

# **Determinants of Junior High School EFL Students' Discourse Grammar Cloze Test Performance in China's Entrance Examination**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The integration of the Discourse Grammar Cloze Test (DGCT) into the Chinese Senior High School Entrance Examination (SHSEE) has added a new dimension to English language assessment, challenging students to apply grammar within a contextual framework. This study examines the impact of content familiarity, text readability, and test format on DGCT performance among 186 EFL ninth-grade students. Results indicate that these factors significantly affect performance, with notable variances across proficiency levels. Analysis of common error types further elucidates the challenges students face, providing insights for pedagogical strategies aimed at improving DGCT outcomes in English education.

*Keywords:* Content familiarity, discourse grammar cloze test, EFL, senior high school entrance examination, test format, text readability

## **INTRODUCTION**

In the context of China's educational reform, English proficiency assessments, particularly high-stakes exams like the SHSEE, play a pivotal role in determining academic trajectories. The DGCT component, designed to test students' grammatical and discourse-level understanding within realistic language scenarios, poses unique

challenges that traditional cloze tests do not address (Fulcher & Harding, 2022; Jin & Wu, 2021). Prior research underscores the importance of context-based testing for holistic language evaluation, yet limited attention has been given to the DGCT's impact on junior high students (Brown, 2018).

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This study investigates the determinants of DGCT performance, focussing on how content familiarity, text readability, and test format influence outcomes. By exploring these factors, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the variables affecting discourse-based grammar comprehension in EFL settings, offering potential pedagogical implications for curriculum developers and educators.

## RESEARCH GAPS

While prior studies acknowledge the complexity of the Discourse Grammar Cloze Test (DGCT) in EFL assessment, three critical gaps remain unaddressed:

1. Limited empirical focus on junior high EFL students within high-stakes testing contexts (e.g., SHSEE) (Jang et al., 2013).
2. Insufficient investigation into how content familiarity, text readability, and test format collectively impact DGCT performance (McNamara et al., 2014).
3. A lack of mixed-methods evidence capturing both quantitative outcomes and learners' qualitative challenges (Bui & Luo, 2021).

## METHODS

Adopting a non-experimental, descriptive study design, this research combines quantitative and qualitative data collection to explore factors impacting DGCT performance. The study sample consists of 186 Year 9 EFL students from a junior high school in Zunyi, China, grouped according to English proficiency levels based on their Public English Test System-Level 2 (PETS-2) scores. Instruments include a DGCT test, a multiple-choice cloze test, and retrospective interviews. Data analysis was conducted using SPSS (Version 26) to identify significant correlations and to perform regression analysis, supplemented by thematic analysis of interview responses. Ethical procedures were strictly followed. Informed consent was obtained from all participants and their guardians before data collection. The study received approval from the school administration, and all student data, including interviews, were anonymised to ensure privacy and confidentiality throughout the research process.

## RESULTS

Students' performance on the DGCT was significantly lower than on the multiple-choice cloze test (MCCT), confirming the test's higher cognitive and contextual demands. Regression analysis revealed that content familiarity ( $\beta = .41, p < .01$ ), text readability ( $\beta = .29, p < .05$ ), and cloze test format ( $\beta = .26, p < .05$ ) were all significant predictors of DGCT scores, jointly explaining 42.5% of the variance (Adjusted  $R^2 = 0.425$ ). These findings indicate that DGCT performance is closely tied to students' ability to process text meaningfully within context, rather than just isolated grammatical knowledge.

## **DISCUSSION**

The findings underscore the role of content familiarity, readability, and task format as key determinants in DGCT performance. Unlike traditional cloze tests, the DGCT requires students to integrate discourse-level understanding with grammatical precision, a skill set less emphasised in conventional EFL curricula (Jin, Y., & Wu, J., 2021). This difference explains why even students with adequate grammar knowledge struggle when contextual clues are subtle or unfamiliar. Compared to standard grammar cloze formats, the DGCT demands greater awareness of cohesion, coherence, and pragmatic appropriateness, making it uniquely challenging (Baker et al., 2021; McNamara et al., 2014). This finding aligns with recent calls for grammar assessment practices that reflect authentic language use and discourse competence. To apply these insights in classroom practice, teachers can incorporate short DGCT-style exercises that require students to complete texts using appropriate grammatical and cohesive forms. For instance, learners can be guided to identify discourse markers and referential ties in reading passages before filling in contextual gaps. Such practices align with discourse-based grammar instruction models (Oyama & Kang, 2023) and are feasible within junior high school curricula.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study contributes to the understanding of factors influencing DGCT performance among junior high EFL students, emphasising the need for discourse-sensitive grammar instruction. The results support targeted interventions to improve DGCT performance, such as familiarising students with diverse text types and focusing on discourse-level grammar. Future research could explore additional variables, such as test anxiety and specific instructional methodologies, to offer more comprehensive support for students facing the DGCT.

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