

Availability of Cloze Tests and Completion Strategies Taught and Learnt in Secondary Schools in Murang'a East Sub-County, Kenya

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Abstract: The cloze test is recommended as a tool for assessment in the Kenya secondary school syllabus (2002). It was first included in the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education examination in 2006 and performance in it reported as poor between 2006 and 2019. The purpose of this study was to find out cloze tests completion strategies taught and learnt in secondary schools in Murang'a East sub-county and to establish the availability and number of cloze tests in approved secondary school English learners' course books in Kenya. The basis of the study was schema theory which works on how knowledge is mentally represented and utilized in context. The basic assumption in the theory is that the written text itself carries no meaning but only offers a sense of direction for the reader to retrieve or hypothesis meaning from previously acquired knowledge and knowledge structures called schemata. A descriptive survey research design was used in the study. The study had a sample frame of 768 students and 20 teachers. Sampling was by simple random technique. Data was collected from students by use of a structured questionnaire and from teachers by an interview schedule. Learners' course books were assessed using a course book analysis checklist. The findings indicate that cloze tests completion strategies are not taught in English subject lessons in secondary schools and English subject learners' course books have few cloze tests for students to practise with. It is recommended that secondary school students should be taught cloze tests completion strategies in their English subject lessons. The approved secondary school English subject learners' course books should have at least one cloze test in each study unit.

Keywords: Cloze tests, Teaching and learning completion strategies, Availability and number.

INTRODUCTION

Academic achievement in school is usually assessed through administration of assessment tests in the learning process and examinations at the close of terms, semester, year or a course. Ganai and Muhammad, (2013) define academic achievement as attainment of knowledge ability which is measured by standardized tests while the level of achievement is expressed in a grade or unit based on learners' achievement. Academic achievement therefore expresses a degree of competence in a given school task. The Kenya Institute of Education (KIE) 2002 syllabus discerns that assessment is instrumental as it helps to inform the teacher on mastery (or lack) of specific skills by students in English subject teaching. In each of the four English subject skills: listening, speaking, writing and reading, the syllabus suggests a number of assessment methods that can be used. Among other methods, the cloze test is included in the list as a tool for testing grammar and especially to test connectors.

The cloze test was first included in Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) English paper 1 in 2006 and has become a part of the paper since then. The Kenya National Examination Council (KNEC) summarizes and reports about the performance of students in each subject and paper in the KCSE examination. The report analyses every question on requirements of the question, weaknesses observed in the students' answers and recommends how students should be

prepared by teachers. The KNEC KCSE examination reports have between 2006 and 2019 reported many students scoring zero in cloze tests and most of the rest of the students less than five out of ten.

In language study, the cloze involves a systematic deletion of letters, words or phrases from a continuous text. A student is expected to supply the blank spaces with the missing parts to make the passage meaningful. It is based on the assumption that language can be shown to exhibit some regularity; for instance, there is a probability that a noun will follow an adjective or 'Merry Christmas' is more probable than 'Merry Birthday'. This idea has been subject to use in various fields in education (not necessarily language) and also research and improvement. Oller has researched extensively on cloze tests and refers to the cloze is a measure of 'grammar of expectancy'. The reader is involved in a process of reconstructing what the original writer went through when arranging the original text. Thus the process involves thinking, understanding, speaking, reading and writing. It is observed that studies on cloze tests generally focus on the use of cloze tests in assessing language proficiency and comprehension, the various types of cloze tests and on various cloze test completion strategies.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Learning how to complete cloze tests is crucial for one who will be expected to fill one in

examinations. The first step is interacting with the cloze test. Secondly, as Gunning, (1998) directs, instructions are necessary before the start of a cloze exercise. Rye, (1982) opines that the instruction to a cloze test becomes effective when sequenced carefully in length and difficulty. Adjustments to the cloze tests should be guided by readers' reading abilities.

Practice and its effect on the cloze has made Dupuis, (1980) conclude that cloze completion is a technique that can be taught and learnt. Rye, (1982) counsels that for students, getting accustomed to the cloze test is important. He advises that training on cloze test completion should emphasize on reading the whole text as one before concentrating on the blank spaces. Errors made by students in the cloze test should be analyzed to help understand particular areas of problem in students' reading ability. He continues to recommend use of group discussions since it assists students to carefully read the test and together reason with one another meaningfully about the choices of words made. He continues that the teacher can help the learning process to continue after the discussion by giving due credit for correct or appropriate responses and also offering possible explanations for the word choice. Steinman, (2002) advises that the words deleted should be those that make the readers look beyond the individual sentences with deletions. Fyfe and Mitchel, (1983) recommend exercises in cloze that involve altering the format of the cloze test and using the same passage to set different kinds of cloze exercises. Maroko, (2016) suggests a procedure involving text selection, cloze test preparation and cloze test presentation that could be used for direction when teaching/learning completion of the cloze test.

However, the cloze test may not improve reading habits if used incorrectly which Rye, (1982) explains as including exposing students to the cloze procedure for short trial periods; lack of training on how to use context clues; absence of discussion with students and lack of feedback from teachers. Rye, (1982) adds that a student would end up frustrated when left to work with short passages while unfamiliar with cloze test rules. Maroko, (2016) says that there is a possibility that there is generally no accepted and reliable method of teaching cloze test completion at primary school among teachers of language in Kenya. This study enquired about what activities English subject secondary school students are involved in when completing cloze tests and what other activities

follow after completing the tests in English subject lessons.

Bgoya, *et al.*, (1997) assert that course books in education are developed by their publishers to reflect a country's goals and objectives so that the materials are relevant. Communication is highly emphasized by the Kenya Secondary English Syllabus which in turn is replicated in English subject training (ELT) objectives at secondary school level. One of the mandates of the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD) is to recommend instructional resources that can be used in Kenyan education institutions offering the national education curriculum. This list generated gets approved by the Ministry of Education (MoE) which then publishes it in a book. This book is informally referred to in education circles as the 'Orange Book'. Course books are the primary instructional resources because a book comes after the teacher as a key resource in the teaching/learning process. A teacher when asked to teach will most certainly request for a course book for him/herself and his/her students. A British Council survey in 2008 polled teachers and found out that sixty five percent (65%) frequently used textbooks. Tomlinson, (2012) reports that in a survey at conferences in Malaysia, the UK and Vietnam, ninety two percent (92%) of respondents regularly use a course book. As Ayot, (1984) found out, ESL teachers from Kenya confess that they cannot teach without a course book because the books form a base for their teaching approach. Teachers use course books to achieve their objectives or aims (Brown, 2002). Davies and Pearse, (2000) say that books guide teachers on what to teach and in what order and standardize instruction. Tomlinson, (2012) reports that the course book helps supervisors in achieving course integrity, timetabling of lessons and standardizing teaching. Course books also assist inexperienced teachers on how to present and sequence teaching content in language lessons. Richards, (2001) adds that books save the teachers' time because they do not need to prepare new teaching materials. Much of lesson time is spent using this resource. Therefore, it is vital that the course books in use satisfy students' needs, capture their attention, stimulate their interests and lead to language acquisition. Tomlinson, (2012) opines that a course book should cover the syllabus, use suitable language, allow for student involvement and accommodate emerging issues. Davies and Pearse, (2000) say that the content of a course book may consist of vocabulary, grammatical structures,

functions and other aspects such as reading passages.

It is noted that in his study of selected practice papers in primary schools in Kenya, Maroko, (2016) found out that the recommended resources in the curriculum show that much of the information teaching and learning of cloze test completion is generally limited to provision of exercises for practice. By focussing on secondary schools, this study intended to establish the availability and number of cloze tests in the approved English subject learners' course books meant to help prepare students to successfully complete cloze tests in examinations.

OBJECTIVES

The paper was guided by two objectives:

To find out cloze tests completion strategies taught and learnt in secondary schools in Murang'a East sub-county.

To establish the availability and number of cloze tests in approved secondary school English learners' course books in Kenya.

Research Questions

This research sought to answer the questions:

1. Which cloze test completion strategies are taught and learnt in secondary schools in Murang'a East sub-county?
2. How many cloze tests are available in the approved secondary school English learners' course books in Kenya?

Theoretical Review

The study was guided by schema theory by Rumelhart, (2017). The theory works on how knowledge is mentally represented and utilized in context. The basic assumption in the theory is that the written text itself carries no meaning but only offers a sense of direction for the reader to retrieve or hypothesis meaning from previously acquired knowledge (prior knowledge) and knowledge structures acquired previously called schemata. One acquires schemata and prior knowledge as he or she relates over a period of time with others and appropriate content in suitable context. Both are acquired naturally in suitable environment or can be planned for by intentionally carrying out a variety of prearranged tasks. Therefore, teaching and learning of the procedure is an intentional prearranged activity that should translate to proficiency by the ESL student.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study used a descriptive survey research. The researcher met students and teachers, and

considered course books as they existed in secondary schools. 10 schools were sampled where six (6) were obtained using simple stratified random sampling that considered the MoE school categorization: the sub-county has only one (1) national, one (1) extra-county school, and only two (2) county and two (2) private schools. The other four (4) schools were got by simple random sampling of sub-county schools. Simple random sampling was used to get twenty (20) teachers from each of the ten (10) sample schools. Where a school had only one teacher, then the researcher picked him or her. Seven hundred and sixty eight (768) students were sampled using simple random sampling to pick the first and every fifth (5th) student in the admission list from all the four forms in each school irrespective of gender or performance. Student questionnaires, a teacher interview schedule and learners' course book checklist were applied to collect data. The data was analysed and presented using tables and calculated percentages.

Research Variables

Variables are categorised as independent, intervening and dependent. Scores in cloze tests were the dependent variable which are a direct outcome of teaching and learning of cloze tests completion strategies which is an independent variable. This is however affected by intervening variables which include among others availability of cloze tests in approved course books, practise with cloze tests, and extensive reading. The variables are related in that an alteration in the independent variable influences the dependent variable.

STUDY FINDINGS

The study involved a survey of 768 students and 10 teachers in 10 schools within Murang'a East sub-county in Murang'a County in the central region of Kenya. The students represented all classes equally from Form 1 to 4 and deemed qualified to be in secondary school upon admission by the secondary schools. All the teachers were professionally trained with a minimum of Diploma qualification in teaching and over 5 years teaching experience. 20 learners' course books approved by KICD for use in teaching English in secondary schools in Kenya were analysed. The study found out the following as per each objective:

Teaching and Learning Cloze Tests Completion Strategies

The study sought to find out cloze test completion strategies taught and learnt in secondary schools in

Murang’a East sub-county. The information regarded activities carried out by students during

and after cloze test completion sessions.

Table 1: Students’ Activities during Cloze Test Completion Sessions

ACTIVITY	n	%
Read cloze before filling gaps	378	34.5
Fill gaps then read the passage	20	1.8
Fill gaps per statement as I read the passage	214	19.5
Discuss cloze with others	35	3.2
Complete the deletions individually and silently without any feedback	450	41.0

Slightly less than half ($\frac{1}{2}$) of students completed cloze tests individually and silently without consultations or feedback on their progress. About a fifth ($\frac{1}{5}$) read the cloze passage before filling the gaps while about a third filled the gaps per statement as they read through the passage. Very few discussed the cloze with others or filled gaps then read the passage.

All twenty (20) teachers reported that they present the cloze test in printed papers and supervise the students as they completed it individually. Three (3) said they sometimes allow students to discuss the tests in groups in class. The responses indicate that cloze tests are predominantly presented in examinations where one would expect the

examination to be presented in printed papers and submitted for marking. Hence, the tests are completed individually and silently without discussion with others which does not provide them with opportunities to relate what they know and lacks immediate feedback necessary to guide the student in progressive learning.

Reading the cloze before filling it is a helpful technique but only about half ($\frac{1}{2}$) the students do this. A good number fail to look at the cloze test as a unit since they complete gaps per statement as they read the passage. The information indicates that the techniques in use during cloze test completion may not be helping the students improve their skills.

Table 2: Students’ Activities after Cloze Test Completion Sessions

ACTIVITY	n	%
Exchange test/exercise with classmate(s)	54	6.9
Discuss with others	23	2.9
Hand in for marking	671	84.8
Write corrections from teachers without explanations	05	0.6
Write answers and discuss explanations from teachers	20	2.5
Discuss explanations and instructions on completion strategies	18	2.3

Nearly all students reported that they handed in their cloze tests after completion and few reported they write answers and discuss explanations from their teachers. A very small number (from the one national and two extra county schools) reported to either exchange their tests with a classmate or discuss it with others. A nearly negligible number (from the one national and two extra county schools) reported to discuss explanations and instructions on strategies on how to complete tests. Just as noted on activities by students during cloze test completion, the students may have responded based on the majority’s interaction with cloze tests at examination times only.

All teachers reported that the students hand in their work for marking during examinations and the class discusses the cloze test upon receiving their papers back. Three (3) teachers (each from the one

national school and two extra county schools) reported having the cloze test as part of class work and explained that the students exchange books/papers and have the class agree on answers with guidance from the teachers. It is noteworthy that examinations are periodical and the teachers may not necessarily include cloze tests in short continuous assessment tests. Hence, the students would be limited in the number of times they discuss cloze tests.

The study found that the best activities which include discussion with others, exchanging tests with classmates and discussing explanations and instructions on strategies on cloze test completion are not carried out by the majority of students. Marking of cloze tests by teachers without a discussion with the students leads to students not learning why and how the correct answers are

arrived at. Therefore, there is poor preparation and subsequently, the students write examinations without the necessary skills. Low scores would be inevitable.

Availability and Number of Cloze Tests in Approved Secondary School English Learners' Course Books in Kenya

Table 3: Students' Source of Cloze Tests

SOURCE	N	%
English learners' course books provided	168	15.7
Teacher's own resources	420	39.2
Past examinations	213	19.8
Revision materials/books	271	25.3

About forty percent (40%) of the students indicated they got cloze tests supplied from their teacher's own resources. The approved learners' course books and past examinations contributed less than twenty percent (20%) as sources of cloze tests while revision books accounted for about a quarter ($\frac{1}{4}$) as sources of cloze tests.

All twenty (20) teachers said they relied on past examination papers and revision books available in the market. Only two (2) out of the twenty (20) teachers said they refer to the approved learners' course books provided to the students.

Only 3 revision books are in the list of KICD approved course books. These are bought by individual students and or schools and so not available to all across the classes. Past examinations are not subject to approval by the KICD. Reliance on past examination papers and revision books points to an inadequacy in the approved learners' course books as sources of cloze tests. The availability and accessibility of past examination papers and revision books by all students is subject to willingness and ability of individuals and institutions. The small number of students finding cloze tests in approved learners' course books indicates a gap in the number available for practice.

All twenty (20) teachers reported they referred to revision books to extract cloze tests since the learners' course books in use do not contain cloze tests and where they have, they have already been tried out by the students. This study found teachers relying on revision books which are not issued to

The second objective was to establish the availability and number of cloze tests in approved secondary school English learners' course books in Kenya. The information relates to approved English subject learners' course books, source of cloze tests in English subject lessons and checking for cloze tests in the approved English subject learners' course books.

each student or are not necessarily accessible in all schools.

Seven (7) learners' course book titles are approved by the KICD for use in secondary school ELLs. The researcher lists the approved English subject learners' course books here where the abbreviations in brackets have been assigned by the researcher for purposes of presentation in table 4.

Head Start Secondary English Book 1, 2, 3 and 4 (H.S.E)

New Integrated English Book 1 and 3 (N.I.E)

Advancing in English Book 1, 2, 3 and 4 (A.E.)

Excelling in English (Secondary English) Book 1, 2 and 3 (E.E.)

New Horizons in English Book 1, 2 and 4 (N.H.E.)

Explore English Book 1 and 3 (Ex.E.)

Macmillan (Moran) English Book 3 and 4 (M.E)

This study perused the approved learners' course books to establish the number of cloze tests provided. The number of cloze tests available in each course book is significant as it is an indicator of the opportunities available for a learner to get to practise with the cloze test in and out of ELLs. The books were found to be arranged in units of study where each unit is structured to cover the four language skills: listening, speaking, writing and reading. The learners' course book checklist considers the book, Form or class considered, number of units in the book and total number of cloze tests found. The number of cloze tests available in the approved learners' course books was reported next with the assistance of table 4.

Table 4: Availability and Number of Cloze Tests in Approved Course Books

Course Books	Form 1		Form 2		Form 3		Form 4	
	N.U.	CT	N.U.	CT	N.U.	CT	N.U.	CT
E.E.	20	0	26	5	24	0	N/A	N/A
N.H.E.	25	1	30	0	N/A	N/A	20	4
N.I.E.	32	0	N/A	N/A	30	1	N/A	N/A
A.E.	30	2	29	3	30	3	31	6
H.S.E.	30	3	30	3	27	3	24	3
Ex. E.	20	0	N/A	N/A	24	2	N/A	N/A
M.E	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	30	1	21	6

KEY: N.U. = Number of Units, CT = Cloze Tests

The books for each class had between nineteen (19) and thirty two (32) units. The figures indicate five (5) cloze tests as being the most in any of the course books out of twenty six (26) units. Five (5) out of twenty (20) course books had no single cloze test. The researcher is of the opinion that five (5) cloze tests in one (1) academic year are very few to provide sufficient completion practice. Being assessment tools, cloze tests in the English subject learners' course books in Kenya appear at points of revision or checkpoints for several topics.

CONCLUSIONS

The research achieved its objectives and the following conclusions were made from the observations:

Cloze tests completion strategies are not taught in English subject lessons in secondary schools. Cloze tests are primarily presented in examinations. Thus, recommended cloze test completion strategies the students should be involved in during and after the cloze test completion sessions are not practised.

The approved English subject learners' course books have few (and some none) cloze tests for students to practise with.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends the following:

Cloze test completion strategies should be taught to secondary school English subject students. This is by having students engaged in the recommended activities during and after cloze test completion sessions. These include teaching students how to complete the cloze by emphasizing the need to read the whole text before focusing on the blank spaces. The errors students make in the cloze test need to be analysed in order to understand particular problem areas in students' reading ability. There should also be use of group discussions as it makes students read carefully and reason together meaningfully about their choice of

a word for the blank space. The teacher should give credit for appropriate and correct responses and also explain possible reasons for the author's choice of words.

The approved secondary school English subject learners' course books should have at least one cloze test in each study unit for practise. Much of lesson time is spent using this resource. Therefore, it is vital that the course books in use satisfy students' needs, capture their attention, stimulate their interests and lead to language acquisition. Having cloze tests in each unit would provide much needed resource for practise.

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Source of support: Nil; **Conflict of interest:** Nil.

Cite this article as:

Mbugua, N.I. and. Ndethiu, S.M. "Availability of Cloze Tests and Completion Strategies Taught and Learnt in Secondary Schools in Murang'a East Sub-County, Kenya." *Sarcouncil Journal of Education and Sociology* 1.10 (2022): pp 1-7.