

The C-Test:

A Teacher Friendly Way to Test Language Proficiency

by Lucy Katona and Zoltan Dornyei

It was 10 years ago that the C-test was developed in Duisburg by Christine Klein-Braley and Ulrich Raatz. Since then this language-testing instrument has gained wide popularity because of its high reliability, sufficient validity, and remarkable practicality. In this article we will give a summary of the C-test procedure and the investigations we have carried out in Hungary in order to “test the C-test,” and we will also describe how this test can be used in the classroom. We believe that the C-test has a lot of potential for practising teachers.

What the C-test is

The C-test is an integrative testing instrument that measures overall language competence, very much like the cloze test. It consists of four to six short, preferably authentic, texts in the target language, to which “the rule of two” has been applied: the second half of every second word has been deleted, beginning with the second word of the second sentence; the first and last sentences are left intact. If a word has an odd number of letters, the “bigger” part is omitted, e.g., proud becomes pr-. One-letter words, such as I, are ignored in the counting. The students’ task is to restore the missing parts. In a typical C-test there are 100 gaps—that is, missing parts. Only entirely correct restorations are accepted.

By way of illustration, here is a short C-test: “One cool autumn evening, Bob L., a young professional, returned home from a trip to the supermarket to find his computer gone. Gone! All so- of cr- thoughts ra- through h- mind: H- it be- stolen? H- it be- kidnapped? H- searched h- house f- a cl- until h- noticed a sm- piece o- printout pa- stuck un- a maga- on h- refrigerator do-. His he- sank a- he re- this sim- message: can’t continue, file closed, bye.”

Comparison with the cloze test

The C-test was developed as a modification of the cloze test, which is a

frequently used, major language-testing instrument, extremely popular because of the ease of constructing it and its high reliability and validity. (The cloze test consists of a longer text of which every fifth to tenth complete word is left out.)

The C-test appears to have some advantages over the cloze test:

1. As students are confronted with a variety of short passages, a better sampling of content areas is possible. Also, a person with special knowledge in a certain field does not have an unfair advantage.
2. By “damaging” every second word, we can obtain a more representative sample of all the different language elements in the text than in the cloze, where normally only every fifth or sixth word is left out.
3. Many more items can be included in much shorter texts, making the test less time-consuming for the students than the cloze.
4. Unlike the cloze test, scoring is easy and objective, as there is only one acceptable solution in most cases.
5. As a rule, students actually like doing C-tests, whereas the cloze test is one of the most frustrating test types for learners.

Testing the C-test

We decided to compare the C-test with the cloze and other complex language tests to see how well it measures the learners’ language proficiency.

The investigations were carried out at the English Department of Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest. They involved 102 first-year English majors, who took five different kinds of tests:

1. the English Department Proficiency Test (vocabulary, grammar, listening comprehension)
2. TOEIC (the Test of English for International Communication), which is an American standardized multiple-choice test for adult nonnative speakers of English consisting of listening comprehension and reading (published by the Educational Testing Service, Princeton, N.J.)
3. an oral interview
4. a cloze test
5. a C-test

After careful statistical analysis of the collected data the following results emerged:

1. The C-test appears to correlate well with our other language-proficiency tests, which proves that it is a good and reliable testing instrument. It is also an integrative language-testing method, correlating highly with both vocabulary and grammar scores, as well as speaking skills (Table 1).

| Correlations | C-Test |
|-----------------------------------|---------------|
| Department Vocabulary and Grammar | .36 |
| Department Listening | .34 |
| Department Total | .43 |
| TOEIC Listening | .55 |
| TOEIC Reading | .54 |
| TOEIC Total | .63 |
| Oral | .46 |
| Cloze | .43 |

All the coefficients are significant at the $p < .001$ level.

2. The C-test measures general language proficiency more accurately than the cloze, and it is a lot easier to construct and to score (Table 2).

| Correlations | GLP* |
|---------------------|-------------|
| C-test | .58 |
| Cloze | .53 |

**GLP = General Language Proficiency (a composite score of all the tests except the C-test and the cloze test)*

3. We recommend the exact scoring method (that is, accepting only entirely correct restorations), as we found that accepting words with spelling errors made no significant difference to the student rankings.

Recommendations

To sum up, we have found that the C-test is an excellent testing method, as it provides a good and quick assessment of general language competence. We therefore recommend it to be used

- to select and place students in appropriate groups
- to assess their achievement at end-of-term exams by selecting several typical passages from the term's materials
- to test certain grammar areas (e.g., tenses or word formation) by including texts that contain several examples of the structures in question
- to check home reading or homework by taking passages from the texts the students had to work on
- to measure the specialized knowledge of ESP groups by choosing suitable texts from their particular field of specialization

Students can easily design C-tests for each other, which could be made into a game or competition.

We believe that the C-test is one of the most versatile test types and can be adapted to many different purposes. We strongly recommend incorporating it into everyday teaching and testing activities.

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