

## The Impact of Using Ellipsis and Substitution in Academic Writing

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### ABSTRACT

This study investigates an important area of English language teaching and learning. It examines the present situation of teaching and learning ellipsis and substitution, the problems that encountered by students when writing English texts and the learners' proficiency level of writing skills when they are in the final year at Alzaeim Alazhari University, Sudan University of Science and Technology and Omdurman Islamic University. Thus, this study focuses on the problems facing the students in writing English texts properly using ellipsis and substitution appropriately at university level. It is firstly hypothesized that Sudanese EFL university students have many problems in writing, most notably in using ellipsis and substitution. Secondly, Sudanese EFL university students do not use ellipsis and substitution appropriately. Thirdly, there is an apparent weakness in Sudanese university students' written work due to their inability to apply ellipsis and substitution adequately. Finally, Sudanese EFL University students differ to a large degree in achieving ellipsis and substitution in their texts. To confirm or reject the hypotheses of the study the researcher used one tool; a test for final year students. The sample of the study was consisted of 100 students. The data collected from these participants were statistically analyzed and the results were obviously discussed. The results of the study prove that some of the students lack the ability to write appropriately and accurately and some of them don't know the correct use of ellipsis and substitution so as to write cohesive texts. Moreover, the findings of the study confirm that there is an apparent weakness in Sudanese University students' written work due to their inability to apply ellipsis and substitution adequately.

**Key words:** cohesion, coherence, ellipsis, substitution, Impact, Grammatical cohesion.

### المستخلص:

تهدف هذه الدراسة لتقصي قضية مهمة في تدريس وتعلم اللغة الانجليزية. وهي تجسد الوضع الحالي لتدريس وتعلم اداتي الحذف والتبديل، المشاكل التي تواجه الطلاب عند كتابة النصوص الانجليزية ومستوي كفاءة المتعلمين في مهارة الكتابة عند وصولهم السنة الأخيرة في جامعة الزعيم الازهري، جامعة السودان للعلوم والتكنولوجيا وجامعة ادمرمان الاسلامية. لذا ركزت هذه الدراسة علي المشاكل التي تواجه الطلاب الجامعيين عند كتابة النصوص الانجليزية كتابة جيدة مستخدماً أداتي التبديل والحذف بطريقة ملائمة وفعالة. تناولت هذه الدراسة أربعة فرضيات. الفرضية الأولى: الطلاب السودانيين الجامعيين الدارسين للغة الانجليزية لغة أجنبية لديهم مشاكل عديدة في الكتابة (أكثر وضوحاً في إستخدام أداتي التبديل و الحذف). الفرضية الثانية: الطلاب السودانيين الجامعيين الدارسين للغة الانجليزية لغة أجنبية لا يستخدمون أداتي الحذف و التبديل بطريقة مناسبة. الفرضية الثالثة: هنالك ضعف واضح في كتابة الطلاب السودانيين الجامعيين نسبةً لعدم قدرتهم علي تطبيق اداتي الحذف والتبديل بطريقة متقنة. الفرضية الرابعة: الطلاب السودانيين الجامعيين الدارسين للغة الانجليزية لغة أجنبية يختلفون عن بعضهم البعض بدرجة كبيرة جداً عند تناول اداتي الحذف والتبديل في كتاباتهم. لتأكيد أو رفض فرضيات الدراسة؛ أستخدم الباحث أداة واحدة: إختبار لطلاب السنة الأخيرة. تكونت عينة الدراسة من (100) طالب. تم تحليل البيانات التي جمعت من هذه العينة بطريقة إحصائية ونوقشت النتائج بوضوح. أثبتت نتائج الدراسة أن بعض الطلاب ليس لديهم القدرة الكافية لكتابة النصوص كتابة جيدة و مناسبة و البعض الآخر لايجيد الأستخدام الامثل لأداتي الحذف

والتبديل. بالإضافة لذلك؛ أكدت نتائج الدراسة الآتية: هنالك ضعف واضح في كتابة الطلاب السودانيين الجامعيين نسبة لعدم قدرتهم على استخدام اداتي الحذف والتبديل بطريقة متقنة.  
**كلمات مفتاحية:** التناغم, الترابط, الحذف, التبديل, الاثر, الترابط النحوي

## INTRODUCTION:

English is now being offered in large amount, not only at the basic school level, but also in many secondary schools and even at universities across the world. Interest in English language learning has increased dramatically in recent years for many reasons. It's the language of modern science and technology, a means of study in some countries and a job requirement. English without acquisition is the most wide spread language in the world. That is why it is taught in Sudan and other Arab countries.

It can be argued that the basic aim of TEFL programs is to improve learner's awareness and performance of English language skills. Awareness and performance of these skills, namely listening, speaking, reading and writing would enable learners to use English for various purposes. Generally, language skills are classified into two main categories. The classification puts listening and reading together as receptive skills, while speaking and writing as productive skills.

Each language has its own patterns to convey the interrelationships between persons and events; these patterns may not be ignored in a language if the readers understand what the writer wants to convey. The topic of cohesion has always appeared as the most useful constituent of discourse analysis that is applied to writing. English and Arabic have different grammar and vocabulary structure, and it is only natural that they pose great difficulties and challenges for a writer to deal with, especially in the field of literature.

Essay writing mainly in a language that is not our mother tongue is one of the difficult tasks that pose challenges even to advanced learners of English. Furthermore, Sudanese students are poor writers when it comes to learning English as a foreign language, Mohdy (2003:70-71). In the same sense, he

clarifies that arranging words, phrases and sentences in the right order to create a unified texts is a considerable problem for the students. Most of our students leave their answer books blank in writing tests, and those who try to write, their texts will be loaded with many mistakes. In short, the learner must know what to write and be able to organize his/her ideas coherently and logically by the use of correct structure, appropriate vocabulary and proper punctuation.

Cohesion is considered as one of the most challenging aspects of writing, as any language has its own unique manners in which it employs cohesive devices in the creation of a cohesive text. Cohesion system was mainly introduced by Halliday and Hasan (1976). They argued that cohesion has a semantic concept, which refers to relations of meaning that exist within the text and define it as a text. Halliday (1989) confirms that cohesion occurs where the interpretation of some elements in discourse is dependent on that of another. Cohesive devices or 'cohesive ties' might be grammatical or lexical and consist of words, phrases or clauses that link the discourse items together. More precisely, the cohesive relations are made by the ways two or more items are semantically jointed to each other in a text. Based on Morris & Hirst (1991), cohesion is the textual quality that makes the text sentences hang together.

After the publication of Halliday & Hasan's (1976) work about cohesion concept, many scholars attempted to explain different aspects of this feature in speech, among which are Dooley & Levinsohn's (2001) view which is taken primarily from Halliday & Hasan (1976) and Brown & Yule's (1983) framework. Halliday & Hasan (1976) make a detailed classification of the cohesive devices in English. These authors distinguish between

grammatical and lexical cohesion. According to them, grammatical cohesion embraces four different devices. These devices are: reference, substitution, ellipsis and conjunction.

The present study will focus on ellipsis and substitution as grammatical cohesive devices with regard to the concept cohesion.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Ellipsis:

Cohesive relation of ellipsis is a relation within the text and in almost every case, what is left unsaid is present in the text. In other words, if something is ellipsis, then there is a presupposition in a sentence that something must be understood or reconstructed.

In spoken and written English, ellipsis and substitution are used as linguistic mechanisms which help specific linguistic structures to be expressed more economically, at the same time maintaining their clarity and comprehensiveness. These mechanisms include mainly those linguistic structures that enable the avoidance of repetition, either by choosing alternative (usually shorter) words, phrases or by complete omission of words, phrases or clauses. These two cohesive relations will be defined and their overlapping will be limited here, since they are closely related (Vera M. (2010: 407).

The relation between substitution and ellipsis is very close because it is merely that ellipsis is "substitution" by zero. What is essential in ellipsis is that some elements are omitted from the surface text, but they are still understood. Thus, omission of these elements can be recovered by referring to an element in the preceding text. (Harmer 2004: 24) defines it: "(...) words are deliberately left out of a sentence when the meaning is still clear". On considering the following example: "*penny*

*was introduced to a famous author, but even before, she had recognized him"* It appeared that the structure of the second clause indicates that there is something left out" introduced to a famous author ", the omission of this feature kept the meaning still clear and there is no need of repetition. Carter et al (2000: 182), state that " ellipsis occurs in writing where usually functions textually to avoid repetition where structures would otherwise be redundant". Starkey (2004) points out that on some occasions; ellipsis is used instead of substitution for the sake of conciseness.

#### For example:

*e.g.1- Everyone who (can) donate time to a charity should do so.*

*e.g.2- Everyone who can donate time to a charity should (0).*

In the first example, where substitution was used, the sentence was somehow wordy in comparison to the other sentence (e.g.2) which seems quite concise as Starkey explains.

According to Halliday and Hasan (1976: 142), ellipsis can be categorized into three categories, as illustrated below.

#### 2.1.1 Nominal ellipsis:

Nominal ellipsis means ellipsis within the nominal group, where the omission of nominal group is served a common noun, proper noun or pronoun.

e.g. "My kids practice an awful lot of sport. Both (0) are incredibly energetic". In this example, the omission concerned with "my kids".

#### 2.1.2 Verbal ellipsis:

Refers to ellipsis within the verbal group, where the elliptical verb depends on a preceding verbal group.

E.g. A: have you been working?

B: yes, I have (0).

Here, the omission of the verbal group depends on what is said before and it is concerned with "been working"

### 2.1.3 Clausal ellipsis:

Clausal ellipsis functions as verbal ellipsis, where the omission refers to a clause.

E.g. A: why did you only set three places?  
Paul is staying for dinner, isn't he?

B: Is he? He didn't tell him (0).

In this example the omission falls on the "Paul is staying for dinner".

### 2.2 Substitution:

This is the replacement of one item by another. It is a relation in the wording rather than in the meaning. This implies that as a general rule, the substitute item has some structural functions as that for which it substitutes.

Substitution occurs anaphorically in a text when a feature replaces a previous word, phrase or clause, such as in the example: "my axe is too blunt. Do you have a sharper one?", where 'one' replaces 'axe'. Halliday and Hasan (1976: 89) expound that substitution holds a text together through avoiding repetition and creating cohesive grammatical relations, not in the meaning but in the wording, between words, clause and phrase.

It is important to mention that substitution and reference are different in what and where they operate, thus substitution is concerned with relations related with wording. Whereas reference is concerned with relations related with meaning. Substitution is away to avoid repetition in the text itself; however, reference needs to retrieve its meaning from the situational textual occurrence.

Halliday and Hassan (1976: 89), confirm:

*In terms of the linguistic system, reference*

*is a relation on the semantic level, whereas*

*Substitution is a relation on the lexicogrammatical*

*Level, the level of grammar and vocabulary or linguistic form.*

Kennedy (2003) points out there are three types of substitution. These are: nominal, verbal and clausal substitution. Let us analyze and support this statement with the following classification and explanations.

#### 2.2.1 Nominal substitution:

Nominal substitution happens where the noun or a nominal group can be replaced by a noun.

"One"/ "ones" always operate as a head of nominal group.

#### Example:

"There are some new tennis balls in the bat. These ones have lost their bounce". In this example, "tennis balls" is replaced by the item "ones".

#### 2.2.2 Verbal substitution:

Verbal substitution occurs where the verb or a verbal group can be replaced by another verb which is "do". This functions as a head of verbal group, and it is usually placed at the end of the group.

#### Example:

A: Annie says you drink too much.

B: So do you?

Here, "do" substitutes "drink too much".

#### 2.2.3 clausal substitutions:

Clausal substitution takes place where a clause can be usually substituted by "so" or "not".

#### Example:

A: It is going to rain.

B: I think so.

In this example, the clause "going to rain" is substituted by "so".

### 3.1 Methodology

The method selected to be applied in this research is a descriptive analytic one. It includes surveys and facts finding which requires describing the state of the students in using cohesive devices as it exists at present. This method depends on the collection of data and information which were analyzed and interpreted so as to arrive at acceptable solutions.

The researcher uses this method to define, describe and recognize the problems facing the students in using ellipsis and substitution (as grammatical cohesive devices) appropriately at university level. Validity and reliability were shown and confirmed.

The subjects of the study consist of (100) students from Alzaeim Alazhari University, Sudan University of Science and Technology and Omdurman Islamic University. The researcher used one tool to conduct this study. Tests were given to the students in order to assess their performance and describe the current state of the students in the process of learning writing.

No doubt, the researcher could not contact everyone in the population. So, he solved this problem by choosing a small and manageable number of people (sampling). Therefore, he used simple random sample from the population of the students which represented the entire population.

### 3.2 Research Hypotheses:

In order to answer the research questions, the researcher proposes the following hypotheses:

5- Sudanese EFL university students have many problems in writing, most notably in using ellipsis and substitution.

6- Sudanese EFL university students do not use ellipsis and substitution appropriately.

7- There is an apparent weakness in Sudanese University students' written work due to their inability to apply ellipsis and substitution adequately.

8- Sudanese EFL University students differ to a large degree in achieving ellipsis and substitution in their texts.

### 3.3 Validity and Reliability of the Test:

The test is believed to have content validity as it aims at assessing the students' achievement in using ellipsis and substitution adequately and appropriately when it comes to writing.

The tasks required in the test were comparable to those covered in the learners' course books and practiced in class. In addition, the test instructions were written clearly in English, and the examinee's task required was defined. Furthermore, the test was validated by a group of experts who suggested some valuable remarks about the test and the researcher responded to that. For the test of reliability, the researcher used the test – retest method: the test – retest method of estimating a test's reliability involves administering the test to the same group of learners or matched learners at least twice. Then the first set of scores is correlated with the second set of scores. The results were as follows:

-The test participants were 100 students.

-The test items were 2.

- The internal consistency in the pre-test was 65 %.

-The internal consistency in the post- test was 68 %.

This indicates that there is a consistency in the test.



#### 4- Analysis and discussion of the results obtained by the means of test:

##### 4.1 Nominal Ellipsis:

Users	Number of Users	Percentage
Correct users	17	17%
Incorrect users	83	83%
Total	100	100%

Table 4.19 Correct versus incorrect use of nominal ellipsis.

Based on the results illustrated in the above table, only 17% from the entire population of the students who took part in this study know how to use nominal ellipsis correctly, whereas, 83% of them do not use it correctly. This could be partially attributed to the lack of proper teaching of nominal ellipsis and getting enough practice in the

form of classroom exercises. As nominal ellipsis is concerned with the omission of a noun or nominal group within the same text, students are not aware of such technique of writing as it poses a great difficulty for them, particularly when dealing with academic writing.

##### 4.2 Verbal Ellipsis:

Users	Number of Users	Percentage
Correct users	13	13%
Incorrect users	87	87%
Total	100	100%

Table 4.20 Correct versus incorrect use of verbal ellipsis.

The above table shows that only a small minority of the students which represents (13%) use verbal ellipsis correctly as they are well trained by their teachers, while, the large majority of the students which represents (87%) use it in an inappropriate

way that changes the intended message or the ideas conveyed by the texts. That is to say learners lack the ability to omit the unnecessary words with concentration on the meaning delivered by the text.

##### 4.3 Clausal Ellipsis:

Users	Number of Users	Percentage
Correct users	27	27%
Incorrect users	73	73%
Total	100	100%

Table 4.21 Correct versus incorrect use of clausal ellipsis.

As clausal ellipsis refers to the omission of a clause within the same text for the sake of conciseness, it is obvious that only 27% from the entire population of the students who participated in this study use clausal ellipsis appropriately and accurately, while, 73% of them do not use it correctly or they

4.4 Nominal Substitution:

Users	Number of Users	Percentage
Correct users	30	30%
Incorrect users	70	70%
Total	100	100%

Table 4.22 Correct versus incorrect use of nominal substitutions

As shown in the above table, only a small minority of the students which represents 30% know how to use nominal substitution appropriately in their writing, whereas, the large majority of them (approximately 70%) use it in an inappropriate way. That is to say most of the students misuse nominal substitution as a result of not taking it into consideration while writing their own texts outside the classroom as well as inside.

4.5 Verbal Substitution:

Users	Number of Users	Percentage
Correct users	27	27%
Incorrect users	73	73%
Total	100	100%

Table 4.23 Correct versus incorrect use of verbal substitutions

The above table shows that the students did not use a remarkable number of verbal substitutions among other cohesive devices to achieve cohesion. The correctly used number of verbal substitution (27%) were far less than the incorrectly used ones (73%). This finding leads us to the process

4.6 Clausal Substitution:

Users	Number of Users	Percentage
Correct users	23	23%
Incorrect users	77	77%
Total	100	100%

misuse it to the extent that makes the meaning unclear and creates new texts which convey different ideas to the readers. This is due to the lack of having enough practice and being aware of clausal ellipsis when dealing with writing courses.

of making sweeping generalizations about the difficulty of using cohesive ties in EFL writing. That is to say most of the students do have problems in using verbal substitution appropriately as a result of not being aware of and having background knowledge about it.



Table 4.24 Correct versus incorrect use of clausal substitutions

According to the results displayed in the above table, only 23% from the entire population of the students who took part in this study use clausal substitution accurately, whereas, 77% of them either misuse it or do not use it at all. So, this is a statistically significant result and leads us to the point that most of the students are not familiar with such type of substitution in the same way that they are familiar with others. And this may happen as a result of not giving clausal substitution the same weight as others when teaching and practicing cohesive ties.

#### 4.7 General Discussion:

The aim of the current study is to disclose the extent to which Sudanese EFL university learners could employ ellipsis and substitution in writing essays, the frequency of these devices in the texts, and the problems they encountered in using them. The overall conclusion that can be drawn is that only few learners succeeded in adopting the two types of grammatical cohesion devices introduced by Halliday and Hasan (1976), despite their significantly different frequencies in the research corpus. Out of the whole number of correctly used cohesive devices that were employed in the research corpus, the learners relied heavily on conjunctions, followed by referential ones, whereas, ellipsis and substitution devices appeared third and fourth respectively. The findings are in line with some national and international researches; particularly, Meisuo's (2000), Azzouz's (2009) and Manahil (2010) studies with regard to using the types of conjunctions the most in expository essays, but they are different from Abadiano's (1995) which shows that reference was the most predominant. Nevertheless, corresponding to Halliday and Hasan's (1976) views, the results in all of the five studies illustrate that ellipsis and substitution were hardly utilized. Also, it is noteworthy that the learners used some sub-categories of ellipsis and substitution much more than others, and within each sub-category they utilized

particular devices while ignoring others. This can be attributed to many factors. Firstly, they used the commonest words in English more frequently. Secondly, they are still inexperienced writers despite the fact that they had many writing courses throughout their study. Thirdly, the lack of continuous practice, since the skill of writing is developmental.

Regarding the problems that faced the learners in using ellipsis and substitution, it is clear that most of them used these devices inappropriately, inadequately and excessively. These problems can be attributed to some factors, such as intra-lingual interference, the learners' incompetency in adopting some devices and they may have been taught by inexperienced teachers with limited discourse knowledge and experience in teaching cohesion and coherence. Moreover, the analysis of the cohesive devices used in these texts understudy revealed that a discourse or text can only be meaningful if various segments are brought together to form a unified whole. Therefore, for a text to be cohesive, it must be held together by some linguistic devices.

#### 5.1 Results:

Based on the results of the data analysis, the study revealed the following results:

As relates to the first hypothesis, which states, Sudanese EFL university learners have many problems in writing, most notably in using ellipsis and substitution. The results showed that this hypothesis is true according to the scores of the students in the research corpus. So, the first hypothesis was confirmed and accepted.

The second hypothesis states, Sudanese EFL university learners do not use ellipsis and substitution appropriately. According to the results obtained from the students' written test, their use of these two cohesive devices was not appropriate and accurate. Moreover, the percentage of the frequency of the categories of ellipsis and substitution varied greatly from one student to another. Thus, the second hypothesis was approved.



As for the third hypothesis, which says, there is an apparent weakness in Sudanese university students' written work due to their inability to apply ellipsis and substitution adequately. The results revealed that this hypothesis is true according to the scores of the students in the written test. Therefore, the third hypothesis was confirmed.

The fourth hypothesis states that, Sudanese EFL university students differ to a large degree in achieving ellipsis and substitution in their texts. The results obtained from the analysis of the written work of the students of these three different universities indicated that most of the students encounter the same problems. Thus, the fourth hypothesis was partially rejected.

Accordingly, the main findings of this study are as follows:

1-Sudanese EFL university learners have many problems in using ellipsis and substitution when it comes to academic writing.

2-Sudanese EFL university learners do not use ellipsis and substitution appropriately.

3-There is an apparent weakness in Sudanese university students' written work due to their inability to apply ellipsis and substitution adequately.

4-There are not any significant differences in the application of ellipsis and substitution by Sudanese EFL learners. They all encounter the same problems.

To sum up, the analysis of the cohesive devices used in the texts understudy revealed that a discourse or text can only be meaningful if various segments are brought together to form a unified whole. Therefore, for a text to be cohesive, it must be held together by some linguistic devices. Furthermore, the learners lack the competence in producing linguistically well-formed written material to create

meaningful texts that convey the information appropriately and accurately as well as coherently. These problems may happen due to the linguistic knowledge of English they have been offered so far, or they may have been taught by inexperienced teachers with limited discourse knowledge and experience in teaching cohesion and coherence.

#### **5.2 Recommendations:**

Based on the findings and conclusions illustrated above, the current study provides some recommendations for students and EFL teachers to enhance learners' production of cohesive extended texts, and overcome the problems encountered by them in using ellipsis and substitution appropriately to generate different text types. They are as follows:

10. Sudanese EFL university students should be given enough exercises on ellipsis and substitution.

11. There should be a writing club in every Sudanese university, in which the students can write a variety of essays and receive feedback from their teachers on time.

12. Teachers should motivate and encourage their students to write short stories of their own interest to improve their use of ellipsis and substitution gradually.

13. Students' written work should be revised and evaluated continuously.

14. A great emphasis should be given to ellipsis and substitution when teaching writing in general and cohesion in particular.

15. English language syllabus designers should give a considerable attention to ellipsis and substitution when designing writing courses.

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