questions.

Pedagogical Implications

The current investigation has provided support for the value of cloze procedure as effective teaching tools, and as a word-search-puzzle game as evidenced by the significant differences found between control and experimental learners.

Most of the writing instructors raise a question about a particular subject and discuss it with students in class and then ask them to write a passage with that background knowledge. They are not quite involved with the specific grammatical details, special orders and coherence of the text. In this regard, cloze tests are the easiest instruments available for covering all the various aspects and points in a paragraph and also for activating the students background information. Consequently, the researchers suggest that writing instructors apply this instrument in class to achieve the goals of writing much more conveniently. Novice instructors may especially benefit from the findings of this study; as they have little experience to teach writing they rely on books and they do as the books say. So this study could be a way to help him /her improve the writing of students.

Given that so much writing research suggests that there is no single, fixed, universal concept of good writing (see, Bloch, 2001; Li, 1996; Shi 2002), then helping novice writers appreciate a variety of criteria for varyingly purposeful written communication with various types of readers (including teachers) may be exactly what's needed. Students would also find cloze tests a practical way of learning various types of paragraph development. They recognize that for completing a cloze passage, they should follow a logical order specific to the language of that passage. Furthermore, most of the students have trouble at getting started with their writing. This can be alleviated if students are given cloze tests to receive activating information.

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