Assessing Coherence through Cloze-Based and Free Summaries: A Study of Adult EFL Learners

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In EFL/ESL classes, writing takes centre stage. The syllabus includes genres such as descriptive, narrative and argumentative texts, and interpersonal communication based texts such as letters, emails, notes and memos. While each text type has its own set of structural and linguistic features, at the heart of every composition lies text coherence. However, very often learners seem to struggle with this sub-skill of writing. In this paper, I will look at tasks that can be used to teach and assess ESL/EFL learners' knowledge of coherence in writing.

While a free composing task such as writing an essay requires one to develop content, a task such as summary writing helps to focus more on coherence. While summarizing, one needs to look at both macro (paragraph) and micro (sentential) levels of coherence in order to build "texture" (Halliday and Hasan, 1976)[1]. In this paper, I will show that summary tasks can be used to assess the knowledge of texture or text coherence at both levels. I will also assess the effectiveness of these tasks based on evidence from an exploratory study conducted on a group of adult EFL learners enrolled in a short term English proficiency course in an Indian university.

To summarize a text, a learner needs to have a whole text representation and needs to be able to do the following—first to select the key ideas, second to identify the links between the ideas, and third to construct a new text by joining the links between the ideas by paraphrasing them. In the absence of any of these skills, the quality of summary writing is likely to be negatively affected.

Writing free summaries may pose to be a challenge for EFL learners who are struggling with the language. This is because they have to express coherently through written expression and their expression can be negatively affected if their proficiency in the target language is poor. One way out of this problem is to use cloze-based summary tasks to assess text coherence as it eliminates the struggle of composing the text. For instance, a summary cloze task can help a learner to identify the links between ideas crucial for whole text comprehension, by blanking out the cohesive ties in the text.

The Study

This study was undertaken to understand whether cloze tasks can help learners better identify micro-coherence and whether this can serve as a precursor to building coherence while writing free summaries.

Hypotheses

For the purpose of the study, it was hypothesized that:

1. Knowledge of micro-level text coherence is dependent on task type.
2. Accuracy of use of cohesive ties is not uniform across all sub-types.

Participants

The participants comprised twenty-three adult EFL learners of English, with a mean age of 32.2 years (sd=2.1) (female 10; male 13). They were enrolled in a twelve-week proficiency course in an Indian university and were found to be at B2 level of proficiency based on their performance in a placement test administered at the beginning of the course. They were found to be fairly proficient in expressing themselves in the target language when they joined the course. So, as a part of the writing syllabus, they were trained in summary writing - an advanced academic skill which requires comprehension, analysis and synthesis of knowledge. They were also made to practice writing summaries of various texts types- expository, narrative and argumentative. At the beginning, the learners were instructed to write free summaries. But their performance revealed that for argumentative texts, they were not able to identify the micro links between the key and supporting ideas. As a result, the summaries they wrote did not cohere well. So cloze tasks were designed to give them context support whereby the key ideas were paraphrased and the links were left out as blanks to assess micro-level coherence.

Tasks

Mid way through the course, the participants' knowledge of text coherence was assessed through a free as well as a cloze-based summary of an argumentative text titled "Enjoying Ballet" by Mary Clark (as cited in Richards & Eckstut-Didier, 2003, p. 22). The free summary task helped to assess learners' knowledge of both micro and macro coherence. The cloze task presented a summary of text and elements of micro coherence or cohesive ties were left as blanks. Five sub-types of cohesive ties were to be supplied - *additive* (4), *contrastive* (2), *exemplification* (2), *sequence* (2) and *resultative* (2). So, the cloze task assessed only knowledge of micro coherence[2].

A week's gap was maintained between the two tasks so as to eliminate the effect of task familiarity on performance. The free task was done prior to the cloze task. The ballet text was made available to the learners while they were doing the tasks.

Findings

In the free summary task, fifteen summary propositions (SPs) were identified[3]. For the presence of each SP and its appropriate link to the corresponding SP, a score of one was awarded. So the total score for the free summary task was 15. In the cloze task, for filling each blank with the appropriate cohesive tie, one score was awarded and the task had a total score of 12.

The first finding of the study was that the Wilcoxon Mann-Whitney test shows a significant difference in performance in the two tasks (n=23, $p<0.05$); the performance on the cloze task is significantly higher and more uniform (m=9.08*; sd=1.71) than the free summary task (m=8.30; sd=2.57). The finding further revealed that in a task such as cloze summary, when the learners do not have to develop content, they can focus on text coherence. This explains

their higher performance in the cloze task. So a sub-skill of summary writing—text coherence—becomes easier when done in a context-embedded manner through the cloze task.

The second finding was that the correlation between the two performances is low and not significant (r = .21, *n.s.*). A low correlation implies that knowledge of cohesion can be used to moderately predict the ability to write free summaries. The two findings prove the first hypothesis— knowledge of text coherence is dependent on task type— to be valid at a moderate level.

The third finding of the study was based on the knowledge of cohesive ties in the two tasks and they are:

(I) in the cloze task, the following order in accuracy was found:

exemplification (96%)>resultative, sequence, additive (72%)>contrastive (67%)

(ii) in the free summary task, a slightly different pattern was found:

additive, contrastive, exemplification (68%)> resultative, sequence (32%)[4]

These findings provide evidence for the second hypothesis: Accuracy of use of cohesive ties is not uniform across all sub-types.

In sum, learner errors in the free task exposed the bottlenecks during text comprehension, especially in micro-coherence. Furthermore, the findings of the summary cloze test helped us to conclude that the task served a dual purpose: one, it served as a diagnostic for the knowledge of the sub-skill of coherence (cohesion), and two it was a scaffold to identify the links between the main and supporting ideas. The pedagogical benefit of the cloze task was confirmed through an informal interview with the learners post the tasks, where they stated that by doing the cloze tasks they were able to 'notice' the structural organization of a summary text and selection of key ideas.

Discussion

Let us now attempt to answer the question: Why did performance in the two tasks differ∫ Writing a summary involves three cognitive steps: (i) *selecting* the main ideas; (ii) *cohering* the ideas; and (iii) *constructing* a summary (that represents the original text). The two tasks we used were of differing levels of cognitive complexity in relation to the presence (or absence) of these three steps as shown in the following Table 1:

Table 1 *Task Complexity Analysis*		
	Free summary	Cloze-based summary
Selection	LEAST problem	X
Coherence	some problem	YES (fewer as only micro)
Construction	more problems	X

In the cloze task, knowledge of grammar and semantics was required to fill in the blanks with the appropriate cohesive ties of five kinds: additive, contrastive, exemplification, sequence and resultatives. However, selection of key ideas or construction of a new text was not required. So, a sub-skill of summary writing—text coherence— becomes easier when done in a context embedded manner through the cloze task. Higher success in the cloze task proved that the learners had knowledge of "texture" to a certain extent[5].

In the free summary, all three steps were required along with knowledge of grammar, vocabulary and semantics. When learners

needed to attend to all these three features, text coherence suffered and was not as high. Let us now look at performance in the free task more closely to understand the bottlenecks in coherence.

Performance in the Free Task

Table 2 represents the frequently occurring SPs found in the free summary texts:

Table 2		
Frequent SPs in Learner Texts		
Text parts	Summary Propositions (SPs)	Comments
Introduction (SP1-SP2)	Ballet is a unique dance form but not popular because misconceptions about the dance form exist	mostly present
Body (SP3-SP7)	Reason 1: wealthy/royal people patrons; so, common people did not find it enjoyable Reason 2: style, costumes and difficult training of the dance form made people think that they cannot understand it	
Body (SP8- SP12)	Effect 1: Like sports or gymnastics people do not find ballet appealing Effect 2: They do not express opinion on this art form as readily as they do for sports	mostly absent
Conclusion (SP13-SP15)[6]	Author's suggestion: enjoy this dance form, its beauty Untrained appreciation is better	mostly present

It was interesting to note that the learners were able to represent the key ideas from the introduction, a part of the body and the conclusion but they left out a part of the supporting ideas of the body. What did they leave out∫ They identified the main idea that ballet as a dance from is not popular as (i) it used to be historically patronized by the rich and (ii) the dance form involves complex style, costumes and training. So, most people do not enjoy ballet and do not have an opinion around it even though it is a visual art form. The learners understood that the author was nevertheless appealing to the masses that this dance form should be appreciated for its

beauty and for that one need not have any training in it. So, the learners left out the part that says that most people do not talk about ballet and that one can enjoy the beauty of ballet without being trained in it. This resulted in a lower performance on the free task than in the cloze task. However, the salient parts of the text were included in the summary. This shows that the learners were mentally able to hold the summary structure with the links between the key ideas. Some additional or supporting ideas were left out, but this did not change the meaning of the original text. It also indicated that the learners had the general skills required for writing summaries; they only needed to include more supporting details to fine tune their knowledge of summarizing more accurately and add to text coherence.

Conclusion

The findings of this study may be applied to the ESL writing classroom. Teachers can help to enhance whole text comprehension and coherence by using summary tasks in a sequentially graded manner as shown in Figure 1:
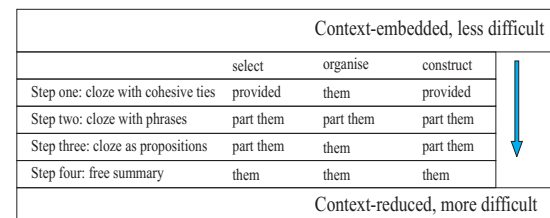
Context-embedded, less difficult			
	select	organise	construct
Step one: cloze with cohesive ties	provided	them	provided
Step two: cloze with phrases	part them	part them	part them
Step three: cloze as propositions	part them	them	part them
Step four: free summary	them	them	them
Context-reduced, more difficult			

Figure 1: Graded summary cloze tasks

The degree of complexity of the tasks can be gradually increased by adding one more component to the previous level[7]. Thus, sequentially graded summary tasks can be used to teach and assess coherence across different text types.

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Endnotes

[1] Texture refers to the property of 'being a text' or establishing the unity of a text based on linguistic-semantic features that bind parts of a text together (Halliday and Hasan, 1976, p.2).

[2] We use the term "context support" as meaning the same as the Cumminisian concept of "context embedded" (as opposed to "context reduced") (1986).

[3] A summary proposition (SP) is the sum of sentences in a sequence to form an orthographic paragraph or a part of the orthographic paragraph indicating a topic shift (Taylor, 2013, p. 95-100).

[4] This count was based on percent accuracy of use according to the type-token ratio estimated in the free summary texts.

[5] It is important to draw attention to the fact that in the cloze task, the processing demands were lowered to a certain extent as the learners had already processed the text while doing the free summary task. So, success on the cloze task can perhaps be attributed to less processing demands made through prior text familiarization and to less task complexity, as it tested only one sub-skill of coherence.

[6] These 15 SPs are the ones that were identified by the assessor to assess the free summary task.

[7] For a full discussion on sequentially graded use of cloze-based summary tasks in the ESL writing class, refer to Mukhopadhyay, 2015.

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