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Problems and Difficulties Encountered by EFL University Students in Using Adjective Intensifiers

ABSTRACT

Adjective intensifiers play an important role in the process of communication in conveying the attitude of the speaker or writer. They are used to focus the reader's attention as well as to enhance the meaning of adjectives in their writing. The main problem is that English foreign language learners lack the ability to use these intensifiers in relevant register. Also, these intensifiers may perform syntactic and semantic functions and it may overlap and cause ambiguity. This study aims at highlighting the importance of using these intensifiers in written discourse. This study hypothesizes the following:

1. English foreign language learners use adjective intensifiers in their writing.
2. English foreign language learner's vocabulary is insufficient, and thus they try to use the intensifiers in order to hide their lexical insufficiency.
3. Misuse of intensifiers may lead to semantic or pragmatic misunderstanding and affects negatively on communication.
4. The grammatical proficiency of English foreign language learners does not confirm the appropriate use of intensifiers in written production.

This work is limited to the fourth-year students in translation department, college of Arts, Tikrit University. The researcher takes the following procedures:

1. Constructing T-Test.
2. Dividing the test into: a Pre-Test, and a post test.
3. Calculating the mean score statistically in both of the two tests.
4. The researcher discusses the results of both test in order to prove the hypotheses.

In this study, the researcher adopts Quirk et al. (1999) model concerning the intensifiers.

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1. The Theoretical Background:

The use of intensifiers take a great attention from the scholars and researchers. Bolinger (1972: 17) refers to intensifiers as “any device that scales a quality whether up or down or somewhere between the two”

Quirk et al. (1985: 589) denote that this term refers to the expression that have a strong effect on meaning. They strengthen the meaning. They, also have a lowering effect on the elements they qualify. These intensifiers are referred to as “broadly concerned with the semantic category of degree”. In addition, these intensifiers is considered as devices to mark intensification. Allerton (1987: 18) make a distinction between degree intensifiers and degree Verbal adverbial. He mentions that there is an overlap between them due to their semantic similarities.

Partington (1993: 178) describes intensification as “a vehicle for impressing, praising, persuading insulting, and generally influencing the listener’s reception of the message”.

Examples:

1. It’s a very interesting song.
2. Everybody is extremely excited.

Ito and Tagliamonte (2003: 258) describe one of the features of intensifiers. They mention that intensifiers are liable to change as old forms, and become insufficient and new form that are established by speakers.

Carter et al. (2011: 255) identify intensifiers as adverbs or adverbial phrases that show emphasis and add a strong meaning Thus, intensification is used in spoken and written language in order to convey a message in an expressive way and to reinforce the speaker’s position besides their attitude.

3. He should be happy because his son is enough intelligent.

1. 1. Classification of Intensifiers:

1. 1. 1. Quirk et al. (1985) Classification of Intensifiers:

In this study, the researcher adopts Quirk et al. (1985) classification because it is more comprehensive to describe the individual categories. Quirk et al. (ibid: 589) denote that intensifier are “broadly concerned with the semantic category of degree. He mentions that “this term is not used only to refer to an increase in intensification.” Rather “an intensifying subjunct indicates a point on an abstractly conceived intensity scale; and the point indicated may be relatively low or relatively high”.

Depending on their characteristic of strengthening or weakening the meaning of the item they refers to, Quirk et al. (1985: 589 - 590) make a distinction between two categories of intensifiers. They are amplifiers and downtoners. This distinction is made to show the semantic roles that is performed by the intensifiers.

1. 1. 2. Amplifiers:

Amplifiers are intensifying devices that go up from a supposed rule for. They are used to increase the semantic category of degree. (Ibid: 590).

Example:

4. The teachers fully appreciate our problems. The class of Amplifiers is divided into:

A. Maximizers.

B. Boosters

Maximizers play an important role in expressing the highest possible degree, and they refer to the upper end of a scale. These maximizers are (quiet, fully, extremely, perfectly, entirely, absolutely, altogether, and completely) (ibid:590).

Example:

5. Layla entirely agrees with her.

While boosters express a high degree. Thus, the difference between them is that: boosters show only a high point in a scale not an extreme one. These boosters are: (Violently, well, a good deal eith, terribly strongly, so, much, severely, a great deal and well) (ibid: 591).

Example:

6. Ali much prefer the new procedures.

Quirk et al. (1985: 591) emphasize that “the distinction between maximizers and boosters is not hard. In particular, when maximizers are in the middle position, they often express a very high degree, whereas when they are in the end position, they are more likely to convey their absolute meaning of extreme degree. For example, many speakers may see very little difference in force between the maximizer utterly and the booster violently when these are in the middle position”.

7. They utterly detested him (Quirk et al, 1985: 591) violently.

1. 1. 3. Downtoners:

Downtoners are softening elements that reduce the intensity of an adjective. They have lowering effect usually scalling down from a supposed rule (Quirk et al., 1985: 590).

Example:

8. Everything we do is newer enough for her.

Downtoners are divided into four groups:

A. compromisers

B. approximators

C. diminishers

D. minimizers

Compromisers reduce the effect of the element they modify slightly. They include (sort of, kind of, quiet, rather sufficiently, and more or less and enough) (ibid: 597).

Example:

9. What kind of appreciation do you need?

Approximators is another subcategory of downtoners. They “serve to express an approximation to the force of verb, while indicating that the verb concerned expresses more relevant”. They include the following items (nearly, almost, practicallyg as good as, and virtually).

Example:

10. He almost forgot.

Diminishers are described as intensifying devices, they “scale downwards and roughly mean ‘to a small extent, “Diminishers include items

like: (partially, slightly, somewhat, quiet, mildly, partly, to some extent, a little, in some respect (Quirk et al., 1985: 598).

Example:

11. These chairs must be quite valuable.

Lastly, minimizers can be viewed as the opposite of maximizer. they express the lowest possible degree. This category includes expressions like (little, hardly, barely, and scarcely) (ibid).

Example:

12. My parents hardly praise me.

1. 2. Functions of Intensifiers (Amplifiers and Downtoners):

Biber et al (1999: 565) deal with the distribution of intensifiers across register like academic prose and conversation. They note that amplifiers are more common in conversation than in academic prose. They mention that amplifiers have three functions:

1. Expressing Certainty
2. Showing Precision
3. Increasing Intensity

These amplifiers are used to modify the adjectives.

Example:

13. This soup is very delicious.

The word very here is used to increase the intensity of the adjective delicious.

In order to express certainty, the amplifier definitely can be used, for example.

14. This is definitely the best book that I've ever read.

To show precision, the amplifier exactly can be used for example:

15. The plane took off at exactly ten o'clock.

On the other hand, downtoners have three common functions:

1. Showing imprecision
2. expressing doubt.
3. reducing intensity.

For Example:

16. This bread is pretty good.

The word pretty here is used to reduce the intensity of the statement.

17. He is probably the best friend I've ever seen.

The word probably here is used to show doubt. To conclude, the main function of intensifiers is either to diminish or amplify the intensity degree of word, phrase or the sentence it modifies (Biber et al., 1999: 565).

1. 3. Factors Affecting the Distribution of Intensifiers:

1. 3. 1. Gender:

Jespersen (1922: 250) says that the use of amplifiers is the characteristic of women's speech. Thus, the main reason which makes women use intensifiers more than men is that women are more emotive, and they tend to use these expressions to convey their emotions (Tag liamonte Roberts, 2005: 289).

Lakoff (1975:55) shows that most women use amplifiers as a prominent feature of “powerless language”. She adds that most women use certain expressions, for example:

18. I like him so much (ibid).

The amplifier so is used here to ‘weasel on’ the intensity of her emotion. This means that the semantic vagueness of so affected the adjective much.

1. 3. 2. Age:

It is noted that there are differences between young and old speakers in the use of intensifiers. Tagliamonte (2008: 372) points out that age is an important factor which has an important role in the distribution of intensifiers. He says that old speakers prefer to use less number of intensifiers than the young speakers. For example the intensifier very is non-existent or infrequent in the use of children whereas this intensifier is most common in adult use.

1. 4. The Development of English Intensifiers:

Blinger (1972: 18) describes the historical development of the intensification system as “fevered invention and competition”. These developments reflect language variation and grammatical change. Moreover, adding new forms like [-ly] suffixation to the intensification system is unwanted and people try to use multiple word expressions in order to boost the meaning of an expression to reach the highest degree.

Gonzalez-Diaz (2008: 225) indicates that the intensifier very loses its intensifying force in the recent years. He adds that intensification system is affected by various process. These processes are: delexicalization, grammaticalization, layering and renewal.

Thus, some of the changes that occur in the intensification system are reflected by these processes in order to “keep the category in constant fluctuation”.

1. 5. The position of Amplifiers:

Quirk et al. (1985: 595) find that:

“Middle and end positions are open to most adverbs that are amplifiers; noun phrases and prepositional phrases are restricted to end position. In positive declarative clauses middle position is favored for both boosters and maximizers when we want to express a scaling upwards, but end position is preferred for maximizers when we want to denote the absolute upper extreme of the scale”.

For Example:

19. He completely denied it (ibid).

In this example, the maximizer completely occurs in the middle position and its effect is “close to that of the booster strongly or the emphaziser really, which can have a sealing effect similar to that of boosters”.

Example:

20. He strongly / really denied it (ibid: 590).

But when completely occurs in end position; for example.

21. He denied it completely (ibid: 596).

We can find that the intention is closer to:

22. He denied it in every respect (ibid).

Quirk et al. (1985:596) denote that “some people find only end position acceptable”.

23. He completely dissected the animal? (ibid).

24. He dissected the animal completely ‘into all the prescribed parts.

Thus, Quirk et al, (1985: 595) refer to the fact that the position of an amplifier in a sentence is important and thinks that it leads to a change of meaning.

1. 5. Intensification and Writing:

Writing is a fundamental skill in every domain of life. Most of the educational institutions have made academic writing as “a fact of life for scholars” (Demir, 2019: 149) It is essential for writers in order to persuade the readers on their claims. The main goal of the writer in this respect is to make the readers believe on the utterances of the author. After that the writer persuades the audience to attach to the utterances to spread the information.

Academic writing is affected by many linguistic elements. These elements are:

- A. Complexity.
- B. Objectivity.
- C. Formality.
- D. Precision.
- E. Explicitness.
- F. Responsibility

Hyland (2005) cited in (Demir, 2019: 151) mentions that linguistic components can be used in a rhetoric manner to discover the writer’s intended or real message submitted to the reader. These linguistic components are:

- A. Adjectives.
- B. Adverbs.
- C. Evaluative Commentary.
- D. Imperative.

Rhetoric is necessary for making claims, organization of the argument, creating a sense to the reader, clarity of the claim and stylistic appropriateness and persuasion. Thus, rhetoric must be used in order to have an effective writing (Hyland, 2005) cited in (Demir, 2019: 151).

Hyland and Milton (1997: 183) find that most second language writers use assertion and claims more than speakers of British English. Hinkel (2002 cited in Hinkel 2005 :31) suggests that most second language writers produce written prose that seems to be overstated with many exaggerated claims due to the comparative prevalence of intensifiers.

Intensification acts as one of the marked featureds of second language writing. The excessive use of intensifiers in second language student writing is due to the cross-cultural differences. These differences occur in the function of hyperboles in writing (Lorenze, 1998: 59).

2. The Practical Part:

The procedures have conducted by the researcher to prove the hypotheses of the present research. These procedures are summarized as follows:

The sample of the research consists of (45) students in the English department/ college of Arts/ University of Tikrit for the academic year 2020-2021. The students were selected randomly. They are (29) male (15) female The texts used are taken from the book (Real English Grammar) They are related to the topic of the study These texts are constructed in order to determine the ability of student to recognize and produce the adjective intensifiers in their writing.

A T-Test is constructed by the researcher to assess the performance of the students. It consists of (4) questions. All the questions are in the form of sentences. A test is done by dividing it into a pre-test and a post test. Each test continued for two weeks. The mean score is calculated statistically in both tests. The correct answer of each student should be taken into account. The researcher give (1) score for each correct answer.

Lapin (1975 :39) defines the mean score as the sum of observation values that is divided by the number of observations made.

$$\text{Mean (M)} = \frac{\text{the sum of the scores (} \sum x \text{)}}{\text{The number of the testees (N)}}$$

Where

M = Mean.

\sum = the mathematical verb directing us.

To sum all the measurement.

N= the number of the students.

X= the score of the students.

The researcher applies this formula to find the levels of students.

9. 1. The Pre-Test:

The pre-test continued for two weeks. In the first week, the students are given the first two questions to test the recognition of the intensifiers and they are asked to answer them correctly. In the second week, the students are exposed to the second two questions to test the student's ability to use adjective intensifiers in their writing. These questions should be answered correctly by the students.

The results of these four questions in the pre-Test can be shown in the following table:

Table (1) The scores obtained from the Pre-Test in the first two weeks

Sample No.	Scores of Week 1	Scores of Week 2	Total Scores
1	2	0	2
2	3	1	4
3	0	1	1
4	0	3	3
5	3	0	3
6	1	3	4
7	2	4	6
8	4	0	4
9	2	1	3
10	4	3	7
11	3	4	7
12	0	2	2

13	4	3	7
14	1	3	4
15	2	2	4
16	1	3	4
17	0	4	4
18	0	3	3
19	1	2	3
20	0	0	0
21	3	2	5
22	2	4	6
23	1	3	4
24	0	2	2
25	1	3	4
26	2	3	5
27	4	0	4
28	1	4	5
29	3	1	4
30	0	0	0
31	4	2	6
32	1	3	4
33	2	3	5
34	3	2	5
35	4	1	5
36	2	4	6
37	3	1	4
38	2	1	3
39	1	2	3
40	2	2	4
41	3	2	5
42	4	2	6
43	3	1	4
44	9	4	6

In order to find out the mean of the testees for each week, the researcher applies the formula above:

Table (2) The Mean of the scores for the Pre-Test

Weeks of the Pre-Test	Week 1	Week 2
The Mean	1.954	2.136

To conclude, the testees are very weak in their performance through the first two weeks.

9. 2. The Post-Test:

The post-test is continued for two weeks. The researcher explains the meaning of adjective intensifiers and gives the students general idea about these intensifiers from the point of view of grammar, function, and use.

The students are given one hour to understand and ask any question about these items.

Then, the researcher asks the students to answer the first two questions about the intensifiers. After one week, the students are asked to answer the other two former questions. The researcher concludes that the number of the scores is higher than these in the first pre-test. This result appears clearly in table (3):

Table (3) Scores of the Post-Test through the second two weeks

No. of the Sample	Scores of Week 1	Scores of Week 2	Total Scores
1	5	4	9
2	5	5	10
3	5	4	9
4	5	4	9
5	5	5	10
6	5	5	10
7	5	4	9
8	5	5	10
9	5	5	10
10	5	5	10
11	5	5	10
12	5	5	10
13	5	5	10
14	5	4	9
15	4	5	9
16	5	5	10
17	5	4	9
18	5	5	10
19	4	4	8
20	5	5	10
21	5	5	10
22	5	4	9
23	5	5	10
24	5	4	9
25	5	4	9
26	5	5	10
27	5	5	10
28	4	5	9
29	5	5	10
30	4	4	8
31	5	4	9
32	4	4	8
33	4	4	8
34	4	4	8
35	5	5	10
36	5	5	10
37	4	5	9
38	5	5	10
39	4	5	9
40	5	5	10
41	5	4	9
42	5	4	9
43	4	4	8
44	5	4	9

Table (4) The mean of the scores for the Post-Test

Weeks of the Post-Test	Week 1	Week 2
Mean	4.7	4.5

3. Discussion of the Results:

The results of the pre-test and the post-test show that most of the testees do not know the meaning of adjective intensifiers and how to apply

them in their writing. The researcher notices that there is a difference between the mean of the first two weeks of the pre-test and mean of the latter two weeks of the post-test.

This disagreement between the two test is happened because the testees do not realize how these intensifiers change the meaning of the sentence and how they function. The subject is new for them. But after taking a general idea about adjective intensifiers and their use, they become able to explore the intensifiers modifying the adjectives and how to use them correctly in their writing. The difference between the mean of the Pre-Test and the mean of the Post-Test is shown clearly in the following table:

Table (5) The Mean of the Pre-Test and the Post-Test

Weeks	Pre-Test	Post-Test
Mean	4.09	9.2

The students need to concentrate on vocabulary and grammatical meaning beside the objective and the content of their writing to develop their rhetorical persuasion. Thus, the activities for raising awareness of the students should be used in academic writing to draw the attention to the uses of these intensifiers and their syntactic functions.

4. Conclusion:

- 1.** This study confirms the hypothesis of the researcher, it proves that Iraqi English foreign language learners have difficulties in recognizing and using adjective intensifiers. The students are not able to recognize the different levels of intensity. They cannot use the adjective intensifiers correctly in increasing or decreasing the degree of intensity of the word to which they refer. This may lead to a poor quality of writing.
- 2.** It affirms that misuse of the adjective intensifiers may lead to a negative impact on communication.
- 3.** This study gives a contribution for the educational purposes especially in language teaching and learning. Through this study, the students acquire knowledge of adjective intensifier in relation to grammatical function and communication.
- 4.** This study may help English language instructors to identify the range of weakness that students encounter in producing these intensifiers in their writing.
- 5.** This study can be used to develop and design language learning strategies based on the role of these intensifiers in teaching writing.
- 6.** This study is considered as a guide to language instructor to improve the process of students learning by motivating the students to write through extra writing courses.
- 7.** It seems that adjective intensifier have a pervasive function in written discourse. Thus, it should take more attention in teaching and writing to make communication between the writer and the reader more easy and more effective.

Appendix:

The Questions Used.

Q1: Choose the more appropriate intensifier in each sentence and circle it (choose 5):

1. She spent a quite / an absolutely enormous amount of money.
2. She went with a really / totally good friend called Jasmine.
3. Jasmine isn't very / a bit rich, but she is completely / very generous.
4. She bought some absolutely / very amazing presents.
5. They went to all the really / quite expensive shops in town.
6. Phyllis bought lots of a bit / quite expensive things for herself.
7. She bought some boots which are rather / completely uncomfortable.
8. She's too / fairly lazy to search the shops for bargains.
9. By the time the shops shut, she was such / quite exhausted.
10. They went and had a lovely meal in a terribly / such expensive restaurant (Cavendish, 2005: 188).

Q2: Pick out the intensifiers in the following sentences (choose 5):

1. That's an absolutely beautiful garden.
2. There is a really tiny kitten under the table.
3. There is a girl with quite brightly coloured hair sitting on a very old garden seat.
4. The fence is almost completely untidy.
5. There are some really peaceful butterflies on the roses.
6. That looks like an absolutely long picnic.
7. I wish I could be there it looks so delicious.
8. The weather is almost hot.
9. The gardener must be quite lazy (Cavendish, 2005: 189).

Q3: Add maximizers to the following sentences:

1. Farming contributed to the region's wealth.
2. He was opposed to capital punishment.
3. The treatment is regarded as effective
4. The situation is not clear yet.
5. This latest statement contradicts what was said earlier (O'connell, 2010: 167).

Q4: Add minimizers to the following sentences:

1. E-commerce is a recent development.
2. The results of the enquiry have been delayed.
3. Forty-five per cent of exam candidates achieved A C grade or higher.
4. The operation was partially successful.
5. Over a fifth of the newspaper consists of advertising (Ibid).

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