

Measuring EFL Learners' Ability to Recover and Reconstruct Missing Information in Spoken English Discourse

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Received: April 18, 2016 Accepted: April 25, 2016 Published: June 15, 2016

doi:10.5296/ijl.v8i3.9615 URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5296/ijl.v8i3.9615>

Abstract

This study was set up to experimentally investigate the extent of EFL learners' ability to locate, decode, recover and reconstruct unstated information presented in discursive conversation. Specifically, the study examines the learners' ability to recover ellipted words, substituted forms and fully deleted sentences. It also sheds light on the techniques used and the obstacles they encounter in this respect. Thirty- five Iraqi sophomores majoring in English took three listening tests consisting of 27 items. The participants were asked to put the heard dialogues or single utterances with omitted information into their original complete and coherent forms. The overall result indicated that EFL learners were poor at identifying and recovering missing information. Data analysis showed that although the participants were able, to some extent, to identify and recover ellipted elements, their performance in recovering substituted element and unstated sentences was quite limited. It was also found that the more cognitively complicated the task is, the harder it will be to recover missing information.

Keywords: Ellipsis, Incoherence, Interpretation, Missing information, Recognition, Substitution, Context

1. Conceptual Framework

It goes without saying that human beings use language to communicate their ideas and needs. And conversation, as an aspect of language, has been identified as the most basic register of language, given that most humans spend much more time participating in conversation than any other use of language (Biber & Conrad, 2009:86). In order to make their conversation fruitful, interlocutors try to be precise, in the sense that their contribution should not be “more informative than is required.” (Grice (1975). Speakers are usually not inclined to repeat known, predictable and formulaic utterances. In rhetoric, redundancy tends to have a negative connotation and is perceived as improper because of the use of unnecessary wording. This has led to the general impression that redundancy is to be avoided in language. Therefore, in everyday conversation speakers try to convey their messages at the lowest cost in time and effort.

The idea of inexplicitness introduced by Cheng and Warren (1999: 295) is in line with the natural language phenomenon that calls for avoiding redundant information and linguistic elements. Warren (1993:42) thinks that being inexplicit is a feature of native speakers' conversation and efficient and successful communication is enhanced by speakers using language that is appropriately inexplicit (Cheng & Warren, 1999: 301). Tsuda (1993: 66) mentions that speakers achieve the sense of rapport that comes from being understood without saying what one means. Sinclair (1991:479) thinks that when an utterance meaning is too obvious, it is the less likely to occur. Many researchers (e.g., Lyon, 1977b: 589, Goa & Zhu, 2005:42) support the view that a competent speaker has the ability to produce grammatically incomplete, but contextually interpretable sentences. In addition, this style will involve the listener by requiring her/him to fill in unstated meaning. Mei-yun (1993:12) states that in spoken texts, there are generally a lot of omissions and substitution, because the interlocutors are in a direct, face-to-face interaction and their mutual understanding is made easier by their facial expressions and gestures. The present researcher has noticed that people resort to inexplicitness (e.g. incomplete utterances) to make language more effective and challenging to the listener and, on other occasions, when they are uninterested in, or dissatisfied with what the participant is saying. To sum up, humans strive to make their spoken texts shorter, relevant, purposeful, and fragmented rather than complete.

In order to avoid over-explicitness, people often omit some words, phrases, clauses and even sentences, when an interlocutor feels that the addressee could recover them from the linguistic and non-linguistic context. Cheng & Warren (1999:292) state that inexplicitness in conversation is achieved through the employment of certain linguistic forms which require the hearer to interpret the specific meaning from the particular context in which it is uttered; and failing to utilize context might result in wrong interpretations of received speech. Baltes (1993:50) suggests that speakers make decision "based on which utterances and clues to provide, based on what they believe the hearers already know and/or can easily reconstruct". Grammar as well as pragmatics provide some tools that make language more economical without damaging the coherence of the bits of information. Reduced forms, condensation, ellipsis, substitutions are cohesive devices employed to realize shortness. Ellipsis and substitution are the two forms of inexplicitness requiring the hearer or reader to recover part

of the discourse from the linguistic context (Goa & Zhu, 2005:42). Deleting full sentences in conversation would turn an explicit coherent discourse into a seemingly incoherent one.

1.1 Ellipsis

Ellipsis is the omission of elements normally required by grammar on the assumption that the listener or reader will be able to supply them mentally (Nunan, 1993: 25, Swan, 2005:156, Biber et al, 2002:230). These elements are too obvious to keep and can be restored verbatim from the linguistic context or the situation. Although the structure has a missing element, the proposition is retained in what remains of the structure (McCarthy, 1991:43). Quirk et al (1985:883) state that there is always some evidence from which ellipsed words can be recovered. Language users often prefer using ellipsis to avoid over-explicitness and repetition. It is highly characteristic of spontaneous speech, because of the need to reduce syntactic complexity due to real-time pressure; besides, speakers need to speed up communication, avoiding the tedium of unnecessary repetition (Biber et al, 2002:441). In addition, ellipsis and substitution are commonly used in message- writing and in the television moving news captions. In addition, the present researcher argues that addressers often use ellipsis to convey pragmatic meanings: e.g., showing power, social status and feelings. For example, in Iraq when greeting someone, people usually say "*Peace be upon you*" (السلام عليكم). If the answer is "*and upon you*" (وعليكم), instead of "*and peace be upon you*" (وعليكم السلام), the addressee would deduce that the speaker is either dissatisfied with her/him, showing higher status and power, or has no intimate relationship with her/him. In this situation, the speaker would definitely use a special kind of tone that usually accompanies the articulation of an utterance to convey a specific pragmatic meaning.

The words omitted in the example (A. *What have you been doing?* B. *writing a letter.*) are the subject and the auxiliary verb. Obviously, the omitted words cannot be retrieved unless the listener refers to the former utterance. This type of ellipsis is classified as situational in that it requires the hearer to interpret the missing items from the immediate situation. According to Chen and Warren (2003:392), in conversation, situational ellipsis which is interpreted through the extra-linguistic situation is the most common form of ellipsis.

1.2 Substitution

Substitution refers to the replacement of one item by another. As a general rule the "substitute item has the same structural function as that for which it substitutes" (Halliday & Hassan, 1976:89). It is used when a speaker wishes to avoid repetition and promote both clarity and economy in discourse (Quirk, et al, 1985: 860). The speaker is able to draw on one of the grammatical resources of language to replace the item (Bloor & Bloor, 1995: 96). When something is substituted, it follows that the replaced item maintains the same structural function as the presupposed item. Like ellipsis, this form of inexplicitness is commonplace in conversation when a speaker assumes the meaning will be retrieved by the hearer. In the example (A. *Is it going to rain?* B. *I think so.*"), the word so is a substitute for *It's going to rain.*

1.3 Incoherence

Coherence is a semantic property of discourse formed through the interpretation of each individual sentence relative to the interpretation of other sentences. It means that one can understand what is heard because it follows a certain kind of logical order and the "organization of concepts and ideas is systematical. Tannen (1984:195) defines coherence as organizing structure, making the words and sentences into a unified discourse that has cultural significance". Steffenson (1986:72) states that coherence is the "consistency of meaning which is constructed by the skilled or knowledgeable reader". Yule (1996:127) defines coherence as "the familiar and expected relationship in experience which we use to connect the meanings of utterances, even when those connections are not explicitly made". In a conversation, coherence refers to the way the participants cooperate to maintain a reasonably focused thread of conversation. They usually do not utter every single piece of information; instead, they leave out a lot of bits of conversation to avoid predictable and known information. As a result, the conversation looks incoherent. Here, incoherence refers to the unstated utterances and listeners' ability to fill the gaps so as to find connectivity in meaning.

Lenk (1998:16) states that processing incoherent language can only happen by submitting it to an interpretation procedure. Most native speakers would create a domestic situational context that would make what seems to be a group of unrelated utterance as an orderly and coherent dialogue. The first step to recover missing sentences is to take two or more than two pieces of information that are understood. In case the listener finds no relation on the semantic level between the utterances, she/he resorts to various linguistic and non-linguistic clues that would help her/him make sense of what might first appear to be odd events and draw logical conclusions not actually stated in the message. If this step is realized, the listener would be able to recognize the location, meaning and structure of the missing sentence(s) in a segment of discourse. Nunan (1993:64) believes that the perception of unstated propositions must either precede or occur simultaneously with the recognition of their functions. According to Cheng & Warren (1993:388), flouting the maxims of manner which requires contribution to be orderly and to avoid obscurity of expression and ambiguity drives the recipient to try to calculate what the missing information is from what has been said and the full context in which it is said and put the discourse into its original order. Our background knowledge, our purpose as well as our ability to reason make a conversation coherent (Cheng & Warren, 1998: 294; Carrell, 1982:483; Yule (1996:85). Lenk (1998: 16) admits there is no guarantee that the speaker's intended meaning is indeed adequately represented in the listener's mind. We also cannot suppose that the speaker's intended coherence of discourse is closely represented in the hearer-inferred coherence. Thus, when listening to a monologue, sometimes, a listener might give an interpretation that does not match the speaker's. Thus, coherence is not a state that can be arrived at, but both a process and a cooperative achievement.

The relationship between cohesion and coherence was investigated by many researchers. Carrell (1982: 486) states that "a coherent text will likely be cohesive, not of necessity, but as result of that coherence". Nunan (1993:61) argues that cohesion is neither necessary nor

sufficient for the establishment of coherence. We are able to recognize a text as coherent by creating a context and then identifying the functions that each utterance fulfills within that context (Brown & Yule, 1983:226). This enables the complete propositional content of each utterance to be supplied by the listener. A text may have a low level of cohesion but still be highly coherent if it draws on a shared domain of knowledge and allows for a high level of inferencing. On the other hand, Spiegel & Fitzgerald (1990:49) support the view that coherence resides in the reader's mind and schemata, in addition to textual factors. The present researcher suggests that we can never dispense without cohesive devices, simply, because a relation in meaning is existed, either overtly or covertly, between one utterance and another. Deciding to vocally produce a certain cohesive tie in conversation or keep it in mind (Srestasathirn, 2013:16) depends on the speaker's evaluation of the situation. For example when a speaker notices the listener is unable to process an emitted utterance, she/he might vocally produce the tie in order help the listener understand the utterance. To illustrate this point, we refer to Widowson's (1978) example: A. *What are the police doing?* B. *I have just arrived.*

We make sense of B's utterance by logical reasoning in that if B has just arrived, then, it is expected that she/he does not know what the police are doing. This procedure is so common in every-day conversation that we are not aware of these processing exchanges. Of course, physical, social and interpersonal context are exploited to supply the missing propositional information. Thus, the cohesive conversation might run as follows: A. *What are the police doing?* B. *I don't know because I have just arrived.*

In this study the present researcher had broadened the term 'missing information' to include incoherence (inexplicit coherence) in the surface form of conversation to the sources of inexplicitness. In other words, the researcher investigates how apparently formally unconnected utterances go together in conversational discourse to form a coherent discourse.

2. Review of Literature

Most of the research on cohesive devices and coherence focuses on the effect of teaching cohesive devices on comprehension, the difficult ones to process, their identification by the learners of English, and the relation between coherence and cohesion. The majority of the studies were carried out in the field of writing and reading. Tahsildar & Yusoff (2014) and Japeen's et al (2013, 2014) studies showed that cohesive devices had a positive effect on learner's ability to comprehend English. Dukta's (1979) study reported positive and significant relationship between total substitution scores and reading scores. Many researchers (e.g. Akpinar, 2012, Hinkle, 2002, Al-Jar, 2001, Monson, 1982) studied the difficulties that learners have in comprehending anaphoric structures including substitution and ellipsis. These studies revealed that substitution and ellipsis were the most difficult structures to identify and interpret for learners of English of all ages. Shen (2010) studied the interrelation among coherence, substitution, and reference. It was found that the participants tended to commit more mistakes in regards to coherence than substitution or reference.

Spiegel & Fitzgerald (1990) examined the relationship between cohesion and coherence in children's writing. It was found there was a positive relationship between cohesion and

coherence. Maurer (2003) study revealed that cohesive ties are just one part of the web of relation that makes up a text coherent. The study conducted by Tierney & Rosenthal (1981) explored the extent to which a statistical accounting of cohesive ties is a legitimate means of measuring and evaluating text coherence. It was concluded that the cohesion of a text as defined by Halliday and Hasan (1976) bears no direct, causal relationship to the coherence of the text. To find out the frequency of use of cohesive devices in coherent writing, Abusaeedi (2010) carried out an investigation, the result of which showed that references were densely used, however, they did not play any role in making a text coherent.

As far as recoverability of missing information is concerned, it was noticed that the studies addressing this issue were scanty. Stretasathiern (2013) investigated the students' ability to recognize, interpret, and recover ellipted words. The qualitative investigation revealed that the students were neither aware nor capable of understanding and recovering these elements. Their problems were attributed to first language transfer and reading strategies. Kim (2012) investigated the comprehension of elided phrases in Korean and English. Results revealed that Korean L1 speakers interpreted Korean VP-ellipsis by taking the entire VP in the first clause to be the antecedent of the elided VP in the second clause. For the null object construction, they comprehended the null argument in the second clause with the help of the antecedent clause rather than contextual information. The purpose of Klein's (2003:34) study was to decide whether learners "would know where words had been dropped and would be able to supply the missing words." A questionnaire was given to beginners and advanced samples. It was found that familiarity with base sentence structure was a decisive factor in comprehending *tacits*, and also in providing the correct grammatical form. Kato's (1986) study examined various samples of ellipsis which non-native speakers of English find difficult to process. It was concluded that native hearers' recoverability of ellipsis referred to the sum total of the knowledge that they had internalized, both linguistic and extra-linguistic, inextricably bound together. It was found that the ellipted elements were often part of the constituents of so-called 'collocations', and encyclopedic common-sense knowledge. This knowledge played a crucial role in helping addressees retrieve what was ellipted.

To sum up, the previous studies showed that: 1. cohesive ties facilitate the process of comprehension. 2. the relationship between cohesion and coherence is weak. 3. ellipsis and substitution are more difficult to process than other cohesive ties. 4. Finding coherence between utterances is more difficult than in cohesion.

2.1 Problem and Purpose of the Study

Native speakers use many sentence fragments rather than complete sentences. These fragments pose significant difficulties, especially to learners and even translators who may have only been exposed to full utterances of English (Klein, 2003:28). Besides, ambiguity arises when it is not clear which item has been omitted (Srestasathiern, 2013:16). Ambiguity in spoken English might get intolerable and seriously hinders the process of listening comprehension. Brown and Yule (1983: 223) state that "We certainly rely on the syntactic structure and lexical items.....to arrive at an interpretation, but it is a mistake to think that we operate only with this literal input to our understanding". We often need more information

to understand what is said.

It has been noticed that Iraqi students try to speak and write as explicitly as possible. They usually listen to spoken English verbatim, trying to understand each word as accurately as possible. This study empirically investigates whether learners of English are able to make sense of inexplicit oral discourse, recover and reconstruct the utterances that are intentionally deleted by speaker. It will exclusively limit its investigation to two cohesive devices, namely, ellipsis and substitution, in addition the investigation is broadened to include incoherence on the surface level in conversation. It aims to statistically measure listeners' ability to recover and reconstruct ellipted elements, substituted forms, and missing sentences when they listen to spoken English discourse. By following this procedure, the researcher could accurately provide a parameter that could decide whether the participants understand a conversation as a cohesive and coherent oral text. He is also interested in finding out if there are any differences in the subjects' performance which can be attributed to the three study variables. The main questions guiding the study were as follows:

1. What is the extent of learners' ability to recover ellipted words?
2. What is the extent of learners' ability to recover substituted elements?
3. What is the extent of learners' ability to recover missing information?
4. Are there any differences between learners' ability to recover omitted words, substituted elements and unstated sentences?

3. Methodology

3.1 Sampling

The 35 participants ranged in age from 19 to 23. They were randomly sampled from the 3 second-grade classes. They were full-time students enrolled in undergraduate courses at the Department of English, College of Arts, Al- Iraqiya University. All the participants spoke Arabic as their native language. The selection was based on the assumption that they had the basic knowledge of the English language. Their ability to speak and comprehend aural English was varied. They were exposed to spoken English mainly through their classes. They had little contact in English with their peers inside or outside their classes. These learners had not received any course geared towards developing their ability to recognize, interpret or produce utterances with omitted elements. However, they had incidentally or indirectly received some information in this area in the course of their learning process, since these language elements could be found in most course books (e.g., spoken English, reading, and writing).

3.2 Data Collection

The researcher developed 3 tests in order to examine the participants' ability to recover missing information (Appendix 1). Test 1 assessed the participants' ability to recover elliptical elements. It included 10 items with 37 omitted words (Table 1). Test 2 measured the learners' ability to retrieve substituted elements. It contained 9 items with 18 substituted words (Table 2). In Test 3 the subjects were asked to turn the inexplicit coherent dialogues

into explicit coherent ones by retrieving unstated sentences. It comprised 8 items and 8 missing sentences (Table 3). The three tests were made up of 27 items, representing the variables intended to be investigated. All the items of both Test1 and Test 2 were based on the criteria set by Quirk et al (1985:889). In all the items with elliptical or substituted elements the participants were required to recover the omitted elements either precisely, (items 2, 3, 4, 6, 8, 9, 10, 13, 15 and 19), or with slight grammatical changes (items 1, 5, 7, 11, 12, 14, 16, 17, 18). The dialogues in Test 3 did not provide full explicit information; therefore, the participants violated the maxim of relevance. In this area, we were interested in restoring the missing ideas (meanings) rather than specific words or grammatical correctness because human beings express their ideas in different styles.

A test has content validity if it is 'relevant to and covers a given area of content or ability' (Bachman, 1990: 244). Accordingly, the three tests contents were considered valid because they represented what was intended to be investigated. Besides, following the writing of the tests material, they were given to three experts specialized in English language and linguistics to ensure its suitability (Allen and Yen, 1997: 113). The jury agreed that the tests items were appropriate to the purposes of the study. The components of the subject matter were short and within the range of subjects' linguistic competence. However, it was found that 5 items out of the 32 had to be dropped because they presented either too lengthy dialogues or they excessively repeated examining the same cohesive device. Thus, the subjects were tested on 27 items comprising 29 utterances inexplicitly expressed. The instrument was piloted on 20 students from the same department prior to its administration. Split-half method was used to determine the test reliability. Pearson correlation formula was used to compute the correlation coefficient. It was then corrected by Spearman Brown formula in order to get the reliability coefficient of the total test. It was found to be 85. (See Hughes, 1989: 158).

All the participants signed a form that confirmed their consent to participate in the experiments. In order to encourage them to be serious and careful, some teachers promised to add some credit marks to their averages. The researcher notified the participants of the instrument administration date (28 December 2015). After making the subjects aware of the type and purpose of each test, the researcher gave them brief instructions on how to fill out the missing elements. In addition, some illustrative examples, both in Arabic and English, were given in order to familiarize the participants with the nature of the test. For test 1, the test-takers were asked to put each elliptical sentence into its original form. When answering Test 2, they had to write down each substitute, and then give its equivalence of substituted words. As for Test 3, the participants would write each conversation in its original form. This procedure enabled the scorer to identify the right location of the retrieved information. Each participant received an answer sheet to be used for putting down missing elements. For each move the researcher would read an utterance at normal speed many times. Although this procedure detracts from authenticity, it neutralizes the forgetfulness variable. The subjects were allowed to write notes. This step was followed by pause during which the participants were asked to do the task by locating the place where words and sentences were dropped, then supplying these words or sentences. The whole task including the instruction took about 50 minutes to finish. As soon as the participants finished doing the task, all the answer sheets were collected. Then,

each participant was given a sheet of paper and a copy of the test paper. They were asked to give detailed accounts on the problems they encountered when doing the task and what techniques they used to do the task. They were given as much time as they needed and allowed to write down their comments and explanations in English or Arabic.

The participants' answers were scored and statistically calculated by the researcher. As far as Test 1 and Test 2 were concerned, each item was allotted 10 scores. The utterances were individually dealt with, in the sense that each retrieved utterance or sentence was independently computed. Here, the 10 scores were divided between the number of correctly retrieved elements, grammatical mistakes, unrecovered words, and wrong words recovering for each item. For example, if the answer for item 4. '*Someone has borrowed my pen, but I don't know who*', was '*borrowed my pen*' without including *has*, the score would be calculated by dividing 10 by 4. So 2.5×3 would make the score (7.5). Then the scores for this item received by the entire participant would be added to get the total score. In order to measure the participants' achievement in coherence (Test 3), a holistic evaluation based on deciding whether a direct relation in meaning between the utterances restored and the other sentences existed. 10 scores were allotted for each recovered sentence. Grammatical and spelling mistakes were ignored, provided that they did not undermine coherence in meaning. As far as the three tests are concerned, if the subject placed the recovered elements in the wrong position, her/his answer would be ignored because a wrong position means a wrong interpretation. In addition, the total number of scores, average, and percentage for each retrieved element and sentence was computed.

4. Results and Discussion

The first research question investigates the extent of learners' ability to recover ellipted words. Table 1 presents quantitative statistics of the scores received by the participants on the first test. It shows that they gained 2707 scores (%64). Effective participants reported that their good command of grammatical structures was the main strategy recruited to interpret and retrieve elided words and structures. They revealed that they were familiar with elliptical structures such as short answers, genitive forms, and tag questions. For example, most subjects reported they could easily recognize, interpret and recover the omitted word '*house*' in item 6 (*Whose house is this? It's Peter's.*), because they were familiar with such base sentences. The other factor that facilitated their ability to recover linguistic elements was the similarity between Arabic and English in using elliptical structures in certain situation. Actually, all the utterances in Test 1 except items 6 and 8 were put in a style similar to the one used in Arabic. Therefore, filling out missing information seemed to be not so much complicated. For example the ellipses used in item 2 (*He wants to solve this problem, but he doesn't know how.*) match that of the colloquial Iraqi Arabic. Once the addressee interjects saying, '*What do you mean by how?*', the addresser would go back to *consciously* recover the ellipted elements.

Table 1. Recovered words, gained scores, and their percentages

Item	Recovered omitted words	Gained score	%
1	-to borrow my pen.	198	56.5
2	-to make friendship.	238	68
3	-Phone.	238	68
4	-who has borrowed my pen.	265	76
5	-he is coming for dinner.	285	81.4
6	-house.	283	81
7	-I'm swimming.	215	61.4
8	-getting older.	215	61.4
9	-forgives	225	64
10	a. -Are you from...?	210	60
	b. -I'm from....Where arefrom	125	36
	c. -I'm from....	210	60
Total		2707	64

Some participants were able to recover the exact words, however, the complete utterance was grammatically defective. For example, in item 1 some participants did not add the preposition **to** after the verb **want** in "You can borrow my pen, if you want." Other students were not able to make the necessary grammatical changes in recovered structures, for example, in item 7, they did not change **you** into **I**. It was also found that when there is no antecedent that might be referred to, the participants, though relevant, would give various words that carry different meanings. Tannen (1984:16) points out that "there is no guarantee that the speaker's intended meaning is indeed adequately represented in the hearer-intended meaning." Thus, in item 10a. some participants wrote "Are you going to Baghdad?" instead of "Are you from Baghdad?". On the other hand, most poor participants disclosed they would prefer complete utterances as they were easily comprehended. They were incapable of handling the case of ellipsis, because they often forgot the previous part of an utterance they needed to refer to. Some of the errors the subjects made indicated they had not enough mastery over some rules concerning the use of ellipsis.

Test 2 examines learner's ability to retrieve substituted words and their structures. Table 2 below shows that the overall achievement percentage was 48%. This result reflects the participant's unsatisfactory degree of their awareness of substitution devices. The result seems to be in line with the studies' results of Akpınar (2012), Al-Jarf (2001, and Hinkle (2008) who found that substitution was difficult to process for the nonnative learners. It was also found that the majority of the participants focused on the semantic strategy to recover

Table 2. Recovered substituted elements, gained score, and percentage

Item no.	Recovered substituted words	Gained score	%
11.	<i>did</i> = had switched off the T.V.	153	43.7
12.	<i>that</i> = I'd like to come for dinner.	149	42.5
13.	<i>So do</i> = And you drink too much.	144	41
14.	<i>So</i> = she will come to the party.	161	46
15.	<i>One</i> = shirt	142	40.5
16.	<i>this</i> = You take one pill every night.	178	60
17.	<i>do that</i> = break my eyeglasses.	197	56
18.	<i>So</i> = they have found the key.	128	36.5
19.	<i>the same</i> = a new coat.	253	72
Total		1505	48

missing words. Despite the fact that they were able to interpret the substitutes, they could not specify the exact number of substituted words. In order solve this problem, they referred to a plausible lexical word that conveyed the main idea, paying no appropriate attention to other words, especially, function word. Items 2, 3, 4, 5, and 7 (Appendix 1) give evidence to this conclusion. This result may be ascribed to listeners' inability to catch up with the running words. For instance, the word *did* in item 11 substitutes has switched the T.V.; nevertheless, some participants recovered switched off, leaving out *T.V.* For the participants, the word *this* in item 16 was the substitute for pill instead of you take one pill every night. Generally, the participants were able to identify the substitution word (s), but could not recover the exact substituted words. The learners' difficulty in identifying and recovering substituted words stemmed from the participants' incompetence in grammar. Ineffective participants also mentioned that they avoided answering some items because they could not locate the substitute. This refers to their unfamiliarity with certain types of substitutes such as *did* (item 11), and *so do* (item 13). An Arabic native speaker cannot find substitute forms identical with the above mentioned forms.

The third study question examines the extent of learners' ability to recover unstated sentences in order to create explicit coherent conversations. Creating coherence between addresser's and

addressee's utterances is an extremely difficult experience for EFL learners because it requires inferencing that connects what is said to what has been said before (Levinson, 1983: 21). This is a much more sophisticated procedure than simply understanding single pieces of information (Bransford, 1979:79).

Table 3. Recovering missing information, gained scores and percentage

Item no.	Suggested missing information	Gained score	%
20.	<i>You might catch cold because</i> the forecast....	60	17
21.	No, there is a big dog in the garden. <i>It will attack you.</i>	131	37
22.	Your dog looks happy <i>because it ate your roasted meat</i>	182	52
23.	<i>We can't play tennis because</i> it was raining.	174	50
24.	I'm out of petrol. <i>Where can I find a petrol station?</i> Or: There is a petrol station round there. <i>You can buy petrol from it.</i>	203	58
25.	<i>Do not turn off the heating because</i> the house plants need to be in a warm room.	111	38
26.	My mother is sick. <i>I have to take her to the hospital.</i>	207	59
27.	<i>I can't go to the movies tonight because</i> I have to finish.....	165	47
Total		1233	44

Table 3 shows that the participants gained 1233 (44%) scores. The result indicated that their ability to recover missing sentences was quite limited. It was noticed they could not go beyond the literal meaning. Here, syntax alone cannot help the interpreter to recover missing information; rather, a listener has to "rely on semantic and/or pragmatic recovery mechanism" (Baltes, 1993:53). Some poor participants disclosed that they hinged on both their lexical and grammatical knowledge, but ultimately they could not disambiguate what they heard. The core reason was that they could not depart from the semantic meaning to the pragmatic meaning. They focused more on lexical words and sentence meaning than on discourse as a whole. They had not got practice in this area, in addition, the researcher noticed that teachers thought their students would not understand what they heard unless their speech got slow and explicit. As a result, most students did not use inexplicitness in their academic activities and daily communication. Flying time, limited memory capacity, and inability to recognize coherence relations between segments were the main reasons for learners' unsatisfactory performance in this area. Some of the participants could not recover the missing sentential information because they failed to identify the pragmatic meaning embedded in some utterances. Effective learners focused on salient words that could be used

as cues to infer missing information, for example, in item 22 (A. *Where is my roasted meat?* B. *Your dog looks happy.*), the word '*happy*' was used to trigger the interpretation (*the dog had eaten the meat*). Most effective participant made use of their knowledge of the world and reasoning to make connection between the interlocutors' utterances and finally decide the sort of speech act they carried. Baltes (1993:52) mentions that native speakers are able to construct context from encyclopedic information and world knowledge. Item 26 (A. *My mother is sick.* B. *You need not come tomorrow.*) received the highest percentage (59%). A listener makes use of utterance B, to decide the intended meaning of A's utterance (request). Here, making connection between the speakers' utterances was relatively easy because the respondents referred to their knowledge of the world to infer the missing elements. Some participants failed to answer item 25 (A. *Do you mind if I turn off the heating?* B. *The house plants need to be in a warm room.*) because the recovered information did not match their experiences in life. In Iraq, people rarely keep plants that need conditioned air inside their houses. The subjects also complained that when doing item 20, they were able to find connection between utterances, however, owing to their linguistic incompetence, they could not write down the missing sentence. Some participants revealed they tried to catch and understand each word as accurately as possible. This accuracy-oriented process of learning was a serious problem that hindered their attempts to recover missing elements. Effective respondents found the task more interesting and challenging, prompting them to think deeply over what they heard. It was also found that most participants did not write down the linking conjunctions, despite their awareness of the relation between utterances. Surprisingly, few participants recovered some utterances that were different from what were expected despite their suitability for making coherent discourse. The reason could be attributed to the fact that the information to be recovered was embedded in the text, giving release to various interpretations.

In order to answer the fourth study question (*Is there any difference between learner's ability to recover ellipted words, substituted elements and missing information?*), a comparison was made in the participants achievements on the three tests. Table 4 shows that the participant's achievement on the ellipsis test (64%) was higher than their achievements on both substitution (48%) and inexplicit coherence (44%) tests. The difference in average percentage of the total responses between Test 1 (ellipsis), and Test 2 (substitution) was 16 in favour of Test 1, Test 1 and Test 3 (inexplicit coherence) was 20 in favour of Test 1, test 2 and 3 was 4 in favour of Test 2. The data showed that the highest difference was between Test 1 and 3, while the lowest was between Test 2 and 3.

Table 4. Gained scores, and percentage for each test

Type of test	Gained score	%
Test 1: ellipsis	2707	64
Test 2: substitution	1505	48
Test 3: inexplicit coherence	1233	44
Total	5415	53

In order to determine if the differences in scores between each two tests was significant an unpaired t-tests were run. Results presented in Table 5 show that the difference in the means between Test 1 (M=225) and Test 2 (165) was statistically very significant ($t=3.49$) in favour of Test 1. The comparison (Table 6) in the means between the participants' achievements on Test 1 (M=225) and Test 3 (M=154) was very significant ($t=3.40$).

Table 5. Difference between the means of the tests 1 and 2

Test no	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>P value</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
1.	12	225	42.93		0.0024	
				3.49		vs.
2.	9	165	33.26			

$P < 05$

Table 6. Difference between the means of tests 1 and 3

Test no	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>P value</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
1.	12	225	42.93		0.0031	
				3.40		vs.
3.	8	154	50.33			

$P < 05$

Table 7 shows the difference in the means between Test 2 (M=165) and Test 3 (M=154) was insignificant ($t= 0.45$). Evidently, the participants encountered difficulties when interpreting and recovering substituted and unstated utterances.

Table 7. Difference between the means of tests 2 and 3

Test no	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>P value</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
<u>2.</u>	9	165	33.2		0.59	
				0.54		ns.
3.	8	154	50.33			

$P < 05$

This result indicated that elliptical elements were the easiest to interpret and recover. It seems that the similarities between Arabic and English in using elliptical forms facilitated the process of their recoverability. On the other hand, results showed that substitutes were difficult to process because listeners have to identify each substitute, delete, and finally replace each one with a word (s) brought from the previous utterance. Actually, the participants had not acquired the substitution grammatical forms well. Recovering missing sentences to make explicit coherent conversation was proved to be the most difficult task. The reason for this phenomenon is that coherence in interaction is not established in the text

but created in the minds of the interlocutors. This is a complex mental process that demands the utilization of linguistic as well as non-linguistic cues to infer and recover unstated meaning.

5. Conclusion

Unlike machines, humans, unbelievably, can stimulate a great number of pieces of information in a moment, filter the raw information, cast trash off, and finally, keep the elements that convey message. Processing useful and redundant information simultaneously would result in mind indigestion. This state is not tolerated and will definitely lead to a deadlock in conversation. The analysis of quantitative results revealed that EFL learners were able to recover structural ellipsis fairly easily. Converting implicit conversation into an explicit one was found the most complicated tasks because it demands greater processing efforts. Students tendency toward word-by-word translation, low level of linguistic proficiency, practioners' negligence of teaching inexplicit speech, differences between the native and foreign languages, inability to recall heard utterances, and inability to recruit available contextual cues to make inferences were the main reasons for the participants' inadequate performance. Generally, it was found that the majority of participants marked the correct place of missing elements, however, they could not give the correct answer because they did not have enough knowledge to reconstruct deleted elements.

6. Implications

This study demonstrated that learners of English have serious problems in understanding fragmented spoken language. And recovering unstated sentences is an advanced skill that has to be developed by experienced teachers during all the stages of language learning. Learners have to be taught the base sentence structure and the various elements of inexplicitness. They are explicitly taught how to omit certain words or sentences and recover them. Teachers are advised to show their students the place of the deleted information, why it is deleted, which contextual clues might be recruited and finally which elements are to be recovered. Special attention is to be paid to full missing sentences, how listeners can recover them and find coherence between them. Mastering the basic grammatical system will provide learners with the background they need to know where and when words are dropped. Learners are to be explicitly taught certain strategies that can help them recover omitted information such as, making use of pauses, stress and intonation, recalling details, identifying the main idea, inferring implied meaning, and inferring cause-and- effect relationship. Learning aspects of inexplicitness has to go hand in hand with the process of acquiring various language skills. The process of familiarizing EFL learners with the inexplicit language should start from the first day of their schooling. The momentum of inexplicit material presentation could be accelerated with each advanced stage of learning English. The teacher is expected to make learners understand that the redundant elements are omitted on the surface level, but they are kept in the speaker's mind and that speakers use this style for the purpose of conveying information in the easiest and most economical way. In addition, learners have to be convinced that avoiding redundant information is crucial for successful language communication. It is also important for the learners to realize that a speaker can switch

between the two styles, depending on the evaluation of the conversation situation.

Learners are in need of a programme, with clear-cut goals, that aims to develop the skill of comprehending inexplicit spoken English. A course book designed to develop this skill might comprise covert and overt information. The material is planned in such a way as to provoke learners to look for certain contextual clues that can help them identify and retrieve missing elements. Plenty of exercises could be given to learners on missing information until their recognition, interpretation and recovering gets easier. Including students' tests some questions on identifying, deleting or recovering redundant linguistic elements is extremely important if educationalists plan to help learners comprehend conversations.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to express his gratitude to the editor and anonymous reviewers for their invaluable suggestions and comments on an earlier draft of this paper. He also thanks the head of the department of English, Dr. Shama Hameed, for her cooperation, and all the students who participated in the study and made the data available for analysis.

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Appendix

Appendix 1. Tests

Test 1 (ellipsis)

Listen to each of the following utterances and dialogues, identify the words which are omitted, and then put each sentence into its complete and original form.

1. You can borrow my pen, if you want.
2. He wants to solve this problem, but he doesn't know how.
3. She said she'd phone, but she didn't.
4. Someone has borrowed my pen, but I can't remember who.
5. **A:** Why did you only set three plates? Paul is coming for dinner.

B: He didn't tell me.

6. **A:** Whose house is this? **B:** It's Peter's.

7. **A:** What are you doing? **B:** swimming.

8. He's getting older and older, but he thinks he isn't.

9. John forgives Mary and Mary, John.

10. **A:** Baghdad? **B:** Yes. You? **A:** Mosul.

Test: 2 (substitution)

Listen to each of the following utterances and dialogues, underline the word (s) that substitute a word (s) or sentence, and then put it into its original structure.

11. The T.V. has to be switched off, but nobody did.

12. **A:** What are you doing this Friday? **B:** Nothing so far.

A: Come on for dinner. **B:** Oh, I'd like that.

13. **A:** Annie says you drink too much. **B:** So do you.

14. **A:** Will she come to the party? **B:** I hope so.

15. **A:** Which shirt do you like to wear? **B:** Give me the one on the peg.

16. You have to take one pill every night. This will help you sleep.

17. You broke my eyeglasses. Why did you do that?

18. **A:** Have they found the key? **B:** I don't think so.

19. **A:** I will have a new coat? **B:** I will have the same.

Test: 3 (inexplicit coherence)

Listen to each of the following dialogues, try to understand it, find the place of the missing sentence (s), then re-write it in its original structure.

20. **Mother:** Are you wearing heavy clothes? **Son:** No.

Mother: The forecast is below zero.

21 **A:** There is no answer at the front door. Shall I try the back door?

B: There is a big dog in the garden.

22. **A:** Where is my roasted meat? **B:** Your dog looks happy.

23. **A:** Shall we play tennis? **B:** It's raining. **A:** Oh, is it?

24. **A:** I'm out of petrol. **B:** There is a petrol station round there.

25. **A:** Do you mind if I turn off the heating? **B:** Th. house plants need to be in
a warm room.

26. **A:** My mother is sick. **B:** O. K. You need not come tomorrow.

27. **A:** Let's go to the movies tonight. **B:** I have to finish my paper by eight in the morning.

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