

The Relationship between Genre and Iranian EFL Learners' Performance on Open-Ended and Multiple-Choice Cloze Tests

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Abstract

Abundant researches have been conducted on various aspects and characteristics of cloze test. Genre; on the other hand, is one of the most recent issues in the field of language teaching and applied linguistics. The present article aims at providing a link between the two, i.e., a genre-based cloze test. After selecting the subjects and determining their proficiency levels, two tests were developed each containing three cloze passages each from a different genre (short story, biography, magazine article) taking into accounts factors such as readability and deletion rate. The first test included three cloze passages in open-ended form and the second test consisted of the same passages in their multiple-choice form. These tests were administered to a group of EFL seniors. The results revealed that the choice of genre has a significant effect on the performance of the subjects on open-ended cloze test and multiple-choice cloze test. Furthermore, the form of cloze test (open-ended Vs. multiple-choice) and the interaction of the two variables (genre and form) has also an impact upon the test takers' performance.

Key words: testing, open-ended cloze test, multiple-choice cloze test, genre.

Introduction

There has been considerable interest in the genre-based approach to the teaching of language since the mid 1980s. This approach has communicative purpose as its foundation and originated through the work of Halliday (1978), Swales (1981, 1990, 1995), and Bhatia (1993). In brief, a genre is a text, either spoken or written, that serves a particular purpose in society.

Until recently, the study of written genres focused on textual pattern. When researchers wanted to examine a particular genre, they

looked across multiple texts for regularities of form and effect. Over the last decade, scholars have been reinterpreting genre as social action: "a complex pattern of repeated social activity and rhetorical performance to a recurrent situation" (Pare and Smart, 1994:147).

The essence of the concept of genre, as now is used in applied linguistics, ESP and rhetoric, is an emphasis on the primacy of communicative purpose and the way in which communicative needs shape or influence both surface and deeper rhetorical structures.

Different scholars have proposed different definitions for genre: For Hymes (1972), quoted in Bhatia (1993), genre is component of speech with identifiable formal characteristics traditionally recognized. For Martin (1984), genre refers to regularities of staged, goal-oriented social processes. Swales (1990) and Bhatia (1993) consider the communicative purpose as the most prominent criterion for the identification of genres. For Miller (1994), genre is a social action, and to Freedman (1994), genres are social actions or rhetorical responses to recurrent situations or context.

Genres are essentially defined in terms of the use of language in conventionalized communicative settings. They are meant to "serve the goals of specific discourse communities, and in so doing, they tend to establish relatively stable structural forms and, to some extent, even constrain the use of lexico-grammatical resources in expressing these forms" (Bhatia, 1993:183).

In recent years, much emphasis has been placed on the application of genre for a variety of purposes. Genre can be applied in the two main areas of language use, language teaching in general and ESP in particular. Findings of genre analysis can be used to understand and appreciate some of the general issues in present-day language teaching. Bhatia (1993:147) states applications of genre and genre analysis for course-designers, language teachers, ESP learners and teachers, and curriculum-developers.

On the other hand, within the field of language testing, the cloze procedure has been extensively investigated from both theoretical and methodological perspectives. Cloze Procedure, initially introduced by Taylor in 1953, was used to determine the readability of texts in the

readers' native language. Later, it gained importance as a good testing device, and it is now one of the most popular testing techniques, especially for assessing general language proficiency of EFL/ESL learners.

Much research has aimed at determining the validity and the reliability of cloze tests. Cloze tests are reported to have moderate to high correlation with standardized tests and their subtests such as listening comprehension, reading comprehension, etc. Oller (1973), Shohamy (1978), Hinofotis (1980) and Mullen (1980) report high correlation between cloze tests and tests of listening, writing, and reading comprehension, and FSI oral interview. The findings of these researchers reveal a relation between the scores on cloze and global language ability tests.

A growing body of research on cloze test has indicated that the features of the text out of which the cloze test is constructed, e. g., text difficulty, deletion rate, text length, text style, and text rhetorical organization, may have an impact upon testees' performance on cloze test.

Taking all of the above mentioned points into consideration, this article addresses the relationship between genre and Iranian EFL learners' performance on open-ended cloze tests and multiple-choice cloze tests.

Related Studies

The process of investigating the reliability and validity of cloze tests has involved the investigation of a number of variables such as scoring method, frequency of deletion, test length, length of blanks, native and non-native performances and so on. Text difficulty, text style, and text rhetorical organization have been some of the features investigated. The conclusion is that text features may have an effect on the performance of test takers on cloze test.

Chapelle and Abraham (1990), for instance, investigated the effect of deletion rate on the testees' performance. They also examined the elements of cloze context which affect performance by determining the extent to which item characteristics correlate with item difficulty. To that end, they considered the testees' knowledge of content

elements of a task, the nature of the required response, and the deletion of function words or content words. They found that all these factors influence the testees' performance on cloze tests.

Jon Jones (1991) made an attempt to find the effect of intersentential links on the comprehension process of non-native users of English. In another study conducted by Farhady and Keramati (1996), it appeared that selecting deletion rate based on the number of linguistic and discourse structures of a passage influences the testees' performance on cloze tests.

Bachman (1990) argues that particular types of language tests (e. g., multiple-choice, cloze, dictation) themselves constitute genres and these activate certain expectations in test takers familiar with them, and thus facilitating the task of test taking for these individuals, while making the task more difficult for test takers not familiar with the particular type. In addition, Bachman asserts, if the language of the input in a given test is characteristic of a genre that is unfamiliar to test takers, we would hypothesize that tasks that depend on the interpretation of that input would be relatively difficult. "Unfamiliarity with the characteristics of a given genre may also make the expected response more difficult" (Bachman, 1990:139).

Salager-Meyer (1991) shows that text familiarity exerts a strong influence on the reading outcome of two test groups of Spanish-speaking medical students learning English as a second language. Other relevant studies show that familiarity with the genre have strong influence on testees' performance.

Other studies experiment the impact of different genres on the test takers' performance. In terms of the effect of test genre, Shohamy and Inbar (1991) investigated the effect of different genres along the oral-written continuum on the test takers' scores on listening comprehension tests, controlling for the topic of the genres. The three types of discourse selected for the research were an interview, a lecturette and a news broadcast. The results revealed significant differences among the testees' scores on each discourse types, despite the fact that the content of the three genres was identical. The interview resulted in the highest score, followed by the lecturette; the

news broadcast resulted in the lowest score, thereby emphasizing its resemblance to the oral-written continuum.

Bullock and Lantolf (1987) discussed the ways in which L2 learners' processing of and interaction with narrative and expository texts affect their performance on cloze tests. They suggest that researchers and teachers interpreting these tests should not assume that such tests only assess language ability.

Method

Subjects

The subjects of this study were 120 senior EFL students, both males and females studying at Kashan University. Thirty students took part in the pilot study for the sake of the validation of the test constructed by the researcher and out of the remaining subjects, 80 were selected on the basis of their proficiency assessed by an original 1992 version of Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). These subjects took different tests prepared for the purpose of the study.

Instrumentation

Three testing instruments were used in this study. The first one was an original 1992 version of TOEFL. It was intended to act as a criterion to validate the other test types, i.e., the open-ended cloze tests and the multiple-choice cloze tests developed for the purpose of the study. Further, it was administered for the purpose of selecting subjects with a specific level of proficiency in English. The second test, Test A, included three open-ended cloze passages developed for the purpose of this study. Each one was constructed by deleting every 7th word out of an original and authentic passage. It is worthwhile to mention that the passages enjoyed nearly equal readability indices. To that end, the readability levels of the passages were calculated utilizing Fog's Readability Formula and Fry's Extended Graph. The third test, Test B., included the multiple-choice cloze forms of the same passages as those of Test A.

Procedure

The procedure which has been followed in this study can be divided into three main phases: test preparation, validation procedure, and test administration.

Phase One: Test Preparation

(1) TOEFL: This test was a 1992 original version of Test of English as a Foreign Language. Due to some practical limitations, it was decided to exclude the "Listening Comprehension" and the "Writing" sections and to include only "Grammar and Written Structures", "Vocabulary and Reading Comprehension" sections. There were 100 multiple-choice items completed in 70 minutes.

(2) Test A: This test included three open-ended cloze passages. The steps involved in adopting the cloze passages were as follows. Firstly, based on the curriculum designed for the central educational system at university level in Iran, several textbooks studied by the subjects were selected. Five different passages out of these books were randomly selected and their readability levels were calculated utilizing Fog's index of readability scale. After determining the readability of each book, the average readability was calculated which served as an index for the selection of the passages for this study. Secondly, based on the obtained average readability index, three passages with three different genres, namely, short story and biography and magazine article were selected after examining several passages. Three cloze passages with every 7th word deleted and the first and the last sentences left intact were developed. Each cloze passage included 30 blanks to be filled by the subjects in 20 minutes.

(3) Test B: This test included three multiple-choice cloze forms of the same passages as those of the open-ended cloze. The steps involved in constructing the choices of the multiple-choice cloze passages were as follows. First of all, the cloze passages in their open-ended form were administered to a group of 30 students majoring in English with the same characteristics as those of the main subjects of the study, e.g., sex, age-range, proficiency level. Then, their answers to the blanks served as the basis of preparing the

distractors of the multiple-choice cloze passages, that is, the most frequent inappropriate words written by the testees were used as distractors.

Phase Two: Validation Procedure

To make sure of the appropriacy of the aforementioned tests for the subjects under investigation, the tests were pretested with a group of 30 senior EFL students at Kashan University. The purpose was to determine the reliability and validity of the newly developed tests. Meanwhile, an item analysis was accomplished and necessary modifications were made.

Phase Three: Test Administration

In the main phase of the study, the first test to be administered was the TOEFL which was taken by all the 120 subjects. Next, the open-ended cloze passages were administered to 80 subjects who had been selected based on their proficiency assessed by the TOEFL. Four weeks later, the multiple-choice cloze passages were given to the same subjects. The rationale for this time interval was that since the same passages were used for developing both forms of cloze tests, this time interval could nullify any possible memory effect.

Results

1. Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics for the study measures are presented in Table 1. As illustrated, the maximum mean has been obtained on Passage A of Test B which is a short story in multiple-choice form. The minimum mean belongs to Passage C of Test A, i.e., a magazine article in an open-ended form.

Table 1 demonstrates the results of descriptive analysis for the students' performance of all of the tests utilized in this study. As can be seen, the subjects have performed much better on Passage A of Test B, which is a short story in multiple-choice form. However, the minimum mean has been obtained on Passage C of Test A, i.e. a magazine article in an open-ended form.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for the TOEFL, Test A, and Test B

Variable	X	SD	M	Me	V	Min	Max	N	K
TOEFL	68.9	5.63	70	69	39.1	52	82	60	100
Test A.									
Passage A.	16.9	3.29	20	17	10.8	8	23	60	30
Passage B.	15.5	3.85	12	15	14.7	10	26	60	30
Passage C.	12.1	2.71	12	12	7.35	7	21	60	30
Test B.									
Passage A.	20.2	3.32	20	20	11.0	12	26	60	30
Passage B.	19.3	3.95	14	19	15.5	13	29	60	30
Passage C.	15.1	3.02	14	15	9.12	10	26	60	30

2. Reliability Estimation

The reliability coefficients, estimated by KR-21 formula, Guttman's Statistics, Split-half method, and Cronbach's alpha, are reported in Table 2. As the table shows, all the measures have more or less acceptable reliability coefficients.

Table 2
Different Estimation of Reliability for Test A and Test B

Variable	KR-21	Guttman' statistic	Split-half	Cronbach's alpha
Test A.				
Passage A.	0.7410	0.7319	0.7967	0.7319
Passage B.	0.8018	0.7948	0.8290	0.7948
Passage C.	0.6350	0.6152	0.7019	0.6152
Test B.				
Passage A.	0.7375	0.7283	0.7912	0.7283
Passage B.	0.8189	0.8125	0.8425	0.8125
Passage C.	0.7093	0.6921	0.7629	0.6921

3. Correlational Analysis

The test takers' scores on TOEFL were correlated with those of Test A and Test B, the result of which is presented in Table 3 above.

Taking the validity coefficients into consideration, the tests seem to be relatively valid.

Table 3
Correlational Analysis for Test A and Test B

Variable	Validity
Test A.	
Passage A.	0.6621
Passage B.	0.7079
Passage C.	0.6051
Test B.	
Passage A.	0.6545
Passage B.	0.7278
Passage C.	0.6217

4. Repeated Measures ANOVA

To compare the subjects' performance on the study measures, the statistical technique of Repeated Measures ANOVA was applied. The results, presented in Table 4, revealed that there is a significant relationship between genre and test takers' performance on open-ended cloze test and multiple choice cloze test. In other words, the subjects have had different performance on all passages of the two tests. The variation in the subjects' performance has been due to three factors: The genre of passages (short story, biography, magazine article), the form of cloze test (open-ended and multiple-choice), and the interaction of genre and form.

Table 4
Repeated Measures ANOVA for Genre, Form and the Interaction of Both

Source of variation	D.F.	F-observed	Sig. of F	F-critical
Genre	2	74.19*	.000	3.92
Form	1	1079.27*	.000	4.00
Genre by Form	2	4.43*	.014	3.92

As Table 4 demonstrates, the observed F in all cases is greater than the critical F implying that the genre of passages, the form of cloze test and the interaction of genre and form have an impact upon the test takers' performance.

5. Pair-wise Comparison of Means

As mentioned earlier, the result of repeated measures ANOVA showed that the subjects have had different performance on the two tests as the result of employing different genres and forms of tests, but it does not allow us to locate the differences precisely. In order to find out the location of the difference (between each pair), a pair-wise comparison of means was conducted employing matched t-test between the subjects' means on each pair. In other words, exploratory comparisons were made between all the different groups of means. To that end, the level of significance for multiple comparison was computed and the result was $C=.003$, which means that when the level of significance (α) obtained by t-test is smaller than or equal to $.003$, it can be concluded that the difference between means on the two paired samples are statistically significant. In order to compare the means of testees on the six passages with one another, the statistical technique of t-test was employed and the results are presented in Table 5.

Table 5
Matched T-Test for Paired Samples

Variable	df	t-observed	t-critical	2-Tailed Sig.
Art-Mc & Art-Oe	59	16.16*	3.460	.000
Art-Mc & Bi-Mc	59	8.63*	3.460	.000
Art-Mc & Bi-Oe	59	.93	3.460	.354
Art-Mc & Sto-Mc	59	12.26*	3.460	.000
Art-Mc & Sto-Oe	59	4.02*	3.460	.000
Art-Oe & Bi-Mc	59	14.37*	3.460	.000
Art-Oe & Bi-Oe	59	7.32*	3.460	.000
Art-Oe & Sto-Mc	59	19.70*	3.460	.000
Art-Oe & Sto-Oe	59	10.68*	3.460	.000
Bi-Mc & Bi-Oe	59	15.81*	3.460	.000
Bi-Mc & Sto-Mc	59	1.71	3.460	.092
Bi-Mc & Sto-Oe	59	6.42*	3.460	.000
Bi-Oe & Sto-Mc	59	11.14*	3.460	.000
Sto-Mc & Sto-Oe	59	19.86*	3.460	.000
Bi-Oe & Sto-Oe	59	3.57	3.460	.001

Conclusions and Suggestions for Further Research

Three general conclusions can be drawn from the findings of this study. First, there is a relationship between genre and Iranian EFL learners' performance on open-ended cloze tests and multiple-choice cloze tests. In other words, when the form of cloze tests remains constant and the genre of passages is different, test takers will have a different performance which may be attributable to the genre of passages. Second, the form of cloze tests also affects test takers' performance on the same passage. In other words, when the same passage (of the same genre) is utilized for developing both open-ended and multiple-choice cloze tests, the testees will have different performance on the two tests. Third, the interaction of genre and form might have an effect upon the test takers' performance.

Furthermore, the present study has raised some questions worth investigating. The first question deals with the effect of other genres on EFL learners' performance on cloze tests. Due to practical limitations, this study focused mainly on three genres, namely, short story, biography, and magazine article. The need is felt for taking other genres into consideration, e.g., formal letter, advertisement, news item, etc. The second interesting question deals with the type of language tests. The present researcher used two forms of cloze tests to evaluate the subjects' performance. It is possible to use other language tests (e.g., functional tests, tests of writing ability, tests of listening comprehension, c-test) as Shohamy and Inbar (1991) did. They investigated the impact of genre on listening comprehension of test takers, and found out that genre has an impact on the subjects' listening comprehension scores. The next question is whether it is possible to facilitate EFL reading comprehension by teaching the genres explicitly as discussed by Freedman (1994) in her Strong Hypothesis and the Restricted or Limited Hypothesis. If teaching is actually useful in this respect, then, we should probe a variety of pedagogical techniques for teaching various genres to improve reading comprehension.

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