

Listening Cloze Meets Info-Gap: A Hybrid Activity to Exploit Listening Materials

In twenty-first-century language teaching, the class should be student-centered and provide learners with skills that empower them in real-life situations. In this regard, it is commonly said that practice makes perfect. It therefore makes sense to ask ourselves how much our listening activities demand from students and to evaluate whether we are getting full benefit from the listening materials we use.

For example, a teacher distributes a handout to the students and tells them that they will listen to a recording several times and write some information on the handout. Afterwards, the teacher checks the students' work, and that might be the end of the activity. Could more have been done? The students' role in activities like this one is rather passive, not to mention that limited integration of skills takes place. Finding good listening materials and designing handouts can be time-consuming, and I believe these efforts could be exploited more than they typically are.

This has led me to reflect on my own professional practice as an English teacher and teacher educator and to find innovative, cost-effective ways to fully exploit listening materials, integrate as many linguistic skills as possible, and ultimately foster students' autonomy and language learning by means of peer assessment. Thus, I created a hybrid task by combining one activity commonly used to teach or test listening—the listening cloze—with another activity commonly used to teach speaking—the information gap (info-gap). In

this article, I will cover relevant research and then describe how I conceptualized the hybrid activity, how to put it into practice, and what results I have gotten by using it. I will also offer ideas on how to make a listening cloze info-gap activity part of a more complex English lesson.

SKILLS INTEGRATION IN LANGUAGE TEACHING

Hinkel (2010) states that in the past, the skills of language were taught in a segregated fashion, even though this segregation of skills does not represent real-life communication. All our linguistic skills interact with one another when we communicate. In this regard, Brown (2001, 234) contends that “production and reception are quite simply two sides of the same coin; one cannot split the coin in two.” It is therefore evident that skills integration is something natural and desirable in the language classroom, and if we are to train competent speakers of English as a second or foreign language, we should incorporate that authenticity in our lessons.

Indeed, Oxford (2001) uses the metaphor of a tapestry to refer to skills integration in language teaching. Each linguistic skill is but one of the threads that make up a larger whole, so if students are to get a real sense of English (or any other language), they should see how all these threads complement each other in the social phenomenon that we call “communication.” We can also view language skills as channels through which information can travel, implying that the more routes the language learner takes, the greater his or her language learning can be. As Kumaravadivelu (2003, 228) states, “It is likely that the learning and use of any one skill can trigger cognitive and communicative associations with the others.”

One way to integrate as many skills as possible is to combine different activities. Integrating skills is simply approaching real life and real language use. In other words, if you want to be a good speaker, you should be a good listener as well, and if you want to be a good writer, you should also be a good reader.

PROMOTING STUDENT AUTONOMY AND PEER ASSESSMENT

Successful language teaching demands student involvement. According to Dörnyei (2001, 103), “involved students are increasingly autonomous students.” Thus, using tasks that promote independent work and provide students with tools to assess their peers may increase student autonomy. Still, if students are to be involved in the language classroom, they should certainly be supported to play a more active role. According to Zoghi and Dehghan (2012), the promotion of student autonomy implies a fair balance between students’ independence from and dependence on the teacher. Therefore, teachers should take care to equip students with tools so that they know when and how to exert their autonomy.

Successful language teaching demands student involvement.

Of course, the leadership and authority provided by a teacher should be minimal, entailing a change from the teacher’s traditional role toward that of a facilitator, someone who helps students focus their own learning. Jingnan (2011, 28) states that to promote autonomy, students should “take responsibility for their learning, such as setting learning tasks, selecting [the] learning method, and evaluating [the] learning process.” Again, the teacher, as facilitator, guides students and helps them realize the importance of playing an active role in their learning.

To create learner autonomy, Dörnyei (2001, 106) likewise advises “a change in the teacher’s role” in the sense that the teacher and students might share some classroom responsibilities. One such responsibility is assessment. Maíz-Arévalo (2008, 128) argues that peer assessment is “a way to involve students in their own learning experience. By assessing their classmates, students also learn to assess themselves in their future performances.” Thus, peer assessment reduces a teacher’s workload in the classroom while allowing students to become more aware of their language-learning needs and to realize that it is not exclusively the teacher’s job to participate in their language-learning process.

BRINGING TWO ACTIVITIES TOGETHER

When I first thought about combining listening cloze with an info-gap activity, I wanted more student talk, skills integration, and peer assessment to take place in my class; I also wanted my students to assume more responsibility for their own language learning as well as get the most out of listening materials. Before I explain how the combination of the two activities works, I will describe general features of listening cloze and info-gap activities in turn.

LISTENING CLOZE ACTIVITY

In listening cloze and gap-fill activities, words are deleted from a text, and the students

are expected to write these missing words. However, the listening cloze activity has particular characteristics. First, it is generally done individually. Second, words are typically deleted systematically (Brown 2004); that is, you take the transcript of a recording and delete a certain number of words—for example, every fifth, sixth, or seventh word. A word can be deleted regardless of its lexical category (nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, and so on). This tends to be the main difference between listening cloze and gap-fill exercises. For instance, if we take the proverb “It is not whether you win or lose; it is how you play the game” and turn it into a very short cloze test by deleting every fifth word, it would look like this: “It is not whether _____ win or lose; it _____ how you play the _____.”

A word of caution is needed here. The smaller the number chosen for the systematic deletion of words, the more challenging the activity becomes; that is because reducing textual context makes deducing or guessing the missing words more difficult. Also, it is advisable not to delete words from the first and last lines of a long transcript (which usually serve as short introductions and conclusions) because they provide students with general ideas about the content of the material, and that helps students predict information they need to complete the activity.

An orthodox systematic deletion of words may produce unexpected results. Let us imagine that a language teacher decides to delete every fifth word from a text as I did above. To his or her surprise, this teacher may realize that only function words (prepositions, articles, and conjunctions) have been deleted, making the exercise not only monotonous but also predictable. Thus, this teacher might modify the pattern in which words are deleted in order to add variety and make this activity more

enjoyable and challenging. Harmer (2001, 324) gives clear advice in this sense, saying that words may be deleted systematically, “but the teacher has the option to delete a word to the left or right if the context makes this more sensible.” This approach may allow the students to focus on salient vocabulary words for the objectives of the lesson.

You might also consider the format of a C-test, in which there is a systematic deletion of words as well. This differs from cloze, as every second word in a text is partially deleted (Alderson, Clapham, and Wall 1995). In traditional C-tests, approximately half of every second word is left intact as a guide for students to complete the words, so our previous example would look like this: “It i__ not whet____ you w____ or lo____; it i__ how y____ play t____ game.” Still, a C-test has the same disadvantages as cloze, so being flexible when deleting letters, as advised by Harmer (2001), is helpful.

INFO-GAP ACTIVITY

Info-gaps are commonly described as pair-work activities in which students share information that they have about a given topic or situation in order to complete a task together (Bailey 2005; Richards 2006; Thornbury 2005). The handouts used in this kind of activity are usually labeled “Student A” and “Student B,” accordingly. For example, a simple info-gap activity can be based on two pictures with slight differences that students have to describe to each other to find how the pictures differ. A basic real-life communicative function is exchanging information with another person, and info-gap activities do precisely that. Info-gap activities need not use pictures exclusively; for example, look at the following hypothetical short info-gap task.

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Student A

Instructions: Work together with Student B to complete this woman's personal information.

Name: _____ Williams

Phone Number: 555-746-201

Email Address: _____

Student B

Instructions: Work together with Student A to complete this woman's personal information.

Name: Cindy _____

Phone Number: _____

Email Address: cin1979@example.com

In this activity, the teacher should provide students with useful questions to ask:

- What is her first/last name?
- What is her phone number?
- How do you spell that?
- Can you repeat that, please?

If modeled appropriately, this kind of activity allows the students to work on their own without much teacher supervision, which is both empowering and motivating. This activity also trains students to deal with information-exchanging situations in real life.

HOW TO PUT THE ACTIVITY INTO PRACTICE

Following are six steps to combine listening cloze with info-gap activities.

Step 1

Find a recording that is appropriate for your students' level and that is neither too

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short nor too long. Radio broadcasts or podcasts are useful for this purpose, and they can be downloaded freely from various websites. You could also use songs of various genres.

Step 2

Transcribe the recording as accurately as possible. You will probably need to listen to the recording and check your transcription several times.

Step 3

Turn the transcript into two separate cloze exercises or handouts (one for Student A and one for Student B). That is, you will delete every *n*th word systematically (or not, as mentioned above) *in a different way in the two handouts*. For example, in Student A's handout, beginning with line two of the transcript, you might delete every seventh word after the first word, and in Student B's handout, also beginning with line two, you might delete every seventh word after the third word. After that, I recommend numbering the lines or paragraphs of both transcripts equally so that students can locate information easily later on. To illustrate what the two handouts might look like in this activity, I systematically deleted every fifth word in Aesop's fable "The Hare with Many Friends" to create a listening cloze info-gap exercise. Note that I began the deletions at different places, starting with the third sentence (see the Appendix).

Step 4

When I use this activity in my classes, I first distribute the handouts to my students and tell them to spend a couple of minutes reading the transcripts and trying to guess any of the missing words before they actually listen to the recording. Depending on the topic of the recording, you might also consider

pre-teaching difficult vocabulary words or activating your students' background knowledge. Then, I tell my students that I will play the recording two (or three) times; they listen to it and write the missing words on their transcripts. This is what I call the *listening cloze phase*. If you cannot play audio in your classroom, you can read the transcript aloud for your students. You may not be a native speaker of English, yet you can still be a good model for your students.

Step 5

Normally after this phrase, the teacher either calls on students to read portions of the transcript to check their listening comprehension or reads the whole transcript for the students to check how many of the missing words they filled in correctly. However, my approach is different. After playing the recording, I tell my students to pair up according to the handout they have (Student A and Student B will sit face-to-face). Then, I tell them that they will be in charge of checking each other's listening comprehension. I recommend providing students with useful expressions or questions to ask, which may be written on the board or included in the students' handouts (see the Appendix for sample handouts and useful questions).

Whenever we communicate, we negotiate for meaning.

Providing students with useful questions is no guarantee that they will use them during the activity, so it is advisable to model them. Your approach to teaching useful language can also be more explicit, and you can instruct your students about negotiation for meaning in communication. Be it in our native or second or foreign language, not everything we say will be completely understood by other people. Whenever we communicate, we negotiate for meaning. That is, we may ask for clarification about something we do not understand, we may need to say something using simpler words, or we may check our

interlocutor's understanding after saying something in a conversation. For instance, you can ask the whole class, "What do you do when you do not know how to say something in English?" and discuss the ideas given by the students. Turn-taking is also important here, so I explain to my students that while doing the activity, they should ask one question at a time. I tell them that the idea is to have a conversation, not an interrogation.

Step 6

After I make sure my students know how to proceed, I tell them to start checking each other's work; this is what I call the *info-gap phase*. Since the pattern of deleted words is different in the two handouts, students will be able to correct each other during this phrase without the teacher's help. I, however, walk around the classroom while this activity is taking place and make sure my students are on the right track. I also help them with the pronunciation or meaning of any words if they request or seem to need assistance.

REFLECTING ON THE OVERALL EXPERIENCE

The results I have obtained with this activity have been impressive in spite of its apparent simplicity. With appropriate support and supervision, students give each other feedback and maintain fluent conversational exchanges. Indeed, this activity is particularly helpful with beginners. I have also observed a sense of accomplishment in my students at the end of the activity because they are able to do so much on their own. Some students also develop a friendly competition as they challenge each other to correct their pronunciation and spelling during the task.

This hybrid activity does not resolve every issue in English language teaching. Still, it works nicely and produces learning gains. It is a useful addition to any English language teacher's toolbox, and it might also be incorporated into more complex activities and lessons.

EIGHT WAYS TO MAKE THE ACTIVITY PART OF A MORE COMPLEX LESSON

1. When implementing the listening cloze info-gap in class, you may consider using the *KWL procedure* (Shermis and Di Vesta 2011), in which students use a chart with three columns, labeled “What I Know,” “What I Want to Know,” and “What I Learned.” Before you distribute the transcript handouts, give the students a general idea of what the recording will be about. Then, distribute the KWL chart and tell students to write as many ideas as come to their minds about the topic in the “What I Know” column. Next, distribute the Student A and Student B handouts and tell the students to read the transcript and write ideas in the “What I Want to Know” column. Later, the students pair up and do the listening cloze info-gap activity as described above. Then, tell the students to complete the third column, “What I Learned.” Finally, go over each of the three questions in the KWL chart with the whole class, have your students share what they wrote in each of the columns, discuss the most important ideas learned during the activity, and comment on the overall process.
2. At the end of the activity, give your students a checklist with can-do statements (such as “I can take turns appropriately,” “I can clarify the meaning of new words,” or “I can speak in English without feeling nervous”) for them to self-assess and reflect on what they did well and where they need more practice. Encourage your students to share their reflections with the whole class, and chances are, new ideas for future lessons will emerge.
3. If the material you used in the activity has a story, you can have your students do a role play, which is a way to test their comprehension and promote their autonomy. Students are welcome to reinterpret the story in any way they want and give full rein to their creativity.
4. Students could also reinterpret the story by working in small groups and writing an alternative ending for the story. They can then read their alternative endings, and the whole class can vote for their favorite one.
5. Students could write a response to the content of the recording, to be discussed with the whole class afterwards, or, if resources are available, you could create a blog where students upload their responses and comment on them. This task extends the lesson beyond the classroom, prolonging the students’ learning experience. Students could also record or videotape their responses using their cell phones. These responses could be uploaded to a website or brought to class as student-made listening material. Your students might even be invited to create their own listening cloze info-gap activity with their recording and prepare handouts for their classmates.
6. Tell your students to form small groups and write comprehension questions about the transcript on a piece of paper. Then, they can take turns asking other groups their questions and checking answers. Encourage your students to explain when an incorrect answer is given and elicit the right one.
7. Students can write down all the words they have trouble pronouncing during the activity to produce pronunciation work. Your students could also write sentences in which these difficult words are used and share them with the whole class. These words and sentences could be entered in a vocabulary log with all the new words students learn during the course.
8. As an additional pronunciation exercise, students may be invited to record the material themselves and upload it to a

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free podcasting site on the Internet and share it with the world. Students could also compare their recorded version with the original.

CONCLUSION

Throughout my career as an English teacher, I have realized that simplicity is a powerful tool. A hybrid activity that combines listening cloze with info-gap integrates the four macro-skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing, not to mention micro-skills such as vocabulary, spelling, and pronunciation. Content is thus processed through various linguistic channels, contributing to greater language learning. This activity is also practical and cost-effective. A successful language lesson does not need to be accompanied with lots of handouts. Allowing students to play a more autonomous role in the class makes a difference.

For those interested in communicative language teaching, I concede that my activity may not resemble real-life situations at first glance. Still, it serves ulterior educational purposes. If you model key language functions and social skills for students and monitor them during the task, this activity fosters students' ability to negotiate for meaning, engage in turn-taking, monitor an interlocutor's understanding, and ask for clarification—all skills a competent speaker should master. Finally, promoting peer assessment in the class takes some responsibility away from the teacher and shows students that they can play an active role in their language-learning process. Both students and teachers contribute to the success of any learning process.

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APPENDIX

Handouts for the Listening Cloze Info-Gap Activity

Student A—Aesop’s Fable Handout

Instructions: Listen and complete the following text by filling in the missing words. After that, get together with Student B and take turns checking your work.

The Hare with Many Friends

I. A Hare was very popular with the other beasts who all claimed to be her friends. But one day she heard the hounds approaching and hoped to escape them by the aid of her many friends. So, she went to _____ horse, and asked him _____ carry her away from _____ hounds on his back. _____ he declined, stating that _____ had important work to _____ for his master. He _____ sure, he said, that _____ her other friends would _____ to her assistance.

II. She _____ applied to the bull, _____ hoped that he would _____ the hounds with his _____. The bull replied: “I _____ very sorry, but I _____ an appointment with a _____; but I feel sure _____ our friend the goat _____ do what you want.”

III. _____ goat, however, feared that _____ back might do her _____ harm if he took _____ upon it. The ram, _____ felt sure, was the _____ friend to apply to. _____ she went to the _____ and told him the _____. The ram replied: “Another _____, my dear friend. I _____ not like to interfere _____ the present occasion, as _____ have been known to _____ sheep as well as _____.”

IV. The Hare then applied, _____ a last hope, to _____ calf, who regretted that _____ was unable to help _____, as he did not _____ to take the responsibility _____ himself, as so many _____ persons than himself had _____ the task. By this time the hounds were quite near, and the Hare took to her heels and luckily escaped. He that has many friends, has no friends.

Useful Questions

- Could you read lines 1 to 2 in paragraph I?
- Could you repeat that again, please?
- Would you mind speaking slowly, please?
- How do you pronounce this word?
- How do you spell that?

Handouts for the Listening Cloze Info-Gap Activity

Student B—Aesop's Fable Handout

Instructions: Listen and complete the following text by filling in the missing words. After that, get together with Student A and take turns checking your work.

The Hare with Many Friends

I. A Hare was very popular with the other beasts who all claimed to be her friends. But one day she heard the hounds approaching and hoped to escape them by the aid of her many friends. _____, she went to the _____, and asked him to _____ her away from the _____ on his back. But _____ declined, stating that he _____ important work to do _____ his master. He felt _____, he said, that all _____ other friends would come _____ her assistance.

II. She then _____ to the bull, and _____ that he would repel _____ hounds with his horns. _____ bull replied: "I am _____ sorry, but I have _____ appointment with a lady; _____ I feel sure that _____ friend the goat will _____ what you want."

III. The _____, however, feared that his _____ might do her some _____ if he took her _____ it. The ram, he _____ sure, was the proper _____ to apply to. So _____ went to the ram _____ told him the case. _____ ram replied: "Another time, _____ dear friend. I do _____ like to interfere on _____ present occasion, as hounds _____ been known to eat _____ as well as hares."

IV. _____ Hare then applied, as _____ last hope, to the _____, who regretted that he _____ unable to help her, _____ he did not like _____ take the responsibility upon _____, as so many older _____ than himself had declined _____ task. By this time the hounds were quite near, and the Hare took to her heels and luckily escaped. He that has many friends, has no friends.

Useful Questions

- Could you read lines 1 to 2 in paragraph I?
- Could you repeat that again, please?
- Would you mind speaking slowly, please?
- How do you pronounce this word?
- How do you spell that?