
Auditory Cloze: Teaching Listening Comprehension Skills Creatively

With an increased focus on the role of listening comprehension in the language acquisition process, there is a great need for foreign and second language educators to provide authentic learning materials which will augment the development of listening comprehension skills. In this article, the author suggests auditory cloze exercises as one way to aid the process of developing listening comprehension. The suggested exercises are similar to written cloze—where words are systematically deleted from a text at intervals determined by the instructor—with one notable exception: Auditory cloze omits fewer words. Passages for auditory cloze exercises can be prerecorded on audio tape, video tape, or read “live” in the classroom. In addition to discussing the auditory cloze procedure, the author provides sample exercises (French, German, and Spanish) with guidelines for their instructional use.

Target Language Competence Through Input

In recent years, second-language researchers have emphasized the silent or pre-speech period of language acquisition during which time the learner is to internalize language which will later be generated spontaneously (e.g., Asher, 1972; Gary & Gary, 1981; Gibbons, 1985; Postovsky, 1974; Winitz & Reeds, 1973). Thus, during the early stages of language instruction, the focus of research has switched from speech production to comprehension, and theories of language learning based on imitation and habit-formation have been

replaced by theories and models which emphasize the *creativity of the learner* in the production phase. Labelled “creative construction” by some theorists (Littlewood, 1984), these increasingly influential models of second language acquisition posit the following: As a result of natural processing strategies and exposure to the second language in situations where real communication is occurring, the learner constructs a series of internal representations of the second language system, and, on the condition that the proper kind of exposure takes place, the learner’s internal representations will gradually develop in predictable stages toward native speaker competence.

Furthermore, a notable feature of the creative construction emphasis is that internal processing depends on input from the language environment and is not directly dependent upon attempts by the learner to produce the target language; learner utterances are not a factor contributing to the process of internalization, but rather, a natural outcome of system internalization. A popular and influential model that supports this notable feature of creative construction is that of Krashen and Terrell (1983) who postulate that fluency in a second language is not taught directly, but emerges by itself as a result of competence which has been acquired through input. If competence is acquired through input, then the role of listening comprehension becomes a topic of considerable debate.

A widely used technique which purports to enhance target language competence through input is the Total Physical Response (TPR) approach in which students respond physically to commands given by the instructor (e.g., Asher,

Kusudo & de la Torre, 1974; Asher, 1977). Although TPR requires active student participation—"Close the window, please. See if anyone is at the door. Give the book on my desk to the student wearing the green sweater"—and provides a context to help students understand the language they hear, it suffers from the constraints imposed by the repeated use of the imperative (Krashen, 1982). Moreover, some educators question whether the learner wants or needs to follow commands such as those commonly used in TPR classes (*British Journal of Language Teaching*, 22(1), 1984, pp. 54-56.). A further weakness of this approach is the fact that it is rather limited in terms of the level at which it can be used effectively. It is best suited for the initial phases of language instruction when concrete rather than abstract lexical terms are usually taught.

The Cloze Procedure

Although the cloze procedure was originally developed to determine the readability of texts (Taylor, 1953), it has gained wide acceptance as a test of reading comprehension and general language proficiency in both foreign and English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) classrooms (e.g., Hanzeli, 1977; Oller & Conrad, 1971; Stubbs & Tucker, 1974). The concept "cloze" (closure) is derived from a term used in Gestalt psychology which refers to the human tendency to complete mentally familiar but incomplete patterns; for example, to see a broken circle as a whole one (Schulz, 1981).

Various formats have evolved which apply the principles of closure to the reading text. In open-ended cloze exercises, for example, every *n*th word or randomly selected words are deleted from a reading passage. The learner's task is to restore the text by supplying the missing words. In multiple-choice cloze exercises, the missing word must be selected from a pool of words provided near each blank or at the end of the reading passage (Jonz, 1976; Wipf, 1981). In the so-called C-Test version of cloze, half of every other word is deleted after the first sentence of the passage has been provided in its entirety (Raatz & Klein-Braley, 1982). In the less frequently used version of cloze, sometimes

referred to as reverse cloze, randomly chosen extraneous words are added to the text at random intervals. The learner's task is to delete the nonsense words (Jones, 1977).

In spite of its popularity in the teaching and testing of reading, the cloze concept has never received serious consideration as an effective tool for the teaching of listening comprehension. This is unfortunate, since in an auditory format, cloze holds great promise for developing techniques which are critical for the acquisition of receptive skills, namely, predicting, contextual guessing, testing, confirming, and correcting (Goodman, 1973). John W. Oller (1974) refers to the process whereby the listener or reader formulates hypotheses based on the internalized grammar of the language (a process he calls the "grammar of expectancy") as the chief mechanism underlying acquisition of the four language skills.

Auditory Cloze Procedures

The basic approach to auditory cloze exercises is similar to that of written cloze: Words are deleted in a systematic pattern determined by the instructor. Rather than seeing the message in print, the learner hears the message as it is read "live" by the instructor or from a recording (audio or video). Missing words are indicated by an appropriate auditory or visual cue such as a beep on the tape, the tap of a pencil on the desk, or a hand signal. Responses can be given audibly, or they can be written.

Construction and Use of Auditory Cloze Exercises. A sufficient number of sentences must remain intact at the beginning of each auditory cloze exercise so the learner can establish a point of reference and the contextual framework in which the utterances are used. This procedure differs from the written cloze where, as a rule, only the first sentence has no deletions since the reader has the luxury of unlimited repetitions.

Deletion Rate. In written cloze, typically, every fifth, sixth, or seventh word is deleted. Because memory is a critical factor in auditory cloze, deletion cannot be as severe; hence, a deletion rate of one in every ten to twelve words is more appropriate for auditory cloze.

Forward/Backward Referencing. If necessary, the learner should have the option of forward referencing. This is achieved by orally providing him or her with the text which follows a deletion, i.e., the remainder of a phrase or sentence. Similarly, the learner should have the option of backward referencing which can be accomplished by re-reading parts of the text. In the language laboratory, auditory cloze exercises provide the learner with unlimited opportunities to engage in both forward and backward referencing: He or she can fast forward or rewind the tape as often as necessary.

Multiple Correct Answers. In auditory cloze, students should be encouraged to produce multiple correct responses. A strength of the auditory cloze procedure is that more than one answer is acceptable for many of the deletions. This strength of auditory cloze inspires confidence on the part of the learner to guess intelligently—a strategy used by successful language learners.

Incorrect Responses. In the event that learners give only incorrect responses or no responses at all, the instructor has several options: He or she can re-read the cue statement(s); if there is still no correct response, the answer can be cued by writing the first one or two letters of the response on the chalkboard. Providing a prefix or the first part of a compound word is also effective. Giving audible cues from the same grammatical category as the answer, but semantically incorrect, is another alternative. For example, if the answer must be a past participle, instructors can give several past participles which are contextually unacceptable. If, after all the above-mentioned options have been tried, there still is no response, an acceptable answer or answers can be provided orally, in writing, or both.

Reinforcement. For purposes of reinforcement and the achievement of overall cloze, the entire passage can be re-read (with emphasis on the words/expressions that had been deleted) after the listening exercise has been completed.

Suitability of Responses. The instructor should entertain student questions about the suitability or appropriateness of various responses. A

distinct advantage of auditory cloze is that immediate, positive feedback can be provided for the learner; in written cloze exercises, longer periods of time elapse before students know how well they performed. If there is student interest, the content of a passage should be discussed as well.

Adapting Video Segments

Now readily available, narrated videocassettes are another source which can be adapted for use with auditory cloze exercises in the language laboratory or in the classroom. Preparation of video/auditory cloze exercises depends on the speed and quality of the original soundtrack and the type of equipment available for making the deletions.

Deletions. Ideally, a video editor should be used and would, in fact, be necessary to delete single words or short utterances from the middle of a rapidly spoken narration. However, good quality exercises can be prepared from a soundtrack of average pace narration in the following manner: Place the original or source videocassette into a videocassette recorder (VCR) whose audio-and-video OUT jacks have been connected by cables to the audio-and-video IN jacks of another VCR into which you have placed a blank videocassette tape. Put the VCR with the blank videocassette into the RECORD mode and the VCR with the original or source videocassette into the PLAY mode. Just prior to the word or phrase you wish to delete, use the PAUSE mode on the VCR with the original or source videocassette and let the recording VCR run for the duration of the time you consider adequate for the learner to supply the missing items. Pauses of at least 15 seconds are recommended for words; 30 seconds for short phrases, if the responses are to be written.

Once the pause is in place, put the recording VCR into PAUSE and the VCR with the source videocassette into PLAY and play back the item or items the learner will provide when he or she works with the tape. Just after the playback of the items in question, re-activate the RECORD mode in the recording VCR—as in the before-mentioned instance—and permit both VCRs to run until the next point in the narration where you

want the learner to supply the missing items. At that point, repeat the above-mentioned procedure. After all the deletions in a specific text have been made, a distinctly audible cue should be added to the prepared auditory cloze video tape so the learner knows immediately that he or she is to supply the missing information at the cue (an audible tone, a bell, a beep, etc., may be used at the beginning of the pauses). If synchronization between the lips of the subjects and the sound of their speech is not important, the instructor could elect to copy the video soundtrack onto an audio tape and make the deletions on the audio tape. An instructor could also elect to record his or her own narration and leave pauses in place of the deleted items.

Sample Auditory Cloze Exercises

What follows are several representative printed texts (in each of the three most commonly taught languages: French, German, and Spanish) with suggested deletions *underlined*. To illustrate the versatility of auditory cloze, texts which treat a variety of topics were chosen, including a literary excerpt. Passages suitable for auditory cloze may be selected from various levels of difficulty, ranging from elementary to advanced instruction. Initially, not all students will be able to perform successfully on every item of the auditory cloze; developing positive listening comprehension demands time, patience, and practice. To encourage students by enhancing their success rate, it is often helpful to use some materials that have been read in advance.

A Sample French Auditory Cloze Exercise. The following sample text is from Jean-Paul and Rebecca Valette's *Panorama-Lectures Faciles 2*, D.C. Heath (1982), p. 53:

“Le jazz en France”

Aimez-vous le jazz? En France, les amateurs de jazz sont très nombreux. La popularité du jazz en France n'est pas récente. Vers 1930, un groupe d'intellectuels et de musiciens français ont acclamé le jazz comme une forme importante de musique contemporaine. Depuis, des générations entières de Français ont appris à apprécier le jazz et ses musiciens.

Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Dizzy Gillespie et tous les grands du jazz américain ont toujours eu un succès extraordinaire en France. Certains musiciens américains ont été honorés par le gouvernement français. Duke Ellington, par exemple, a reçu la Légion d'Honneur, qui est une distinction importante en France. D'autres musiciens ont décidé de se fixer à Paris de façon permanente. Le plus célèbre de ces expatriés est sans doute le grand Sidney Bechet. Qui est Sidney Bechet? Ce grand musicien est né à la Nouvelle-Orléans, probablement en 1897 (la date de sa naissance n'a jamais été établie avec certitude). Sidney Bechet a été un musicien très précoce. Il a appris à jouer de la clarinette à l'âge de six ans et à huit ans il a commencé à jouer avec les meilleurs orchestres de la Nouvelle-Orléans.

A Sample German Auditory Cloze Exercise. The following sample text is from Ulrich Plenzdorf's *Die neuen Leiden des jungen W.*, John Wiley & Sons (1978), pp. 95-97:

Ich wußte langsam, daß es genau richtig war für mich, nach Berlin zu gehen. Schon wegen Charlie. Leute, war ich high! Ich weiß nicht, ob das einer begreift. Wenn ich gekonnt hätte, hätte ich euch alle eingeladen. Ich hatte für mindestens dreihundertsechzig Minuten Musik in den Kassetten. Ich glaube, ich war echt begabt zum Tanzen. Edgar Wibeau, der große Rhythmiker, gleich groß in Beat und Soul. Ich konnte auch steppen. Ich hatte mir an ein Paar Turnschuhe Steppeisen gebaut. Es war erstaunlich, im Ernst. Und wenn meine Kassetten nicht gereicht hätten, wären wir in den “Eisenbahner” gegangen oder noch besser in die “Große Melodie,” wo die M.S.-Jungs spielten oder SOK oder Petrowski, Old Lenz, je nachdem, wer gerade dran war. Montag war immer fester Tag. Oder denkt vielleicht einer, ich wußte nicht, wo man in Berlin hingehen mußte, wegen echter Musik? Nach einer Woche wußte ich das. Ich glaube nicht, daß es viele Sachen in Berlin gegeben hat, die ich versäumt habe. Ich war in einem Strom von Musik. Vielleicht versteht mich einer. Ich war doch wie ausgehungert, Leute! Schätzungsweise zweihundert Kilometer um Mittenberg rum gab es doch keine anständige Truppe, die Ahnung hatte von Musik. Old Lenz und Uschi Brüning!

Wenn die Frau anfing, ging ich immer kaputt.

A Spanish Sample Auditory Cloze Exercise. The following sample text is from Gene S. Kupferschmid's *Y tú, ¿qué dices?*, D.C. Heath (1982), p. 60:

“El estudiante y el trabajo”

Para muchos estudiantes norteamericanos las vacaciones de verano son una oportunidad de trabajar para ganar dinero y para conseguir experiencia. También, muchos de ellos trabajan media jornada durante el año escolar para pagar sus estudios. Y, como hemos notado antes, muchos estudiantes en los países hispanicos también trabajan mientras estudian. Aunque la universidad del estado cuesta muy poco y generalmente el estudiante vive en casa, muchos de ellos trabajan porque tienen que ayudar a su familia económicamente o porque tienen que mantenerse.

Pero existe un gran número de estudiantes hispanos que no trabajan durante las vacaciones, sino que pasan el verano en la playa o viajando. Eso se debe a varios motivos. Uno es la dificultad de obtener empleo por pocos meses en países que tienen mucho desempleo. Otro es la estratificación social. Un estudiante hispano de una familia de clase media nunca trabajaría en un restaurante, ni en una estación de servicio, ni en un supermercado. Tradicionalmente la gente de la clase media y de la clase alta no hacen trabajo manual. Y, como hay pocas oportunidades de empleo interesante para la gente con pocas habilidades profesionales, el estudiante de cierto nivel económico prefiere aprovechar otras experiencias.

Conclusions

Auditory cloze exercises are an effective way to augment the development of target language listening comprehension skills. The advantages of using such exercises are numerous: (1) Most importantly, perhaps, they provide authentic language utterances which can be used at all levels of instruction; (2) Since the majority of cues can be satisfied with one word, over-emphasis on productive skills is minimized; as students build confidence, instructors can design

exercises in such a way that learners are required to supply entire phrases instead of just words; (3) Auditory cloze exercises stimulate a great deal of learner involvement—all learners actively search for answers—so motivation remains high; (4) Learners develop anticipatory behavior toward the missing units—an indispensable prerequisite for successful listening comprehension; (5) With auditory cloze exercises, creativity and intelligent guessing are encouraged; (6) Through the use of pre-recorded exercises in the language laboratory or at home, learning can take place independently; and, (7) From a practical point of view, auditory cloze exercises are relatively easy to prepare, to correct, and to revise.

With a growing body of evidence supporting the notion that receptive skill acquisition has a profound effect on the quality of generative language skills, foreign and second language educators are facing an increasing urgency to construct listening comprehension exercises which are stimulating, relevant, and challenging to the learner. Since auditory cloze exercises meet these criteria, they are worthy of serious consideration as vehicles for the enhancement of second-language listening comprehension.

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