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Van Dijk's Model as a Reading Strategy to Improve EFL University Students' Mitigation and Intensification Strategies

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Abstract

Mitigation and intensification are discursive strategies that allow language users to adjust the tone, emphasize key points, or soften statements depending on the communicative context. However, many EFL learners face difficulties in identifying and effectively applying these strategies due to limited exposure to discourse frameworks. Van Dijk's Model, with its focus on macrostructures, microstructures, and superstructures, provides a systematic approach to comprehending and producing language that integrate these strategies effectively. This study explores the application of Van Dijk's Model as a reading strategy to enhance EFL university students' use of mitigation and intensification strategies in written and spoken discourse. The research employs a quantitative method design. An experimental study is conducted with two groups of EFL learners: an experimental group with 30 students is taught using Van Dijk's Model and a control group with 30 students using conventional reading strategies. Data are collected by distributing a questionnaire that consists of (10) items to assess learners' ability to recognize and use mitigation and intensification strategies and gather feedback on the effectiveness of the approach. Results indicate that the experimental group show significant improvement in their ability to identify and employ mitigation and intensification strategies in reading compared to the control group. Learners in the experimental group demonstrate enhanced awareness of the nuances of tone, emphasis, and contextual adaptation in their discourse, highlighting the pedagogical value of Van Dijk's Model.

Keyword: *Van Dijk's Model, Discursive Strategies, Mitigation, Intensification*



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المستخلص:

التخفيف والتكثيف هما استراتيجيتان خطابيتان تُمكنان مُستخدمي اللغة من تعديل نبرتهم، والتأكيد على النقاط الرئيسية، أو تخفيف حدة العبارات بناءً على السياق التواصل. ومع ذلك، يواجه العديد من مُتعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية صعوبات في تحديد هذه الاستراتيجيات وتطبيقها بفعالية نظراً لقلة اطلاعهم على أطر الخطاب. يُوفر نموذج فان دايك، بتركيزه على البنى الكبرى والصغرى والفوقية، نهجاً منهجياً لفهم وإنتاج لغة تُدمج هذه الاستراتيجيات بفعالية. تستكشف هذه الدراسة تطبيق نموذج فان دايك كاستراتيجية قراءة لتعزيز استخدام طلاب الجامعات المُتعلمين للغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية لاستراتيجيات التخفيف والتكثيف في الخطاب المكتوب والمنطوق. يعتمد البحث على تصميم المنهج الكمي. أُجريت دراسة تجريبية على مجموعتين من مُتعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية: مجموعة تجريبية تضم ٣٠ طالباً تُدرّس باستخدام نموذج فان ديك، ومجموعة ضابطة تضم ٣٠ طالباً تستخدم استراتيجيات القراءة التقليدية. جُمعت البيانات من خلال توزيع استبيان يتكون من (١٠) بنود لتقييم قدرة المُتعلمين على التعرف على استراتيجيات التخفيف والتكثيف واستخدامها، وجمع الملاحظات حول فعالية النهج. تشير النتائج إلى أن المجموعة التجريبية تُظهر تحسناً كبيراً في قدرتها على تحديد استراتيجيات التخفيف والتكثيف واستخدامها في القراءة مقارنةً بالمجموعة الضابطة. يُظهر المُتعلمون في المجموعة التجريبية وعياً متزايداً بالفروق الدقيقة في النبرة والتأكيد والتكيف السياقي في خطابهم، مما يُبرز القيمة التربوية لنموذج فان ديك.

الكلمات المفتاحية: نموذج فان ديك، الاستراتيجيات الخطابية، التخفيف، التكثيف

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1. Introduction

Learning a second language, especially EFL can be defined as the process of how learners not only acquire English as a foreign language but also learning how to use it in classrooms appropriately. Among these are mitigation and intensification strategies. They are pragmatic features that enable speakers to modulate the key aspects of messages. Such strategies are crucial in many and diverse communicative situations, helping people navigate complex or sensitive social interactions, observing politeness or stressing important information and ideas. However, difficulties experienced by EFL learners using these strategies are that they depend on the use of both linguistic forms and pragmatic conventions, social expectations and obligations that characterize real-life communicative interactions (Fraser, 1980, p. 342; Holmes, 1984, p. 346).

In view of this, one of the possible ways to promote the sensitization of EFL learners of using mitigation and intensification strategies is by applying Van Dijk's model of discourse analysis as a reading strategy. By comparing and contrasting earlier mentioned models, it is clear that Van Dijk's model focuses on the interrelation between the cognitive and discursive factors while providing understanding of the texts meaning and production. Through the application of Van Dijk's framework, learners are able to easily understand how language functions at the discourse level as well as how certain features of context may affect language use (Van Dijk, 1980). This awareness can, therefore, promote pragmatic competence, making learners use mitigation and intensification strategies in their own speech effectively.

This research addresses two key aspects: firstly, it investigates reading as a decoding skill; secondly, it explores the application of interactive discursive strategies and secondly, it encompasses the creation of interactive language strategies. In numerous educational contexts, reading is regarded as a foundational element in language instruction, as it exposes learners to a broad spectrum of linguo-discursive practices that facilitate language development (Grabe, 2009, p. 14). Integrating Van Dijk's socio-cognitive model into reading instruction serves not only to deepen learners' engagement with text but also to reinforce their cognitive and discursive competencies. This integration is particularly effective in fostering learners' productive language skills, with specific emphasis on the strategic use of mitigation and intensification as discursive tools.

This research aims to address the following question: To what extent does applying Van Dijk's model improve EFL learners' use of mitigation and intensification strategies?

By responding to this question, this study intends to make a tentative contribution to the literature of discourse analysis, reading pedagogy and pragmatic competence in EFL. Learning a second language, and in particular English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is not only a matter of acquisition of linguistic competence, but also of learning a language to be used in context. When it comes to interpersonal communication, there are many technical aspects of the language one needs to learn and follow, in order to make a good impression on whoever you are speaking to. One of these functions is the expressions of mitigation and intensification which both play a productive role in the speaker's ability to modulate the degree of politeness and force in their discourse. Such strategies are essential in different communicative situations. As they allow speakers to manage difficult social relationships, display or mark politeness, or to highlight specific features. However, EFL learners face challenges in employing these strategies effectively, as doing so requires a nuanced understanding of both linguistic forms and sociocultural norms (Fraser, 1980, p. 342; Holmes, 1984, p. 346).

One approach that might contribute to exert an impact on EFL learners' employment of mitigation and intensification strategies is to make use of Van Dijk's model as a reading strategy. Van Dijk's model highlights the way in which cognitive activity and discursive structures interact, providing a view on the way texts are interpreted and produced. Reading the texts in this way would allow learners to explore the functioning of language at the level of the discourse, and to see how situational factors impact on language choices (Van Dijk, 1980). Such awareness can then facilitate the development of pragmatic competence and allow learners to more successfully use mitigation and intensification strategies in their own production.

This study is of interest in which the act of reading is commonly seen as a nurturing ground for broader language competence, where the language learner is exposed to diverse linguistic and discursive forms (Grabe, 2009, p.6). It aims to capitalize on the cognitive and discursive knowledge they attain from reading by embedding Van Dijk's model in reading instruction to enhance their production, in particular, mitigating and intensifying strategies. This research aims to address a question: To

what extent does applying Van Dijk's model improve EFL learners' ability to use mitigation and intensification strategies?

By answering this question, the study seeks to contribute to the growing body of literature on the intersection of discourse analysis, reading pedagogy, and pragmatic competence in EFL.

2. Literature Review

Van Dijk has had a major impact on discourse analysis. Through a number of his major works he has developed a model which covers the interplay of cognition, discourse structure and language in context.

2.1 Overview of Van Dijk's model

One of the prominent and widely used frameworks for discourse analysis is represented by that of Van Dijk and his concern with the cognitive, text-based and social aspects of discourse (Van Dijk, 2014, pp. 19–21). In the terms of Van Dijk (2008), the study of discourse on the mere textual surface does not suffice as the text is just the end result of a more complex production process which needs to be discussed as well. If one wants to account for why a text has a certain structure, one must understand the cognitive and social factors that contribute to its design.

Through his extensive body of work, Van Dijk developed a comprehensive discourse analytical framework that integrates multiple structural levels of analysis. He identifies three interrelated components that operate in a mutually supportive manner: social cognition, which refers to the mental representations and shared knowledge guiding discourse production and comprehension; text structure, which encompasses the organizational and linguistic features of discourse; and social analysis, which examines the broader sociocultural and institutional contexts in which discourse occurs (Van Dijk, 2008, pp. 19–21).

Furthermore, Van Dijk sees a text consisting of several text structures or levels, each of which supports one another. He divides it into three levels of text structure: macrostructure, superstructure, and microstructure. In macrostructure, the thematic elements are the global meaning of discourse and also generally describe the theme of discourse on each news topic in which there are essential points that refer back to the central theme. In superstructure, a text or discourse generally has a flow scheme from the introduction to the end. The flow shows how the parts in the text are

arranged and ordered to form a unified meaning. Lastly, the microstructure consists of semantic analysis, syntax analysis, lexicon analysis, and stylistic.

2.2 Mitigation and Intensification Strategies

Discursive strategies are intentional plans of discursive practices and tactics employed in discourses to achieve particular societal, political, psychological or linguistic goals (Reisigl and Wodak, 2009, p.88). Reisigl and Wodak (2001, p. 44; 2009, p. 88) identify five discursive strategies central to the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA). These strategies are: Nomination/Referential, Predication, Argumentation, Perspectivation, and Intensification/Mitigation. They are typically employed to construct either positive representations of the self or negative representations of the other. Specifically, intensification and mitigation strategies are used to amplify or downplay the force of utterances depending on communicative goals and context (Wodak, 2001, p. 73).

In Ruth Wodak's Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), strategies of intensification and mitigation are essential for understanding how speakers and writers modulate the force of their statements to influence addressees. These strategies adjust the illocutionary force—the intended impact—of utterances, either amplifying (intensifying) or downplaying (mitigating) their effect.

Intensification strategy is used to make the communicative effect more forceful or more assertive. This may use strong linguistic cues such as repetition, a bid for emphasis, hyperbole or modal expressions (e.g. must, absolutely). These are the methods employed to underscore the speaker's dedication to a proposition or the urgency of an issue. On the other hand, mitigation strategy is referred to soften up statements, involving to make the content weaker, and then mitigate it or less aggressive. Ways to mitigate to expressions include hedging expressions (e.g. perhaps, somewhat), passive constructions, or euphemistic lexicons. Such strategies allow for more diplomatic or less certain presentation of controversial claims (Wodak, 2001, pp. 72–74).

These strategies, as Wodak (2001) highlights, are context-specific and constitute an important part of the discursive construction of social realities. Through analysis of how intensification and mitigation are employed, underlying ideologies, power relations, and persuasive strategies in discourse can be discovered. Such strategies

are key to analyzing the impact of discourse on reality and on public opinion, and to sustain or subvert power within society.

2.3 The Role of Reading in Language Development

Reading is essential in second language learning process since it provides various linguistic input to the learners and stimulates cognitive processing of language. As a receptive skill, reading affords learners the opportunity to be exposed to real language tangible and rich syntactic structures, extensive vocabulary in context. This kind of exposure is necessary for linguistic acquisition to take place and to produce learners who appreciate solid constructions and subtle uses of language (Krashen, 1985, p. 20). Additionally, reading has a major role in the construction of metalinguistic awareness, a skill that is essential to appreciate how language works in terms of both syntax and discourse structure (Alderson, 2000, p. 5).

Reading not only has linguistic benefits but also contributes to the cognitive and affective components of language acquisition. It allows learners to go beyond the receiving stage to processing at deeper levels, such as inferencing and critical thinking, which are necessary for comprehension and for producing coherent discourse (Grabe & Stoller, 2011, p. 11). On the one hand, reading skills let learners look up cultural and pragmatic implications of language - including how politeness, tone, and emphasis are used in different situations. This is very much in line with objectives of promoting mitigation and intensification strategies, for learners are able to see and evaluate these pragmatic devices in real texts.

The inclusion of structured reading skills (such as Van Dijk's model) provides an even greater opportunity for these benefits as instruction can prompt learners to break apart and examine texts. The solution enhances not only the students' comprehension but, more importantly, it provides them with the tools to transform their awareness of discourse patterns into productive language. In so doing, reading is transformed from a mode of input to a vehicle for developing more general communicative competence such as pragmatic and discursive strategies necessary for the successful use of one's second language in interaction.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a quantitative method, true experimental design to examine the effect of utilizing van Dijk's model as a reading strategy on EFL students'

intensification and mitigation strategies. In this design, the independent variable is (van Dijk's model) that is administered only to the experimental group, while the control group does not receive the treatment. Both groups are subsequently subjected to posttest, with their performance analyzed to assess the influence of the independent variable. If the experimental group achieves significantly higher scores than the control group, the improvement is attributed to the impact of van Dijk's model.

3.2 Participants

The participants in this study were (60) students of University of Tikrit/ College of Education for Women in the Department of English/ Second year in the academic year 2023/2024. They were divided into two groups, experimental and control each with (30) students who were chosen randomly.

3.3 Instrument

A questionnaire is constructed by the researchers to elicit students' feedback after the treatment (See Appendix 1). The questionnaire contained 10 items in which students should have expressed whether after learning CDA techniques their opinion had changed toward English language or the phenomenon of the language itself or not. The questionnaire 's items are divided as follows: Items from 1-5 aims to measure students' ability to comprehend the mitigation strategy through the actions of the story and then using this strategy in their communication; Item 6-10 aims at measuring students' ability to identify intensification strategy and how to use them.

Students' answers are divided into 5 scales according to Likert scale of five points scale to examine how much participants in both control and experimental groups (always) or (Never) agree with each statement.

3.4 Procedure

The study employed a pretest-treatment-posttest design carried out over a period of six weeks, two hours per week. The experimental group is treated by applying Van Dijk's model of CDA whereas the control group is treated by the conventional method of teaching. The instruction of Van Dijk's model of CDA was considered as the independent variable while the EFL students' mitigation and intensification strategies were considered to be the dependent variable.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Results

Item Discrimination Index of Questionnaire

Item discrimination index is whether an item can discriminate among those who have high scores from those with low scores in the overall test (Rezigalla et al., 2024). How the effectiveness of questionnaire items in discriminating among the high and low scorers was analyzed. It is an indicator of how much a test can discriminate between students who performs well relative to the overall scale score performance (Panjaitan et al., 2018). By taking the average score and the SD of two groups, t-test for independent samples can be applied to determine if the difference between the two is significant. All the calculated t-value for the items (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10) are greater than the critical t (2.05) at a dof (28) and significant level (0.05), thus implying that all the items are statistically significant as seen in the following table:

Table (1)

The Mean Score, Standard Deviation, and the T-Value of the Mitigation and Intensification Strategies Scale Items

No.	Upper Group		Lower Group		Calculated t- Value	Critical t- Value	Level Of Significance 0.05
	Mean Score	Standard Deviation	Mean Score	Standard Deviation			
1	4.53	1.06	3.20	1.03	2.23	2.05	Statistically Significant
2	4.53	0.74	3.00	1.25	4.07		
3	4.40	0.83	3.13	1.30	3.18		
4	4.47	0.64	3.47	1.46	2.43		
5	3.53	0.99	2.07	1.16	2.18		
6	4.33	0.82	3.47	0.99	2.61		
7	4.87	0.52	3.53	1.36	3.56		

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8	4.87	0.35	2.73	1.49	5.41		
9	4.53	0.64	3.10	1.33	2.10		
10	4.20	0.68	2.80	1.21	3.92		

Experimental and Control Groups of Using Mitigation and Intensification Strategies

In order to find out the difference between the students' mitigation and intensification strategies, the mean score of the experimental group is 117.53 with a standard deviation of 9.05. Whereas the control group is 98.06 with a standard deviation of 5.23. The calculated t-value is 10.193, which is found to be higher than the tabulated t-value, which is 2.000. The degree of freedom is 58, with a level of significance of 0.05. Thus, the research question, which states that (To what extent does applying Van Dijk's model improve EFL learners' ability to use mitigation and intensification strategies?) is in favour of the experimental group as shown in table (2).

Table (2)

**Means, Standard Deviation, and t-Values of the Two Groups
Towards Mitigation and Intensification Strategies**

Group	No. of students	Mean	SD.	T-Value		DF	Level Of Significance
EG.	30	117.53	9.05	Calculated	Tabulated	58	0.05
CG.	30	98.06	5.23	10.193	2.000		

4.2 Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate a significant improvement in the performance of the experimental group (EG) over the control group (CG) in their use of mitigation and intensification strategies. This is evident from the statistical analysis of the mean scores, standard deviations, and t-values obtained.

The experimental group, which underwent instruction incorporating Van Dijk's model as a reading strategy, achieved a higher mean score (117.53) with a standard

deviation of 9.05. In contrast, the control group, which did not receive the same targeted instruction, had a mean score of 98.06 with a standard deviation of 5.23. The calculated t-value of 10.193 far exceeds the critical t-value (2.000) at a significance level of 0.05, indicating that the observed differences are statistically significant.

This finding indicates that incorporating Van Dijk's discourse analysis model into reading instruction can considerably help EFL learners employ mitigation and intensification strategies appropriately. Such superior results obtained by the experimental group is probably due to their engagement in guided reading activities that focus on cognitive and discursive aspects underlying language. When students read texts through Van Dijk's approach, it was possible to understand how language is used in a pragmatic way and to use this information in their communicative doing.

In addition, the experimental groups' skill to adapt tone and stress in communication demonstrates a developed pragmatic competence. This is consistent with findings demonstrating the pedagogic utility of an explicit approach to teaching pragmatics for enhancing the ability of learners to engage with the complete microprocess of human social interaction involving language in context (Fraser, 1980; Holmes, 1984).

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this research illustrates how effective Van Dijk's model is as a pedagogical device encouraging EFL learners to develop both their mitigation and intensification strategies. Accordingly, evidence from the present study contributes to a growing body of studies which demonstrate the positive effects of discourse-driven approaches on the input and output modes of language use. Findings revealed that the use of the pragmatic cueing aids was significantly higher for the experimental group (those who were trained based on this model) in comparison to the use of the same tools by the control group. This phenomenon, thereby, suggests the relevance of incorporating DA approaches into EFL pedagogy particularly in the development of pragmatic competence and situation language use.

The positive performance of experimental group points to several serious implications. First, that, when taught through systematic and discourse orientated approaches, reading provides a vehicle for the development of receptive and productive language skills. The participants who were trained according to Van Dijk's model were more likely to comprehend the pragmatic functions of language

and to use these functions more efficiently in communication. This suggests an improvement not just in their linguistic proficiency but also in their sociolinguistic and pragmatic knowledge.

In sum, EFL instructors can utilize Van Dijk's framework or similar discursive analysis systems to contribute to EFL curricula. One way to achieve this is by teaching readings and sets of operations that demand that students take apart the cognitive and discursal structure of texts and, in so doing, engage more meaningfully with language.

Furthermore, EFL teachers should be trained to use discourse-focused methodologies adequately. Teachers should be trained on how to help students study the interrelation of language and context.

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Appendix (1)

No.	Items	1 Never	2 Rarely	3 Sometimes	4 Often	5 Always
1.	I deliberately use stronger, more emphatic language to highlight important points.					
2.	I use modifiers like "very," "extremely," or "incredibly" to intensify the meaning of key terms.					
3.	I repeat important words or phrases multiple times to emphasize their significance.					
4.	I use superlatives like "best," "worst," or "most important" to highlight the magnitude of a concept.					
5.	I employ qualifiers like "extremely," "significantly," or "considerably" to amplify the degree of an attribute.					
6.	When expressing a disagreement, I would use hedging devices (e.g., "I think", "It seems to me",					

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	"Perhaps", "Maybe") to soften my stance.					
7.	When making a request, I would use polite expressions (e.g., "Could you...", "Would you mind...", "I was wondering if...") to mitigate the imposition.					
8.	When giving a criticism or negative feedback, I would use indirect language (e.g., "The presentation could have been stronger in this area") to avoid sounding too rough or confrontational.					
9.	When expressing uncertainty or lack of knowledge, I would use qualifying phrases (e.g., "I'm not sure", "I may be mistaken", "As far as I know") to acknowledge the limitations of my understanding.					
10.	When making a claim or assertion, I would use modal verbs (e.g., "may", "might", "could", "should") to soften the strength of the statement.					

The Questionnaire (Mitigation and Intensification Strategies)