

## Tacit Misunderstandings: Problems of Ellipsis for Beginning and Intermediate ESL Learners

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### Abstract

It is hard to talk about words that are not there. For this reason, ellipsis has been given little attention in grammar texts, let alone addressed as a skill required for competent listening and reading comprehension. I call the wide variety of omitted words *tacits*, since native speakers tacitly understand what is missing and non-native speakers generally do not. Missing words often lead learners into linguistic wrong-turns and dead-ends, which can lead to comprehension confusion, when nouns follow nouns, auxiliaries and modals are dropped, verbs are omitted, conjunctions removed and interjections expanded into incomplete phrases. In most cases, the words unspoken have an antecedent referent, which causes problems for beginner listeners and word-encoding readers.

The first part of this paper is a discussion of the variety of different grammatical and linguistic structures in which words are deleted, substituted and omitted —totally almost 50 different forms in all. The second part discusses a questionnaire administered to first year freshman English majors at a Japanese university. The third part of the paper is a discussion of how ESL teachers can teach *tacits*.

### Introduction

For native speakers of English, our language is dynamic, fluid and elastic. We have a lifetime of familiarity and know what we can do with it. We can speak it in different registers from formal to slang; we can incorporate our cultural references from prehistoric history to last night's television show; we can play with it in rhyme, pun and double entendre; we can stretch it in poetic metaphors; we can decode its tonal inflections and locutionary acts; we can have confidence in our pragmatic appropriateness; we can discern the affect of interjections; and we tacitly understand when words are left out.

These are all advantages to native speakers of any language. The road to acquiring a second language covers much the same territory as primary language learning, however usually at a later stage of life, more accelerated and without the daily social/cultural/parental reinforcements. L2 learning is more formalistic, rote and repetitive, and as such, more

limited. The requirement of learning basic grammar and vocabulary precedes the need for nuances and niceties of sociolinguistics or pragmatics.

One aspect of language, rarely taught in textbooks yet widely used in discourse, is the condensing of full grammatical sentences. In its more formal linguistic identity, this is sometimes called ellipsis, sometimes deletions, sometimes omissions. Yet there are other forms of truncations and incomplete sentences, which are very much a part of the everyday use of language. These include simple formulae (*Nice day!*), aphorisms (*Long time, no see*), instructions (*Open other end*), headlines (*UN: Rich, Poor Divide Widening*) and simple truncations (*Anything wrong?*).

Native speakers tacitly understand the meaning of these incomplete sentences. They do not need to be told what is missing. Rarely do they need to ask for clarification of missing subjects, predicates, objects, infinitives, prepositions, relative conjunctions, pronoun referents, pro-verbs, etc. There is a tacit understanding of the antecedent referents, either preceding the sentence or within the head sentence. There is enough familiarity of the base sentence to allow the native speaker to drop words that non-native speakers often need in order to complete their understanding.

Because these dropped words are tacitly understood by native speakers and because they go beyond the formal structure of ellipsis or deletion, I would like to call the total group of omitted words *tacits*. For the purpose of this paper then, *tacits* will refer to the whole body of examples, where words are linguistically or grammatically missing.

The prevalence of *tacits* in English can create problems for ESL learners, especially those in Japan. In Japan, like in many other countries, English is taught universally in all secondary schools from 7th–12th grade. However, one problem in learning English in Japan is the obsession with teaching grammar. Japanese students have exposure to very sophisticated grammatical constructions, mastery of which is required for the mandatory English test of all university entrance examinations. Yet despite the Ministry of Education's attempt to put native speakers in the classroom, Japanese learners simply do not have enough chance to hear and speak English. The tendency toward word-by-word translation creates problems for beginner listeners and word-decoding readers in understanding the meaning of sentences where words are omitted. These omissions lead learners into linguistic dead-ends and confusion.

This paper has three sections. The first one demonstrates that the existence of *tacits* is more widespread than usually acknowledged. A taxonomy will be introduced showing the

variety of forms and uses of omitted words. The second section will show that the acquisition of *tacit* understandings is indeed a problem for intermediate learners of English. A short questionnaire of sample examples of *tacits* was given to both intermediate and advanced learners of English. The results show that while freshman college students were generally at a loss to supply the missing words, more advanced learners could supply them. As a result of demonstrating the problem this poses, the final section will discuss possible approaches to teaching *tacits*.

### **What are *tacits*?**

In their *Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*, Quirk et. al. devotes a section to “sentence types and discourse functions” (801–853). Besides exclamations and echoes, one type is “irregular sentences,” including wh-questions, aphorisms, block language, instructional writing and informal conversation. Another type is the “nonsentence” which includes formulae and interjections. All these are commonly used in spoken language and such discourse functions often break the formalistic rules of grammar, especially as taught in textbooks. For Quirk, these irregular and nonsentences are yet separate from the additional list of pro-forms and elliptical forms of what he calls “grammatical omission” (883). Basically, Quirk classifies ellipsis into recoverable, functional and formal types, emphasizing omissions that are recoverable, grammatically defective and referential. He acknowledges the close relationship between these ellipses and other pro-form substitutions and the difficulty of distinguishing between the two. Adding to the confusion, he also describes quasi-ellipsis and virtual ellipsis, in which words are omitted, substituted or combined.

Another standard text used for teaching grammar for ESL is *The Grammar Book* (Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman). As useful as it is for teaching grammar, surprisingly it does not contain the same categories of omission as Quirk and, in fact, only lists elliptical forms of wh-questions and yes-no questions (640). However, the concept of *tacits* is found throughout the text in examples of “deletions” which are not combined in any organized discussion. In fact, Celce-Murcia’s examples of deletions cover different aspects of grammar than do Quirk’s ellipsis.

Other recent texts on syntax, semantics and applied linguistics give very little, if any, attention to either ellipsis or deletions. For example, McCarthy discusses “situational ellipsis” in only two pages of *Spoken Language and Applied Linguistics*. but Leach, Levi, Radford and

Baker give ellipsis little attention in their discussions of grammar.

In addition to Quirk's various examples of non-grammatical discourse form and Celce-Murcia's examples of deletions, there are other grammatical forms that *tacits* can take, including conjecting modals, contrasting subjects, subjunctive & be-verbs and noun determiners. Taken together, these given examples of *tacits* comprise almost 50 different grammatical entities. The following list summarizes many of these forms referred to.

### **Chart A** Varieties of *Tacits*

(from Quirk, et. al., *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*, 1987)

**1. Exclamations (wh-element):**

- How quickly you eat!
- What a mess we're in!

**2. Echoes:**

- A: The Browns are emigrating.      B: Emigrating?
- A: I'm going to London for a holiday.      B: To London?

**3. Irregular wh-questions:**

- How about your parents?
- Why listen to him?

**4. Subordinate clauses:**

- To think that he could be so mean!
- If only he were not so timid!
- That it should come to this!
- Now for a good bath!

**5. Adverbials as directives:**

- That way!
- On your feet!
- On with the show!
- Back to work!

**6. Aphorisms:**

- The sooner the better.
- Here today, gone tomorrow.
- Waste not, want not.
- Like father, like son.

**7. Subject plus complements:**

- Not bad, that salmon.
- Just our luck, Sue finding out.

**8. Block language (labels, titles, notices):**

- No entry
- Fresh today
- No dogs without leashes
- All the news that's fit to print

**9. Headlines:**

- Oil Spill Threat Decreasing
- Woman Claims Drug Caused Cancer, Sues
- British Victory Surprises

**10. Letters, cables, diaries:**

- Having a wonderful time!
- Sorry about Jane!

**11. Instructions:**

- Cook to golden brown.
- Keep away form heat.
- Refrigerate after opening.
- Open other end.

**12. Abbreviated sentences:**

- Want another cup?
- Serves them right!
- Anything wrong?
- First lap over. Five more to come.

**13. Elliptical dialogue:**

- A: Who sent you? B: The manager.
- A: When will you leave? B: With luck, on Friday.

**14. Nonsentences:**

- Good idea!
- Hot or cold?
- You and your statistics!
- One step more and I'll shoot.

**15. Formulae:**

- |                     |                   |                               |
|---------------------|-------------------|-------------------------------|
| a. Greetings:       | •Evening!         | •Good morning to you!         |
| b. Farewells:       | •All the best!    | •See you later!               |
| c. Thanks:          | •Thanks a lot.    | •Appreciate it!               |
| d. Reactions:       | •Yeah, OK.        | •No problem!                  |
| e. Toasts:          | •Here's to you!   | •Good health!                 |
| f. Alarms:          | •Fire!            | •Help!                        |
| g. Warnings:        | •Watch out!       | •Be careful!                  |
| h. Apologies:       | •Sorry!           | •My mistake!                  |
| i. Responses:       | •No matter.       | •Never mind.                  |
| j. Congratulations: | •Well done!       | •Congratulations!             |
| k. Introductions:   | •Joan, my sister. | •John, a good friend of mine. |
| l. Anger/dismissal: | •Get lost!        | •Bugger off!                  |
| m. Expletives:      | •Good lord!       | •Damn it!                     |
| n. Miscellaneous:   | •Well, I'll be!   | •Nothing doing!               |

**16. Ellipsis: grammatical or semantic omission, usually but not always recoverable**

- |                       |   |
|-----------------------|---|
| a. nouns:             | •My camera, like Peter's is Japanese.                             |
| b. adj. & noun heads: | •Helen is the older girl, but Julie the taller.                   |
| c. modifiers:         | •Her second novel was different from her first.                   |
| d. medial:            | •A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.                     |
|                       | •That letter was the last I ever received from her.               |
| e. finite clauses:    | •I'm happy if you are.  |
|                       | •His father was at Oxford when Harold Wilson was.                 |
| f. do-operators:      | •Rupert wanted to attend the bullfight, although his wife didn't. |
|                       | •I don't like living in the country. Do you?                      |
| g. predicates:        | •Nigel finished the exam at the same time as George.              |
|                       | •Nigel finished the exam first, then George.                      |
| h. wh-clauses:        | •We're bound to win the prize someday. But when?                  |

- i. to-infinitives:
  - Somebody has hidden my book, but I don't know who/why/where.
  - I won't disturb you again unless I have to.
  - She borrowed my pen, although I told her not to.
- j. entire clauses:
  - You can borrow my pen if you want.
  - Somebody ought to help. Shall I ask Peter?
- k. nonfinite/verbless:
  - Although exhausted, he continued his journey.
  - Whether right or wrong, the government always wins.
- l. appended:
  - I caught the bus —just!
  - The train arrived on time, for a change.
  - It was nice of him to call, wasn't it?

(from Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, *The Grammar Book: an ESL/EFL Teacher's Course*, 1983)

### 17. Deletions

- a. auxiliary deleted:
  - You going to the movies?
  - You know Fred Callaghan?
- b. imperatives:
  - Leave the room!
  - Don't be late!
- c. auxiliary in wh-questions:
  - Where you been hiding?
  - What you doing?
- d. prepositions of time:
  - We have lived here 12 years.
  - He went surfing Saturday.
- e. parallel structure:
  - Mary ate an apple and Joe a banana.
  - Mike is a lawyer and Ken a teacher.
- f. reduction of relative. Clause:
  - The curry I cooked was too hot.
  - The ice skater in the show looks familiar.
- g. relative adverb:
  - The reason I voted "no" was my opposition to the project.
  - I remember the time I tried to make a souffle.
- h. indirect speech:
  - John said he would buy that car the following day.

### 18. Other

- a. head sentence:
  - He went back home after school, but reluctantly.
  - You can fax it to my home today or to my office Monday.
- b. subjunctive & be-verb:
  - He looked away as if embarrassed.
  - He looked like before.
- c. verbs compared/subject omitted:
  - He studied harder than planned.
  - She succeeded more than expected.
- d. subject raising, delete be-verb:
  - I found their prices reasonable.
  - I didn't think it particularly exciting.
- e. relative pronoun & be-verb:
  - There are topics not suitable for children.
  - She has a daughter still living at home.
- f. modality conjuncting/verb deleted:
  - Why bother going all the way home?

- g. noun determiner:
  - I wouldn't if I were you.
  - There were some left behind.
  - Have you seen any lately?
- h. participial conjunction/with deleted & accompanying circumstance:
  - She woke up in the morning, her pillow wet with tears.
  - He left home in the morning, a newspaper under his arm.
- i. contrasting objects:
  - Jim wondered if they would finish, but Sheila didn't.
  - I depended on you more than Roger.

Many of these examples, especially the non-ellipsis examples from Quirk, are a common part of English usage, but probably not taught in classroom texts. Examples such as the echo, nonsentences or elliptical dialogue rely on recovered antecedents. Others, like the truncations of adverbials as directives, headlines, letters, instructions and abbreviated sentences, follow normal omissions common in the native language, like Japanese, which has its own brand of missing syntax. Also, block language of labels, notices, instructions and most formulae carry meaning without the need for linguistic comprehension.

Looking at Quirk's ellipsis, most of these are recoverable, with the dropped word—nouns, verbs, adjectives—available within the sentence. Examples include:

#16b *Helen is the older girl, but Julie (is) the taller (girl).*

#16e *I'm happy if you are (happy).*

#16i *I won't disturb you again unless I have to (disturb you).*

Celce-Murcia's deletions tend to involve simple implied subjects, and the dropping of auxiliaries, prepositions or relative conjunctions:

#17b *Don't (you) be late!*

#17c *What (are) you doing?*

#17d *We have lived here (for) 12 years.*

#17f *The curry (that)I cooked was too hot.*

On the other hand, analysis of just a few of the other examples will demonstrate the problems that Japanese students trained in word-by-word decoding may have in discerning the linguistic form of truncated sentences. Take for example the aphorism, *Waste not, want not*. Not only does it rely on an outdated structure of English, putting the negative after the verb, and an outdated use of the word *want* but the relationship between the seemingly parallel directives is ambiguous and unclear.

In example #18a:

*He went back home after school, but reluctantly.*

the final phrase, *but reluctantly*, without a subject or verb, stands too far away from the main verb, which it modifies, leading students to question its linguistic relationship to the rest of the sentence.

In #18f:

*Why bother going all the way home?*

the lack of noun gives the verb *bother* an ambiguous meaning, especially next to the gerund *going*, especially since the modal *would*, which gives the sentence its uncertainty, is also missing.

Finally, in #18h:

*He left home in the morning, a newspaper under his arm.*

the phrase *a newspaper under his arm* is a dangling modifier showing accompanying circumstance, but lacking the preposition *with* or the participial verbs *having*, *holding* or *carrying* to tie it to the sentence.

As these examples show, even if the student is advanced enough to be able to retrieve the meaning of dropped subjects, predicates and modifiers, there are many other examples where the retrievability is more difficult, where the omitted words lead a non-native learner into a linguistic dead-end, causing difficulty in comprehending the meaning of the sentence.

### **Testing *Tacit* Recognition**

To test this hypothesis, I administered a short questionnaire, consisting of 14 of these examples, to a class of freshman English majors at Hiroshima Jogakuin University at the end of their first year. As English majors they had just completed a year of taking eight English classes in reading, writing, listening, speaking and TOEIC preparation. They were not beginners, yet their ability was not advanced, so perhaps they could be considered active intermediate learners, having contact with English several hours every school day.

At the same time, it was important to see if *tacits* somehow become understood with increased exposure to the language. To measure this, I gave the same questionnaire to a group of advanced practitioners of English, translators working for Mazda Motor Company. My expectation was that the advanced learners would tacitly understand the deletions. They would know where words had been dropped and would be able to supply the missing words.

Below is the list of sentences given. The instructions stated:

*Each sentence has a word or words missing. Please add words to make the meaning clearer.* It then gave three examples, showing where words had been added to give the sentence a clearer meaning.

### ***Tacit Recognition Questionnaire***

1. How kind of you!
2. On your feet!
3. Join us for lunch?
4. A boy was standing on the left side, a girl on the right.
3. If she tried, she could speak English well, but she didn't.
5. She returned to England because she had to.
6. You can fax it to my home today or to my office Monday.
7. He looked away as if embarrassed.
9. She succeeded more than expected.
10. I found their prices reasonable.
11. She has a daughter still living at home.
12. I wouldn't if I were you.
13. Have you seen any lately?
14. He left home in the morning, a newspaper under his arm.

The following chart shows the results of the responses:

**Chart B Tacit Understandings—English Majors, End of First Year (T=53)**

	<b>Correct Response</b> (ave. 25.8%)	<b>Correct Marker Wrong Response</b> (ave. 20.0%)	<b>Wrong Marker/ Wrong Response</b> (ave. 27.5%)	<b>No Answer</b> (ave. 26.2%)
1	0 0.0% <i>How kind of you</i> (to come today/to say so).	12 22.6% <i>How kind of you</i> (are).	28 52.8% <i>How</i> (are/is) <i>kind of you</i> (are)!	13 --- 24.5%
2	15 28.3% (Get) <i>on your feet!</i> (It is) <i>on your feet.</i>	9 16.9% (Please/That/Watch/Take care of) <i>on your feet!</i>	12 22.6% <i>On your</i> (the) <i>feet(s)</i> (are).	18 --- 33.9%
3	10 18.8% (Can you/Would you/Will you) <i>join us for lunch?</i>	16 30.1% (Shall we/Are you) <i>join us for lunch?</i>	16 30.1% <i>Join</i> (to) <i>us for</i> (the) <i>lunch?</i>	11 --- 20.7%
4	23 43.3% <i>A boy was standing on the left side, a girl</i> (was standing) <i>on the right.</i>	4 7.5% ---	21 39.6% <i>A boy was standing on the left side,</i> (and) <i>a girl on the right</i> (side).	5 --- 9.4%
5	11 20.7% <i>If she tried, she could speak English well, but she didn't</i> (try).	20 37.7% <i>If she tried, she could speak English well, but she didn't</i> (speak English/it/do).	17 32.0% <i>If she</i> (wasn't/didn't/is/have/had) <i>tried</i> (speak English), <i>she could speak English well, but she didn't.</i>	6 --- 11.3%
6	22 41.5% <i>She returned to England because she had to</i> (return).	17 32.0% <i>She returned to England because she had to</i> (do/it/returned to England).	3 5.6% <i>She</i> (has) <i>returned to England because she had to.</i>	11 --- 20.7%
7	15 28.3% <i>You can fax it to my home today or</i> (you can fax it) <i>to my office Monday.</i>	6 5.6% <i>You can fax it to my home today or</i> (it) <i>to my office Monday.</i>	20 37.7% <i>You can fax it to my home today or to my office</i> (on/by) <i>Monday</i> (it).	12 --- 22.6%
8	17 32.0% <i>He looked away as if</i> (he was/were) <i>embarrassed.</i>	13 24.5% <i>He looked away as if</i> (he) <i>embarrassed.</i>	9 16.9% <i>He looked</i> (like) <i>away</i> (from) <i>as if embarrassed</i> (me).	14 --- 26.4%
9	28 52.8% <i>She succeeded more than</i> (I/she/we had) <i>expected.</i>	1 1.8% ---	11 20.7% <i>She</i> (was/is more) <i>succeeded</i> (to) <i>more than expected</i> (me).	13 --- 24.5%
10	14 26.4% <i>I found their prices</i> (were) <i>reasonable.</i>	5 9.4% <i>I found their prices</i> (of/with/which is/more/in) <i>reasonable.</i>	17 32.0% <i>I found</i> (that) <i>their prices reasonable.</i>	17 --- 32.0%
11	11 20.7% <i>She has a daughter</i> (who is) <i>still living at home.</i>	15 28.3% <i>She has a daughter</i> (who/it was/and she/the daughter) <i>still living at home.</i>	10 18.8% <i>She has a</i> (her) <i>daughter still</i> (her daughter is) <i>living at</i> (the) <i>home.</i>	17 --- 32.0%
12	8 15.0% <i>I wouldn't</i> (do it) <i>if I were you.</i>	21 39.6% <i>I wouldn't</i> (do/you/this/that/such things/think about) <i>if I were you.</i>	8 15.0% <i>I wouldn't</i> <i>if I were you</i> (wouldn't).	16 --- 30.1%
13	7 13.2% <i>Have you seen any</i> (movies/thing) <i>lately?</i>	2 3.7% <i>Have you seen any</i> (that/new) <i>lately?</i>	18 33.9% <i>Have you</i> (ever) <i>seen</i> (that/him/her/to) <i>any</i> (at) <i>lately</i> (movies)?	26 --- 49.0%
14	11 20.7% <i>He left home in the morning,</i> (carrying/holding/with) <i>an umbrella under his arm.</i>	11 20.7% <i>He left home in the morning,</i> (and/then/it was/so) <i>an umbrella under his arm.</i>	15 28.3% (When) <i>He left home in the morning,</i> <i>an umbrella</i> (was/is) <i>under</i> (the) <i>his arm.</i>	16 --- 30.1%

## Discussion of Results

The results were tabulated into four categories. The first category showed correct answers marked in the correct place within the sentence. The second noted incorrect answers marked in the correct place. These mistakes showed that, although respondents knew where something was missing, they did not have enough knowledge to know what grammatical form should be added. This resulted in some very strange grammar patterns. The third category marked wrong answers placed in wrong locations. And the fourth category were no answers, where respondents did not add anything to the sentences.

The average percentages of total responses of the four categories were remarkably evenly distributed:

<b>Correct Response</b>	25.8%
<b>Correct Marker/Wrong Response</b>	20.0%
<b>Wrong Marker/Wrong Response</b>	27.5%
<b>No Answer</b>	26.2%

However, the symmetry of responses cannot hide the fact that an average of only one quarter of the respondents could identify the missing words and put them in the right place. Of course, within each category, there was some variety of responses, which may bear some analysis.

For example, in the category of correct responses, #1 had no correct answers, the only case in all the examples and all the categories. The sentence:

*How kind of you!*

is almost formulaic in English, but none of the respondents could finish it with an appropriate infinitive; for example, *How kind of you to drop in like this.*

At the other extreme, #6:

*She returned to England because she had to.*

had 41.5% correct responses, and #9:

*She succeeded more than expected.*

had the high of 52.8%. One possible reason for a high number of correct responses in these examples may be the students' familiarity with these base sentences. In #6, they may have learned that the final unfinished infinitive refers back to the antecedent verb; in #9 they may

have learned the comparative structure *more than s/o V*.

The responses of the **Correct Marker/Wrong Response** category of answers show an inconsistency. Although students recognize the place where words have been deleted, the responses they would add often do not make grammatical sense. Looking at #1, a common response was:

*How kind of you (are)!*

showing the students' desire to introduce a verb for the subject *you*.

In #8:

*He looked away as if (he) embarrassed.*

this probably reflects the students' mistake in thinking that *embarrassed* is a transitive verb rather than a past participial functioning as an adjective.

#12 shows a variety of grammatical misconceptions including verbs, pronouns and objects:

*I wouldn't (do/you/this/that/such things/think about) if I were you.*

In most cases, however, the responses did show some understanding of what needed to be added. But the high percentage of errors probably reflects a weakness in grammatical fundamentals. On the other hand, although we will never know the exact cause for the high frequency of incorrect answers, unfamiliarity of base sentences may be the reason for not knowing what is missing from the examples.

A closer look at some of the recurring wrong answers will be instructive in learning about student grammatical expectations.

#1 shows the need to provide a verb for the apparent subject *you*:

*How (are/is) kind of you!*

In #9:

*She (was/is more) succeeded more than expected.*

students were more eager to supply an auxiliary for *succeeded* than in completing the comparison *more than (she) expected*.

#10 shows the tendency to complete the head, *I found that ...* leading to the object rather than add the predicate:

*I found (that) their prices reasonable.*

And #13:

*Have you (ever) seen any lately.*

*Have you seen (that/him/her) lately.*

*Have you seen any lately* (movies).

shows the variety of grammatical mistakes students are commonly prone to make with this kind of sentence.

Although many of the incorrect answers were marked that way because students did not accurately fill in the ellipsis, some responses did add some correct grammatical elements outside of the ellipsis. For example, in #4:

*A boy was standing on the left side (and) a girl on the right .*

*A boy was standing on the left side, a girl on the right (side).*

can both stand as correct sentences which continue to include the ellipsis.

#7 is another example:

*You can fax it to my home today or to my office (on/by) Monday.*

In this case students correctly replaced the deleted preposition but missed the more important repetition of the head sentence.

*You can fax it to my home today or you can fax it to my office Monday.*

Returning to #13, one possible reason for the high percentage (49.0%) of **No Answer** may be that students are taught that *any* and *some* may transform from noun determiners, which would indeed require the addition of a noun, to pronouns which can stand alone representing the antecedent noun.

The high percentage of **No Answer** responses could be for two contradictory reasons. One possibility is that students understood the sentences so perfectly they didn't see the need to add anything. More probable, however, is the fact that students simply found themselves at a linguistic dead-end and didn't know what to add to give the sentence grammatical coherence.

Although the results of this questionnaire show that an average of 75% of students were not able to supply the correct reinstatements of deleted words, what this figure does not show is actual comprehension of the meaning of the sentence itself. Among these samples, two sentences serve as good examples.

In #4:

*A boy was standing on the left side, a girl on the right.*

despite the linguist confusion of the deletion, it is probable that students do in fact understand the relationship between the boy and the girl and, if asked, could probably draw a picture showing the correct relationship. That is to say, operationally the students may be comprehending more than their grammatical ability would indicate.

A second example is #14:

*He left home in the morning, an umbrella under his arm.*

Here again, it is highly probable that students would be able to operationally show the relationship between the man and his umbrella, without knowing that a participial or *with* has been deleted.

While this may hold true for some of these examples of *tacits*, it would be wrong to expect too much understanding from the kinds of linguistic ambiguities that *tacits* demand.

### Advanced Sample

At the same time that the questionnaire was given to university freshmen, it was also administered to advanced learners of English, professional translators at Mazda Motor Company. Many of this group had spent some time abroad and had been studying English for many more years and more seriously than the university sample. The hypothesis was that advanced ESL learners understand *tacits* at a higher level. Although the number of respondents was not as many (T=10), the results show that in fact there was a dramatic increase in *tacit* understanding:

#### Advanced (Intermediate) Subjects Compared

40% ( 0.0%)	1. How kind of you!
50% (28.3%)	2. On your feet!
100% (18.8%)	3. Join us for lunch?
70% (43.3%)	4. A boy was standing on the left side, a girl on the right.
70% (20.7%)	5. If she tried, she could speak English well, but she didn't.
100% (41.5%)	6. She returned to England because she had to.
80% (28.3%)	7. You can fax it to my home today or to my office Monday.
100% (32.0%)	8. He looked away as if embarrassed.
100% (52.8%)	9. She succeeded more than expected.
90% (26.4%)	10. I found their prices reasonable.
100% (20.7%)	11. She has a daughter still living at home.
70% (15.0%)	12. I wouldn't if I were you.

- 90% (13.2%) 13. Have you seen any lately?  
100% (20.7%) 14. He left home in the morning, a newspaper under his arm.

**82.8% (25.8%) Total Percentage for Advanced and (Intermediate) Subjects**

An average of 82.8% of correct answers shows a marked comprehension of both the accurate placement and accurate responses of deleted words. The only possible conclusion to be drawn is that *tacit* understanding is a natural consequence of advanced learning. The more familiarity you have with base sentence structure, the more you are able to depart from it, the more you are able to understand its incompleteness. Not only is a higher level of *tacit* comprehension demonstrated here but also a higher ability to provide the correct grammatical form, which we could expect from advanced learners.

### **Implications for Teaching *Tacits***

The previous section has demonstrated that beginners and intermediate learners of English have difficulty in understanding *tacits* while advanced learners have mastered them. The implications of this deficiency would tend to show up mostly in reading comprehension, where students may not have a strong enough background in linguistic structure to be able to reconstruct grammatical omissions. A second problem area of *tacit* misunderstanding would be in listening comprehension, where the listener must hold in his mind the referents of the previous sentence or the head of a complex sentence. Despite possible ambiguities of the questionnaire in pinpointing exact comprehension of the examples, the data seems to support the contention that *tacit* misunderstandings pose a serious problem. How then can this issue be addressed? There are several possibilities to consider.

1. *Tacits* are embedded in grammar structure and only a firm understanding of base sentence structure will give beginner and intermediate students the background they need to understand when words are omitted.

2. Only by increased and improved exposure to spoken language patterns will students learn the flexibility in the language. A simple example of how they learn this is the use of the formula greeting *Good day!* as an abbreviation of *It is a good day!* or a truncation of the full grammatical, *I hope you have a good day!*

3. Some forms of *tacits* can only be learned by rote, where the grammatical coherence is

secondary to its operational function. This is certainly the case with aphorisms (*The sooner, the better*), block language (*No dogs without leashes*), instructions (*Open other end*), and the myriad of formulae.

4. The form of some other *tacits* can be taught with an explanation of where words are deleted in certain contextual situations; for example, adverbial directives (*On your feet!*), headlines (*Oil Spill Threat Decreasing*), abbreviated sentences (*Anything wrong?*), elliptical dialogue and nonsentences. These contexts probably parallel similar omissions of informal speech in the learners' first language.

5. Along with the teaching of base sentence structures, teachers need to also teach the parallel possibility of *tacits*. This is commonly done in some cases such as the *you*, dropped in imperative commands:

(You) *Put that down!*

and the relative pronouns and pronoun-auxiliaries dropped in dependent clauses:

*The jacket* (that) *I bought ...*

*The man* (who was) *sitting ...*

Other simpler forms of *tacits* can also be taught by looking for recoverable antecedents when something in the dependent clauses brings linguistic confusion.

These approaches should account for most of the *tacits* students are likely to encounter. Other forms will have to be learned with more exposure to sentence patterns. As the data showed, advanced learners do learn where and what has been deleted. This is an expected outcome of greater familiarity with the language and a milestone of being able to use it in its more elastic, informal, common usage.

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