

# Ellipsis in EFL Classroom Dialogue: An Expanded system

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**Abstract:** This paper presents an analysis of ellipsis choices occurring in authentic EFL classroom dialogue. Unlike the results of previous studies, it is found that an elliptical clause occurs in both a responding and an initiating move, thus a cohesive tie both in an adjacency pair and among several successive exchanges that may extend over a considerable span of text; and as such, ellipsis constitutes an important resource for textualizing classroom dialogue. The paper gives a detailed description of the different types of elliptical clauses as identified in the analysis and proposes an ellipsis system of EFL classroom dialogue based on the analysis, with a view to modelling the potential of ellipsis as it is being expanded in the actual use of language in genuine dialogues.

**Key words:** ellipsis; cohesive tie; system; EFL classroom dialogue

## 1. Introduction

Ellipsis is a linguistic phenomenon often found in dialogue. It is a construction in which an element is missing but recoverable or inferable from the preceding text. In fact, ellipsis has to do with both the grammar of a clause and the coherence of a text; hence it has been studied from the perspective of both general linguistics (Halliday & Hasan 1976; Merchant 2001) and psycholinguistics (Shapiro & Hestvik 1995; Shapiro et al 2003) or linguistic philosophy (Hardt 1999; Frazier & Clifton 2006). The studies are important as they not only enhance our knowledge about the nature of ellipsis and the syntax-semantics interface, but also inform discourse analysis, literacy teaching, and software applications in human-machine interaction or in automatic translation between human languages. Meanwhile, since language evolves in its use, it is equally important to model the potential of ellipsis as it is being stretched and expanded in the process of language use in genuine dialogues.

In former studies of ellipsis in the context of dialogue, ellipsis is described as largely limited to the immediately preceding clause (Halliday & Hasan 1976; Halliday 1994) and hence a resource for joining a response to an initiation (Martin 1992; Halliday 2004). However, in the present study of ellipsis in EFL classroom dialogue, it is found that ellipsis occurs in both responding and initiating moves and may reach back a long way in the text; thus it serves to tie up both an adjacency pair and a much larger text span. This paper will present 1) the method of our study, 2) the various types of ellipsis as identified in the study, 3) an expanded ellipsis system thus set up; demonstrating that the potential of ellipsis has been

expanded in the actual use of language in EFL classroom dialogue.

## 2. Method of study

Our study of ellipsis is based on an actual analysis of authentic EFL classroom dialogue. The data used are texts transcribed from 10 audio-recorded EFL classes taught by 10 different teachers from 8 well-known universities in Beijing, each lasting 45 or 50 minutes (i.e. 1 class hour). Given the level of average EFL teachers in China (see Yang 2003; Zhou 2005), the teachers were chosen on account of 1) their outstanding records in Teaching Evaluations and 2) their good reputation as a teacher among students and colleagues alike. It was assumed that ‘good teachers’ would be more likely to promise a fruitful analysis of their classes. Still, differences among the 10 teachers came out quite strongly in terms of academic title, age, gender, type of university affiliated to, and type of course being taught. See Table 1 for details.

Table 1: Teacher differences involved in the data

|                       |                                |               |                          |
|-----------------------|--------------------------------|---------------|--------------------------|
| <b>academic title</b> | lecturers: 3                   | professors: 2 | associate professors: 5  |
| <b>age</b>            | 20-30: 2                       | 30-40: 3      | 40-50: 3 over 50: 2      |
| <b>gender</b>         | male: 3                        | female: 7     |                          |
| <b>affiliation</b>    | general university: 2          |               | normal university: 2     |
|                       | foreign language university: 2 |               | special college: 4       |
| <b>course type</b>    | Intensive Reading: 5           |               | Comprehensive English: 2 |
|                       | Extensive Reading: 2           |               | Oral Interpretation: 1   |

The 10 texts were analyzed by reference to the system of clausal ellipsis as developed by Halliday & Hasan (1976) and Halliday (1994, 2004), which is particularly relevant in the context of dialogue, as summarized in Table 2 below. According to Halliday, ellipsis is a device of anaphoric cohesion that sets up a relationship between two clauses – by giving them the same grammatical structure, but leaving out certain elements in the second clause so as to give prominence to those present. So, those elements absent from the second clause can be viewed as ‘continuous’ in terms of information flow, and those present as ‘contrastive’ (Halliday 2004: 580). To supply the missing elements and to insert them in place, the addressee must go back to the preceding text to look for a clause in the same grammatical structure. This is how ellipsis serves as a cohesive tie and why it is considered as ‘a relationship in wording rather than directly in the meaning’ (Halliday 1994: 316).

Table 2: A summary of Halliday’s system of clausal ellipsis

| mood | speech function        |   | absent /<br>continuous | present /<br>contrastive                              | span of<br>cohesive tie                                   |
|------|------------------------|---|------------------------|---|---|
| decl | (direct)<br>response   | answer to yes/no Q  | clause                 | reporting clause + <i>so/not</i>                      | adjacency<br>pair:<br>question<br>-answer                 |
|      |                        |   |                        | modal adjunct + <i>so/not</i>                         |   |
|      |                        |   |                        | polarity/modal Adjunct                                |   |
|      |                        |   |                        | ( <i>not</i> +) qualifier                             |   |
|      |                        |   | Residue                | polarity/modal Adjunct + Mood                         |   |
|      |                        | answer to WH-Q  | clause                 | WH- responsive element                                |   |
|      |                        |   | Residue                | Mood  |   |
|      |                        |   | Mood                   | Residue   |   |
|      | (indirect)<br>response | commentary to Q   | clause                 | reporting clause (+WH- element)                       |   |
|      |                        | supplementary to Q  | clause                 | coordinated /conditional clause                       |   |
| int  | (indirect)<br>response | disclaimer to Q   | clause                 | WH- element   |   |
|      |                        |   | Residue                | Mood  |   |
| decl | rejoinder              | assent/contradiction<br>to statement                        | Residue                | <i>so/nor</i> + Mood                                  | adjacency<br>pair:<br>statement<br>/command<br>-rejoinder |
|      |                        |   |                        | (polarity Adjunct+) Mood                              |   |
|      |                        | consent/refusal<br>to command                               | Residue                | (polarity Adjunct+) Mood                              |   |
| int  | rejoinder              | sequel to statement:<br>clarification request               | clause                 | WH- element + <i>so/not</i>                           |   |
|      |                        | sequel to statement<br>/command:<br>confirmation<br>request | clause                 | new/corresponding WH- element                         |   |
|      |                        |   |                        | existing/corresponding WH- ele                        |   |
|      |                        |   |                        | (coordinator+) existing/<br>corresponding WH- element |   |
|      |                        |   | Residue                | Mood  |   |

As indicated by this system, elliptical clauses appear only in responding moves – either as response to a question or as rejoinder to a statement/command – although there is a variety of response types and their realizational forms. In addition, only two types of mood occur in the responses: declarative and interrogative. While the declarative mood occurs in a response to a question (direct or indirect), or in a rejoinder to a statement/command; the interrogative mood occurs, not in a question, but in a disclaimer to a question, or in a request for clarification or confirmation following a statement or a command. In any case, the span of the cohesive tie thus set up is rather limited, for it never extends beyond an adjacency pair.

### 3. Results and descriptions

As a result of applying Halliday's system of clausal ellipsis to the analysis of ellipsis choices in the 10 texts, it is found that many options in the system seldom show up, including the various types of indirect responses to a question and rejoinder to a statement or a command. Meanwhile, quite a number of ellipsis choices found prominent in EFL classroom dialogue are simply unaccountable by reference to the system. Actually, it is found that elliptical clauses are used in initiating as well as responding moves, and in three

types of mood: declarative, interrogative and imperative. While the declarative mood occurs in elliptical clauses produced mainly by the students as a response to a teacher's question, the interrogative and imperative occur in elliptical clauses produced mainly by the teachers as an initiation – including question, command and invitation. Thus the span of the cohesive tie often extends over a much larger text span than two adjacent moves. The following is a detailed description of the different types of elliptical clauses as identified in the analysis and classified according to their speech functions in the on-going EFL classroom dialogue.

### 3.1 Elliptical clause as answer

Elliptical clauses functioning as a response to a question, as described by Halliday, can also be found in the data. But here they function as a direct answer rather than a commentary or a supplementary response; and their realizational forms are fairly limited in comparison with the range of forms (including clausal substitution) as described in Table 2.

One realizational form identified in the data is a declarative clause in which the whole clause is omitted, while the only element present is a mood Adjunct of polarity (*yes* or *no*), which either affirms or negates the proposition set out in the preceding *yes/no* question. For example (bold type indicates a contrastive/present element while underlining indicates a continuous/absent element):

#### *Example 1 [from Text 5]*

1-T/4: xxx, **did** your parents give you any advice?

2-S: **Yes.**

3-T: Yes, what is it like?

#### *Example 2 [from Text 7]*

4-T: OK, so 'furious' – this is the word I'd like you to pay attention to – **can** we say 'I feel furious', 'I feel furious'?

5-S(n): **No.**

Another form is a declarative clause in which all is omitted but the element in response to the WH- element in the preceding question (by not a *why* or *how* question). For example:

#### *Example 3: [from Text 4]*

9-T/4: So, then, "it is devoid of all theme and principle except appetite and racial domination", "it is devoid of..." and here, 'devoid', **what** does it mean, 'devoid'?

10-S/a: **'without'**.

11-S/b: **'absent'**.

#### *Example 4: [from Text 8]*

13-T/3: er, do you still remember, **who** led the war, I mean, in the south, in the southern states?

14-S: **Lee.**

Both forms of the elliptical clause as answer require that the addressee go back to the preceding clause in the initiating move to retrieve the missing elements, hence linking the two moves into an adjacency pair.

### 3.2 Elliptical clause as question

In Halliday's system of clausal ellipsis, the interrogative mood does not occur in a question that serves to initiate an exchange; but it does here in the data, for example:

*Example 5: [from Text 1]*

105-T/2: All right, now, I'd like you to tell me, what people did in this disaster, er, **what did they do** – they actually did many things?

105-T/3: Yes, xxx.

106-S: er, she cried to her husband.

107-T/1: She cried to her husband, (laugh) yes.

107-T/2: **And what else?**

107-T/3: xxx.

108-S: Then they go to the job.

109-T/1: uh-huh, right, the husband went to see his job, yes.

In this example, the interrogative mood first occurs in a complete clause in 105-T/2 and then in an elliptical clause in 107-T/2. The latter may appear like what Halliday considers as a rejoinder to a statement, especially a request for confirmation of an existing element in the preceding statement by expanding that element through coordination (e.g. – *John is coming to dinner. – And who else?*). But the elliptical clause in 107-T/2 does not belong to this category. For one thing, a confirmation request comes immediately after a statement produced by a different speaker, but the statement in 107-T/1 is produced by the same speaker, i.e. the teacher herself, as a feedback to the student's answer in 106-S. For another, a confirmation request – if elliptical – presupposes the immediately preceding statement; but the elliptical clause in 107-T/2 presupposes, instead, the non-elliptical question that is several moves apart and again produced by the same speaker. In other words, it does not mean *what else did she do* but *what else did they do*. What is more, both the student's answer in 108-S and the teacher's feedback in 109-T/1 prove that the student is not confirming *what else she did* but answering the question *what else did they do*.

Therefore, this kind of elliptical clause is considered not as a confirmation request but as a question, or perhaps a rotation question since it can be repeated several times (see examples below). By leaving out everything in the non-elliptical question but one element, the elliptical clause serves to demand more information about that element – and from more students. As for the element left in the elliptical clause, apart from a WH- element (as in

Example 5), there can also be found a circumstantial Adjunct, the Subject, or the Complement (see respectively Examples 6, 7 and 8; the nine dots indicate intermediate turns omitted to save space):

*Example 6: [from Text 6]*

15-T/2: OK, can anyone tell me, say, at the time A.D. 1, how many people there were in the world – say, what's the population in A.D. 1, remember?

.....

17-T/2: But **by the time 1650**?

.....

21-T/2: And **by 1930, by 1930**?

*Example 7: [from Text 9]*

25-T/4: Ok, 'text', what's a '**text**'?

.....

27-T/2: And '**video**'?

*Example 8: [from Text 1]*

19-T/2: All right, have you ever experienced **any disaster in your life**?

.....

52-T: OK, **any other disasters**?

.....

64-T/2: OK, flood, earthquake, **anything else**?

In order to retrieve the elements absent from the elliptical question, the addressee needs to reach back a number of moves or turns for the non-elliptical question (note that in Example 8 the two elliptical questions are respectively 33 and 46 turns apart from the non-elliptical one). The cohesive tie thus set up extends far beyond a question-answer pair: it serves to link two or more questions and hence several successive exchanges.

### 3.3 Elliptical clause as command

Another type of elliptical clause found in the teachers' utterances that initiate an exchange is in the imperative rather than interrogative mood, used to demand action rather than information, hence taken as command. An elliptical command tends to occur repeatedly, and usually occurs in an exercise session in an EFL class. For example:

*Example 9: [from Text 1]*

167-T/3: Now, **let's do the exercises**.

167-T/4: Now, **the first one**, xxx, please.

.....

169-T/3: All right, **Number 2**.

*Example 10: [from Text 10]*

16-T/2: Now, **let's read the statements and then decide it's true or false.**

16-T/3: First **you read the statement and then you tell them true or false.**

16-T/4: **xxx, Number 1,** please

17-S: I think it's true

18-T/2: And **Number 2, xxx, would you** please?

.....

53-T/4: Now, **the 8th statement, xxx,** please.

.....

61-T/6: And **the last one, Effie, would you** please?

As shown in the examples, an exercise session usually begins with one or two moves realized by a complete imperative clause, which orientates the class (*let's...*) towards the coming exercise or gives the students directions (*you...*). Then there is a series of commands, each addressing a different student, but all being realized by an elliptical imperative clause. The element absent from the elliptical clause is the Predicator, which specifies the action to be carried out and must be retrieved from the initial non-elliptical clause. The elements present include 1) the Complement (*the first one, number 1, number 2, the eighth statement, the last one*), which specifies the object of the action; 2) a vocative<sup>1</sup>, which addresses the person responsible for carrying out the action; 3) the Mood element (*would you*), as found in the metaphorical realization of a command (see Halliday 2004: 632), which makes it easier for the addressee to refuse to comply; 4) the interjection *please*, which mitigates the command. These four elements may occur either alone or in various kinds of combinations.

An elliptical clause functioning as command presupposes the action being demanded while specifying the object as well as the subject of the action. In order to find out what action is being demanded, the addressee must go back to the initial non-elliptical imperative clause for the Predicator, thus a cohesive tie between the two imperative clauses. No matter how many elliptical commands are given successively, each of them is equally linked – through ellipsis – with the initial non-elliptical command; consequently, a large number of successive exchanges are linked into a coherent exercise session. And the cohesive ties set up in this way, again, extend beyond an adjacency pair, over a much larger text span.

### 3.4 Elliptical clause as invitation

In the data, there is another type of elliptical clause in the interrogative mood, but it does not function the same way as a question. It is referred to as 'invitation'. See an example:

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<sup>1</sup> As found in the data, a vocative may occur either within an elliptical clause, or more than 6 seconds after a question, a command, or an invitation. In the latter case, it is taken as a distinct move selecting the next speaker (see Example 5).

Example 11: [from Text 5]

47-T/2: Now, was it so important – why was it the biggest problem, **have you got any idea?**

47-T/3: Anyone?

[more than 6 seconds, no response]

47-T/4: xxx, **have you got any idea?**

48-S: No.

In this example, 47-T/4 is actually an elliptical clause in which the question *why was it the biggest problem* is presupposed. The clause *have you got any idea* is not a proposition in its own right, but part of the metaphorical realization of a proposition. In the form of a projecting clause, it typically expresses a logical relationship between two clauses within a clause complex. But in the particular form of [*I/you* + present tense], this logical resource is made to do an interpersonal service, i.e. to make explicit the subjective orientation of a proposition, thus called ‘interpersonal projection’ (Halliday 2004: 626). So, in the elliptical clause in 47-T/4, the only element present is the interpersonal projection while the entire question is absent; consequently, the subjective orientation of the question is given unusual prominence. Clearly, this type of elliptical clause is used, not to raise a question, but to orientate a question raised earlier explicitly towards the addressee, inviting the addressee to give an answer. For this reason, it is viewed as an invitation rather than a question.

As found in the data, elliptical clauses functioning as an invitation occur in two other variant forms. First, everything else in the projecting clause can also be omitted except the Participant, i.e. the Sensor or Sayer, such as *Anyone?* in 47-T/3 in Example 11, which means *anyone of you has got any idea (why it was the biggest problem)*, with the indefinite pronoun *anyone* added so as to extend the invitation to every student in class. Second, the only element present in the projecting clause is the mental or verbal process (*think, suggest, say*) which, however, is always nominalized (*idea, suggestion, version*; 47-T/4 is also a case in point) to function as the ‘Range’ of the process (see Halliday 1994: 146). For example:

Example 12: [from Text 7]

44-S/a: What will you do if you get food poisoning?

45-S/b: I will go to hospital [hos'pitl]

46-T: hospital ['hospitl]

47-S/b: hospital ['hospitl]

47-T/1: hospital ['hospitl], yes, very good, ‘I’ll go to hospital’.

48-T/2: **Any other suggestions?**

49-S: I’ll dial 120.

50-T/1: (laugh) That’s not in China! (laugh) In Istanbul!

In Example 12, the students are drilling on the conditional clause in pairs. The teacher’s



move in 48-T/2 is an elliptical clause that presupposes the non-elliptical question in 44-S/a, meaning *do you have any other suggestions (what one should do when one gets food poisoning)*. Thus the elliptical clause in 48-T/2, just as that in 47-T/3 and 47-T/4 in Example 11, is used to invite the students to answer a question raised earlier.

However, it should be pointed out that the above three forms of an elliptical clause are not used to invite an answer to a question only: the speech function of the clause may vary slightly according to the type of move in which everything absent can be retrieved. If it can be retrieved from a preceding question, such as in Examples 11 and 12, the elliptical clause functions as an invitation to answer a question. If it has to be retrieved from a preceding command, then it functions as an invitation to perform an action, for example:

*Example 13: [from Text 3]*

3-T/2: The first sentence: 全国每分钟生产 1,267 吨煤.

4-Sn: [confusion for more than 12 seconds]

5-T: Come on, **any idea**?

Here 3-T/2 is an elliptical command that demands the action of translating a sentence from Chinese into English. It is presupposed by 5-T, an elliptical clause meaning *do you have any idea (how to translate the first sentence)* and hence functioning as an invitation to perform an action. In any case, an elliptical clause functioning as invitation serves to link either a question with an invitation to answer, or a command with an invitation to comply, thus tying up successive exchanges centered on the same question or the same item in an exercise. Clearly, the cohesive ties being set up here once more extend beyond an adjacency pair.

#### **4. An expanded ellipsis system**

Based on the results of the analysis, an ellipsis system of EFL classroom dialogue has been established, as presented in Table 3 (CR = comparative reference). In comparison with Halliday's system of clausal ellipsis, this system has a wide variety of initiation rather than response types, including question, command and invitation. In other words, this system is much expanded in the speech functions of the elliptical clauses, and consequently in the span of the cohesive ties as set up through ellipsis – which ranges from one adjacency pair to several successive exchanges that may extend over a considerable stretch of dialogue.

Table 3: An expanded ellipsis system

| mood                     | speech function                               | absent / continuous           | present / contrastive                                  | span of cohesive tie   |
|--------------------------|---|-------------------------------|--|--|
| declarative              | answer to yes/no question                     | clause                        | polarity Adjunct                                       | adjacency pair: question-answer                                |
|                          | answer to WH- question                        | clause                        | WH- responsive element                                 |  |
| interrogative            | question                                      | clause<br>remainder of clause | (coordinator +) WH- element + CR item                  | successive exchanges: question-question                        |
|                          |   |                               | (coordinator +) Adjunct                                |  |
|                          |   |                               | (coordinator +) Subject                                |  |
|                          |   |                               | Complement + CR item                                   |  |
| imperative               | command                                       | Predicator                    | vocative; Complement; Mood; interjection <i>please</i> | successive exchanges: command-command                          |
| interrogative [metaphor] | invitation to answer question /perform action | clause                        | projecting clause                                      | successive exchanges: question-invitation / command-invitation |
|                          |   |                               | projecting Participant                                 |  |
|                          |   |                               | nominalized projecting process                         |  |

#### 4. Concluding remarks

In sum, while ellipsis in dialogue is generally described as a resource applied in question-answer or statement/command-rejoinder sequences, the elliptical clauses found in our data turn out to occur in an initiation as well as a response, hence a much larger span of the cohesive tie. This demonstrates that the potential of ellipsis can be stretched and expanded to meet the needs of language users in real-life dialogues.

EFL classroom dialogue is in fact a dialogue between one teacher and multiple students, with the teacher usually being the initiator and students being the responders. When elliptical clauses occur in teachers' utterances as question, command and invitation; they serve well to get more students to participate in class discussions, to assign different exercise items to different students, and to encourage the students to answer a question or to complete a task. In other words, with its potential being expanded, ellipsis has become an important resource for textualizing dialogue in EFL classrooms.

Of course, a number of issues rising out of the present study should also be pointed out. First, in an elliptical clause functioning as question or command, a comparative reference item (*else*, *other*) can also be found, which sets up a relation of contrast and seems to work jointly with ellipsis in marking the contrastive element. This is an issue worth further study. Second, it is still unknown whether the various types of ellipsis identified here are features of English in general, or a variety of World Englishes (Kachru 2006), i.e. China English (Hu

2008), or the variety of English in EFL classrooms. These are questions that deserve further investigation.

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