Student Pitfalls in Reading English Texts
─Observations from the Results of Cloze Tests─

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英 文 読 解 に お け る 学 生 の つ ま ず き
─クローズテストの誤答分析より考察─

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Key Words : Cloze Test, Vocabulary Size, Flow of English, Reading Scope

Introduction

For the past three years, we have been trying to enhance the English reading abilities of students majoring in nursing and medical technology. We expected that the larger the vocabulary the students have, the faster they could read English materials and the higher their ability to understand English. However, through vocabulary tests and cloze tests during the last 3 years carried out for the 1st and 2nd year students at Ehime Prefectural University of Health Sciences, we have found our expectation does not always hold good. In fact, the results of these two kinds of tests carried out at the beginning of the first semester in 2007 show there are some students who have got high marks in the vocabulary test and yet got the lower marks in the cloze test. Furthermore, some students were not able to attain high scores on the cloze test even though they had a larger vocabulary, as shown in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1.　Cloze Test and Size of Vocabulary (2007 Academic Year)
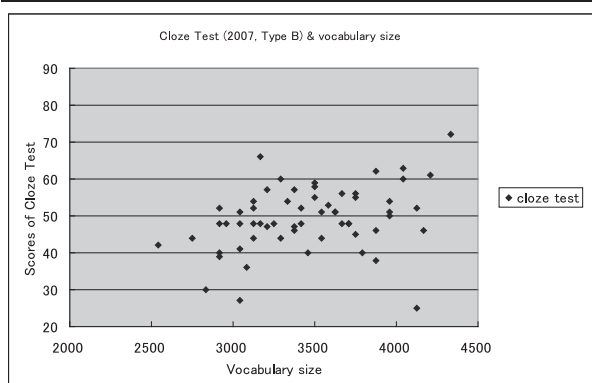
The above results show that the students did not make full use of their knowledge of English words and phrases when reading an English text. Consequently, they failed to understand the whole text. What can students do to more effectively use their knowledge of vocabulary? We assume that they need to enhance their guessing ability in English and grasp the flow of English. In general, the students are poor at using their imagination when reading English texts, focusing only on the translation of a word or phrase. However, if they could improve their sense of the flow of English, they could experience rapid progress in reading ability.

In order to verify our assumption mentioned above, we decided to analyze the results of the cloze tests which have been carried out for the past 3 years. Cloze tests have been widely used to evaluate second language proficiency, though it was originally introduced in 1953 by Wilson Taylor in his paper to determine the difficulty level of prose passages for native English speakers. According to Hinofotis (1987, p.413), the cloze procedure which "involves systematically deleting every nth word from a prose passage and asking the person tested to supply the missing words in the blanks," is justified on the assumption that "a person who is either a native speaker of the language tested or a reasonably proficient non-native speaker should be able to anticipate what words belong in the blanks given the contextual clues of the passage." Since 1970's, ESL teachers have been using cloze testing procedures not only as a measure of readability but also as that of reading comprehension, quality of translations, and pragmatic expectancies (such as shown in Oller:1973, p.105).

There are two more merits for utilizing cloze test in the classroom settings. On one hand, teachers can objectively

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measure overall English proficiency of large number of the students at the same time. On the other hand, even if students lack a feeling for the flows and hesitations of English, most of the words are predictable if they have a sense of the flow of English, and therefore, through doing cloze exercises, students are getting a feeling for the overall flow of English. After all, we decided to use the results of cloze tests to find where the students fail to grasp the flow of English and where they are not able to determine the correct direction of interpretation.

Method

We prepared two kinds of multiple choice cloze formats : one with 52 missing words and the other with 100 missing words at the beginning of the academic years (2007-2009). Generally, a cloze exercise is defined as a text in which some of the words are removed － perhaps every seventh or eighth word － and students have to replace the missing words. However, in this exercise the students were given two kinds of texts in which they were required to choose the most suitable word from four alternatives at every eighth word, as it is very difficult for the students to guess the missing words without any visible clue. (See Appendix for the texts.) The contextual type of these two texts (both are short pieces of fiction) and the level of vocabulary are almost the same, but the number of missing words is different. The number of students who took these tests and the results are shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Number of examinees and average scores for the cloze tests.

Type of Cloze Test	Number of Examinees	Academic Year	Average Score (Max 52points)
Type A (52 words)	77	2007	25.0
*Type B (100 words)	60	2007	25.6 (49.3/100)
Type B (100 words)	82	2008	25.5 (49.0/100)
Type A (52 words)	82	2009	25.8

(*The result of this test is shown in Figure 1.)

In 2007 academic year, the two test types were used to determine if there is any difference in the total percentage of correct answers according to the length of the text. In other words, for a longer text, can the students gain a better understanding of the flow of the entire English text or do they fail to concentrate on reading for meaning? Against expectations, however, the students who took the Type B test gained similar scores to those who took Type A. This could be due, in part, to students' short attention span : they could not concentrate on the longer text. We decided to leave the result of the Type B cloze test to future research and carry out analysis of the results of the Type A test.

Results

In 2007 and 2009, the same cloze test (which consisted of 52 missing words) was given to 77 and 82 first-year students, respectively. (The actual test is shown in Appendix A.) The test results in Table 2 on the next page, show similar tendencies for both groups of students in 2007 and 2009 : they gave wrong answers in approximately the same places on the test, making similar wrong judgments.

From the results in Table 2, we pick up the top 5 or 6 words which students are the most likely to fail to choose and the words which should be paid special attention to from the educational viewpoint. Error analysis of the results shows similar characteristics in students' reading and is discussed in the next subsection.

Observations

As mentioned in Introduction, the students with a large vocabulary were expected to get high scores in the cloze test, but this was not reflected in the results. As can be seen in the text for the cloze test (see Appendix A), there are not many difficult words which the students do not know. They should know the meanings of most of the words in the text, but they failed to choose the correct answers because of unfamiliar usage ; for example, in *fooling* in (42), which is used as a verb meaning "to say or do stupid or silly things often in order to make people laugh", the students know the word *fool* as an adjective, but they were not able to make the association. Therefore, what we must pay attention to is not the difficulty of vocabulary itself but its usage and function in the flow of the given English text, and we must also focus on what led the students to make wrong judgments.

Analyzing the common errors made by the students reveals the following features.

1．Idiomatic/Conventional expressions

First, in using idiomatic or conventional expressions such as those in (2), (17), (22) and (28), most of the students were able to choose the correct answers because they only paid attention to the specific idiomatic expression in each sentence; they did not have to take the rest of the sentence into consideration. However, as seen in (18) and (37), their knowledge of idiomatic expressions led them to select wrong answers : in (18), instead of *not*, many students chose *also* which comes from *but also;* and in (37), instead of *with*, the majority chose

Table 2. Results of same cloze test given in 2009 and 2007.

Number	Words	2009 (82 students)		2007 (77 students)	
		Correct Answers	(%)	Correct Answers	(%)
1)	month	69	84.1	69	89.6
2)	up	47	57.3	41	53.2
3)	Is	29	35.4	22	28.6
4)	relatives	27	32.9	22	28.6
5)	Though	17	20.7	28	36.4
6)	different	16	19.5	15	19.5
7)	too	18	22.0	20	26.0
8)	together	45	54.9	42	54.5
9)	heart	33	40.2	36	46.8
10)	think	53	64.6	55	71.4
11)	since	51	62.2	39	50.6
12)	It	70	85.4	64	83.1
13)	band	35	42.7	43	55.8
14)	song	58	70.7	46	59.7
15)	for	69	84.1	67	87.0
16)	In	21	25.6	19	24.7
17)	Of	61	74.4	63	81.8
18)	not	12	14.6	6	7.8
19)	person	63	76.8	62	80.5
20)	But	36	43.9	26	33.8
21)	we	19	23.2	17	22.1
22)	to	67	81.7	57	74.0
23)	am	41	50.0	45	58.4
24)	so	46	56.1	43	55.8
25)	was	80	97.6	69	89.6
26)	She	60	73.2	58	75.3
27)	who	13	15.9	11	14.3
28)	as	68	82.9	41	53.2
29)	says	42	51.2	31	40.3
30)	while	62	75.6	56	72.7
31)	times	64	78.0	65	84.4
32)	really	27	32.9	35	45.5
33)	only	2	2.4	5	6.5
34)	altogether	17	20.7	13	16.9
35)	if	26	31.7	16	20.8
36)	until	46	56.1	46	59.7
37)	with	4	4.9	9	11.7
38)	asked	12	14.6	10	13.0
39)	I	5	6.1	11	14.3
40)	without	53	64.6	53	68.8
41)	used	35	42.7	21	27.3
42)	fooling	8	9.8	5	6.5
43)	plans	38	46.3	38	49.4
44)	much	63	76.8	54	70.1
45)	under	17	20.7	18	23.4
46)	received	53	64.6	47	61.0
47)	other	55	67.1	46	59.7
48)	Walter	50	61.0	45	58.4
49)	surprised	58	70.7	51	66.2
50)	that	59	72.0	55	71.4
51)	voyage	39	47.6	35	45.5
52)	before	34	41.5	34	44.2

from in association with *different from*. This is because such idiomatic expressions have been fixed in the students' minds. It follows that, in order to correctly answer such cases like the above, the students need to read the sentence as a whole, and take into consideration the flow of the passages before and after the subject sentence.

2．Errors caused by narrow reading perspective
2.1 Content words

Second, the students read the text without any consideration of contextual flow. The answers found in (4) and (46) show the students based their answers not on what they had already read and understood, but on words that appeared before them. In (4), for example, they forgot about the uncle and aunt who are *relatives* that appeared in the previous paragraph and just chose *parents* which is in the reading passage; and in (46), "one from Walter ... from Gordon" which followed just after (46) is overlooked. Similarly, content words like verbs found in (10), (29) and (38), adjectives as in (49), and nouns as in (13) and (43), should be judged as appropriate from the contextual as well as grammatical viewpoints. As the students can make a fairly good judgment from the grammatical viewpoint, they need more contextual consideration and practical usage. Adverbs which strengthen or soften the meanings of sentences exemplified in, for instance, (32) and (33), are the most difficult for the students, because some adverbs can be judged correct only from the grammatical viewpoint, but most need to be judged from the viewpoint of contextual appropriateness.

The next subsection discusses errors in contextual flow, such as those in (5) and (35), where only about 30% of the students chose the correct conjunctions.

2.2 Functional words

Among functional words, conjunctions are the important element that gives readers a cue to understand the whole text and therefore, if the students cannot guess the correct conjunction they cannot follow the flow of the text.

Some students could not distinguish the construction of a subordinate conjunction followed by a clause, and that of a preposition followed by a phrase, as seen in (21) and (52). In the case of (21), *marry* is a verb and needs a subject, so naturally the subjective form *we* or *they* is appropriate (judging from the context, *we* should have been chosen). Also in (21), *after* is a conjunction and is followed by a clause, but there were some students who regarded *after* as a preposition and chose *our*. In (52), some students incorrectly chose *during*, which is a preposition and never followed by a clause.

Furthermore, some students were not being able to distinguish between subordinate and coordinate conjunctions, as shown in (20) and (35).

As for prepositions, the use of *for* as in (15) is more familiar to the students than that of *in* as in (16), and this unfamiliarity with the usage of the preposition as in (16) prevented them from giving a correct answer. In (45), however, the use of *under* in the phrase *under the circumstances* is widely known to the students and yet only a quarter of them answered correctly. This is likely because they were thinking of a phrasal verb (verb＋adverb), overlooking the phrases in the latter part of the sentence. In other words, they were reading the text within a narrow scope.

Last, the students are rather poor at identifying an interrogative pronoun, as they often confuse it with a relative pronoun. A typical example is given in (27), where the interrogative pronoun *who* should have been chosen but the majority of the students answered *what*. From the personal communication with some of the students, it became clear that they thought the antecedent such as *the person* is missing and a relative pronoun including antecedent should be *what*. That is, they left out interrogative pronouns from the start, and created a form like *the person＋that＝what*. With this kind of tendency, it may be misleading to teach formulaic patterns as the most important part of English education, rather than have students feel and grasp the contextual flow in a long English text. As a result, students cannot get used to reading English texts as a whole, which causes them to be slow readers with a narrow reading scope even if they have large vocabulary.

3．Future Applications of Analysis in English Education

After observing and analyzing the data so far, we suggest the following activities be carried out in classroom settings. First, from the grammatical and pragmatic points of view, the cloze exercises should be given to help distinguish the differences between transitive and intransitive verbs, subordinate and coordinate conjunctions, and relative and interrogative pronouns. Needless to say, this does not simply mean giving grammar exercises, but rather, getting the students to think of grammatical accuracy as well as take the contextual flow of English into consideration at the same time. This effective use of cloze tests is sure to be very useful. Once the students grasp the flow of English, they can understand the whole text, making correct guesses, and finally becoming fast readers. Second, vocabulary exercises should not be separated from the reading exercises. Since an English word does not always correspond to one fixed translation, the students

have to find appropriate meanings in accordance with the context. To do this, cloze exercises should be given which leave appropriate interpretations to the students, so that they have to find related words in the text through a wider reading scope. By doing cloze exercises in the classroom settings, we hope, students can be close enough to join the flow of English in reading and they will experience rapid progress. Cloze exercises, however, will not effectively work for students with very small vocabulary, since they have difficulty in understanding even one sentence. For those students, dictation exercises together with cloze ones would be preferable, though this verification will be a future task.

After all, our research has just started, so we will be conducting the above-mentioned cloze exercise, with new findings to be published in a year or two.

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Appendix [Cloze test-52 missing words]

I am staying here at the hotel while my parents are away for four weeks with my Uncle Nat and Aunt Jule. I decided to keep a diary while I am here to help pass the time. I can also keep a record of things that happen. I really don't expect anything to happen, since Uncle Nat and Aunt Jule, who are both thirty-five, are making the plans.

Dad and mother are abroad for a (1)｛ア week イ month ウ year エ time｝. My coming here is supposed to make (2)｛ア up イ out ウ off エ over｝ for them not taking me with them. (3)｛ア My イ His ウ Is エ Are｝

coming here to be left with my (4) {ア sisters イ parents ウ friends エ relatives} is supposed to be some kind of treat? (5) {ア If イ Though ウ For エ Since} it would be a heavenly place under (6) {ア different イ bad ウ any エ best} conditions, for instance if Walter were here (7) {ア for イ too ウ with エ along}. It would be wonderful if we were {ア there イ staying ウ lonely エ together}. The very thought of it makes my (9) {ア heart イ tongue ウ hand エ finger} stop. I can't stand it. I won't (10) {ア go イ think ウ ask エ study} about it.

This is our first separation (11) {ア if イ because ウ after エ since} we have been engaged, over two weeks. (12) {ア I イ It ウ He エ Soon} will be seventeen days tomorrow. The hotel (13) {ア maid イ guests ウ desk エ band} at dinner this evening played our favorite (14) {ア song イ dish ウ game エ guitar}. It seemed that they were playing it (15) {ア with イ of ウ for エ on} me even though I knew the person (16) {ア in イ on ウ with エ if} that song is talking about their mother. (17) {ア Of イ As ウ On エ Off} course, I miss my mother too, but (18) {ア so イ as ウ also エ not} the same way I miss Walter, the (19) {ア father イ person ウ member エ uncle} to whom I'm engaged to be married.

(20) {ア Since イ Even ウ But エ If} there won't be any more separations after (21) {ア our イ we ウ their エ they} marry. My mother laughs when I talk (22) {ア to イ before ウ in エ over} her about it because she says I (23) {ア become イ will ウ go エ am} crazy even to think about getting married (24) {ア at イ in ウ so エ if} young.

She got married herself when she (25) {ア was イ is ウ grew エ came} eighteen, but she says that was different. (26) {ア That イ I ウ She エ It} wasn't crazy like I am. She knew (27) {ア if イ what ウ which エ who} she was marrying. She talks about Walter (28) {ア even イ so ウ as エ only} if he were from another planet. She (29) {ア persuades イ says ウ hopes エ expects} that she has only been engaged once (30) {ア while イ during ウ if エ so} I have been engaged at least five (31) {ア times イ people ウ minutes エ promises} a year since I was fourteen. It (32) {ア also イ hardly ウ really エ usually} isn't as bad as that. I have (33) {ア never イ also ウ only エ ever} been what I call engaged six times (34) {ア entire イ only ウ altogether エ again}. But is it honestly only my fault (35) {ア but イ because ウ so エ if} they won't go home, and keep

insisting (36) {ア before イ until ウ by エ after} I say yes? But it is different (37) {ア with イ from ウ to エ about} Walter. I honestly believe if he hadn't (38) {ア ignored イ believed ウ hated エ asked} me I would have asked him. Actually (39) {ア she イ he ウ I エ they} wouldn't have, but I couldn't have lived (40) {ア without イ along ウ up エ for} him. Anyway, mother may as well get (41) {ア angry イ used ウ off エ through} to the idea, because I am not (42) {ア moving イ trying ウ expecting エ fooling} around this time. We have got our (43) {ア lives イ plans ウ futures エ minds} all made.

Actually, this has been a (44) {ア much イ so ウ really エ very} more exciting day than I originally expected (45) {ア about イ through ウ under エ around} the circumstances. In the first place, I (46) {ア wrote イ expected ウ mailed エ received} two letters, one from Walter and the (47) {ア another イ other ウ rest エ two} from Gordon. Indeed, I had thought that (48) {ア Father イ Nat ウ Walter エ Gordon} would write me soon, but I was (49) {ア happy イ surprised ウ interested エ attracted} at the letter from Gordon. It said (50) {ア when イ if ウ that エ as} he had just come back from a (51) {ア year イ time ウ leisure エ voyage} around the world. The trouble is that, (52) {ア before イ because ウ during エ as} he left, Gordon and I had been engaged, or at least he thought so.

All day I thought about what to say to Gordon when he calls up. Finally I couldn't stand thinking about it any more. I will tell him the truth about Walter and me, though I know it will kill me to hurt him.

要　　旨

英文読解には語彙力の高さが不可欠である。しかし、ここ３年、本学の１・２年生を対象に実施しているクローズテストの結果を見ると、本学の学生のようにある程度の語彙力がある学生（語彙サイズ3000から4500）の場合、語彙力が高くても英文読解能力が必ずしも高いとは言えないのではという疑問が生じた。知っている語彙が多くても、その知識をうまく活用することができず、内容の理解につなげられていないのではないかと思われるのである。そこで文脈の理解度を知るために、実施してきたクローズテストの結果の誤答分析を行った。その結果、正しい読解を妨げ

る要因として、リーディングのスコープが狭いため、英文の流れがつかめてないことがわかった。ここでは、資料としてその誤答分析の詳細をまとめ、すでに身につけた語彙力、文法力を最大限に適切に活用するためには、広いリーディングスコープを持って英文の流れをつかみ、推測能力を働かせながら文章を読む作業が必要であることを示唆した。

謝　　辞

（2009年 9 月30日提出）