

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 BACKGROUND

The cloze technique has evolved from the initial purpose of assessing the readability of texts, testing reading comprehension to that of assessing general language proficiency of learners. The cloze as an assessment technique is an integral part of all the English language papers in Malaysian public examinations, such as, the UPSR (Primary School Assessment Test), PMR (Lower Secondary Assessment), and the SPM (Malaysian Certificate of Education) as well as the MUET (Malaysian University English Test). The frequent use of the cloze technique in Malaysian government and institutionalised English language examinations has prompted the researcher to investigate how language learners arrive at their answers to cloze texts. For instance the cloze technique is frequently adopted by the English language instructors of the Polytechnic of Port Dickson in assessing the general proficiency (in terms of grammar and lexis) of their English language students. Cloze texts appear in quizzes and the end-semester assessment paper. The deletions in these cloze texts are carefully selected function and content words. Therefore they are actually rational cloze instead of random cloze with  $n$ th word deletions,  $n$  being the number of words between two blanks. In addition students can choose from four options provided for each deletion. One advantage of this design is to facilitate objectivity in marking.

The paradigm shift from the emphasis on teaching to the actual learning process has also lent support to the rationale of the present study. Research on the cloze technique has focused on various aspects of the cloze design. For example, the effects of deletion

rate for random cloze; the starting point of the first word deleted, and the level of difficulty of cloze text as well as the performance by language learners of differing levels of proficiency. Since its first research on second language learners, there has been considerable effort in identifying which language skills and cognitive processes are tapped in cloze performance. The present study seeks to compare the strategies employed by subjects in solving two different rational cloze designs, that is, one with options and the other without options.

The study can be considered as applied psycholinguistics as it seeks to explore by identifying, describing and perhaps attempting to explain the psychological processes or preferred strategies (the term that is used in the study) that go on when language is being processed and produced. Briefly the term strategies can be defined as “the often conscious steps or behaviours used by language learners to enhance the acquisition, storage, retention, recall, and use of new information” (Oxford 1993: 175). A more specific definition related to problem solving in learning is “potentially conscious plans for solving what to an individual presents itself as a problem in reaching a particular ... goal” (Faerch & Kasper 1983 cited in Black 1993: 419 & 420). These two definitions epitomise the meaning of the term strategies and also mark the parameter of its use in the study. Hence strategies in this case refer to potentially conscious steps employed by the subjects in solving two types of rational cloze designs.

The following three sections would provide a more detailed view of the study in terms of its purpose, research questions and significance.

## 1.2 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The primary aim of the study is to identify the mental processes and the language processing strategies utilised by a small, approximately homogenous group of English language learners in performing a particular kind of second language task, that is, cloze completion. In other words, it is to gain an insight into the learners' problem-solving and thinking processes in relation to second language processing. The investigation focuses on two types of cloze design, namely, rational cloze with options and without options which are also originally known as "multiple-choice cloze" and "open-ended cloze" (Jonz 1976) respectively. For each cloze type, the deletions comprise ten content words and ten function words.

It is also the interest of the study to establish whether the task types (rational cloze with options and without options) or the deletion types (content words and function words) play a more influential role in determining the mental processes and the choice of language processing strategies employed by the subjects. This can be achieved by comparing the similarities and differences between the data obtained for the task types and the deletion types. Incidentally the analysis of the data concerned could be utilised to infer the kind of language skills that can be measured via the cloze technique. This would in turn provide the necessary feedback on cloze design.

Furthermore the study takes the opportunity to inquire if the subjects practise the strategies that they have been taught by their English language instructors on how to solve cloze texts. By comparing the data collected via the subjects' think-aloud protocols and stimulated recall with the data obtained from the English language

instructors' interviews, it would be possible to gauge the effectiveness of teaching cloze completion strategies to language learners.

### **1.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The research questions in the study have been formulated to identify the mental processes and language processing strategies employed by second language learners as they respond to two types of cloze completion tasks and provide plausible explanations for their occurrences based on the insights gained from the research conducted. In addition it is anticipated that the data collected would be informative regarding the effectiveness in teaching strategies involved in cloze completion. The four fundamental research questions are as follows:

1. What are the kinds of mental processes involved in solving rational cloze with options, and without options?
2. What strategies did the subjects use to solve rational cloze with options, and without options?
3. Which is the more influential factor in determining the utilisation of strategies, task type or deletion type?
4. Do the subjects practice the strategies they have been taught? In other words, is the teaching of cloze completion strategies effective in assisting the subjects in their performance?

## 1.4 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

It is intended for the present study to provide a more comprehensive and realistic insight regarding the mental processes and language processing strategies employed in completing cloze texts. The findings would be viewed as a pragmatic contribution towards cloze design, cloze as an assessment technique, and learner training in cloze completion. In other words, suggestions and recommendations are made for the material writers, test designers, second language instructors, and syllabus designers.

By inferencing from the strategies unveiled, it may be plausible to explain what learners do when they read and comprehend language, that is, how the second language is processed. This would in turn reflect the appropriate skills measured by the cloze technique. This insight would enhance the validity of the cloze as a testing instrument when test designers are able to understand what is being tested by the cloze technique. Thus they would be able to design the appropriate type of cloze to measure the intended skills. consequently better designed cloze will emerge as the designers become better informed.

English language instructors have been too often focusing on what learners should be doing that the more crucial contributing factor towards learning has been neglected. In other words, they should also be concerned about what learners actually do when given a language task. It would be beneficial if the instructors are able to examine the mental processes or reasoning by which solutions to language tasks are reached. In thus doing, they will begin to understand how learners process the second language. Then they would be able to rectify the incorrect application of learners' language processing strategies, linguistic knowledge or the inaccurate inferences that they make.

Hence the shift of emphasis from product to process enables successful behaviours and thought processes to be determined. These strategies may form the basis for planning a language learner training program with the goal of instructing less proficient learners to realise their full language learning potential. In other words the study is concerned with increasing basic understanding of the cloze technique so that programs and teaching practices can be developed to help students solve cloze tasks more accurately.

Further details of the implications of the study will be discussed in Chapter Five.