The Ability of Supplying the Elliptical Items Omitted From a Written Text and its Impact on the Reading Comprehension of 4th Year Libyan University Students Studying EFL

Abdussalam A. Annajeh
University of Al-Jabal Al-Gharbi, Libya
abdussalamnajeh@yahoo.com

Abstract: This paper investigates the ability of supplying the elliptical items omitted from a written text and its impact on the reading comprehension of Libyan university students studying EFL. Ellipsis can be defined as the omission of one or more lexical items that are understood in the context, but which are required to make the sentence or utterance grammatically correct. An elliptical item could be nominal, verbal or clausal. 4th year English Department students from the English Department- Faculty of Arts-Gharian in Al-Jabal Al-Gharbi University completed reading comprehension test. Seventy one out of a hundred and four students accepted to participate in the study. The test was modified to include many elliptical items and the students were asked to supply them. The results, which were statistically analyzed, suggested that the study participants were not able to supply the correct elliptical items and consequently had poor reading comprehension results. The mean marks achieved were only 33.8. This result may have many pedagogical implications.

Keywords: E*llipsis, nominal, verbal, clausal, reading comprehension*

1. Introduction

The relations, which exist in a text and unify its components to be meaningful, are called cohesion. A text is a semantic unit that should have a coherent message and a good reader can always follow up the texture (i.e. coherence) and grasp the meaning of the full text. This is because "a text has a texture, and this is what distinguishes it from something that is not a text" (Halliday and Hasan 1976). Certain linguistic features are usually explicitly found somewhere in a passage to ensure a unified semantic construction. With the exception of the first sentence, every sentence in the text should have some type of relation to the sentence, which precedes it. This relation is commonly created by the presence of specific cohesive ties such as reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction and lexical cohesive items. Hoey (1991) defines cohesion as "the way certain words or grammatical features of sentences can connect that sentence to its predecessors (and successors) in a text". He reports that textual features such as reference, substitution, and conjunctions are found by many linguists to be "capable ...of casting light on the nature of text itself". Reference is a relationship which links a noun(s), a phrase or even a sentence and the pronoun/vocabulary which refers to it, and exists somewhere (i.e. anaphorically/ cataphorically) in the sentence or text. Substitution is the replacement of one linguistic item such as a word or a phrase by another which has the same structural function that it substitutes. Ellipsis is the omission of a repeated linguistic item that can be easily understood and supplied by the reader. Conjunctions are partly grammatical and partly semantic. Conjunctive items such as *and, but, so, then* are distinguishable in that they do not link sentences anaphorically or cataphorically as reference, for example, but they explicitly signal certain relationships between the pairs of sentences they connect. Finally, lexical cohesion covers repeated words which explicitly mentioned throughout the text in that they form what Heoy (1991) termed as "bonds" that contribute to the tightness of the text. Lexical cohesion occurs when two words or more in a text are related in meaning.

Halliday and Hasan (1976) divide lexical cohesion into reiteration and collocation. Reiteration involves the repetition of a lexical item that refers back to a certain related item mentioned before. As explained by Innajih (2012), a reiterated item may be a repetition of the same word, a synonym or near-synonym, a superordinate, a hyponym (specific-general), an antonym or a general word which could be a name of people, a thing, a place or an abstract noun. Collocation as MUTO (2007) explains, "refers to the semantic and structural relation among words, which native speakers can use subconsciously for comprehension or production of a text." Words such as *sea, ship, water,* and *cost* have some recognizable semantic relation to one another, which termed as collocation. This paper investigates ellipsis as one of the

cohesive devices and its relation to the reading comprehension of Libyan university students learning EFL. It is hypothesized that if these students are capable of supplying the correct elliptical language item, they will have efficient understanding of the written text they read. Failure to supply the appropriate elliptical language item results in poor comprehension and delays progress in all educational fields. This is in accord with Halliday and Hasan"s (1976) cohesion theory which will be the background of this study. To support or nullify the mentioned hypothesis, seventy one Libyan university 4th year students' reading comprehension was tested. They were asked to supply the correct elliptical items to a number of selected sentences adapted from Halliday and Hasan (1976). The results will be quantitatively analyzed by using SPSS software and the conclusion will be highlighted.

2. Literature Review

Many pieces of information need to be available to the reader in order to achieve satisfactory understanding of a written text. Some of them are brought to the text by the reader, i.e. knowledge of the world (schemata), and other information exists in the text. Since reading is an interactive process among all the information available, the reader needs to recognize and understand how certain cohesive ties operate within a text. As stated in the introduction, cohesive ties as suggested by Halliday and Hasan (1976) are divided into four types: reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunctions and lexical cohesion. In this review, the focus will be on ellipsis, which is a substitution by zero. When writing in English many nominal, verbal and clausal items are left unsaid to avoid repetition and give a chance to the active reader to supply these omitted items. Halliady and Hasan (1976) define the elliptical item as the "one which, as it were leaves specific structural slot to be filled from elsewhere." This slot is left empty and the reader has to look back somewhere in the text to recognize the appropriate grammatical item which can fill the slot. This mental process is not easy for students studying English as a foreign language. However, an example such as (1) below is not difficult to understand because the elliptical item is within the same sentence since both the coordinated clauses are structurally related. The elliptical item from the second clause can be easily supplied from the preceding one, so the full statement is *Salma bought a golden key chain.*

- For my birthday, Asma bought a golden pen, and Salma a golden key chain.
- Structural related clauses do not contribute to text cohesion so they will not be investigated in details here. Only the relations, which link two independent statements, can form a "bond" or a net as Hoey (1991) describes them, and construct a cohesive text. Example,
- Would you like to have another apple? – I already have two.

In (2) there is no structural relation between the question and its answer. The elliptical item from the second part has to be presupposed from the first part, which are *two apples.* So here, there is a presupposition, which has to be supplied to the second clause to be correctly understood. As Halliday and Hasan (1976) explain, "an item is elliptical if its structure does not express all the features that have gone into its make-up- all the meaningful choices that are embodied in it." In most cases, the presupposed item is present somewhere in the preceding text, which means that ellipsis is an anaphoric relation. However, few cases may have exophoric ellipsis, which do not contribute to text cohesion.
Elliptical items could be nominal, verbal or clausal. All have an important role to play in lexical and grammatical cohesion.

Nominal ellipsis: Nominal structure usually consists of a head, which could be a common noun or a proper noun in addition to its pre-, and post-modifier(s). The modifiers could be an element such as Deictic which includes specific deictics (possessives, demonstratives and *the*) and non-specific (i.e. *each, every, all, both, any, either, no, neither, some* and *a*).
Examples:
- Take these pills three times daily. In addition, you had better have some more of those too. In this example the demonstrative *those* functions as a head. It substitutes the structure *those pills*. Another example of the non-specific demonstratives:
- The parents may enjoy it; but children could be bored. You cannot please both. *Both* here are the head, which substitutes *both parents and children.* Non-specific deictics such as *each, every, any, either, no, neither, a,* and *some* can occupy the head of an elliptical item as shown in the following example:

- Write a report about your parents. Two pages about each will be enough. Here the elliptical nominal is *person*, so the full form should be *each person*. Post-deictic elements are treated not as determiners but as adjectives. The most frequent ones are *other, same, different, identical, usual, regular, odd, famous* and *obvious.* Unlike the normal adjectives, post-deictic elements are usually preceded by *the* and *a* when they are followed by a numerative as in *the identical three questions, a different three people.* Example:
- I have eaten the three eggs you gave me. Can I have the other? Of course, *the other* in the second interrogative statement does not mean the *three eggs* mentioned in the preceding statement but the *other eggs* on the table, for instance. *Another* also can be used with the same conditions.

Numerative elements can also occupy the elliptical nominal head. They usually take the form of numerals or other quantifying words (i.e. ordinals, cardinals and indefinite quantifiers). Examples of ordinals are *first, next, last, second, third* and *fourth.* Cardinals are usually preceded by the appropriate deictic. *The three, these three,* and *any three* are some examples of the cardinals. Indefinite quantifiers are exemplified by items such as *much, many, more, most, few, several,* and *a little.*
Examples:

- Have another cup. - No thanks; that was my *fifth*. (ordinal)
- Jane was the first person to arrive. I was *the second.* (cardinal)
- Can babies of just one month old smile to their parents? - They can; and *most* do. (indefinite quantifier) Epithets' position is usually occupied by an adjective in its different grammatical forms such as comparative and superlative. Colour adjectives are the most usual.
- Our Sunday market has different types of vegetables. Tomato is *the cheapest*.
- The supermarket has new colorful shirts. *The blue* suit you very well.

Verbal ellipsis: Elliptical verbal groups are defined by Halliday and Hasan (1976) as "a verbal group whose structure does not fully express its systematic features-all the choices that are being made within the verbal group system." The elliptical verbal group may have the following features: (1) Finite or non-finite- if finite: indicative or imperative; if indicative: modal or non-modal. (2) Positive or negative, and marked or unmarked. (3) Active or passive. (4) Past or present or future. Therefore, in this type of ellipsis there is a grammatical system, which monitors the possible elliptical verbal components. In the example (12) below, the elliptical grammatical structure is *have been jogging*, which is positive, finite, active, and present in past in present.
- What have you been doing? - jogging. Verbal group has two types of ellipsis: lexical ellipsis and operator ellipsis. **Lexical ellipsis** is the type of ellipsis in which the lexical verb is missing from the verbal group. The lexical verb is always omitted as in the following example:
- I had better call him. I do not really want to. The elliptical verbal is *call*. Modal operators such as *can, could, will, would, shall, should*…etc. Cannot be omitted from the verbal structure and so they cannot function as a lexical verb. However, any verbal group with only a modal operator in their structure can be recognized as elliptical operator. The following example which is cited from Halliday and Hasan (1976) can explain this,
- Is John going to come? - He *might*. He *was to*, but he *may not*. – He *should*, if he wants his name to be considered. All the instances of the models mentioned in (14) are elliptical verbal groups with a model operator only. The lexical verb *come* could fill the elliptical item, which follows the modal operator. Lexical ellipsis always involves omission from the right and extends 'leftward' to leave only the first word intact. So we may have , in an answer to *our school headmaster should have been coming every day:*
- At least I understand him …….. To have been-to have-to- **Operator ellipsis** involves the omission of the operator and the subject of the clause. However, the lexical verb always remains as in the following example:
- What have you been doing? - Jogging. The complete non-elliptical form could be *I have been jogging.* It can be observed that the elliptical elements are 'from the left'. This type of ellipsis is usually found very closely bonded sequences such as question and answer as in the example (16) mentioned above. However, in passive voice responses the operator **be** should be mentioned to avoid ambiguity since a number of verbs have the same past simple tense and participle tense as in the following example:

- What have you been doing? - *Being* questioned by the police officer. With the **negative response** which usually takes the form (n't, not) the operator is always present because polarity has to be made explicit. It cannot be presupposed by the reader. Example:
- Were you sleeping when I called you last night? - No, I was not. In general, in elliptical verbal group there should be something refers back to the tense, polarity and voice of the preceding statement. In some cases, it has to be fully explicit in the elliptical form to avoid incorrect presupposition.

Clausal ellipsis: A clause in English is defined by Halliday and Hasan (1976) as the "expression of the various speech functions, such as statement, question, response and so on, has two-part structure consisting of MODAL ELEMENT plus PROPOSITIONAL ELEMENT". Therefore, in addition to the verbal group, which was mentioned in verbal ellipsis, the propositional elements include any *complements* or *adjuncts* that may be present in the whole statement. Example:

- In our house garden, my father was going to plant a row of palm trees. Preposi-Model element-tional element. The Model element is omitted if we ask a question such as:
- What was my father going to do? - Plant a row of palm trees in our garden. In other circumstances there may be ellipsis of the propositional element as shown in the following example:
- Who was going to plant a row of palm trees in our garden? - My father was. In (21) both the complement (a *row of palm trees*) and the adjunct (in *our garden*) were omitted. However, there are some instances where it is not possible in English to respond with *she has fed* as an answer to the question:
- Has my mother fed her chicken? - *She had fed. In this instance, we must either omit both *her chicken* and the lexical verb *feed* or answer in full, *she has fed her chicken*. Another possible answer is to substitute the lexical verb with *done*, so the answer could be *she has done.* "Substitution is more common in spoken than in writing in English, ellipsis being often preferred in writing." (Halliday and Hasan, p.199)

Ellipsis and reading comprehension: Ellipsis as one of the cohesive devices supposed to help readers in extracting meaning from any authentic written text. This is because " cohesion… is a major text quality such that we might suggest that the more cohesive a text and the more the reader is aware of this, the more comprehending is assisted" (Chapman, 1983, p.122). This can only be achieved by efficient readers with enough linguistic knowledge of English language. Supplying the elliptical items omitted from a written text is not always an easy task for students learning English as a second/foreign language. Monson (1982, p.146) states that "substitution-ellipsis structures were the most difficult for all age groups." Enough knowledge of both the world and the English grammar are necessary to supply the correct omitted item and consequently have satisfactory understanding of any written text. Many writers presuppose that their readers are efficient enough to supply the omitted language items and get the correct message they want to convey. Most of them do this with the intention of inviting their readers to participate in the making of meaning and widen the shared assumptions with their readers. However, only efficient readers can correctly bridge the gaps left empty by writers. Davie (2011) states that ellipsis in English language seems to have two main functions: first, it allows efficient reading if the reader has enough background knowledge to allow ready inference of what has been omitted; and second, by requiring readers to make inferences, it makes the writing more engaging, more intellectually or aesthetically stimulating. The following quasi-experiment will reveal whether a sample of Libyan university student studying English as a foreign language are able to supply the elliptical items omitted from selective statements and consequently understand their messages.

3. Methodology

This paper investigates the ability of supplying the elliptical items omitted from a written text and its impact on the reading comprehension of Libyan university students studying EFL. 4th year English department students' reading comprehension was tested by asking them to fill spaces in statements modified to have elliptical items supposed to be understood by the study participants. It is hypothesized that if the participants manage to supply the correct lexical and grammatical items omitted from the given statements, it suggests that they understand the messages of these statements. Failing to do so suggests

that the participants have poor reading comprehension, which can be attributed to many factors, which will be discussed later.

Research questions: The data collected by testing the reading comprehension of the study participants tried to answer the following research questions:
- Can 4th year English department students supply the correct elliptical items omitted from written statements?
- How does this affect their comprehension of these statements?

Participants: Seventy one fourth year university students participated in the study. 97.2% were females and 2.8% were male students. Their age ranges from 20 to 25 years old. They learn English as a foreign language since their L1 is Arabic. Their English language background is almost similar since all of them passed (reading comprehension course I and II) which were assigned to them in their second and third year of study. They also have to pass (reading comprehension course III) before graduation. Actually, out of the total number of the 4th year students, which was 104, seventy one accepted to participate in the study? They did so after the researcher assured them that their tests' results would not affect their progressive evaluation.

Table 1: Gender of the Participants

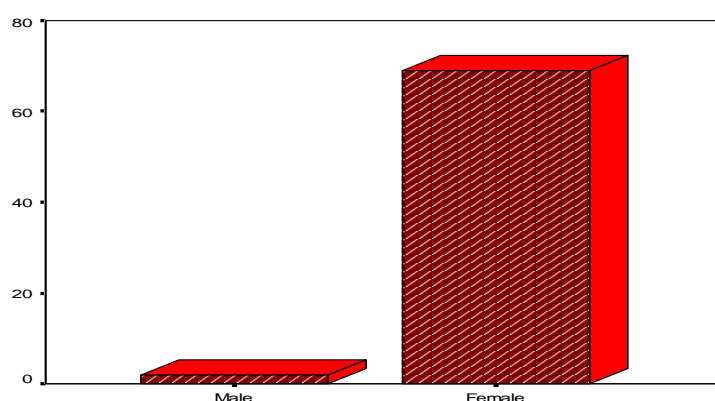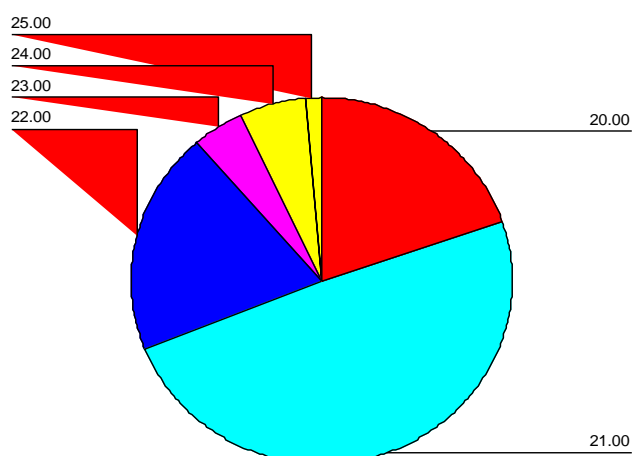|	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Male	2	2.8	2.8	2.8
Female	69	97.2	97.2	100
Total	71	100	100	

Fig. 1: Gender of the study participants

Table 2: Average Age of the Participants

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Dev
Age	71	20	25	21.31	1.10313
Valid No	71				

Fig. 2: Average age of the study participants

Instruments: Fifty statements consist of at least two independent clauses were selected from Halliday and Hasan's examples to represent the types of elliptical lexical and grammatical items such as nominal, verbal and clausal were used as the study instrument. Every statement has an elliptical item, which is understood from the preceding clause. Study participants were asked to fill the empty spaces with the correct elliptical item both in grammar and meaning.

4. Results

Data collected by testing the reading comprehension of the study participants were statistically analyzed by using SPSS programme. Table (3) below shows the mean score and the standard deviation of the test. The mean of the test scores was about (M: 33.80) which is considered quite low. In addition, as Figure (3) shows, about 85% of the study participants scored below 50 marks. Only 15% scored above 50 marks which is usually the passing marks in normal examinations.

Table 3: Results of Reading Comprehension Test

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Dev
Test Marks	71	6	82	33.8028	15.85706
Valid No	71				

Fig (3) Frequency of test marks

Std. Dev = 15.86
Mean = 33.8
N = 71.00
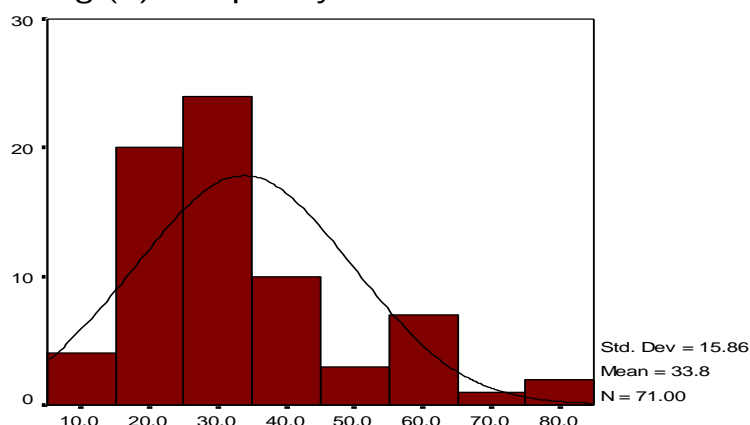
Discussion: This paper investigated the ability of supplying the elliptical items omitted from a written text and its impact on the reading comprehension of Libyan university students studying EFL. 4th year English department students' reading comprehension was tested by asking them to fill spaces in

statements modified to have elliptical items supposed to be understood by the study participants. This study hypothesized that if the participants manage to supply the correct lexical and grammatical items omitted from the given statements, it suggests that they understand the messages of these statements. Failing to do so means that the participants have poor reading comprehension, which could be attributed to the following reasons:

- The level of the English language used to test the reading comprehension of the study participants might be above their language level. Most of the statements used in the testing instruments were adopted from Halliday and Hasan's (1976) book (Cohesion in English). As an academic book written by English native speakers should have a high standard English language which could be difficult to be understood by Libyan university students learning English as a foreign language.
- To supply the correct omitted items to the spaces given in the testing instruments, the study participants need enough knowledge of the English language grammar. Recognizing nominal, verbal and clausal elliptical items, which are grammatical in nature, requires deep understanding of English grammar. Though of the grammar courses our university students have passed, when it comes to practice most of the students fail to apply the knowledge of grammar they have while reading or writing.
- Most of the cohesive devices are explicitly stated some where in the text to guide the readers and help them in constructing the full meaning of the text. For example, conjunctive items can be recognized easily and the task of the reader is to benefit from their existence and get the message the writer wants to convey. With the ellipsis, structure there is nothing to guide the reader; on the contrary, he has to analyze the grammatical structure, whether it is a statement or a question, and supply the elliptical item to be able to understand the chunk of text, which is difficult for most of the students learning EFL.
- English grammar courses in Libyan secondary and university levels are taught with no reference to their use in other language skills such as reading and writing. When students read authentic texts, they usually fail to apply their knowledge of grammar to recognize the cohesive relations, which contribute in the structure of the text and consequently fail to fully understand the message of the text.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper examined the ability of supplying the elliptical items omitted from a written text and its impact on the reading comprehension of Libyan university students studying EFL. 4th year English department students' reading comprehension was tested by asking them to fill spaces in statements modified to have elliptical items supposed to be understood by the study participants. The study data analysis revealed that the majority of the participants failed to get the passing marks, which is usually 50% of the total marks. Actually, the average mark the participants managed to score was only 33, 8 which is far below the passing mark. This result suggests that the participants of the study did not benefit from the elliptical cohesion, which suppose to help them in extracting the appropriate meaning of the statements given to them. Ellipsis as a cohesive tie according to Halliday and Hasan's (1976) classification is a grammatical relation between words and clauses where something is left unsaid because it is understood. This means only active readers with enough knowledge of English grammar can supply the unsaid items to complete the omitted words and clauses. Reading as an interactive process requires talented writers as well as proficient readers for the message to be transferred correctly from the writer's mind to the reader's one. Enough linguistic knowledge beside knowledge of the world are paramount for the reader to succeed in his or her mission, which is getting satisfactory understanding of text's message.

Libyan university students learning English as a foreign language struggle to understand English grammar, which is entirely different from their L1, Arabic language grammar. In addition, if they do understand English grammar they need long time and hectic practices to be able to use this knowledge in comprehending English written text. Grammar lessons in our secondary and university levels are taught with no reference to their semantic benefits. Even clever students are able to answer grammar questions but they are not able to analyze, for example, statements and differentiate between agent and patient. It is recommended that English grammar lessons given to Libyan university students studying EFL be presented in an analytical way with clear reference to other language skills such as reading and writing. Teaching grammar rules with simple artificial examples has a limited use when students encounter difficult authentic texts. In addition, cohesive devices as Halliday and Hasan (1976) classify them should

be explicitly taught to Libyan university students in their reading comprehension courses. As cohesive ties conjunctives, reference, ellipsis, substitution and lexical cohesion are used by skilled writers as signals to guide readers to get the correct meaning they want to convey. Students can only benefit from their existence if they recognize these relations and how they operate within a text.

References

Chapman, L. J. (1983). Reading development and cohesion. UK: Heinemann Educational Books.

Davie, K. G. (2011). Functional Redundancy and Ellipsis as Strategies in Reading and Writing. *Utah State University*, 15(3).

Halliday, M. & Hasan, R. (1976). Cohesion in English. London: Longman.

Hoey, M. (1991). Patterns of lexis in text. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Innajih, A. (2012). The Effect of Recognizing the Lexical Cohesive Relations of Written Text on the Reading Comprehension of Libyan University Students Studying English as a Foreign Language. ICERI 2012 conference, Madrid (Spain) 19th -21st of November 2012.

Monson, D. (1982). Effect of Type and Direction on Comprehension of anaphoric Relationships. ERIC No. ED 298003.

Muto, K. (2007). The use of lexical cohesion in reading and writing. Available at: Library.nakanishi.ac.jp/ p.107-129.