

Cloze, Listening and Debating in a Skills Lesson

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Introduction

Cloze tests as a testing device have been warmly welcomed by many teachers as an easy-to-mark, quick way to assess both students' grammar and vocabulary at the sentence, paragraph and whole text levels. However, many other teachers, and probably most students, regard them as frustratingly difficult, mechanically boring and far from the type of communicative activities they seek. The presence of these tests in many English-as-a-Foreign-Language examinations, such as those of the University of Cambridge, has meant that teachers often do cloze tests with their students in the belief that it is a regrettable necessity to be suffered through. This is especially the case with examination-preparation courses.

I hope to show that fun and interest can be engendered while doing cloze tests. I have used this technique successfully for many years with my students. In most cases those in my classes are adults at a post-First Certificate level and expecting to present themselves for the Cambridge Advanced Certificate within the academic year. However, the basic technique for using cloze tests as a learning activity rather than a testing activity is applicable at any level. More care would have to be exercised with the use of video at lower levels, but even here much can be done if the teacher is judicious in his choice of video.

A Way of Using Cloze-type Exercises in a Skills Class

Basically there are two ways of presenting such an exercise. The most common is for it to be part of the class textbook . Another is for the teacher to prepare his own examples. The latter is by far the most valuable and it is surprisingly easy to do. In both cases the basic framework for class delivery that I propose is the same. For clarity, I will put forward this basic framework which I use with all textbook-based cloze exercises before considering how it can lead on to the showing of real-life video followed by a class debate.

The Basic Framework of the Activity

The Warmer

First, the teacher sets up a warmer activity to introduce the theme of the cloze activity. For example, if the passage were about losing baggage at an airport, I might narrate an experience of mine while travelling and then get students in groups of three to talk about their experiences before reporting back to the class. There are many ways of introducing a topic known to teachers, so I will not elaborate further, other than to stress that a suitable warmer is an essential first step before doing cloze texts with foreign learners.

Stages in Presenting the Cloze Passage

1. Before the students have seen it, the teacher reads the entire text without gaps twice, at slightly below normal conversational speed, while students take notes on the content. These notes are for the students' immediate use and should be limited to keywords without grammatical concerns. This is excellent listening practice and an opportunity in taking notes in a useful and meaningful way. They are now familiar with the nature of the text and its general outline. This is an essential step in making the cloze done later in the class more intelligible and meaningful. Failure to do this in some way is, I suspect, the cause of much difficulty experienced by students with this type of exercise. In pairs, or triads, students compare what they believe

they have heard from memory and their notes.

2. Students now look at the text in question. In pairs they read it, discussing to what extent they have heard correctly and the possible meaning of vocabulary unfamiliar to them. It should be stressed that ***at this stage that they must not attempt to complete the gaps.***
3. When finished, as a whole class activity, the teacher goes over the text giving the students the opportunity to speculate on the meaning of the new lexis with him/her confirming or clarifying as required.
4. In groups of three or four, depending on class-size considerations, students should finally attempt to complete as many of the gaps as they can. Consulting the notes taken previously normally helps them in this. After a reasonable time, five or six minutes, or sooner, if they are beginning to get bogged down, or one group is nearing completion, the activity should be stopped. It is assumed that no more than fifteen items are missing from the text as a larger number leads to tedium and frustration.
5. Students form new groupings to compare answers, agree on changes, and complete unfinished items. This should take not more than five minutes. The size of the new groups will depend on the total number in the class: in a class of twenty with original groups of four, there will be five.
6. The following is an optional activity. I ask for their copies of the cloze text to be put away. I then read the text for a third and last time at a faster conversational pace. As students are by now familiar with it, they welcome the opportunity to familiarize themselves with listening to their teacher at full speed. While I am reading, they listen for the missing gapped items, which they may jot down if they wish. They are not allowed, however, to consult their texts to change items until the reading is finished.
7. Students, in pairs, make any final changes they deem necessary before calling their final decisions back to the teacher as a whole class activity.

Contextualizing the Cloze Test into a Skills Lesson

Using the Video

I am fortunate to work for an organization that has video within the classroom and an agreement with the British Broadcasting Corporation, on a fee-paying basis, to use some of their material for non-commercial educational purposes. This applies not only to the television news programmes but the corresponding items on their website. Many teachers will have similar rights and will adjust accordingly to their own personal situation. I imagine that many are able to use the CNN network or something similar, to try out similar activities.

I record a suitable item of interest from the BBC news channel. Many short suitable documentaries of three minutes or less are regularly incorporated into these broadcasts. I have found of particular use those which have a theme which lends itself to debate as explained below. Then, I take the corresponding article from the BBC website. The complete article consisting of not more than three-hundred-and-fifty words is then turned into a cloze test to be used as explained above.

Preparing the Cloze Test before Class

Many programs exist to prepare cloze tests. Personally, I am very indebted to the Hot Potatoes program, available freely as open-source for personal-teacher-use on the Internet. For those not familiar with it, this is a very sophisticated and useful tool for many on-line activities. However, it can be used for the purpose under discussion in a very simple and practical way. Use the program to convert the text into a cloze passage. This is explained clearly within the program. Then save it as a printed text, not an html page, within a word-processor. You have the choice of either limiting yourself to producing the cloze text itself, or of preparing it with the cloze on one side and the full text on the back or on a separate sheet. The latter allows for the initial reading in stage one above to be extremely easy, and in stage seven students can consult the complete text rather than call back their answers. If both the cloze and the complete passage are placed on the same sheet, as I tend to do, students

obviously have to be warned before giving out the paper in stage two, not to look at the back of the sheet until told to do so in stage seven. Words and collocations from the video which you wish to bring to students attention, can be placed on the same sheet following the complete text. Finally, print out sufficient copies for each student to have one.

Going Beyond the Framework

After going through the seven stages above with material prepared by myself I have found it very fruitful to go through the following further steps:

Viewing

8. Preteach the lexis from the video either on the whiteboard/blackboard or from the distributed sheets as explained above.
9. Show the video without stopping. Students have now been prepared sufficiently to understand the video with little difficulty. They appreciate being able to understand a documentary designed for native speakers with ease. The visual effect accompanied by sound intensifies the subject for them arousing greater interest. The cloze is seen as a way to achieving this interest and commitment not just by the teacher but most importantly by the learners themselves.
10. Show the video without stopping once more. This allows for assimilation after understanding. Optionally, the listeners may be tasked to prepare a question on what they hear or see for others to answer at the end of the viewing.

For those who have no access to video, aural passages from podcasts or similar could be substituted. Showing video is much preferable where possible.

The Debate

11. Present the theme of the debate taken from the printed and video materials. Divide the class according to the opinion chosen. For example, in a lesson I gave dealing with the possibilities presented by modern facial-imaging techniques, they were asked to make up their minds whether they thought the dangers of these techniques outweighed the advantages or not. Three decisions were allowed: for the motion, against it, or undecided. I then divided the undecided among the other two groups so that they were approximately equal making sure there was a reasonable distribution of stronger students. I have followed this procedure on many occasions without any unexpected difficulties.
12. The two groups are then separated, one group staying in the classroom and the other in a nearby empty classroom or passageway. They prepare the arguments for their case and consider the counter argument their opponents are likely to produce and what they should say in reply. One student is chosen, preferably by the learners themselves, to prepare a one minute presentation of their case and another, a one minute presentation of their perceived principle argument. A time limit for this preparation should be set. I have found some seven minutes to be reasonable.
13. Students come together in a parliament-type situation: two rows either side of the teacher's desk, each row consisting of one team, the top of each row being headed by the presenter with the proponent of the main argument at his /her side.
14. The teacher acts as the official "Parliamentary Speaker", presenting the motion, allowing for the four speakers to present their arguments in turn without interruption before throwing the debate open. I have invariably found that, with the students I have had, this has led to a lively and satisfying time.

Follow-up

A class like this typically lasts seventy-five minutes. This could be adjusted as necessary, by modifying the activities as seen fit. I give feedback after the break, which is short and to the point. First the students' achievements are stressed. Then a reasonable number of errors which I have noted during the discussion are mentioned and explained.

On occasions I have extended the theme into another class, getting students to summarize the video as a group-writing exercise, which each group then transfers to an acetate after finishing and inventing a suitable heading. Groups then exchange acetates, and prepare a presentation for the class on the strong and weak points of the other group's work. This gives them the chance to practise constructive criticism before an audience, apart from the various writing and error-correcting opportunities involved in such an exercise.

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