

# CONVERSATIONAL CLOZE TEST AND ORAL PROFICIENCY\*

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## 要 旨

日本の高校英語教育にオーラルコミュニケーション A, B, C の各コースが導入されて3年になる。今まで英語学習の4技能の中で最も難しいとされているスピーキングのテストの作成, 実施, 評価の方法が当然問題となる。本論では, Conversational Cloze Test (会話型クローズテスト) と Conversational Ability (会話力) が相関関係を持つ, といういくつかの研究報告に注目し, Conversational Cloze Test を Speaking Ability を評価するテストとして採用することの有効性を考察した。

## Introduction

In 1994, the Ministry of Education in Japan has introduced conversation classes in the High School English curriculum as a requirement. Thus, recently, much attention has been given to how communicative ability of nonnative speakers can be tested. Among the various methods of measuring oral proficiency there are functional dialogue tests that consists of guidelines for a dialogue and conducted through role-playing, functional written tests that consists of multiple-choice questions on common situations, other forms of oral and written tests that involves work-related situations, interview tests that requires dialogue between the interviewer and interviewee, and cloze tests that involves students to fill the gaps of a continued discourse. This paper will focus mainly on cloze tests as a means to determine oral proficiency and integrative skills, conducted in a simplified and practical manner. To give a brief background, the definition and history of cloze test will be introduced, followed by discussion of the advantages of the cloze test over existing methods. The goal of our study is to determine if cloze procedure can be used as a measure for communicative skills. Thus, two questions will be pursued: (a) How do the cloze and Michigan test relate to each other in measuring integrative skills? (b) How do the cloze and oral recording relate to each other in measuring oral proficiency skills?

## Definition and History of Cloze Test

In 1953, W. L. Taylor invented a type of test called "cloze" designed to measure readability of prose passages. This term "cloze" originated from the notion of Gestalt "closure" which refers to the natural human psychological tendency to fill in gaps in patterns. The test involves deleting every nth word from a selected prose and replacing it with a standardized blank space. The examinee restores the gap with words that would make sense by utilizing the ability to complete broken patterns.

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\* 会話型クローズテストと会話力の関係

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The cloze was not intended to measure the skills of the examinee, but to estimate the difficulty of the passage. Taylor extended its use to measure reading skills, then later in 1956, used the cloze technique to measure second language proficiency. Further study proved it to be a fair indicator of vocabulary usage, ability to read aloud, and intelligence quotient. In 1968, T. C. Potter introduced an orally presented cloze tests to measure the comprehensibility of materials and the listening comprehension of the examinees. Furthermore, James R. Geyer (1968) and D. M. Froelich (1970) demonstrated that cloze tests indicates the readability of prose better than any of the existing procedures. Thus, cloze tests portrayed characteristics of consistency, stability and sensitivity and became a useful measure of reading comprehension.

The cloze procedure was originally used to measure readability of the native speakers. The first attempt was made to test foreign-language proficiency on non-natives by Carroll, Caron, and Wilds (1959). Since then, cloze formula for ESL was used as a teaching or testing device. Studies have found it to have firm concurrent validity as an integrative test of overall proficiency in English as a second language. These studies portrayed high correlations between cloze and corresponding scores on an established language proficiency exams such as the UCLA English as a Second Language Placement Examination and Test of English as a Foreign Language. Furthermore, cloze may also be applied as a teaching device. Friedman (1964) found cloze activities to be helpful in teaching reading comprehension to non-native speakers and reported significant progress in reading comprehension with his subjects of study. Years later, more research has been made on cloze procedure by Bachman (1982, 1985), Brown (1983), Oller (1975), Hanania & Shikhani (1986), and Jonz (1990) and results brought forth reliability to comprehension processes at various levels.

### Advantages of the Cloze Test over Other Methods

Along with the revision of Gakushu Shidou Youryou (government guidelines for teaching), oral communication A, B, and C have been introduced to high school classes in Japan since 1994. The primary goal of these courses that the Ministry of Education is aiming at is “to foster the students attitude to try to communicate positively with others in English.”

It has long been said that the Japanese are, in general, good at English grammar but not good at so called “practical English”. Then what is “practical English”? It is often referred to as listening and speaking of the language. Compared with other non-native speakers of English, Japanese are less competent in listening and speaking, in spite of the fact that English is required at least for three years during the compulsory education. Therefore, it can be said that the revision of the guidelines has been a long awaited improvement.

However, it is not over-exaggeration to say that among the four basic skills of the language, namely, listening, speaking, reading and writing, speaking has been least effectively taught in high school. Moreover, speaking skill has not been satisfactorily evaluated, due to the difficulty in its testing.

It is quite paradoxical that in spite of the fact that speaking is required in oral communication classes at high school and it has to be taught at least for 100 minutes a week, it is not fully evaluated.

The following three methods have been commonly adopted to evaluate speaking competence :

Direct Method : The examiner(s) face(s) the examinee, carry(ies) on conversation with him and evaluate(s) his ability.

Semi-Direct Method : The conversation between examiner(s) and examinee is tape-recorded and later evaluated by reproducing it.

Indirect Method : The examinee's speaking ability is evaluated through such indirect methods as a written test.

The above given direct methods and semi-direct methods share such disadvantages as follows :

1. extremely time-consuming to prepare the test
2. extremely time-consuming to operate the test
3. extremely time-consuming to grade the test
4. difficult to be objective.

In the past, oral proficiency has mainly been tested through interviews and it has been a time-consuming task. The interviewer can only interview one to three examinees at a time. Moreover, it required several judges to prove the validity of assessment. As noted by Keitges (1987), one of the weaknesses of interview test is that judges have the tendency to be very subjective. Another weakness lies in the difficulty of interview procedure. Examiners at times are not sure of what they are to evaluate and are not consistent with their scaling.

As Fukazawa (1989) stated, owing to the difficulty in evaluation, speaking ability in regular classes throughout the year should be graded instead of that in a single final exam. However, how can it be satisfactorily evaluated in the entrance exam to universities? The fact is that speaking ability is not evaluated in entrance examination by most of the universities. According to Saito, (1989) only 4% of the questions is allocated for communicative competence. This may bring about a serious problem in that the students do not find it important or worthwhile to acquire speaking ability as far as it is not counted in the entrance exam to their prospective universities. Despite the aim of the Ministry of Education was to enhance the communicative competence of the students, students are inclined to return to the notorious "entrance exam English" again. It is natural for the students to concentrate on entrance exam English just for the sake of being able to pass the exam.

If communicative ability is evaluated in entrance examinations to universities, it will be inevitable for high school teachers to address communicative skills and have the students apply their accumulated knowledge of the language into actual usage.

Very limited proportion of the questions in entrance examinations to universities is covered with a listening test. As Larson (1983) stated, one's speaking proficiency cannot be estimated by his listening proficiency. Therefore the test exclusively for speaking should be given.

In some universities and colleges, students take placement tests and according to the result, they are divided into classes. Although they are selected to be members of the best class, some students feel uncomfortable because their speaking ability does not reach the standard of the class. Why does this happen? It is because the placement test does not measure their speaking ability ; it only consists of written tests in many cases. Although some students get good grades in written tests, it may be difficult for them to keep up with the class or participate in the class especially when they are conducted in English. Taking this into consideration, speaking tests should also be included in the placement test. Consequently, it is inevitable to include speaking tests in high school, university entrance examinations and placement tests. Considering the above mentioned disadvantages of the interview tests, the validity to use cloze tests will be studied. The strength of the cloze test is as follows :

1. easy to prepare the test
2. easy to give the test
3. easy to grade the test

4. easy to be objective

### Cloze Procedure Used as a Measure for Communicative Skills

Although cloze, in the past, was mainly used to measure reading comprehension and overall English proficiency, other studies have suggested that this procedure can also be used to measure oral competence. In the 1982 study by Bachman, it was discovered that the cloze test scores reflect a general language proficiency factor along with three strategic traits: a syntactic (clause-level) trait, a cohesive (inter-clausal and intersentential) trait, and a strategic (semantic) trait. Thus, the cloze scores reflected not only phrase-processing but complex skills used in human language processing capacities.

Furthermore, cloze procedure is thought to be one test, like dictation, that measures integrative skills rather than a discrete-point. The test examines overall grammatical, semantic, and rhetorical knowledge of the language. To fill the gaps of the text, examinees have to comprehend main ideas and perceive the context of the continuous discourse. In other words, the students must produce rather than merely recognize an appropriate word that fits in the blank. It requires the examinee to perform a task which is similar to what native speakers do in sending and receiving messages. Therefore, the task involves communicative skills and reflects the student's ability to function in the language. It can be said that using cloze tests and activities can promote communicative language teaching in the classroom.

As mentioned earlier, since Taylor introduced cloze procedure in 1953, most cloze tests have been made based on prose. Some studies, however, have shown the reliability of conversational cloze to rate speaking ability of the non-native speakers of the language.

Hughes gave both prose cloze and conversational cloze to 64 foreign students taking English courses before the enrollment in their special fields. Then Hughes compared the result of the two kinds of cloze and the same students' oral ability which was evaluated by their English teachers.

Table 1 shows the correlation among the results in conversational cloze, prose

Table 1 Significance Levels for Differences Between Correlations

	Oral Comprehension		Oral Production		Communicative Competence	
CC Exact	(.64)		(.67)		(.63)	
v	v	n.s.	v	p< .01	v	p< .05
PC Exact	(.52)		(.45)		(.46)	
CC Exact	(.64)		(.67)		(.63)	
v	v	p< .01	v	p< .001	v	p< .001
PC Acceptable	(.41)		(.35)		(.28)	
CC N.S. Based	(.73)		(.69)		(.65)	
v	v	p< .01	v	p< .01	v	p< .05
PC Exact	(.52)		(.45)		(.46)	
CC N.S. Based	(.73)		(.69)		(.65)	
v	v	p< .001	v	p< .001	v	p< .001
PC Acceptable	(.41)		(.35)		(.28)	

cloze and speaking ability according to the rating method.

The table indicates that the correlation between conversational cloze and each element of speaking ability is consistently high regardless of the rating method. In addition, the correlation between conversational cloze and each element of speaking ability is significantly higher than that between prose cloze and each element of speaking ability.

Brown also experimented with conversational cloze to rate conversational ability of the examiners indirectly. In his study, two examiners interviewed 30 foreign students studying English at an institute, giving them two tasks orally.

The tasks are :

1. Ask the examiners where they are planning to spend their next vacation.
2. Explain that you broke the racket that you borrowed, and that you are ready to compensate him for it.

The examinees were requested to complete their tasks orally within 5 minutes. One of the examiners was rating the grammaticality and validity of the utterance (ability to understand the other's utterance and convey necessary information fully using your own words) and the other examiner was rating variety and accuracy of vocabulary.

Brown reached the conclusion that there was a high correlation of +0.80 between the speaking test and conversational cloze.

## Materials and Procedure

The cloze test consisted of a passage of 218 words taken from pages 178-179 of *The Role of Cloze Testing in English Education* (Sato, 1988). Every eighth word was deleted, resulting in 25 missing words, with the short explanation of speakers and situation given intact.

Instructions for the cloze test were read aloud by the teacher and silently by the students. The following are the instructions used in the test originally given in Japanese in order that students should not misunderstand the instruction.

In the dialog below, every eighth word has been taken out and blanks put in in their place. Your job will be to guess, from the context, which word has been left out of each space and write that word in the blank.

Remember these things :

1. Write only ONE word in each blank.
2. Try to fill in every blank. Guess if you do not know.
3. Spelling mistakes will not be marked wrong.

After the instruction, subjects were allowed 30 minutes to complete the test.

The cloze test was carefully pretested with six native speakers of English. Contextually acceptable responses were collected from the native speaker responses and used in scoring the test. (Appendix A, B and C)

The results of the Michigan Form A Placement Test which had been administered to all the freshmen about two months earlier was also used in measuring integrative skills. It contains three sections : grammar, vocabulary and reading comprehension.

To see the actual oral performance, the students were instructed to record an introduction of themselves in a tape. Guidelines and suggestions were given to them on the board. They were instructed to speak for ten minutes about themselves. On the board, students were given ideas to talk about with the intention that they could serve as questions asked by an interviewer. Suggestions included family, friends, hometown or neighborhood, favorite food, interests, sports, hobby, and the schools they have attended. This procedure was used with the hope to collect fluency and oral data without having to use one whole class hour. Later, the recorded data was

transcribed and scored by using evaluation criteria based on two types of methods. Three criteria were borrowed from the FSI (Foreign Service Institute) Checklist of Performance, Factors and Descriptions: grammar, vocabulary, and fluency. Two criteria were borrowed from the Bartz' Rating Scale: quality of communication and amount of communication. The rating scale consists of six levels.

## Subjects

Forty-three freshmen students of the English Department at a women's university in Tokyo, Japan were tested on the cloze test. At the time of its administration, these students had already been grouped into one of six proficiency levels based on the results of the Michigan test. Of the six levels, the students who were tested in this study were grouped in the lower intermediate level.

## Results

The study was conducted to see if the conversation cloze test would be a measure of oral proficiency. To check on how well this intention would be fulfilled by the test, an oral recording test was also administered and the scores of the two tests were compared. The results of the standardized Michigan test which was given about two months prior to the cloze test was also compared to measure integrative skills and correlation of the two results, was pursued.

Table 2 Means and Standard Deviations for Group I (N=22) and II (N=21)

	M		SD	
	Group I	Group II	Group I	Group II
Michigan	49.180	65.428	49.443	65.393
Cloze	46.363	55.077	45.247	55.707
Recording	59.227	66.091	57.428	66.462

The primary aim of the analysis was to answer two questions: (a) How do the cloze and Michigan test relate to each other in measuring integrative skills? (b) How do the cloze and oral recording relate to each other in measuring oral proficiency skills?

The results of the calculation to measure the correlation between the cloze and Michigan tests indicates that they correlate highly for both groups I and II: .984 for group I and .973 for group II. The high correlations indicate a degree of commonality between the two tests and confirm their validity as tests of integrative skills. The same positive result can be seen for the correlation between the cloze test and the oral recording: .985 for group I and .975 for group II.

## Conclusion

As previous research has introduced the cloze test as an integrative test that measures the overall grammatical, semantic, and rhetorical knowledge of the language, this study attempts to provide data that would support the possibility that cloze could be an alternative to oral proficiency interview and other direct methods of

evaluating skills.

According to the study done by Hanania and Shikhani (1986) and Bachman (1985), cloze tests have a practical advantage of objective scoring and require less administration time. Cloze tests tend to correlate highly with tests that require integrative skills rather than with discrete items of grammar or vocabulary, its score is more representative of general language ability rather than of single skills. Moreover, results of our study has proved that cloze tests can be used to measure oral proficiency. Thus, it can be said that the testing process can be simplified by using the cloze procedure.

We hope to continue on with this research to make further discoveries and understand different situations. Variation in the content of the cloze text and the order of deletion may bring alternative possibilities.

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## APPENDIX A

以下の文章は、各8番目の単語が空欄になっています。前後の文脈から判断して、空欄に最も適当と思われる単語を記入しなさい。その際、以下の事柄に注意しなさい。

1. 各々の空欄には単語1語のみ入ります。
2. すべての空欄を埋めるよう努力しなさい。(わからない場合、推量でもいいから埋めるよう努力しなさい。)
3. スペリングの間違いは、間違いとはみなされません。

At a Night Club

■ Dialog (A: Foreign visitor B: Young girl C: Waiter)

■ Situation A foreign visitor and an American girl are visiting one of the night clubs on New Year's Eve and are having a wonderful time.

- A: I hope you like this place. I've (1 ) been here before, but I've heard that (2 ) have a good dance band and a (3 ) floor show.
- B: Yes, I've heard that the (4 ) in the floor show are beautiful. That's (5 ) the reason you wanted to come.
- A: Well, (6 ) don't need to be jealous. You're more (7 ) than any of them.
- B: Oh, I'll bet (8 ) say that to all the girls.
- A: Here's (9 ) waiter. What would you like to drink?
- B: (10 ), I'm a very light drinker.
- A: Oh, this (11 ) New Year's Eve. Have something special. How (12 ) champagne?
- B: Well, all right.
- A: A bottle of (13 ), please, well iced.
- C: Yes, sir.
- A: Would you (14 ) to dance?
- B: I'd love to.
- A: You look (15 ) pretty tonight. You have the most beautiful (16 ) eyes I've ever seen.
- B: That champagne is (17 ) to your head—and you haven't even (18 ) the champagne yet.
- A: That's a good orchestra.
- B: (19 ), the music's over. You're right. It is (20 ) good orchestra.
- A: To us, and to a (21 ) New Year.
- B: To us, and to a (22 ) New Year.
- A: This is my first New (23 ) Eve in the United States. What do (24 ) do at midnight?
- B: You'll see in a (25 ) minutes. It's almost midnight now. People blow horns and throw confetti, and everybody makes a lot of noise.

## APPENDIX B

以下の文章は、各 8 番目の単語が空欄になっています。前後の文脈から判断して、空欄に最も適当と思われる単語を記入しなさい。その際、以下の事柄に注意しなさい。

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I hope you like this place. I've (1 never ) been here before, but I've heard that (2 they ) have a good band and a (3 good ) floor show.

B: Yes, I've heard that the (4 girls ) in the floor show are beautiful.

That's (5 probably ) the reason you wanted to come.

A: Well, (6 you ) don't need to be jealous. You're more (7 beautiful ) than any of them.

B: Oh, I'll bet (8 you ) say that to all the girls.

A: Here's (9 the ) waiter. What would you like to drink?

B: (10 Well ), I'm a very light drinker.

A: Oh, this (11 is ) New Year's Eve. Have something special. How (12 about ) champagne?

B: Well, all right.

A: A bottle of (13 champagne ), please, well iced.

C: Yes, sir.

A: Would you (14 like ) to dance?

B: I'd love to.

A: You look (15 so ) pretty tonight. You have the most beautiful (16 blue ) eyes I've ever seen.

B: That champagne is (17 going ) to your head—and you haven't even (18 had ) the champagne yet.

A: That's a good orchestra.

B: (19 Oh ), the music's over. You're right. It is (20 a ) good orchestra.

A: To us, and to a (21 Happy ) New Year.

B: To us, and to a (22 Happy ) New Year.

A: This is my first New (23 Year's ) Eve in the United States. What do (24 people ) do at midnight?

B: You'll see in a (25 few ) minutes. It's almost midnight now. People blow horns and throw confetti, and everybody makes a lot of noise.

## APPENDIX C

### List of the Exact Words in the Original Passage and Acceptable Answers

Exact Word	Acceptable Answers Based on Native Speakers' Answers	Examinees' Answers Approved by Native Speakers
1. never		
2. they		
3. good	great, terrific	nice, beautiful
4. girls	dancers	dancers, dances
5. probably	precisely, actually, not	
6. you		
7. beautiful		wonderful
8. you		
9. the		
10. Well	Oh, Nothing, Beer	Oh, Nothing, Beer
11. is		
12. about		
13. champagne	bubbly	
14. like		
15. so	very, awfully	very, really
16. blue	brown, green	
17. going	gone, filled	
18. had	drunk, finished, tried, tasted, touched	drunk, drunken, finished
19. Oh	Well	Well, Now
20. a		
21. Happy	Great, Fantastic	wonderful, beautiful
22. Happy	Great	beautiful
23. Year's		
24. people*	you, we	you, we
25. few		

\* Did not occur in native speaker pretest responses.

## APPENDIX D

### The FSI Checklist of Performance Factors and Descriptions

#### *Accent*

1. Pronunciation frequently unintelligible.
2. Frequent gross errors and a very heavy accent make understanding difficult, require frequent repetition.
3. "Foreign accent" requires concentrated listening and mispronunciations lead to occasional misunderstanding and apparent errors in grammar or vocabulary.
4. Marked "foreign accent" and occasional mispronunciations that do not interfere with understanding.
5. No conspicuous mispronunciations, but would not be taken for a native speaker.
6. Native pronunciation, with no trace of "foreign accent."

#### *Grammar*

1. Grammar almost entirely inaccurate except in stock phrases.
2. Constant errors showing control of very few major patterns and frequently preventing communication.
3. Frequent errors showing some major patterns uncontrolled and causing occasional irritation and misunderstanding.
4. Occasional errors showing imperfect control of some patterns but no weakness that causes misunderstanding.
5. Few errors, with no patterns of failure.
6. No more than two errors during the interview.

#### *Vocabulary*

1. Vocabulary inadequate for even the simplest conversation.
2. Vocabulary limited to basic personal and survival areas (time, food, transportation, family, etc.).
3. Choice of words sometimes inaccurate, limitations of vocabulary prevent discussion of some common professional and social topics.
4. Professional vocabulary adequate to discuss special interests; general vocabulary permits discussion of any nontechnical subject with some circumlocutions.
5. Professional vocabulary broad and precise; general vocabulary adequate to cope with complex practical problems and varied social situations.
6. Vocabulary apparently as accurate and extensive as that of an educated native speaker.

#### *Fluency*

1. Speech is so halting and fragmentary that conversation is virtually impossible.
2. Speech is very slow and uneven except for short or routine sentences.
3. Speech is frequently hesitant and jerky; sentences may be left uncompleted.
4. Speech is occasionally hesitant, with some unevenness caused by rephrasing and groping for words.
5. Speech is effortless and smooth, but perceptibly non-native in speed and evenness.
6. Speech on all professional and general topics as effortless and smooth as a native speaker's.

#### *Comprehension*

1. Understands too little for the simplest type of conversation.
2. Understands only slow, very simple speech on common social and touristic topics; requires constant repetition and rephrasing.
3. Understands careful, somewhat simplified speech directed to him or her, with considerable repetition and rephrasing.
4. Understands quite well normal educated speech directed to him or her, but requires occasional repetition or rephrasing.
5. Understands everything in normal educated conversation except for very colloquial or low-frequency items or exceptionally rapid or slurred speech.
6. Understands everything in both formal and colloquial speech to be expected of an educated native speaker.

## APPENDIX E

### Bartz' Rating Scale

A. Fluency	1	2	3	4	5	6
B. Quality of Communication	1	2	3	4	5	6
C. Amount of Communication	1	2	3	4	5	6
D. Effort to Communicate	1	2	3	4	5	6

The levels of the scales are defined as follows :

- A. *Fluency* (similar to the Foreign Service Institute scale)
- B. *Quality of Communication*
1. Speech consists *mostly* of inappropriate isolated words and/or incomplete sentences with just a *few* very short complete sentences.
  2. Speech consists of *many* inappropriate isolated words and/or incomplete sentences with *some* very short complete sentences.
  3. Speech consists of *some* inappropriate isolated words and/or incomplete sentences with *many* very short complete sentences.
  4. Speech consists of *hardly any* isolated words and/or incomplete sentences with *mostly* complete sentences.
  5. Speech consists of isolated words only if appropriate and *almost always* complete sentences.
  6. Speech consists of isolated words only if appropriate, otherwise *always* "native-like" appropriate complete sentences.
- C. *Amount of Communication*
1. *Virtually no* relevant information was conveyed by the student.
  2. *Very little* relevant information was conveyed by the student.
  3. *Some* relevant information was conveyed by the student.
  4. *A fair amount* of relevant information was conveyed by the student.
  5. *Most* relevant information was conveyed by the student.
  6. *All* relevant information was conveyed by the student.
- D. *Effort to Communicate*
1. Student withdraws into long periods of silence, without any apparent effort to complete the task.
  2. Student makes *little* effort to communicate, what he does do is "half-hearted," without any enthusiasm.
  3. Student makes *some* effort to communicate, but still shows rather "disinterested" attitude.
  4. Student makes an effort to communicate but does not use any non-verbal resources, such as gestures.
  5. Student makes a real effort to communicate and uses some non-verbal resources such as gestures.
  6. Student makes a special (unusually high) effort to communicate and uses all possible resources, verbal and non-verbal, to express himself or herself.