

# Investigating Efl University Students' Written Performance On Cloze Test

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## Abstract

This study aims at investigating EFL university students written performance in cloze tests in relation to the grammatical, vocabulary and discoursal mistakes of the texts they write. The causal-comparative design was used by the researcher. The study's population was made up of (275) male and female third-year students at the University of Mosul's English department and College of Basic Education. A random sampling technique was applied for sample selection. The total number of the sample was (110) male and female students during the academic year 2021-2022. The sample is divided into two groups (male and female); each group consisted of (55) students. This study's instrument was the test. There was only one type of test provided, which was a cloze test that passed the instrument validation stage. When the cloze test was used to measure written performance, the study's findings revealed that most third-grade students at Mosul University demonstrated a significantly different level of written performance.

**Keywords:** Cloze test, written performance, Vocabulary, Grammar.

## INTRODUCTION

For almost all learners, learning to write in a foreign language is one of the most difficult skills to master. Writing skills are regarded as among the most complex to develop when compared to speaking, listening, and reading skills. " Writing must follow specific standards in order to be considered acceptable. These standards relate to a number of writing-related factors, including punctuation, content, vocabulary, language use, spelling, organization, and proper capitalization and paragraphing. Due to this, writing is an extremely difficult issue for EFL students (Hamadouche, 2010). Since writing is the primary format used by university students to complete assignments across a variety of subject areas and respond to exam questions, it becomes more significant to them. For students, writing failure or inability is more likely to lead to academic failure, so they will find it challenging to complete the required essays because they lack the tools to effectively communicate their experience or understanding (Elachachi, 2006 and 2010).

Because writing skills are transferable, improving a strong understanding of writing

processes enables learners to preserve clear communication as well as accurate documentation in any work environment. It is a difficult task to attempt to create a good written text because it calls for the simultaneous control of several language systems and the capacity to consider how the discourse must be shaped for a specific purpose (Celce Murcia 2001). On the other hand, a great deal of theoretical and methodological research has been done on the cloze procedure. One of the most popular testing methods is now Cloze, which is especially useful for determining the general language competence of EFL/ESL students.

According to Heaten (1990), "reading, writing, and speaking skills "appear to be associated with performance on what seems like a cloze test." (p.17). Hughes (2003) claims that the skills that influence the whole performance of students are used by them to complete cloze tests. According to this study, a cloze passage is a prewriting exercise. A significant correlation was discovered by Carter and Nunan (2001) regarding the participants' performance on integrative tests (such as the cloze test) and various other test components that evaluated speaking, writing, and other language skills

(p.139). The best method for teaching language skills holistically is an integrated approach because writing is a skill that requires a variety of different types of components. The Cloze test is an example of an integrative test that evaluates multiple sub-skills simultaneously. These issues sparked a new thought: devising new techniques and different activities for teaching writing. Even though some worthwhile efforts have been made to enable learners to become more proficient writers, the results so far have not been satisfactory. It appears to be essential to change the method of teaching writing and replace it with innovative teaching techniques. Use of the cloze test as a complementary exercise in the classroom is one of the so-called activities. Cloze tests have drawn more attention from students than other tests due to their unique nature.

### **Theoretical Background of the Study**

A cloze test is "a significant tool for evaluating student comprehension because it involves taking out roughly every fifth word from either a paragraph or clause then requesting the reader or student to return the omitted words. It is therefore frequently referred to as the fill out the blanks workout (Keisuke, Yuki, and Mamoru, 2013)". This kind of educational instrument has been around meanwhile the 1950s. A theoretical background for this kind of test was the "closure" principle of the Psychology Gestalt School, which asserts that the cerebrum perceives things as a total then will typically also eventually return omitted components (Walter, 1974). To put it another way, students will use their experiences, prior knowledge, and critical thinking and reasoning abilities in combination with omitted information or words to "fill in the gaps" (Melody Ann Ross, 2017).

The deletion will be tested using the cloze test on an whole passage of obviously taking place, properly structured text. Cloze tests employ two techniques: one instructs test takers to fill in the blanks with their own interpretations of the words and phrases, and the other instructs test takers to guess the words and phrases. The system deletion can also be applied by giving learners a set of elements and phrases, asking them to select the appropriate items, also then correctly addition those items in sentences or else content (Torsten and Tobias, 2014). Taylor (1953) developed the idea of the cloze test,

considering it to be a universal measurement that could be used to evaluate a variety of language skills. In a cloze test, students are able to fill in the missing elements from their prior knowledge.

By evaluating how well students can fill in the missing words from the original text, teachers can assess their language skills (Hughes, 2003).

"There seem to be two methods to employ with any cloze exercise in the deletion area. The systematic deletion method and the unsystematic deletion method" (Bachman, 1985) each have an effect on how cloze activities are evaluated. This is in line with Murcia (2001), who showed that test designers have access to more deletion methods than just two but must remember that each deletion method needs to be evaluated differently. In other words, it's simpler to remove origin words than it is to remove textual words or phrases, etc.

### **Testing Writing**

being a production skill as well as having a real product that is able to be assessed however the user chooses. Writing tests is typically a straightforward process. It has been widely believed that encouraging people to write is the most effective way to evaluate their writing skills. Hughes (1989) argues that the fundamental step in the written test procedure is for the test-taker to produce a portion of written work, which is then scored by the testers in accordance with predetermined criteria. Although the procedure seems to be generally consistent throughout this simple approach, writing tests vary greatly in other aspects.

There are generally two contested purposes for writing tests: the first is to draw conclusions about an individual's language proficiency; the other is to make judgments based on those conclusions. Because they are unable to directly observe students' language proficiency, teachers utilize answers to test items as a gathering of pertinent information to make decisions at the person, program level, or classroom (Bachman and Palmer, 1996).

According to Brown (2019), there are three main categories for written language. Here are these three areas:

1. Essays, articles, papers, theses, and dissertations are all examples of academic writing.
2. Writing formats used in the workplace include memos, reports, schedules, letters, and schedules.
3. Fiction, journal entries, e-mails, notes, and shopping lists are examples of personal writing formats.

### Written Performance

Students' written performance indicates their level of proficiency in writing studies. It means that good writing and effective writing help students accomplish three key goals. In the beginning, it improves vocabulary, expressions, and grammatical structures. Second, writing gives students the chance to push the boundaries of their knowledge and be more daring with language. Another aspect of the value of writing is the capacity to increase language proficiency in terms of accuracy, fluency, and suitability in conveying meaning and messages (Yah Awg Nik<sup>1</sup>, Badariah Bt. Sani<sup>2</sup>, Muhmad Noor B. Wan Chik<sup>2</sup>, Kamaruzaman Jusoff<sup>3</sup>, and Hasif Rafidee Bin Hasbollah<sup>4</sup>, 2010).

### Types of Written Performance

Brown (2019) further analyzes the amount of writing proficiency needed by students to write various types of tests. Intensive, responsive, imitative, as well as extensive are the four categories that writing performance is broken down into. These categories include a focus on the exclusive shape, context, and focused meaning.

**1-Imitative:** The learner must master the fundamental skills of writing letters, punctuation, words, and very short phrases in order to produce written language. The English spelling system's phoneme-grapheme correspondences and the capacity for accurate spelling fall under this category. At this level, students attempt to master the rules of writing. The context as well as meaning are currently secondary concerns, with the form serving as the main, if not the only, focus.

**2-Intensive:** Along with the basics of imitation writing, students need to have the ability to use appropriate vocabulary in context, correctly use

collocations, expressions, and idioms, and use proper grammar at a rate greater than or equal to the sentence length. Although meaning and context can play a role in assessing accuracy and suitability, the majority of evaluation tasks place a greater emphasis on form and are tightly regulated by test design.

**3-Responsive:** When completing assessment tasks, students are expected to engage in limited discourse, form logically connected paragraphs out of two or three sentences, and connect sentences into paragraphs. The tasks follow pedagogical instructions, criterion lists, outlines, and other rules. Examples of writing genres include concise explanations and narratives, short reports, lab reports, succinct answers to reading summarization, and explanations of charts or graphs.

**4-Extensive:** The good execution of all-purpose writing methods and strategies, regardless of an essay length, major research project report, term paper, or even a thesis, is a requirement for extensive writing. The writers maintain a clear focus on a particular objective, logically arrange and develop ideas, rely on information to promote or clarify ideas, use a variety of grammatical constructions and vocabulary, and, in so many cases, go through multiple drafts before producing a final product. The infrequent editing or proofreading of a proposal is the only time grammar is specifically addressed.

The final three performance types are listed as follows by Weigle (2002) (the first performance type only concerns proper word spelling and letter usage):

1. reproducing data that has been already encoded.
2. organizing the author's existing data.
3. Creating new concepts or knowledge.

Hughes (1989) suggested a variety of ways to guarantee the validity of writing tests, in addition to choosing the appropriate task and performance. It was tried to suggest that candidates be evaluated on as many different tasks as possible without having a choice. Additionally, he suggested limiting candidates to producing a relatively uniform set of outcomes by using notes, diagrams, and even outlines.

Additionally, Hughes serves to remind testers to make absolutely sure that the samples are long enough for an educator to write in order to test the necessary level of performance.

### **Scoring Rubrics for Writing Skill Assessment**

It has been assumed that the scoring criteria used to evaluate writing skills fall into one of three categories (Brown, 2004; Weigle, 2002; Hughes, 1989;). These categories are typically described as:

1. "Holistic Scoring: The individuals who scored award a single score according to the overall impact of the in-question work."
2. "Primary Trait Scoring" assigns a single number focused on how well the work as a whole accomplished the assignment.
3. "Analytic Scoring: The score is the result of multiple writing-related factors or standards rather than a single score."

### **Cloze Test**

A cloze test, also known as either a filling space test or deletion test, is a simple exercise, activity, or evaluation that consists of specific text or sentences with deleted words, symbols, signs, or phrases. The examinees are then asked to restore, fill in, or demonstrate the items that have been deleted. To replace and use the correct response that relates to the missing texts in this kind of activity, it is necessary to understand the context and have a large vocabulary. Students who employ indirect learning techniques may perform significantly better on tasks that include a significant amount of cognitive and reasoning work, such as cloze tests (Ajideh, 2017).

There are several different kinds of cloze tests, deletions with a fixed rate, which focuses on removing each seventh word, the multiple-choice cloze, in which students must circle the one that best fits the blanks out of three to four possible answers. The Cloze elide test, which involves the gaps being first filled in with actual errors and inappropriate words before learners are instructed to fill them in using the right elements, and also the C-test, is one where the second half of each word is omitted. The learner is asked to choose the text's words that best support the testing objectives when using

selective deletion, also referred to as the rational cloze method. Hadley (2004).

The written performance test is appropriate for this type of testing. Specifically, cloze tests have been discovered to be incredibly significant predictors of L2 students' writing scores (Chapelle & Braham, 1990; Fotos, 1991, Lee, 1997).

There are steps for students on how to take this test in a dictionary. Here, there are two steps: (1) The examinee must identify the exact word used in the original passage. (2) The examiner can guess which word is acceptable or suitable in the context. The exact word method is the first, while the acceptable word method is the second (Richards, J. & Schmidt, et al., 2002, p.78)

### **Construction of the Cloze Test**

The cloze test construction is a remarkably simple operation. First, choose a self-contained passage of about 375 words. The test's objective determines the kind of passage to use. A particular reading comprehension test, for example, requires a previously read passage. A proficiency test, readability test, or general comprehension test, on the other hand, will require selecting a passage that is as close to the standard language style as possible. Second, remove each seventh word and substitute it with a standard-length blank until you reach fifty blanks. Any n-deletion pattern can ideally be used, but it was discovered that patterns with fewer than every fourth word or with more than every ten words either had an unmanageable or impractical frequency (MacGinitie 1961). Third, create questions and instructions with simple language. Whatever system is chosen; the passage length needs to be adjusted to accommodate roughly fifty deletions Brown (2019).

According to Longman's Dictionary of Teaching Language and Applied Linguistics (Richards, J., & Schmidt, 2002, p.78), there are two ways to create blanks. The first is known as rational deletion, in which words are omitted based on rational decisions, or particular words are removed from the passage for a specific purpose (e.g., prepositions, parts of speech, discourse, etc.), resulting in rational cloze. Prepositions, for example, can be removed to

evaluate learners' knowledge of English prepositions.

The second is the deletion of the fixed ratio, also known as the deletion of the ninth word, because each *n*-word is deleted. For instance, each fifth, sixth, or seventh word would be deleted. The examiner should then read through the passage and make an attempt to identify the words that are missing. The deletion number depends heavily on the text length. However, if the deletions are less than the fifth word, it might make the test appear difficult because it will be difficult for the testee to determine the context.

### Number of Deletions

When producing the Cloze test, the test designer should think about the number of items to remove. 50 items are usually included in cloze tests (e.g., Oller & Conrad, 1971). This high number of omissions appears to make tests highly reliable. Depending on how the scores will be used, fewer numbers of omissions are also acceptable. The 50-item Cloze test typically takes 50 minutes to complete, depending on the test-takers' skill level and how challenging the text is. However, some researchers create various deletion numbers for cloze tests. Sciarone and School's 1989 study found that a cloze test typically necessitates around 100 words for exact word scoring and about 75 items for acceptable word scoring, but maybe the omission of 50 elements is "a matter of pure chance" (p. 415). According to Rand (1978), "the tester who has used cloze tests can make the best use of both his own resources in addition to the time of his students by administering a cloze test mostly with twenty-five omissions and applying a reliable word scoring method. This is so because his specific item analysis program employs acceptable and exact word scoring techniques.

### Text Selection

#### 1-Text Difficulty:

Among these textual factors, text type, text difficulty, and simplified texts are addressed as follows:

As Klein Braley (1997, p. 51) noted, there is no doubt that some tests are harder superior to others.

Additionally, it is unfair to assign groups of test takers to complete exams that are, on the whole, too challenging to those. Brown (1998) claims, "According to the number of students who took the test and the texts selected, cloze tests can vary substantially."

2- Simplified Texts: Using simple or simplified texts is an alternative if the texts chosen to take from such authentic passages are too challenging for the students." While a simplified narrative "may or might not be real and is often pedagogic in goal," a simple account is an authentic piece of speech. as noted by Davies (1984) and Widdowson (1978), is necessary, as Alderson (2000) remembered us (p.72).

3-Kinds of Texts: Four general categories can be used to classify texts:

"explanation, argumentation, description, and narration (Mochizuki 1991)", Alderson, however, asserts that these forms can be broadly separated into two categories: narrative texts and expository texts (2000, p.64).

### Cloze Test Scoring Methods

When the cloze test, improved based on the above criteria, is administered to learners as a test, it must be graded in some way. For scoring purposes, each blank in cloze testing is treated as an item. Two of the many technologies on offer are actually quite useful, exact-word scoring and the acceptable-word scoring methods—were used to grade the cloze test. In contrast to the latter, which allows substitute words to be used in place of the deleted words, the former limits the usage of each word to the one that was removed from the original text. In accordance with the criteria from Stubbs and Tucker (1974), alternative answers are provided for the acceptable-word scoring method: There is only one word allowed per blank and no non-grammatical structures (such as she do for she does) are permitted. Even if the responses differentiated from the original words in parts of speech, they were accepted if they had been grammatically and contextually suitable and had similar meanings. While capitalization errors in responses were accepted, misspelled words were penalized.

## Methodology

### Population and Scoring

The population, as defined by Lodico (2006, p. 13), is the "large group" that the researcher would prefer the results of research to be generalizable to.

The current study's population is made up of all third-year English-basic college students that are enrolled in morning studies only at the Department of English/College of Basic Education/University of Mosul during the second semester of the academic year 2021–2022. In total, there are 275 students in the five sections: A, B, C, D, and D. They were chosen specifically to confirm the study's objectives.

### The Sample of the Study

A sample is the process of choosing a part of a population to perform as the only representative of the whole population. The sampling procedures included in this study are the following:

- 1-Out of the five sections in the third stage (A, B, C, D, and E), two were randomly chosen.
- 2- From a name list taken from the English department, fifty-five study participants who indicated the group of the cloze test were chosen at random by identifying the odd numbers in their names.
- 3- The odd numbers of the participants' own names were then randomly selected from a naming list that was obtained from the English Department, and fifty-five female participants from the group were chosen to represent the standardized test.
- 4-Finally, 110 participants in total were chosen to participate in this study. They were all EFL learners and Arabic native speakers, ranging in age from 20 to 27.

### Instruments of the Research

"Research instruments are mostly devices for gathering information relevant to the study"(Wilkinson and Birmingham, 2003, p.3). A cloze test was used to evaluate the students' written performance.

## The Cloze Test

The cloze test contains two different essays (argumentative essays) from the students' textbook. The deletions in the first essay covered both content and function words. Furthermore, each deletion type has 40 deletions. The deletions were covered in the second essay (linking words). which has also undergone 40 deletions.

The text of three distinct cloze tests was altered by:

- 1-The removal of every fifth ( $\pm 4$ ) function word.
- 2-The removal of every fifth ( $\pm 4$ ) content word.
- 3-The removal of every fifth ( $\pm 4$ ) linking word

The researcher identified prepositions, articles, modal verbs, auxiliary verbs, pronouns, and conjunctions as the function words.

The researcher identified nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs as content words.

## Results and Discussion

### Discussion

The current study's outcomes found that male students' written performance in the cloze test performed significantly better than female students' scores. These findings indicated that, in writing essays, the cloze test format is adequately and reliably for measuring grammar, vocabulary, and discursal aspects.

Regarding grammar, two cloze tests were used to assess function and content words in the grammatical aspect. There were several mistakes made when choosing the content words, as evidenced by the fact that the students' performance on function words had a mean score that was higher than their performance on content words. This indicates that the students made a number of grammatical mistakes when writing their written tasks.

Since verb usage mistakes were prevalent in the students' essays, they were the most common type of grammar mistake. The students may have a fair amount of skill in using verb tenses when writing their essays, which could be the cause.

When word forms used to indicate an action are incorrect, the verb is incorrect. Subject-verb

agreement mistakes as well as regular/irregular verbs are the most common types of errors. Some students also made mistakes as well as using the incorrect verb tenses and failing to construct simple past sentences. The students' failure to properly apply grammar rules indicates that they were unable to do so.

The second most common error type that was discovered in student essays was the improper use of plurals in a sentence. As a result, it falls under the poor category. Specifically, the students struggled to apply the guidelines for plural noun usage in their writing. Prepositions like in, from, and to that are used before a noun or pronoun to show place, position, time, or method were also found to be misused in the writing of students. There is no doubt that the students chose at random the preposition that was required to be written.

Concerning vocabulary. A component of learning vocabulary is using word lists, random words, etc. In actuality, students' vocabulary is weak. It is believed that their limited vocabulary is at least partially to blame for their poor writing abilities. It's also possible that the relationship could go the other way, with poor writing skills causing a vocabulary deficit. In fact, the way it is perceived shows that context is crucial. Isolated words or word lists do not have as much meaning.

In regards to the discursial aspects, the test concentrated on cohesive devices, particularly linking words. It was discovered that students performed better in other multiple-choice cloze tests (i.e., content and function words). Students were not aware of linking words, as can be seen. It is clear that students were unable to distinguish between the distinct functions of linking words. As a result, their cloze test scores were lower when compared to the other deletion types.

According to Bachman (1982:61–70), numerous scholars and researchers have found that particular cloze test types, especially the selective deletion cloze tests, are useful in order to test grammatical knowledge, including cohesion, syntax, and strategic textual comprehension. Hadley and Naaykens (1997) assessed by contrasting the outcomes of a more traditional grammar test with the results of their students' performance on a cloze test. They

found a strong correlation between the cloze test and the grammar test. According to Bowen (1985: 376). (McNamara, 2000) asserted that it is essential to assess students' language proficiency. He also argued that the cloze test is the most effective way to assess students' abilities in language skills. According to Aitken, Cloze tests are valid and reliable for evaluating second languages (1977).

## Conclusions

This study has found that the female student's performance in the cloze test is higher than that of the male student's performance. In terms of assessment formats and student preferences, it has been discovered that most female students are more familiar with multiple-choice cloze test items than male students on cloze tests. Because they could predict the answer, almost all students thought multiple-choice cloze tests were better for assessing written performance. Students take a multiple-choice cloze test without feeling dizzy because they just need to fill in the blanks with answers that have already been provided. Furthermore, students agreed that the cloze test was a more appropriate test used for measuring outcomes for students in writing.

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