

A Chronological Analysis of the Validity of English Cloze Test in Guangdong High School Entrance Examination 2017-2021

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Abstract: *The cloze test is a kind of classic test used to test and evaluate students' comprehensive language application ability. Based on Li Xiaojun's test point validity theory, this paper makes a textual and quantitative analysis of the test point validity of cloze tests from 2017 to 2021, in order to provide a reference for experts and teachers. It is finding that the validity of the cloze test questions in the past five years is relatively high for it mainly focuses on the discourse level and meaning factor in the cloze test. For the topic is closely related to students' life and rich in humanities and modernity, it could to some extent arouse students' interest and has positive value guidance for their growth.*

Keywords: *High School Entrance Examination (English); Cloze; Test point validity; Testing point gradation; Focus factor*

1. Introduction

English cloze test is an effective way to test and evaluate students' comprehensive ability to use English. Because of its advantages and convenience in proposition, implementation, marking, and result analysis, the cloze test is one of the most common types of selective English tests at home and abroad. Thus, testing point validity has become a hot research topic in the field of language testing. In recent years, many experts and scholars have studied the validity of cloze tests in most English tests in China. However, there are still few studies on the testing point validity of English cloze in the High School Entrance Examination, and most of them focus on the college entrance examination. As a large-scale selective examination in the compulsory education stage, the high school entrance examination has a strong washback effect on junior high school English classroom teaching. Therefore, it is very important to analyze the characteristics and the testing point validity. Based on Li Xiaojun's testing point validity theory, this study aims to explore the testing point validity of the 2017-2021 English cloze test in the High School Entrance Examination (Guangdong).

2. Literature review

The cloze test was first invented and designed by Taylor based on Gestalt psychology, namely completion psychology, and by taking full advantage of the language redundancy phenomenon of natural languages. While, in language testing, the theory is based on the Unitary Competence hypothesis proposed by Oller et al.^[1]. At first, the cloze test was used to test the readability of language materials, then to test the reading comprehension ability of native English speakers. Gradually, it is developed to test students' comprehensive ability to use a foreign language or second language^[2]. Dating back to the 1970s, the cloze test was popularized by foreign language experts as a quick and effective way to measure a person's foreign language proficiency and reading comprehension. Since there are several different classification standards, the cloze test mainly has five types; based on the different word deletion methods, it can be divided into fixed distance cloze, specific category deletion cloze, and logical-deletion cloze; according to the different filling methods, it can also be divided into open cloze and selective cloze. From 2017 to 2021, the Guangdong Provincial Middle School English Examinations have consistently employed the logical-deletion cloze together with multiple choice, which is also widely used in various English tests throughout China.

Although the cloze test is simple and easy to understand, due to its flexibility, it can be extended into a variety of variations, so it is favored by experts and scholars at home and abroad.

2.1. Foreign literature review

Koffka^[3] pointed out that thinking is a complete and meaningful process, rather than a simple collection of interrelated appearances on the surface. Correcloze is an effective way to measure the reading and thinking ability of the subjects. Alderson^[4] proposed that the cloze test has its own advantages. Cloze refers to the deletion of some important content in a complete essay, which is used to evaluate the subject's comprehension ability and logical language knowledge. Bachman^[5] believes that the cloze test allows readers to simultaneously show their imagination in a specific space. Readers will use their own experiences and guesses to fill in the blanks with the right words. However, the different proportions of deleted words will affect readers' judgment to some extent, thus affecting the test results. This kind of deletion is reasonable and meaningful to test the language ability of the subjects. Oller^[6] and Alderson regard the cloze test as an important question in ESL proficiency testing. Alderson also proved through research that the cloze test can investigate the comprehensive language pragmatic ability of second or foreign-language learners. In addition to demonstrating the feasibility of cloze filling in measuring second or foreign language ability, many foreign scholars have also studied how cloze filling reflects the specific language ability of the subjects. Hanania and Shikhani^[7] showed that the cloze test could be used as a supplementary form of an English language proficiency test in place of composition items. To sum up, there are two main focuses of foreign research on the cloze test. The first is how well cloze tests can measure the comprehensive language ability of the subjects, and the second is about how to use it more efficiently to measure the language ability of the subjects.

2.2. Domestic literature review

Domestic research on cloze has a slow start, and the focus of research is mainly on its difficulty and validity. Shu Yunxiang^[8], Wu Zunmin^[9], and some scholars have made a detailed discussion on the types of cloze test items, compiling principles, and scoring methods. Lu Qingqing^[10], Ma Rongguang^[11], Lan Chunshou^[12] et al. analyzed the validity of the cloze test in the English College Entrance examination and clearly pointed out that it is necessary to make breakthroughs from the perspective of the text to improve the validity of this test. Dong Manxia^[13] took the 2004-2013 National College Entrance Examination English cloze as the research object, conducted a diachronic analysis from the perspective of text characteristics and test point validity, and put forward suggestions for further improving the designing system of cloze in the college entrance examination.

Meanwhile, the cloze test, as a kind of required question in the domestic high school entrance examination, has attracted the attention of many experts and teachers on how to improve the score, and they focus on the study of cloze filling strategy. Nie Shouxiang^[14], in *Common Cloze Solving Mistakes and Countermeasures*, summarized the mistakes commonly made by test subjects, classified them, and gave countermeasures. Fang Xiaojun^[15] analyzed the causes of cloze failure in combination with specific examples and put forward some teaching suggestions, which help explain the characteristics and new trends of cloze proposition in the college entrance examination. Han Chunfang, in the book called *Analysis of the current situation of the Middle School Students' English Cloze Ability and Countermeasures*, by the way of investigating the tested students' emotional attitudes towards English cloze, completion methods, major obstacles, and the needs of teachers, she ended up with relevant countermeasures taken by teachers in teaching. Also, Jiang Minmin^[16] explored the relationship between high school students' discourse awareness and cloze test scores in the college entrance examination to reveal the reasons for missing scores in cloze tests.

3. Research design

Without any doubt, test point validity, content validity, structure validity, and reverse validity are all fundamental requirements for test item validity of language testing. However, the difference is that test point validity is specifically proposed for comprehensive tests in the form of cloze and paragraph correction so forth. For cloze questions, according to Li, "test point validity demands that the proposer should analyze and select the items to be deleted to maximize the level of the text point gradation as much as possible. Eventually, there is no doubt that it is a useful tool to fully test the students' comprehensive use of language knowledge with the reflection and utilization of the chapter features, contextual functions, and comprehensive features. Professor Li believes that the validity of the cloze test is mainly affected by the level and focus of the test. The so-called test point gradation stands for the choice of words that is subject to the restriction of what level of context. As a matter of fact, it is divided into three levels, which, from lowest to highest, are words, phrases, sentences, and texts. The higher the

level of the test point, the higher the validity of the test point. At the same time, she emphasizes that high levels commonly cover low levels, but low levels cannot in turn contain high levels. As for the focus factor, it refers to the factor that the test focuses on, that is, the content of the test, which is generally fallen into three categories: grammatical factor (G), idiomatic collocation factor (C), and meaning factor (M). In Professor Li's opinion, high-level questions usually focus on the examination of meaning, but low-level questions usually focus on the examination of grammar. There is a progressive inclusive relationship among the three. Specifically, the questions that focus on meaning also examine idiomatic collocations and grammar. When the focus is on idiomatic collocations, grammar can be examined at the same time, but meaning cannot. When the focus is on grammatical questions, it cannot examine the knowledge about idiomatic collocations and meanings.

Therefore, this paper analyzes the text and the test point validity of cloze questions in the Guangdong High School Entrance Examination from 2017 to 2021, adopting a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. Based on the theory of test point validity of cloze questions proposed by Professor Li Xiaojun, this paper tries to explore the test point validity of cloze questions in Guangdong High School Entrance examination in the recent 5 years

4. Research results

4.1. Overview

In a nutshell, the total score of the Guangdong High School entrance examination (English) is 120 points in which the score of the cloze test is 10 points in total, accounting for 12%. The number of this type of test is one each year, including 10 small questions in the range of questions 46-55, which is the second part of the written section, after the single choice and before the reading comprehension.

4.2. Genre

The text genres of the English cloze test in the Guangdong High School Examination from 2017 to 2021 are mainly narrative text which goes away with the goals of the new curriculum standard that multiple genres are well encouraged to expose to students. However, due to the particularity of cloze questions, there will be many hollows in the text. For students, compared with expository and practical essays, narrative essays are more readable after deletion. Also, it is easy to infer and select according to the context, which is in line with students' cognitive development level. Thus the chance of being chosen is higher.

4.3. Theme

It can be observed from the content analysis of the five passages in the Guangdong High School Entrance Examination that the theme of the text involves three major theme groups, namely man and self, man and society, and man and nature, simultaneously including five sub-themes: personal life, science and technology, life and learning, man and work, and environmental protection. Students are exposed to subject matters that are rich and these topics are close to life, meaningful, and funny, which can activate the relevant background knowledge in students' minds and arouse their thinking, so as to properly reduce the difficulty of reading.

4.4. Test point gradation

As shown in Table 1, in the 2017-2021 Guangdong High School Entrance Examination(English), the highest proportion (54%) of cloze is tested on the discourse level, followed by the sentence level (38%), the phrase level (8%) ranks the third, and the word level is not examined. Among them, the test items in 2019 examine the most at the discourse level, accounting for 80%, and the test items have the highest validity; In 2017, the proportion of discourse level is the lowest at 30%, so the validity of the questions is low. In other years, the proportion is in the middle. From the statistical data changes of test point gradation in the past five years, we can see that cloze filling questions of Guangdong High School examination(English) in the past five years focused on discourse levels, which aim to test students' ability to understand discourse and to apply the comprehensive language. Additionally, except for the word level, the proportion of questions at each level does not change regularly. And the proportion of questions at the discourse level and the sentence level is not stable.

Table 1: Test Point Gradation

Year	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	Total	
						Number	%
Word	0	0	0	0	0	0	0%
Phrase	0	3	0	0	1	4	8%
Sentence	7	2	2	4	4	19	38%
Discourse	3	5	8	6	5	27	54%
Number	10	10	10	10	10	50	

4.5. Focus factors

As shown in Table 2, in the 2017—2021 Guangdong Entrance Examination (English), the total number of tests on meaning factor accounts for 90%, followed by 8% for collocation factor, and 2% for grammar or structure factor at least. Among them, the number of tests on meaning factor in 2019 and 2020 make up the highest 100%, followed by the number in 2017 and 2021, which occupy 90%, and the lowest proportion of in 2018 is 70%. From the distribution of focus factors in the past five years, the meaning factor is the key factor in the annual examination. Meanwhile, collocations and grammar or structure are occasionally concerned. It can be seen that the close filling focuses on students' ability to distinguish, reason, and judge the passage according to their understanding of the passage and the logical relationship of the context. When filling in the blank, students are required to grasp the general idea of the passage and understand the author's point of view, attitude, and intention through the key sentence.

Table 2: Focus Factor

Year	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	Total	
						Number	%
Grammar	1	0	0	0	0	1	2%
Collocation	0	3	0	0	1	4	8%
Meaning	9	7	10	10	9	45	90%
Number	10	10	10	10	10	50	

5. Summary and discovery

Therefore, we could have some conclusions as followed as per the analysis above.

From the perspective of the genre, it is relatively repetitive and single but tends to be reasonable. The five-year high school entrance examination in Guangdong Province uses narrative essays for cloze questions, which is contrary to the requirement mentioned in the new curriculum standard that students should be familiar with various genres. However, due to the particularity of the cloze test itself, the readability of the article, and students' ability level, it is practical and practicable to choose narrative text.

In terms of subject matter, the passages they chose not only are meaningful and relevant to students' life but also pays value orientation and attaches equal importance to humanity and modernity. Accordingly, the selection of test materials in these five years mainly focuses on the three themes as per the new curriculum standard: man and life, man and society, and man and nature, including five sub-themes: personal life, science and technology, life and learning, man and work, and environmental protection. It goes without denying that the topics are varied, which meets the requirements in the new curriculum standard that students can discuss all kinds of topics in communication. Furthermore, the subject matter is closely related to students' daily life, such as environmental protection in 2017, the discussion on the key to happiness in 2018, and the communication with Cindy and Anna's friends in 2019, which are easy to arouse students' resonance and activate students' background knowledge as they read. All in all, by observing the contents of the past five years, it is apparent that the cloze questions of the 2017-2019 Guangdong High School Entrance Examination (English) are abundant in wisdom underlying by the way of concentrating on the guidance of students' correct values and getting students to think about environmental protection, the key to happiness, and the maintenance of relationships with friends, highlighting the humanistic nature. However, the topics of cloze tests in 2020-2021 are related to science and technology. For example, in 2020, Mr. Smith had plastic surgery and fail to be recognized by the machine. In 2021, it's about a child who wrote a letter to a space agency to apply for the position of space defender, which keeps up with modernity and paid attention to social current affairs and the environment. The subject matter enhanced modernity based on humanity.

Regarding the test point gradation, the English cloze test in Guangdong High School Entrance Examination is mainly about high-level questions that are able to effectively test students' ability to understand sentences and text. As can be seen from the distribution data of cloze questions in the past five years, discourse level is concerned mostly, representing 54%, followed by sentence level (38%), and phrase level (8%), but word level is not involved.

From the perspective of focus factors, the cloze questions of the Guangdong High School Entrance Examination mainly associate with the meaning factors, occasionally with the idiomatic collocations, grammar, or structural factors, with the aim of testing students' language comprehension and application ability at the discourse level. In the 2017-2021 Guangdong High School Entrance Examination, the number of questions relevant to the meaning factor occupies 90%, followed by collocation (8%) and grammar or structure (2%). The meaning factor is the focus over the years.

Hence, it can be concluded that the cloze test in Guangdong High School Entrance Examination is reasonable in the selection of genre and theme. As a result, the validity of the cloze test questions in the past five years is relatively high for it mainly focuses on the discourse level and meaning factor in the cloze test. For the topic is closely related to students' life and rich in humanities and modernity, it could to some extent arouse students' interest and has positive value guidance for their growth.

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