



The Interpretation of Ellipsis and Reduced Utterances in the development of Speaking skills of Iraqi EFL College Students - An Experimental Study

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Abstract

Spoken language differs from written language in several aspects. Competency in speaking depends upon pragmatic features, Grice's Conversational maxims, complementary non-verbal cues etc. Ellipsis and reduced utterances are a common feature of conversation, which are generally neglected by language teachers. EFL learners remain ignorant about these features, which affects their conversational skills to a great extent. An understanding and interpretation of ellipsis and reduced utterances helps speakers as well as listeners to contribute substantially to conversation. The aim of this experimental study is to study the effect of creating awareness about the features in EFL Iraqi students. The experiment was conducted on 30 first year college students. A program was prepared for creating awareness about ellipsis and reduced utterances in conversation with the help of examples from plays. Results showed that students began to use reduced utterances consciously during conversation.

Keywords: Reduced utterances, ellipsis, conversation, pragmatics, conversational maxims

Introduction

Spoken language differs from written language in several aspects. Competency in speaking depends upon pragmatic features, Grice's Conversational maxims, complementary non-verbal cues etc. Ellipsis and reduced utterances are a common feature of conversation, which are generally neglected by language teachers. EFL learners remain ignorant about these features, which affects their conversational skills to a great extent. An understanding and interpretation of ellipsis and reduced utterances helps speakers as well as listeners to contribute substantially to conversation. The aim of this experimental study is to study the effect of creating awareness about the features in EFL Iraqi students.

The basic aim of language use is communication, the ability to speak and converse face-to-face with others. Herein come features like pragmatics, speech acts, non-verbal cues and so on. These are difficult to learn as well as teach; they develop gradually with practice and persistence.

When foreign learners learn English as a second language, they are very particular about constructing complete grammatical sentences, pronunciation and all the features that they are taught during instruction of second language. They are conscious, especially adult learners lest they should make mistakes while speaking. Listening and reading are receptive skills; while writing, they have scope for making changes and corrections. However, speaking is directly open to scrutiny and judgment by the listeners.

While teaching, teachers or instructors focus on grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation. Most of the pragmatic features are not emphasized. As a result, the speaking skills of second language learners sound unnatural and show effort on their part. This study is a report of an experiment conducted in order to make second language learners aware and conscious about ellipsis and reduced utterances, that are so common in natural speech of native speakers.

The assumption in this study is that if awareness about such features is created among learners, it will help them to sound more natural and perfect in conversational situations and would boost their confidence. Features like pragmatics and speech acts are common in almost all languages. However, there are certain features typical to the English language. Two unique features of natural speech in English are ellipsis and reduced utterances.

Importance of the study

Communication across the globe is no longer restricted to the written mode. Cell phones enable conversation to people in any part of the world. Although business chiefly depends upon written



communication with a view to documentation, certain issues can be cleared only through speech communication. Ellipsis and reduced utterances are typical features not only of spoken English, but all languages across the world. An awareness about the same certainly helps participants to converse in a more natural way and prevent miscommunication. Ellipsis is generally neglected in English teaching as a foreign or second language. As a result, learners tend to construct grammatically complete utterances. Limited knowledge of grammar leads to errors. Hence, it is advisable to use ellipsis and reduced utterances, and eliminate repetition of words and phrases which can be understood from the context in a continuous dialogue.

Aims of the study

- To discuss the concepts of ellipsis and reduced utterances in English conversation
- To prepare a programme for creating awareness about the features of English speech
- To implement the programme
- To test the effectiveness of the programme

Research questions

- Does the interpretation of the awareness about ellipsis and reduced utterances improve the speaking skill of EFL Iraqi learners?
- Does the use of ellipsis and reduced utterances make speech of EFL learners sound more natural?

Ellipsis

The word 'ellipsis' means omission. In linguistics, it means the omission of an equivalent word or words which need not be repeated because they can be understood from the context. This does not imply that every grammatical construction that is incomplete and not explicit is ellipsis. According to Winkler (2005:10), the term ellipsis, from Greek 'elleipsis', refers to the omission of linguistic material, structure and sound. Ellipsis is a kind of grammatical link (MacCarthy, 1991:43). Ellipsis gives us a minor sentence instead of a long one and helps to economize speech. Usually, ellipsis refers to the omission of words and is represented by three dots.

Reduced Utterances

In natural conversation, syllables, words or sounds are often deleted. Sometimes, the utterances are not clear. This does not normally happen while reading aloud or while speaking formally. However, it is common in casual informal speech. This is a common feature of all languages. The interesting part is that it does not affect communication. In spite of the deletions, the listeners are able to get a clear and precise message. This is because speech takes place in a context.

The experiment

The participants were chosen from a purposive sample of 30 Iraqi EFL students studying in second year of college in Al Mansour University College, Department of English, In Baghdad. The sample size was limited to 20 because the utterances of each participant were analysed individually. The pre-test and post-test design was used.

Each participant responded to 10 utterances on the basis of their knowledge of English. They were then exposed to selected extracts from plays where ellipsis and reduced utterances were present. It was explained how the playwrights had achieved economy in dialogue and how it would have sounded without the ellipsis and reduction, thus drawing their attention to these two aspects of speech communication.

The same utterances were presented to the students in the post-test and the differences in their responses were noted down, to check their use of reduced utterances and ellipsis. Conclusions were drawn on the basis of the responses.

The data was statistically treated by calculating the mean, SD and t -score of the Responses in pre-test and post-test.



Observation and results

It has been observed that second language learners take a longer time to master the art of speaking English compared to other language skills. It is a fact that language is best learnt in the natural way, as one learns the mother tongue (MT). While learning the MT, listening and speaking develop first and reading and writing come later. However, while teaching English as a second language (SL), learners are first taught to identify, read and spell out letters and words. Writing is a formal mode compared to speaking so when they write, learners are instructed to write in complete sentences. They become habituated to complete grammatically correct sentences which does not sound natural when speaking. Moreover, it is not in accordance with Grice's maxim of quantity. In a natural conversational situation, when speakers converse face-to-face, they are aware of the context. Hence, repetition of several words, phrases and sentences becomes unnecessary. Moreover, as a characteristic of natural speech, one needs time to frame an utterance. While doing this, some sentences are left incomplete, some words or phrases are repeated and a number of filler words are used by speakers. SL learners feel that it is inappropriate to utter incomplete sentences or falter, that it affects fluency and they try their utmost to be as fluent as possible. Fluency is one thing while ellipsis and reduced utterances are another. When a speaker stutters or stammers, it is said that he is not fluent. It is different from ellipsis and reduced utterances. They are commonly used in all languages, including the MT of SL learners. Fluency may be social or psychological (Feng R. and Guo Q. (2022)).

It can be concluded that it is necessary to make SL learners of the way they can achieve economy in speech by using ellipsis and reduced utterances, as they do in their MT. The aim of this paper is to create awareness through dialogues and exchanges in plays.

According to Jennifer S and Hendriks P. (2005), the function of ellipsis is not very clear. Sometimes, it makes the meaning of a sentence clear while at other times, it confuses the listener. However, at times, it is the only way to express the desired meaning. Whatever the case, it must be said that ellipsis is an important phenomenon of natural speech. According to Jonathan White (2013), the use of ellipsis is a strong marker of interaction in spoken discourse.

In conclusion, if ellipsis and reduced utterances are common characteristics of natural speech and if they perform various important functions, they should not be neglected while planning courses of SL learners of English.

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