

Yazd University

Faculty of Languages and Literature

English Department

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree
of Master of Arts in Teaching English as a Foreign Language

Title

**A Comparative Study of Cloze Test and C-Test in Assessing Collocational
Competence of Iranian EFL Learners**

Supervisor

Dr. Hamid Allami

Advisor

Dr. Ali Akbar Jabbari

By

Seddigh Taheri

March, 2015

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I am deeply indebted to my supervisor, Dr. Hamid Allami, for his guidance, insights and encouragement throughout my M.A. program. I would also like to express my deepest gratitude to my advisor, Dr. Ali Akbar Jabbari, for his copious helps to improve the work. Further, I would like to express my appreciation to all the participants in my study for their willingness and cooperation despite their heavy workload. My thanks also go to the faculty and administrative staff of the department. Finally, I owe sincere thanks to my family for their on-going love, affection, encouragement through my years of study.

Abstract

Assessment in general and language assessment in particular is an indispensable part of any educational program. It is regarded as a thorny area influencing lives of individuals in varying ways and to different extents. One of the dominant approaches to language testing is the integrative one. This view of testing involves the testing of language in context. The present study aimed at shedding more light on possible effectiveness of the cloze tests, C-tests and open ended tests in assessing Persian EFL learners' collocational competence. To this end, four hundred and twenty Persian EFL learners of intermediate and advanced proficiency levels from Yazd and Shiraz Universities were selected. They were assigned into three groups of one hundred and forty learners who took each of the tests separately. The results yielded compelling reason to argue that advanced participants in all of these three groups performed much more efficiently compared to their intermediate peers. The results did not support superiority of C-test over the other two tests and indicated that male participants performed more efficiently on C-test and open ended test in comparison with females who recorded better performance on cloze test. The study suggests important implications for language learners, EFL instructors and materials developers.

Key words: Collocation, Cloze test, C-test, Open ended test, Language proficiency

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Preliminaries

Testing in general and language testing in particular is an indispensable part of any educational program. It is regarded as a thorny area in that it influences individuals' lives in various ways and to different extents. The importance of testing is even more obvious when it is a high-stake one i.e. when some crucial decisions are made on the basis of test results. Consequently, educators have always been concerned with developing appropriate tests. They have tried to influence the development of tests. On the one hand, they provide us with accurate information on test takers' skill, and on the other, they keep us with the latest developments in other testing areas. Their efforts, therefore, result in the emergence of disparate approaches to testing, each of which claims superiority over other testing approaches.

One of the dominant approaches to language testing is the integrative approach. This view of testing involves the testing of language in context. It is concerned, therefore, with overall meaning and proficiency, the total communicative effect of discourse and the underlying linguistic competence of which it is argued that all learners possess (Oller,1979). The adherents of integrative testing believe that natural language processing and production requires making a complex number of decisions, which will involve knowledge of a number of crucial elements such as grammatical structure, lexis, pronunciation and intonation, discourse structure. Therefore, they argue that tests should not separate language skills into neat and ordered divisions and they should seek to gauge the test taker's ability to use two or more skills simultaneously (Cohen,1984 ;Oller,1979).

From the educational perspective, language testing is central to language teaching. It influences the goals for language teaching and also monitors success in

achieving the pre-determined goals. Furthermore, language testing provides a methodology for experiment and investigation in both language teaching and language learning/acquisition (Davies, 1990). Therefore, there has been logically a close relationship between language teaching and language testing in every era.

Spolsky (1978) classified the major trends in language testing in the 20th century into prescientific, psychometric-structuralist, and integrative-sociolinguistic based on close relationship between language teaching and testing. Tests of these trends co-existed although they were developed in a chronological order. Tests which represent the first trend, referred to as intuitive, are often used in language classrooms and the teachers usually develop such tests. The second trend deals with creating standardized, nationwide or large scale tests like TOEFL and the Michigan English language assessment battery (MELAB) which are mainly discrete-point in nature. The third trend is concerned with the development of tests which considers language as a holistic phenomenon and measures it through integrative tests.

In the field of foreign language instruction, various tests are constructed to measure EFL learners' foreign language proficiency or communicative language ability. In Bachman's view (1990,p.166) , "the primary interest in using language tests is to make inferences about one or more components of an individual's communicative language ability". Among language tests, the cloze procedure – in which every nth word of a passage is deleted – has been considered to measure overall language ability (Aitken,1977; Oller, 1979).

Cloze test which was initiated by Taylor (1953) as a means of measuring the readability of texts was first used to assess first language (L1) reading comprehension. The cloze procedure was used both as a reading activity and as a test in second language (L2) situations in the early 1970s. A cloze test differs from a 'fill

in the blank's exercise which is composed of isolated sentences as it is applied to a longer passage and is therefore contextualized.

Cloze tests correlate highly with other measures of language proficiency, as well as with other tests of reading comprehension (Bachman,1985). A number of issues have been raised regarding the significance of this procedure as a measure of general language proficiency.

Madsen (1983) considers the cloze test to be a good measure of language proficiency: It is integrative, that is, it requires students to process the components of language simultaneously, much like what happens when people communicate. Moreover, studies have shown that it relates well to various language measures – from listening comprehension to overall performance on a battery of language tests. In brief, it is a good measure of overall proficiency.

Baker (1989) believes that a cloze test which is properly constructed and has sufficient length can function as a placement test in a general language instruction program. He further talks about the advantage of cloze tests over other formats and mentions that they are easy to construct and can be assessed in a fairly objective manner. Raymond (1988) believes that Cloze forces the reader to construct a schema at a more conscious level compared to what normal reading could help to create an awareness of syntax and meaning and emphasizes scanning and searching skills which are often neglected in second language reading. Brown (2001) argues that successful completion of cloze items indicates knowledge of vocabulary, grammar, and discourse structure as well as reading skills and strategies.

C-test was developed by mutilating the second half of every other word beginning from the second word of the second sentence of a passage. A complete sentence at the beginning of the test and another sentence at the end of the test are left intact.

Klein-Braley and Raatz (1984, 1985) claimed that C-tests are valid and reliable measures of general language proficiency both theoretically and empirically.

Rouhani (2008) conducted a study of C-Test validation with Iranian EFL learners and came to the conclusion that the obtained reliability estimates confirmed earlier reports of high reliability coefficients in connection with the C-Test.

One form of the open ended test is fill in the blank type which is adapted from the traditional fill-in-the-blank type activities. The difference is that traditional activities were often sentence based, while a cloze activity involves a passage in which every n th word is deleted. The deleted words are listed and the testees are required to fill in the blanks with the appropriate words from the list.

Another type of open ended test is standard cloze procedure. When a value is assigned to n , the deletion procedure continues through the text and every n th word is deleted. This method in which the value of n is fixed and constant is called the fixed-ratio deletion. Sometimes, the testers especially the teachers are interested in deleting a particular set of words to check the students' ability in using these words. In such cases, the value of n cannot be fixed because the blank may correspond to a word that should not be deleted. Therefore, teachers use random ratio deletion procedure in which n is not fixed and it is determined by the test developer who may prefer to delete a particular word. In this version, which is most useful for instructional purposes, a particular group of words is deleted.

Collocations are predictable patterns and phrases or groups of words that typically co-occur. They include lexical items and structural patterns which may seem closer to grammar and combinations of words that simply “go together.” Collocations include noun phrases like sound investment, wide imagination, and

phrasal verbs like *make up* or other stock phrases like *the rich and powerful*. Some subtle and complex patterns of usage that all native speakers know are particularly interesting: why we say *a stiff breeze* but not *a stiff wind* while *a strong breeze* and *a strong wind* are acceptable.

Celce-Murcia (1991) defines collocation as a co-occurrence of lexical items in combinations, which can differ in frequency or acceptability. Items which collocate frequently with each other are called 'habitual', e.g. *tell a story*, whereas those items which cannot co-occur are called 'unacceptable', e.g. *powerful tea* instead of *strong tea*.

Lewis (1994) defines collocation as a subcategory of multi-word items, which is made up of individual words that habitually co-occur and can be found within the free-fixed collocational continuum. In his opinion, they differ from another important subcategory of multi-word items which are called institutionalized expressions because collocations tell more about the content of what a language user expresses rather than what the language user is doing, e.g. *apologizing* or *denying*.

Reading is probably the most common and easiest skill of the four skills to be tested. However, testing reading has difficulties, and there are issues that anyone testing reading should be aware of. How reading ability might be assessed in a best way has interested language testing researchers for a long time. In English as a foreign/second language reading comprehension tests, it is very common to include a series of related items that are based on the same reading passage (Lee, 2004). These items can be placed after a passage, as in traditional comprehension questions, multiple-choice or short-answer or embedded in the passage itself as in cloze or C-test (Klein- Braley, 1985).

Two areas of applied linguistic theories – reading and testing- come together when testers design a test of reading ability. In such cases, the test designer decides what s/he wants to test i.e. what s/he means by reading ability and finds a means of testing it. Alderson (2000), points out that there is no ‘best method’ for testing reading comprehension and no single test method fulfills all the purposes of tests. Discrete-point (multiple-choice) and integrative (cloze) tests are significant methods of testing comprehension.

As second language learners have great difficulty in learning and using collocations appropriately, this study is focused on measuring Iranian EFL learners' collocational competence through utilizing three test types of cloze test, C-test and open ended test.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Assessing collocational knowledge of language learners is crucial and at the same time very difficult. As collocational knowledge of a native speaker or second language learner is very important to consider him/her as a competent language user, it is also crucial to design good language tests to tap collocational knowledge of language learners. If learners' collocational knowledge is thoroughly measured with valid and reliable testing devices, then, test designers can diagnose those areas in which language learners have many problems in learning collocations. As many language learners, especially second language learners have difficulties in learning collocations, it would be very important to incorporate collocation learning and collocation tests to measure collocational competence of learners and identify their weak points.

It is crucial to design a test which is a good representative of language use. The language testers should try to choose those texts which are representative of language use. So, the subject matter is also important. Then, he/she should decide which of the class of words are needed for testing. These classes of words include nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs and prepositions. The test designers needs to utilize random deletion technique to enable him to measure each collocational categories that he deems necessary. Constructing a parallel C-test to cloze test is also difficult as only first and last sentences are left intact and every other word is deleted to the end of the text. As C-test has too many blanks beside those items that need to be filled, many test takers feel hopeless and confused when dealing with them. In constructing open ended test, the choices in cloze test are deleted and therefore, this test is constructed. As there are no choices in this test and test takers should provide the correct choices, it imposes heavy burden on test takers.

There have been investigations into testing collocational knowledge of language learners; however, there exists considerable gap in collocation testing literature, in that little importance has been given to testing collocational knowledge through three test types of cloze test, C-test and open ended test. Furthermore, which of these three test types are more effective than others has not been well addressed. As mentioned, some studies have investigated and compared these test types in measuring collocational competence of EFL learners. However, they have not taken account of the roles of proficiency level and gender in assessing collocational competence of EFL learners.

What distinguishes the present study from similar works conducted is the fact that this study tries to investigate which of these three test types are more effective in

assessing learners' collocational competence. Another distinguishing characteristics of the present study is that it tries to investigate the roles of proficiency level and gender in collocational competence of language learners.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

This study is aimed at comparing three test types of cloze test, C-test and open ended test in measuring collocational knowledge of Iranian EFL learners. There are many problems for EFL learners when they intend to learn collocations of the second language because native speakers know these items through their extensive exposure in their first language as they have many opportunities to hear and make use of them while second language learners do not enjoy such opportunities to be exposed to and know how to use them in different communicative situations. Therefore, second language learners may face serious problems in using collocations in their correct order as collocations have their specific co-occurrence of words that need to be learned together. If these collocations are not used appropriately, the speaker will also surely be labeled as awkward. So, this investigation tries to enable the second language learners to understand and treat collocations more favorably, so that in the long run, they know their weak points and utilize new ways to learn them more efficiently.

Generally, this study is an attempt at shedding more light on the nature of lexical and grammatical collocations and tries to find Persian EFL learners' weak points and difficulties in acquiring this very important part of a second language and may propose new ways in learning them.