

# Assessing the Performance of Iraqi EFL University Students in Using Intensifying Adjectives

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## Abstract

The effect of the **Intensifying adjectives** is either "heightening" or "lowering" the noun they modify. They semantically classified as:

- a- Emphasizers.
- b- Amplifiers.
- c- Down tonners.

**Keywords:** intensifying adjectives, test, error source.

## الخلاصة

الصفات المشددة للمعنى إما تقوي أو تقلل من معنى الموصوف. دلاليا، هذه الصفات تصنف الى:

أ- مؤكدات المعنى.

ب- مضخمات المعنى.

ج- مخفضات المعنى

تبحث هذه الدراسة في تقويم إداء طلبة الجامعة العراقيين الدارسين اللغة الإنكليزية لغة اجنبية على تمييز

واستعمال الصفات المشددة للمعنى.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الصفات المشددة للمعنى، الإختبار، مصادر الخطأ.

## 1. Introduction

**Intensifying adjectives** have "heightening" or "lowering" effect on the noun they modify. Semantically they are classified as:

- a. Emphasizers.
- b. Amplifiers.
- c. Down tonners

The problem of the present study rises when Iraqi EFL university students fail to recognize **intensifying adjectives**. Also, they fail to use the correct **intensifying adjective** in certain context. Accordingly, it is hypothesized that:

- 1- Iraqi EFL university students are expected to face difficulty in recognizing **intensifying adjectives**.
- 2- Such learners are expected to face more difficulty in using the suitable **intensifying adjective** in certain sentences.

A diagnostic test has been designed and applied on a sample of one hundred Iraqi EFL university students at fourth year Department of English, College of Education for Human sciences, University of Babylon, (2015-2016).

## 2.1 Adjectives

Quirk et al. (1985: 402) denote that adjectives generally have four criteria:

1- They modify a noun i.e they occur in attributive function.

(1) Bob is an **utter** fool. (ibid: 403)

2- They may function as a subject complement i.e. they occur in predicative function.

(2) The universe is **infinite**. (ibid)

3- They may be premodified by the intensifier very.

(3) His views were **very surprising**. (ibid: 413)

4- They may take comparative and superlative forms.

(4) These students are **more intelligent**. (ibid: 403)

(5) They are the **most beautiful paintings** I have ever seen. (ibid)

Although not all adjectives have these four criteria.

## 2.2 Intensifying Adjectives

**Intensifying adjectives**, according to Quirk et al. (429: 1985), have "heightening" or "lowering" effect on the noun they modify. Beare (3: 2016) states that **intensifying adjectives** are used to describe happening or type of a person:

(6) a **big** decision. (ibid)

(7) a **complete** fool. (Quirk et al., 1985: 429)

Quirk et al. (429: 1985) denote that semantically, **intensifying adjectives** are classified as:

d- Emphasizers.

e- Amplifiers.

f- Down tonners.

### 2.2.1 Emphasizers

**Emphasizers**, according to Oxford Dictionary of English Grammar s.v. (2014:137), have "heightening, reinforcing" effect. Such adjectives are attributive only.

(8) a true scholar. (Quirk et al., 1985: 429)

**Emphasizers**, have heightening effect on the noun and convey the speaker's attitude towards something ([www.linguarama.com](http://www.linguarama.com)).

(9) **utter** despair. (ibid)

### 2.2.2 Amplifiers

**Amplifiers**, according to Quirk et al. (1985:429), "scale upward from an assumed norm" or they, according to [www.linguarama.com](http://www.linguarama.com), represent the upper extreme of the scale. **Amplifiers** are central adjectives, i.e. they function attributively and predicatively, if they are "inherent", i.e. they describe the referent directly, and indicate high or extreme degree. Quirk et al. (1985:429).

(10) a. A **complete** victory. Quirk et al. (1985:429)

b. The victory is **complete**. (ibid)

If the adjective is noninherent, **amplifiers** are attributive only (ibid)

(11) a. A **firm** friend. (ibid)

b. \* The friend is firm.

**Amplifiers** can be used as **emphasizers** when they express emphasis rather than degree but in this case the adjective is attributive only (ibid).

(12) a. **Total** nonsense. Emphasizer (ibid)

b. **Total** destruction. Amplifier (ibid)

c. The destruction was **total**. (ibid: 430)

### 2.2.3 Downtoners

**Downtoners**, according to Quirk et al. (1985:430), have a "lowering effect". They "scaling downward from an assumed norm". they are usually central adjectives.

(13) a **slight** effort. (ibid)

### 2.3 Uses of Some Intensifying Adjectives

Beare (2016:2) states that most of the **intensifying adjectives** are used to describe nonphysical objects:

(14) **absolute** agony. (ibid)

Beare (ibid) special uses to some **intensifying adjectives**: **big** is used to describe happening or a type of person

(15) a **big** decision. (ibid)

(16) a **big** liar.

The **intensifying adjective great** is used to describe feelings or qualities (ibid):

(17) **Great** anger. (ibid)

(18) **Great** happiness. (ibid)

**Large**, on the other hand, is used with nouns concerning numbers and measurements (ibid):

(19) A **large** amount of sugar. (ibid)

## 3. The Test

### 3.1 Test Design

The test consists of two questions. Question 1 measures the subject's responses at the recognition level. It includes ten items. In Question 1, the subjects are asked to underline the intensifying adjectives in the given sentences. Question 2 measures the subject's responses at the production level. It also includes ten items. In Questions 2, the subjects are requested to use the suitable intensifying adjective to complete the sentence. (see Appendix I).

### 3.2 The Subjects

The sample of the test consists of a hundred subjects of the fourth academic year (2015-2016) of the Department of English at the College of Education for Human Sciences, University of Babylon.

### 3.3 Results of the Test

#### 3.3.1 Subjects' Performance at the Recognition Level

The first question measures the subjects' performance at the recognition level. The results obtained on each item are shown in Table (1)

**Table (1) The Frequency and Rate of Subjects' Performance Question 1: The Recognition Level**

Item	No. of correct answers	% of correct answers	No. of incorrect answers	% of incorrect answers
1	30	30	70	70
2	32	32	68	68
3	31	31	69	69
4	20	20	80	80
5	90	90	10	10
6	5	5	95	95
7	86	86	14	14

8	76	76	24	24
9	89	89	11	11
10	14	14	86	86
total	473	47.3	527	52.7

The table above shows the total number and percentage of the correct responses at question (1): the recognition level are (473, 47.3%) whereas those of the incorrect responses are (527, 52.7%).

Items (5, 7, 8, and 9) have the high number of correct responses (90, 86, 76, and 89) respectively. In these items the adjectives are (**big, great, heavy, and real**) which are all intensifying adjectives. These adjectives are familiar to the subjects. Whereas items (6 and 10) have the lowest number of correct responses (5, 14) in that order. There is no intensifying adjective in item (6) as the adjective used is **old** but most of the subjects incorrectly consider it as an intensifying adjective. The adjective in item (10) is **occasional** which also not an intensifying adjective but erroneously considered by a considerable number of the subjects as an intensifying adjective.

Table (1) illustrates that the number and frequency of the incorrect responses at the recognition level are (527, 52.7%) which reflect that the subjects face difficulty at the recognition level.

### 3.3.2 Subjects' Performance at the Production Level

The second question measures the subjects' performance at the production level. The results obtained are shown in Table (2):

**Table (2) The Frequency and Rate of Subjects' Performance Question 2: The Production Level**

Item	No. of correct answers	% of correct answers	No. of incorrect answers	% of incorrect answers
1	7	7	93	93
2	0	0	100	100
3	3	3	97	97
4	5	5	95	95
5	3	3	97	97
6	37	37	63	63
7	50	50	50	50
8	57	57	43	43
9	64	64	36	36
10	23	23	77	77
Total	249	24.9	751	75.1

The table above shows the total number and rate of the correct responses at question (2): the production level are (249, 24.9%) whereas those of the incorrect responses are (751, 75.1%).

Table (2) shows that the highest number of correct responses is obtained in item (9) where there are (64) correct responses. The noun is **admiration** which can be intensified by using the adjective (**great**). While the lowest number of correct responses is obtained

in item (2) with (0) correct responses. The noun used in item (2) is **effort** which can be intensified by the down toners (**feeble**, or **slight**) or can be intensified by the emphazier (**great**) but a great number of the subjects has used (a lot of) which is not an intensifying adjective in addition to other erroneous responses.

Table (2) shows that the number and frequency of the incorrect responses at the production level are (751, 75.1%) which reveal that the subjects face difficulty at the production level.

The results of the whole test are shown in Table (3):

**Table (3) The Frequency and Rate of Subjects' Performance In the Whole Test**

Level	No. of correct answers	% of correct answers	No. of incorrect answers	% of incorrect answers
Recognition	473	47.3	527	52.7
Production	249	24.9	751	75.1
Total	722	36.1	1278	63.9

Table (3) shows that the number and rate of the incorrect responses for the whole test are (1278, 63.9%) which reflect that the subjects face difficulty in using the intensifying adjectives.

#### 4. Error Analysis

Brown (1987: 184) remarks that errors made by foreign language learners may be attributed to four major categories: interlingual transfer, intralingual transfer, context of learning, and communication strategies.

##### 4.1 Interlingual Transfer

The errors that happen as an outcome of the influence of the mother tongue is termed interlingual transfer. The learner's production presents features of both his mother tongue and the foreign language he learns (Corder, 1986: 66-7)

Here are some examples of the subject's erroneous responses which may attributed to interlingual transfer, all the examples are taken from the production level, Question 2:

**Item (3) He is in a(n) ----- agony.**

Some of the erroneous responses have used the adjective **big**

Influenced by the Iraqi Arabic expression حزن كبير

**Item (4) She lives in a ----- bliss.**

Some incorrect responses have used the adjective **big** also influenced by Iraqi Arabic expression سعادة كبيرة , نعمة كبيرة

**Item (9) He shows a -----admiration.**

Some wrong responses have used the adjective **strong**

Influenced by the Arabic expression احترام شديد

**Item (10) The soldiers have ----- devotion to their country.**

Some incorrect responses have used the adjective **big** influenced by the Arabic expression إخلاص كبير

There are (71) erroneous responses that can be ascribed to interlingual transfer i.e. (5.55%) of the incorrect responses of the production level. The percentage is calculated out of 1278 which is the total number of the incorrect responses of the test.

##### 4.2 Intralingual Transfer

An **intralingual error** is the out come of defective or incomplet learning of the foreign language (Richards et al. 1997:187). The factors that lead to make errors that may

be ascribed to intralingual transfer are : (a) **overgeneralization**, i.e. errors caused by applying material that has previously learned on a present language context (ibid.). (b) **incomplete rule applications**, i.e. errors resulting from learners producing simpler structures and failing to learn more complex types of structure (Richards, 1970: 12), and (c) **false concepts hypothesized**, i.e. errors that may be attributed to poor comprehension (Brown, 1987: 82).

First, errors that may be attributed to **overgeneralization** can be seen at the recognition level as it can be noticed at items (2, 6, and 10) where the adjectives used are (precise, old, and occasional) in that order. A considerable number of the incorrect responses regard these adjectives as intensifying adjectives while they are not. The number and rate of the incorrect responses of the items that can be assigned to **overgeneralization** are (240, 18.77%). The percentage is calculated out of 1278 which is the total number of the incorrect responses of the test.

Second, errors that may be attributed to **incomplete rule applications** can be noticed in Question (2), the production level in items (1, 4, 5, and 6)

**Item (1) This is a \_bad\_ nonsense.**

**Item (4) She lives in \_\_happy\_\_ bliss.**

**Item (5) The audience were in a(n) \_\_dangerous \_\_furry.**

As for items (1,4, and 5) the adjectives used (bad, happy, and dangerous) are not intensifying adjectives. The number and rate such incorrect responses are (15, 1.17%). The percentage is calculated out of 1278 (the total number of the incorrect responses of the test).

Third, erroneous responses due to **false concepts hypothesized** can be seen in Question (2): the production level in items (2, 8, 9, and 10)

**Item (2) The job needs a(n) \_\_\*working\_\_ effort.**

**Item (8) Her answer put him in a(n) \_\_\*result\_\_ disappointment.**

**Item (9) He shows her a(n) \_\_\*love and \_\_\_\_ admiration.**

**Item (10) The soldiers have \_\_\_\_\*guns\_\_\_\_ devotion to their country.**

The words used in these items are not intensifying adjectives ;moreover, they are not adjectives at all. The number and frequency of the incorrect responses that possibly attributed to **false concepts hypothesized** are (10, 0.78%). The rate is calculated out of 1278 (the total number of the erroneous responses of the test).

The number and frequency of incorrect responses that may be ascribed to intralingual transfer are (265, 20.73%).

#### 4.3 Context of Learning

**context of learning** is the third source of errors. **context of learning** refers to the classroom, the teacher and the materials. The teacher, the text book or both may lead the learners to misunderstand the material. Moreover, some text books give emphasis to some aspects and pass over others according to the authors' knowledge (Brown, 1987: 179).

Erroneous responses may be assigned to **context of learning** can be noticed in Question (1): the recognition level in items (1, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9)

**Item (1) He is a true scholar.**

**Item (3) This is a feeble Jock.**

**Item (4) I was in an utter catastrophe.**

**Item (5) It was a big decision.**

Item (7) The mission was a great failure.

Item (8) He is a heavy sleeper.

Item (9) He is a real hero.

All the adjectives in the previous items are intensifying adjectives but some erroneous responses wrongly consider them not being so. The total number and rate of the erroneous responses that may be ascribed to context of learning are (278, 21.75%). The percentage is calculated out of 1278 which is the total number of the incorrect responses of the test. Such erroneous responses are assigned to the context of learning because most of grammar text books and English teachers do not focus on the intensifying adjectives.

#### 4.4 Communication Strategies

According to Corder (1986:104) the learner tries to express certain meanings when his linguistic knowledge failed him. Accordingly, the learner may use some communicative strategies.

**Approximation** means using a word or an expression that may semantically have the same features of the expression that the learner presumes to use (Brown, 1987: 183).

The incorrect responses that may be attributed to **approximation** can be noticed in the production level: Question 2 Items(1, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 10)

Item (1) This is a \_\_foolish\_\_ **nonsense**.

Item(4) She lives in \_\_\*heaven\_\_ **bliss**.

Item (5) The audience was in \_\_\_\_dangerous\_\_ **fury**.

Item (6) He is a(n) \_foolish\_ **idiot**.

Item (7) This is a(n) \_\_\_crazy\_ **madness**.

Item (10) The soldiers have \_\_loyal\_ **devotion**.

The words used in each item have similar semantic features to the words they modify. As in item (1) **foolish** is related somehow to **nonsense**. Item (2) **heaven** is associated with **bliss**. Item (5) **dangerous** is related to **fury** but it is not an intensifying adjective so the answer is incorrect. Item (6) **foolish** and **idiot** have close semantic relation. The same can be said about item (7) **crazy** and **madness** and item (10) **loyal** and **devotion**.

The number and rate of the incorrect responses that may be ascribed to **approximation** are (283, 22.14%).

**Guessing**, according to Scholfield and Katamine (2002: 2) means using clues that may or may not be based on language. The learner may depend on the context to find some clues in order to guess the meaning.

Errors that may be related to **guessing** can be found in question (2): the production level in items (6,7, 8, 9, and 10)

Item (6) He is a(n) \_stupid\_ **idiot**.

Item (7) This is a(n) \_\_\_ill\_ **madness**.

Item (8) Her answer put him in a(n) \_\_\_ bad\_\_ **disappointment**.

Item (9) He shows her a(n) \_\_\_ good \_\_\_\_ **admiration**.

Item (10) The soldiers have \_\_good\_ **devotion**.

In the items mentioned above, the subjects depend on the noun after the blank to guess the adjective they use no matter whether they intensifying adjectives or not . Item (6) the noun is idiot, so some incorrect responses use the adjective **stupid**. Some of the incorrect responses use the adjective **ill** in item (7). Depending on the negative connotation of the noun disappointment, item (8) some erroneous responses have been

**bad.** By the same token, the positive connotation of the nouns admiration (item 9) and devotion (item 10), some wrong responses have been **good**.

The number and rate of the erroneous responses that may be ascribed to guessing are (381, 29.81%).

The total number and rate of the incorrect responses that may be ascribed to communication strategies are (664, 51.97%).

The results of error source are summarized in Table (4):

**Table (4) Results of Error Source**

Error Source	No. of Incorrect Answers	Percentage
Interlingual Transfer	71	5.55
Intralingual Transfer	265	20.73
Context of Learning	278	21.75
Communication Strategies	664	51.97
Total	1278	100

Table (4) shows that the highest source of error is communication strategies which constitute more than half of the errors (51.97%) and the lowest source of error is interlingual transfer which comprises (5.55%) of the errors.

## 5. Conclusion

1- Question (1) measures the subjects' responses at the recognition level. The number and rate of the correct responses are (473, 47.3%) while those of the incorrect ones are (527, 52.7%) which reflect that the subjects face difficulty in recognizing the intensifying adjectives. In question (1) the subjects are required to tick the sentences that contain intensifying adjectives and to underline the intensifying adjective.

2- Question (2) measures the subjects responses at the production level. The number and rate of the incorrect responses are (751, 75.1%) which reflect that the subjects face difficulty at the production level. In this question, the subjects are required to fill the blank with the correct intensifying adjective but most of the subjects fail to use the correct intensifying adjectives.

3- The results of the whole test are ( 722, 36.1%) for the correct responses and (1278, 63.9%) for the incorrect responses which reveal that the subjects face difficulty in using the intensifying adjectives.

4- The subjects' poor performance may be ascribed to to the following error sources arranged according to the number and rate of each:

I- Highest number and rate of the error source is related to communication strategies (664, 51.97%). Communication strategies comprises approximation and guessing. The frequency and rate of incorrect responses that may be attributed to approximation are (283, 22.14%) while those that may be ascribed to guessing are (381, 29.81%).

II- The context of learning is the second error source with frequency and rate of incorrect responses (278, 21.75%). The incorrect responses that may be attributed to the context of learning may be caused by most of grammar text books and English teachers do not focus on intensifying adjectives or even mention them.

III- Intralingual Transfer is the third source of error. The number and rate of the incorrect responses that may be assigned to Intralingual Transfer are (265, 20.73%). The first factor of Intralingual Transfer is overgeneralization. The number and percentage of errors that may be attributed to overgeneralization are (240, 18.77%). A considerable



number of the incorrect responses consider the adjectives in items (2, 6, and 10) intensifying adjectives while they are not.

The second factor of intralingual transfer is incomplete rule applications. The number and percentage of the erroneous responses that may be ascribed to incomplete rule applications are (15, 1.17%).

False concepts hypothesized is the third factor of intralingual transfer. The frequency and rate of the incorrect responses that possibly attributed to false concepts hypothesized are (10, 0.78%).

IV- The lowest number and rate of errors ascribed to interlingual transfer. (71, 5.55%). The cause behind committing such errors depend on the direct translation from Arabic (the subjects' mother language) to English.

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### **Appendix**

Q1 Tick the sentences that contain **intensifying adjectives** and underline the **intensifying adjective**:

- 1- He is a true scholar.
- 2- That was the precise reason.
- 3- This is a feeble jock.
- 4- I was in an utter catastrophe.
- 5- It was a big decision.
- 6- Mr. Brown is an old friend of mine.
- 7- The mission was a great failure.
- 8- He is a heavy sleeper.
- 9- He is a real hero.
- 10- He is an occasional visitor in the hotel.

Q2 Fill the blanks with the suitable **intensifying adjective**:

- 1- This is a(n) -----nonsense.
- 2- This job needs a(n) ----- effort.
- 3- He is in a(n) ----- agony.
- 4- She lives in a ----- bliss.
- 5- The audience was in a(n) ----- fury.
- 6- He is a(n) ----- idiot.
- 7- This is a(n) ----- madness.
- 8- Her answer gives him a(n) ----- disappointment.
- 9- He shows a ----- admiration for her.
- 10- The soldiers have ----- devotion to their country.