Priming the Metaphor: Using Cloze with Poetry in the Language Classroom

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Abstract

The intimacy and drama of literature can be a resource in the language classroom. In this paper, cloze is used to introduce poetry to students who may lack confidence discussing literature. A cloze can provide conventional language practice while priming students' attention as they prepare for oral interpretation tasks. The poems used in the teaching materials, by Jack Gilbert and Robert Frost, feature a controlling metaphor that is also a conceptual metaphor. Poems whose metaphors are of this kind are likely to be more accessible and they provide opportunities for clarification by reference to everyday idioms. The approach has thus a dual focus in utilising cloze to make lessons more student-centred while employing intentional text selection to scaffold understanding.

Introduction

Literature allows language learners to immerse themselves in the imaginative worlds and human dramas projected by fictional texts. While literature is not formally part of the language curriculum at Asia University, there are opportunities for its use within elective 'Communication' classes for which instructors may develop independent curricula and activities. Over a number of semesters, I have taught a communication class whose sources of language input and output have been extensive reading and literature circles. In addition to graded readers, I have used literature for supplementary activities. A condition has been that I have been able to establish that the students have an interest in reading, do read, and are motivated to tackle English texts. What is proposed here, therefore, is most appropriate to an elective or similar context. Students who joined the course persisted in reading at least one graded reader every two weeks, persevered with the in-class sharing and discussion activities, and expressed positive reactions to being given the opportunity to engage with English in this way.

The specific focus of this paper is to demonstrate the use of cloze as a means of scaffolding students' reading of poetry in such a class, using teaching materials developed for poems by Jack Gilbert and Robert Frost. The aim is to combine the use of cloze for practising the language system with an opportunity for the open-ended discussion of the poems. The poems have been chosen because they are likely to be accessible to language learners, for reasons that will be developed below.

Literature and Language Teaching

That literature has a place in language teaching has been acknowledged by linguists and practitioners, although this does not involve literary study as such, but the use of literature as a language resource (Carter and Long, 1991; Carter and McRae (eds.), 2014; Duff and Maley, 1990; Maley, 1989; Lazar, 1993). Where literature is used as a resource, activities such as familiarity with the canon and applications of theory are less important than the text being a source of authentic language that can provoke a response (Carter and Long, 1991). Literary texts elicit empathy and concern, and they create opportunities for personalisation. Further, literary texts provide exposure to linguistic features like register variety and figurative language that may be absent from language textbooks. Their ambiguity and indeterminacy make them useful for discussion, prediction, role-play and a variety of other student-centred language activities that have been detailed in resource books (Carter

and Long, 1991; Carter & MacRae (eds.), 2014; Collie and Slater, 1987; Duff and Maley, 1990; Lazar 1993).

Cloze in Language and Literature

Cloze is an established technique in language teaching and testing. It involves the deletion of words from a text, either intentionally chosen or randomly selected, requiring learners to identify the deleted item. This enables students to practice guessing the meaning of unknown words from context while processing the available semantic and grammatical clues. Learners must select items that will collocate and colligate acceptably with the existing text.

Weston (2014) has called for a greater use of cloze with literature in language learning settings. She notes a variety of options – including one-word, several-word and whole-clause omissions – and the choice between written and aural format. Weston cautions, based on her experience, that written cloze with previously unseen texts may prove challenging and demotivating for learners. She proposes that texts should first be read aloud in their entirety, without deletions, enabling students to process them for gist. Aural cloze then continues with the instructor reading the text aloud while using a filler such as 'hmm' in place of the deleted items. Weston uses examples from prose to demonstrate the use of aural cloze with deletions of varying lengths.

An important aspect of Weston's (2014) procedure is intentional deletion used to stimulate literary interpretation. Cloze allows students and teachers to explore a range of conceivable candidates for a missing term. Weston uses the opportunity to ask students why an author might have chosen one alternative instead of another, and what function this might have in the text. In the materials that follow, I demonstrate aural cloze while deleting thematically significant words from poems. The aim is to focus attention on vocabulary that may enable metaphors to be more easily interpreted. I make the assumption that the relevant language is primed more strongly when learners are challenged to anticipate it as the answer to a cloze deletion. In this way, literary interpretation can be made more student-centred and less transmissive, as recommended for instruction in the language-learning class (Carter and Long, 1991).

Controlling and Conceptual Metaphors

In interpreting some poems, the most important fact is that they consist of a single extended metaphor, or 'controlling metaphor' (Kowitt, 2017). A familiar example, used in

the materials below, is Robert Frost's 'The Road Not Taken', in which a significant life choice is represented by a forking path in a wood. The poem is structured around this choice and dramatises its implications. In a language learning class, the value of poems reliant on a controlling metaphor is that their interpretation relies on a single extended comparison. This provides a holistic context that can be used to understand individual phrases and lines.

A conceptual metaphor is one such as the conventional LIFE IS A JOURNEY metaphor that Robert Frost's poem employs (I capitalise the metaphor here, following a standard convention in conceptual metaphor theory). The relation between metaphor and idiom has been most fully explored in conceptual metaphor theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980a; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980b; Lakoff & Turner, 1989). Its theorists claim that metaphor is not just a stylistic flourish added to plain prose, since conceptualisation is itself metaphorical by nature. They argue that we often understand abstract ideas by mapping them to more easily understood networks of concepts that are material or spatial in meaning. Their analysis of the LIFE AS A JOURNEY metaphor, for instance, demonstrates that we conceive of purposes as destinations, means of achieving purposes as routes or paths, difficulties as impediments to travel, choices as crossroads, and progress as the distance travelled (Lakoff & Turner, 1989). These correspondences are implicit in very familiar idioms like 'I've lost my sense of direction', 'There are obstacles in my way', 'I'm at a crossroads', 'I've come very far' and others. According to conceptual metaphor theory, poets innovate by extending well-used metaphors, filling out their implicit schemas in novel ways (Lakoff & Turner, 1989). In a language teaching context, the value of using conceptual metaphor is that when interpretative difficulties occur, the use of already existing linguistic expressions like those mentioned above can scaffold the comprehension of literary meanings.

To clarify, 'controlling' and 'conceptual' are distinct categories. A controlling metaphor is a single metaphor that predominates in a literary text. A conceptual metaphor is a highly conventional metaphor implicit in everyday expressions. However, a poet may use a conceptual metaphor *as* the controlling metaphor of a poem. Metaphors that are both controlling and conceptual will be used in the teaching materials presented here, since both may contribute to the accessibility of a poem.

Teaching Procedures and Materials

Example 1: 'Michiko Dead' by Jack Gilbert (2018)

      A poetry cloze lesson might be introduced by giving students some very brief biographical information about the poet and the context of the poem, perhaps using a photograph available online. It may also be worthwhile pre-teaching a small number of vocabulary items that could cause difficulty. To commence the aural cloze activity itself, the instructor first distributes a worksheet containing the gapped poem and asks students to turn it face-down. The poem can be read aloud without deletions before students turn over the worksheet. The instructor then reads the poem aloud again, this time substituting an aural filler for the gapped words. The challenge for students is to identify the deleted item or an acceptable alternative. It may be that they require additional readings or extra time. Once the exercise has been completed, and answers have been elicited and corrected, a discussion can follow, providing an opportunity for student output in pairs or groups. Feedback can be used to elicit responses and negotiate an understanding of the poem, referring students to the cloze items to highlight relevant aspects of meaning. If students have difficulties, idioms related to the conceptual metaphor can also be introduced as a bridge to comprehension. (In Example A below, these would include expressions like 'carrying a load', 'overburdened', and 'weighed down'). Feedback also offers a chance to open up the class to reactions, responses or questions from students. The lesson sequence is summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Lesson Sequence for a Poetry Cloze Activity

Step 1. Set a context for the lesson by introducing the poet and the context of the poem.

Step 2. Pre-teach a small number of unfamiliar words that might cause difficulty.

Step 3. Distribute a worksheet containing the gapped poem, which students turn face-down.

Step 4. Read the poem aloud as students listen for gist.

Step 5. Students complete the worksheet as the instructor reads the poem aloud while substituting an aural filler for deleted items.

Step 6. Elicit and provide answers to the cloze activity.

Step 7. Students discuss the questions in pairs or groups.

Step 8. Conduct an open-class feedback session and elicit responses from students, exploring the discussion questions and the relevance of the cloze items to answering them, while addressing comprehension difficulties and misunderstandings. Elicit reactions to the poem, the language, or the activity itself.

The controlling metaphor of 'Michiko Dead' is one of carrying a burden or load, which Gilbert uses to express the depth of his mourning. It relies on the conceptual metaphor DIFFICULTIES ARE BURDENS (Lakoff & Turner, 1989). We speak of 'carrying' or 'shouldering' a 'heavy load' to express the effort to cope with a great responsibility or a painful emotion. While the central meaning in the poem is the attempt to bear the loss, additional interpretations might include that the poet has an emotional need to remember his partner clearly, or that he wishes to honour her memory by resolutely keeping her in mind. Areas for exploration in whole-class feedback include the attempt to carry, the great physical effort involved, and the question of what motivates the speaker. Gilbert details the physical effort of carrying so that it takes on literal implications, like gripping, that make the familiar metaphor more expressive in the context of grief.

Table 2 presents the teaching materials. These include pre-teach suggestions, the gapped poem, potential responses, correct answers, and finally discussion questions.

Table 2. Teaching Materials for 'Michiko Dead'

Pre-teach:
manage, give out, drain, steady, numb

Gapped poem:
He manages like someone ___(1) a box
that is too heavy, first with his _____(2)
underneath. When their strength gives out,
he ___(3) the hands forward, (4) ___ them
on the corners, pulling the ___(5) against
his ___(6). He moves his thumbs slightly
when the fingers begin to ___(7) and it makes
different _____(8) take over. Afterward,

he carries it on his ___(9), until the (10) _____

drains out of the arm that is stretched up

to steady the box and the arm goes numb. But now

the man can _(11) underneath again, so that

he can go on without ever ___(12) the box down.

Potential answers:

(1) lifting / holding / carrying, (2) hands / arms, (3) puts / brings / moves, (4) putting / holding / placing / hooking (5) box / weight, (6) body / chest, (7) get tired / get sore / slip / tire (8) parts / muscles, (9) arm / body / chest / back / shoulder, (10) blood (11) lift / carry / hold (12) putting / bringing

Correct answers:

(1) carrying, (2) arms, (3) moves, (4) hooking, (5) weight, (6) chest, (7) tire, (8) muscles, (9) shoulder, (10) blood, (11) hold, (12) putting

Discussion questions:

(1) This poem is about a man whose partner has died. (We can guess this from the poem's title and from some real-world information about the poet Jack Gilbert. His partner Michiko Nogami died when she was 36). Why does the poet compare himself to a man carrying a box?

(2) The poet uses bodily actions to express how the man feels. What parts of his body does the man use? Is the box easy or difficult to carry? Does the man always hold it the same way? How do you think the man feels as he carries the box? What words help you answer these questions?

(3) Do you think the man *wants* to carry the box, or does he *have to*? Why? Is it important *not* to drop the box? If he dropped the box, what would this mean?

Example 2: 'The Road Not Taken' by Robert Frost (1991)

In the previous example, the omitted terms were verbs and nouns. Cloze can also require students to supply words expressing cohesive relations such as reference, ellipsis or substitution. As such, it can provide an exercise in discourse structure. The next example, the

Frost poem referred to earlier, is structured by an extended contrast involving multiple anaphoric links. Once they have completed the cloze, students could be asked to identify the antecedents of the cohesive ties, although this is not required by the cloze activity.

Just as before, the poem might be read aloud as students simply listen, before being read with an aural filler substituted for deletions. On this occasion, a third reading might optionally be made with further deletions, to help draw attention to the fact that the speaker dwells on a comparison of the alternatives. The gapped clauses in the additional reading contain comparatives that may prove difficult for students. An alternative to pure cloze would be treat this iteration as a reading dictation. Table 3 presents teaching materials. The lesson sequence remains the same as that summarised in Table 1 but for the additional optional reading prior to the discussion.

Table 3. Teaching Materials for 'The Road Not Taken'

Pre-teach:
diverge, fair, wear/worn, tread/trodden, sigh, ages hence

Gapped poem
Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel _____(1)
And be one traveller, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where ____(2) bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the _____(3) as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because _____(4) was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that, the passing there
Had worn ____(5) really about the same,

And __(6) that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept ____ _____(7) for another day!

Yet knowing how way leads on to way,

I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh

Somewhere ages and ages hence:

_____ _____(8) diverged in a wood, and I –

I took _____ _____(9) less traveled by,

And _____(10) has made all the difference.

Potential answers

(1) the two of them / both of them / both, (2) the road / one road / it, (3) road / other, (4) the road / it, (5) the roads / them, (6) the roads / they / both, (7) the other road / the other / the first road / the first (8) Two roads, (9) the one, (10) it, this, that

Correct answers

(1) both, (2) it, (3) other, (4) it, (5) them, (6) both, (7) the first, (8) Two roads, (9) the one, (10) that

Gapped poem: Additional optional reading

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,

And sorry I could not travel both

And be one traveller, long I stood

And looked down one as far as I could

To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other as _____ _____(1) fair,

And having perhaps the _____(2) claim,

Because it was grassy and wanted wear;

Though as for that, the passing there

Had worn them really about _____ _____(3),

And both that morning _____(4) lay

In leaves no step had trodden black.

Oh, I kept the first for another day!

Yet knowing how way leads on to way,

I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I –
I took the one _____(5) traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

Potential answers to additional reading:
(1) ?, (2) ?, (3) ?, (4) ?, (5) ?

Correct answers to additional reading:
(1) just as, (2) better, (3) the same, (4) equally, (5) less

Discussion questions:
(1) The speaker compares making important life choices to walking in a forest. How is choosing like walking in a forest?

(2) In the poem, do the paths in the forest look similar or different? How are they similar or different? Is it easy for the speaker to choose between them?

(3) After the speaker made their choice, do you think they could change their mind later?

(4) What do you think the road "less traveled" means? Did the speaker's choice make a difference to their life? How do you think it did?

Frost's speaker broods on several aspects of the situation: been obliged to make an important choice, the difficulty of knowing which choice to make, the unlikelihood of ever having the same opportunity again, and the fact that the choice was fateful or consequential. Each of these areas might be broached in the post-discussion feedback. The speaker's attitude is hard to determine. The precise context of the "sigh" is not clarified, and the consequences of the choice are unspecified. It does seem that the differences between the alternatives were not so clear that the decision was an obvious one. Further, since the opportunity cannot come

again, it is impossible to be certain where the other path might have led, and of what, in consequence, the speaker has foregone. The poem is not a straightforward celebration of the "road less traveled" since this interpretation would neglect its uncertainty. Frost's poem is memorable because of the coyness of its tone and the elusiveness of its final position. Like Gilbert, he develops a well-used metaphor to externalise complex feelings into a dramatic scene.

Conclusion

Cloze can be used in language teaching to make poetry interpretation more student-centred. Choosing metaphors that are both controlling and conceptual can also make that task more accessible for students that may have a limited experience of discussing English poetry. Poems used in language teaching need not require this fortunate coincidence of metaphor, however. Making it a requirement would severely limit the options. Two further poems are presented in the Appendix, only one of which represents both kinds. 'To a Daughter Leaving Home' by Linda Pastan relies on the metaphor EMOTIONAL INTIMACY IS PHYSICAL CLOSENESS. This is implicit in 'We're close', 'I can't reach you', 'We're drifting apart' and related expressions (Lakoff, Espenson & Schwartz, 1991). In 'I Wash the Shirt' by Ana Swir, a father's shirt is used as a controlling symbol to represent his daughter's love, which is expressed by her washing of the shirt. It also represents his being alive, expressed by a contrast between its organic smell and the synthetic smell of paint. Using a poem containing at least a controlling metaphor or symbol is a way of promoting accessibility for non-literature majors, although this remains a suggestion, and teachers are best placed to judge their situation as they find it. The supports used in this paper may be less relevant where students have more experience talking about poetry.

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Appendix: Two Further Poems

'To a Daughter Leaving Home' by Linda Pastan (2010)

When I taught you
at eight to ride
a bicycle, loping along
beside you
as you wobbled away
on two round wheels,
my own mouth rounding
in surprise when you pulled
ahead down the curved
path of the park,
I kept waiting
for the thud
of your crash as I
sprinted to catch up,
while you grew
smaller, more breakable
with distance,
pumping, pumping
for your life, screaming
with laughter,
the hair flapping
behind you like a
handkerchief waving
goodbye.

'I Wash the Shirt' by Anna Swir (1996)

For the last time I wash the shirt
of my father who died.
The shirt smells of sweat. I remember
that sweat from my childhood,
so many years
I washed his shirts and underwear,
I dried them
at an iron stove in the workshop,
he would put them on unironed.

From among all bodies in the world,
animal, human,
only one exuded that sweat.
I breathe it in
for the last time. Washing this shirt
I destroy it
forever.
Now
only paintings survive him
which smell of oils.