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BOOK REVIEW



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Assessing Second Language Reading: Insights from Cloze Tests, Karim Sadeghi. Springer (2021). XII + 231 pp., ISBN: 978-3-030-84472-1.

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As assessment assumes a pivotal role in language education, the quest for the most valid, reliable, practical, and all in all, effective assessment has gained momentum (Kremmel & Harding, 2020). This quest has led to the emergence of different types of testing techniques, one of which is the cloze test (Gellert & Elbro, 2013). Rooted in his Ph.D. dissertation, Karim Sadeghi endeavors to provide a thorough treatment of the extent to which the cloze test can be employed as an appropriate and valid measure of reading comprehension in his recently published book *Assessing Second Language Reading: Insights from Cloze Tests*. The book comprises 10 chapters and offers an authoritative account of L2 reading and the cloze procedure before evaluating a range of cloze tests both quantitatively and qualitatively.


Chapter 1 explains that the cloze test has been employed extensively since 1953, but no clear answer has been provided to the question of what it actually measures and whether it is an appropriate technique to assess reading comprehension. Consequently, the author attempts to shed more light on the nature of the cloze procedure by providing quantitative and qualitative data from the Iranian 'English as a foreign language' (EFL) context and seeks an answer to the research question "Is cloze procedure a valid measurement tool for assessing second language reading?".

Chapter 2 presents discussions on the nature of reading, chronologically reflecting different theoretical orientations supported by empirical evidence. While reading was treated as a skill emphasizing bottom-up processes till the early 1970s, the psycholinguistic perspective influenced the conceptualization of reading later in the 1970s, and interactive models of reading which underlined the interaction between the bottom-up and top-down processes were widely welcomed in the 1980s. As for what reading comprehension is, the chapter offers views held by different camps: some researchers believe that reading involves comprehension, but others divorce reading from comprehension contending that reading is decoding written symbols and

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constructing meaning based on readers' frame of reference. Reading comprehension is concluded to be a dynamic, interactive, and constructive process influenced by the reader's world knowledge, linguistic knowledge, and memory. Next, the chapter covers the factors affecting reading comprehension which unfold into two: internal factors (reader variable) and external factors (text variable, context variable, and writer variable). Although written symbols (visual input) are necessary, the reader's schemata play a pivotal role in successful comprehension. In addition, cognitive abilities and intelligence are listed as internal factors influencing reading comprehension. As for the external variables, besides the context and the writer variables, the alphabet, the cues such as headings, subtitles, capitalization and underlining, lexical density, syntactic complexity, and semantic abstractness are highlighted as the factors influencing reading comprehension. The chapter also touches upon the L1-L2 relationship in reading comprehension and briefly summarizes linguistic interdependence and threshold hypotheses. The research findings conclude that L1 reading ability and L2 proficiency predict L2 reading. The chapter concludes with a warning that reading comprehension is an elusive construct affected by many factors and reading tests may only help test reading comprehension partially.

Chapter 3 focuses on how context impacts reading comprehension. Comprehension in written language is mentioned to be affected by the reader's linguistic proficiency, knowledge of vocabulary, and background knowledge. Considering the role of syntax in comprehension, garden path sentences are relatively easier to comprehend. Text-genre is highlighted as another factor influencing comprehension. Among the procedural, narrative, and argumentative genres, argumentative is indicated as the most demanding one. Finally, when explaining the relationship between language and thought, linguistic determinism and linguistic universalism are disfavored, and linguistic relativism is presented as the most rational perspective.

Chapter 4 presents an in-depth survey of the cloze procedure. The learning theory of communication and Gestalt psychology and the concept of redundancy in information theory lay down the theoretical foundation of the cloze procedure. The chapter also focuses on how to construct a cloze test. To ease the burden of managing text coherence, it is advised to give the first and the last sentence(s) in a text complete. It is also suggested to use culturally and intellectually neutral texts of medium difficulty to discriminate between good and poor learners. The texts are to be long enough to allow the appropriate number of deletions with an optimal rate. Explaining the deletion rate in a cloze test, random deletion through which the deletions in a text are arbitrary is criticized as optimal deletion rate may not be managed and there may not be enough context to infer meaning. Pseudo-random deletion or fixed-ratio deletion, which is based on deleting every "nth" item systematically is also discussed; and as an alternative to these deletion procedures, the rational method is proposed as a more viable means of testing comprehension. In terms of scoring procedures, the advantages and disadvantages of exact-word scoring and acceptable-word scoring procedures are provided, but no conclusive answer is given as to which one may be superior. Regarding the varieties of a cloze procedure, modified cloze, two-word choice cloze, maze, selected-deletion, sel del gap test, multiple-choice cloze, semantic cloze, cohesion, cloze, summary cloze, C-test, and cloze-elide are presented and their reliability and validity are studied. No conclusive evidence has been found as to which one is more effective to test reading comprehension. Next, the chapter provides a summary of the range of abilities the cloze test has been used to measure, namely readability, intelligence, retention of knowledge, reading comprehension, and language proficiency. The final part of the chapter focuses on the validity and reliability of the cloze test. As what the cloze test measures and the effect of non-linguistic factors affecting the performance on the test result are inconclusive, determining its content and construct validity is not a simple task.

Chapter 5 describes the first quantitative study carried out in Iran, aiming to investigate whether the cloze test measures reading comprehension properly. For this purpose, it seeks to put the criterion-related validity of the cloze test against the International English Language Testing System (IELTS). The findings indicated that there is a significant relationship between the easy and medium standard score cloze test and the IELTS reading section. However, no statistically significant difference is observed between the difficult standard cloze test and the IELTS reading section. It is concluded that the standard cloze test is a valid test to gauge EFL reading comprehension as far as correlational validity can be trusted.

Chapter 6 describes a complementary study to investigate the validity and appropriacy of the cloze test in measuring L2 reading. The criterion-related validity of the cloze test against the First Certificate in English (FCE) and Cambridge Advanced Examination (CAE) is investigated. No statistically significant relationship between the cloze tests (standard, rational, and phrase-cloze test) and FCE and CAE reading test was observed in measuring reading comprehension. On the other hand, a statistically significant positive relationship between student-centered cloze and the FCE and CAE reading test was found. As a conclusion, it is asserted that the cloze test, in general, may fail to assess L2 reading comprehension validly.

Chapter 7 recaps the qualitative data obtained via interviews that accompanied the quantitative data in Chapter 6. It was reported that the students did not have a clear conceptualization of what reading is and they associated it with academic reading they did in their EFL classes. The participants did not favor cloze as a testing procedure and the majority believed that it tests the knowledge of vocabulary and grammar. They indicated that the cloze is far from reflecting their L2 reading comprehension, thus the cloze was not considered as a valid and appropriate measure to test it.

Chapter 8 analyses data obtained from student questionnaires to provide further evidence about the validity and appropriateness of the cloze test to measure L2 reading comprehension. The students considered the cloze as a test, stating that it has face validity. They found the cloze cognitively more demanding than a normal test. It was also observed that topic familiarity and practice effect impacted their cloze test performance. To sum up, the quantitative data revealed that the cloze is not a valid measure of L2 reading comprehension and its judgmental validity is not within the acceptable range. Qualitative analysis indicated that the cloze was perceived negatively and remarked as a test of vocabulary, grammar, writing, general English, general information, memory, intelligence, and imagination. It was not recognized as a natural, normal real-life task. Cloze-takers believed that the cloze tests they took were influenced by different practices, such as deleting keywords, content, or function words, the position of the deleted words (in the beginning, middle, or end of the text). The tests were found to be inefficient to reflect their actual level of L2 reading comprehension. In a nutshell, the cloze test was perceived as a very difficult and invalid technique to test reading comprehension and its judgmental validity was not justified.

Chapter 9 presents the qualitative data obtained from EFL teachers. They perceived the cloze test as an appropriate technique, especially for advanced-level students. All of them used it to test reading comprehension, but also as a means of testing vocabulary, grammar, proficiency, background knowledge, and memory. They did not consider the cloze test as a valid measure of reading comprehension, however. They believed that cloze scores reflect the actual performance of advanced students, but not that of the weaker ones. All in all, it can be concluded that the cloze test may fail to test L2 reading comprehension accurately and it may test other factors more than reading comprehension. Chapter 10 provides an overall summary of the findings and discussions presented so far, and the research question "Is cloze procedure a valid measure of EFL reading comprehension?" is answered negatively.

The book provides an in-depth perspective for what reading comprehension is and whether the cloze procedure is a valid measure of L2 reading comprehension. For years, the cloze procedure has been employed assuming that it measures readers' text comprehension. However, Karim Sadeghi questions the basic nature of reading and its theoretical foundations and those of the cloze test. The book shakes the long-lasting assumptions about reading and the cloze tests – what they are and what they measure. As such, the book has substantial ramifications for language assessment. For years, international testing services and teachers have been under the illusion that the cloze procedure is a valid testing technique and they have employed it confidentially. As for now, they are expected to take a more cautious approach toward it and gather enough empirical evidence before using it to measure reading comprehension. As a way of improvement and to make the book more coherent, redundancies in chapters 2 and 4, where the same issues are revisited every now and then, can be removed in a later edition. Moreover, chapters 5 to 9 could be summarized in one chapter to allow more space to discuss the content more succinctly.

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