

## **The Use of English Amplifiers in Argumentative Writing Corpora\***

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This study aims to investigate the features of English amplifiers which are categorized into maximizers and boosters in two writing corpora. Korean EFL students' argumentative writing corpus was compiled from essay contests held at a national university between 2006 and 2012 and the NS professional writing corpus was collected from Opinions in the New York Times. A Chi-square test was performed to determine if there is a significant difference between the two corpora in the use of the amplifiers. An error analysis of the amplifiers used in the EFL corpus was also conducted. In the analysis of overall frequency of amplifiers in the two corpora, it was found that Korean EFL students significantly overused the amplifiers compared to NS professional writers. Although there was no significant difference in the use of maximizers, there existed a significant difference in the use of boosters between Korean EFL students and NS professional writers. The frequency analysis of individual amplifiers used in the two corpora revealed that Korean EFL students significantly overused certain maximizers and boosters (e.g., *quite*, *more*, *very*, and *really*). In the analysis of misused maximizers and boosters, there were many cases of semantic misuse of amplifiers, unnecessary use of amplifiers, and semantic misuse of adjectives in Korean EFL students' writing. Drawing on the findings of the study, pedagogical implications for L2 writing instruction are presented.

**[amplifiers/maximizers/boosters/learner corpus/argumentative writing/  
확장사/극대화/상승사/학습자코퍼스/논증작문]**

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The importance of collocations has been increasingly recognized in second language (L2) acquisition research. Palmer (1933) defined a collocation as “a succession of two or more words that must be learned as an integral whole and not pieced together from its component part” (p. i). Firth (1957) also argued that “you shall know a word by the company it keeps” (p. 11) and stressed the importance of both linguistic and situational contexts of words in the acquisition of vocabulary. Lewis (1993) further suggested that an important part of learning an L2 is closely related to being able to understand and produce lexical phrases as chunks. As such, it has been posited that the appropriate use of collocations constitutes an essential part of L2 competence (Cowie, 1998; Hill, 2000; Nesselhauf, 2003; Schmitt & Carter, 2004; C. Yoon & J. M. Choi, 2015).

Despite the importance of collocations, the nature of collocations was perceived to be difficult to identify and had long remained in a theoretical domain. However, over the last few decades, the advancement of computer technology has led to the resulting development of corpus linguistics. Consequently, large amounts of text have been collected in an electronic form from spoken and written sources of English while increasingly sophisticated software has made possible the investigation of the nature and use of collocations (Granger, 1998; S. Lee, 2006; Recski, 2004).

English amplifiers collocated with adjectives, which constitute one of the aspects of the complex phenomenon of collocations, are considered difficult for L2 learners to use appropriately in authentic contexts (Edmonds & Gudmestad, 2014; Lorenz, 1998; Recski, 2004). Amplifier is “a linguistic term for a modifier that makes no contribution to the propositional meaning of a clause, but serves to enhance and give additional emotional context to the word it modifies” (Kennedy, 2003, p. 469). Several studies on English amplifiers collocated with adjectives have been conducted (S. Lee, 2006; Lorenz, 1998; Paradis, 1997). Great efforts along this line of research have been devoted to presenting general patterns of the use of amplifiers, focusing on the frequency and distribution of amplifiers. Few studies, however, have been conducted on the misuse of amplifiers collocated with adjectives produced by English as a foreign language (EFL) learners. To fill this gap, this study attempts to examine the use of amplifiers collocated with adjectives in Korean EFL students’ argumentative writing in comparison to that of NS professional writing, with a special focus on features of misuse of amplifier-adjective collocations produced by Korean EFL students.

Argumentative essays have been chosen for the analysis of English amplifiers mainly because in argumentative essays, the appropriate use of amplifiers is critical in expressing assertion and emphasis, and taking a committed stance towards the message in question (Lorenz, 1998). Although some studies have used professional writing as a comparison for

the learner corpus, there has been a controversy over whether it is compatible to the learner corpus in terms of the genre and type. Bolton, Nelson, and Hung (2002), for example, used professional research papers as a reference corpus for the learner essays and thus the compatibility between the two corpora has been questioned. Thus, following S. B. Lee and Y. H. Na (2015), this study draws on argumentative essays for the NS professional corpus which serves as a criterion for Korean EFL student corpus which also consists of argumentative essays. This study will not only investigate the similarities and differences in the frequency and distribution of amplifiers in these two corpora but also probe Korean EFL students' misuse of amplifier-adjective collocations from both quantitative and qualitative perspectives. The following research questions guide this study:

- 1) What is the overall frequency of amplifiers used in Korean EFL students' and NS professional writers' corpora?
- 2) What amplifiers are overused and underused by Korean EFL students compared to NS professional writers?
- 3) What are the dominant features of misused amplifier-adjective collocations in Korean EFL student corpus?

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 1. Concepts and Classifications of Amplifiers

The use of intensifiers, which refer to adverbs of degree that modify adjectives, has been explored most comprehensively by Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, and Svartvik (1985). Their framework consists of two categories of intensifiers, that is, amplifiers and downtoners. While amplifiers such as *absolutely*, *completely*, and *highly* are used to express degrees of intensification of an adjective “upwards from an assumed norm,” downtoners such as *rather*, *a bit*, and *somewhat* are perceived as scaling the sense of an adjective “downwards from an assumed norm” (Quirk et al., 1985, p. 445).

The present study is specifically focused on the use of amplifiers, given the nature of the corpora (the genre of argumentative essays) in which marking varying degrees of intensification in accordance with the author's “stance towards the message in question” constitutes an important part of the author's argument (Lorenz, 1998, p. 53). There are two major subcategories of amplifiers, namely, maximizers and boosters (Kennedy, 2003; Quirk et al., 1985). Kennedy (2003, p. 469) notes that maximizers “maximally intensify the sense of an adjective” (e.g., *absolutely correct*, *completely unclear*, *utterly ruthless*) while boosters “signify less than maximal intensity” (e.g., *really annoyed*, *particularly helpful*,

*highly advanced*). The most striking difference between maximizers and boosters lies in their different demands on the gradability of the modified element (Altenberg, 1991; Paradis, 1997; Recski, 2004). As illustrated by Recski (2004), in expressing an absolute degree, maximizers are typically used to modify “non-gradable” items or adjectives that already contain a notion of extreme degree (e.g., *impossible*). In contrast, boosters generally modify “gradable” adjectives (e.g., *beautiful*).

As such, what makes amplifiers (both maximizers and boosters) an important area for corpus-based studies from a collocational point of view is that “they are subject to a number of syntactic, semantic, lexical and stylistic restrictions affecting their use in various ways and fostering a great deal of competition between them” (Altenberg, 1991, p. 198). Therefore, it is important to analyze the use of amplifiers by classifying them into maximizers and boosters which convey different semantic meanings and thus have different collocational relationships.

## 2. Corpus-based Studies on Amplifiers

The use of amplifiers within a corpus-based research framework has been investigated by researchers such as Altenberg (1991), Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, and Finegan (1999), Granger (1998), Kennedy (2003), Lorenz (1998), and Paradis (1997). As the earliest corpus-based study of amplifiers, Altenberg’s (1991) pioneering work examined the types and functions of amplifier collocations in the London Lund Corpus of Spoken English. In a comprehensive investigation of two types of amplifiers (9 maximizers and 15 boosters) used in the spoken corpus, Altenberg uncovered several striking features of the amplifier use in the spoken corpus. Of special interest was the strong predominance of a few frequent items. For example, *quite* among the 8 maximizers used in the spoken corpus was more common than all the other maximizers put together. Among the boosters, *very* and *so* were predominantly used, accounting for more than 90% of the examples in the spoken corpus. Another notable feature was the great predominance of boosters over maximizers among the amplifiers. There were nearly six times as many combinations with boosters as with maximizers, indicating that the boosters are more productive than the maximizers.

Following Altenberg (1991), Paradis (1997), using a million words of spoken British English which comprises dialogues and monologues, not only explored the frequency and distribution of amplifiers but also probed the collocational relationships between amplifiers and adjectives. Out of the 7 maximizers investigated in this study, *quite* was the most common maximizer and among the 8 boosters, *very* was found to be the most frequent booster. In the analysis of adjective-amplifier collocations, Paradis highlighted the finding that there existed some “constraints on the possible combinations of degree modifiers and

gradable adjectives” (p. 41). For example, while gradable adjectives such as *nice* can be modified by gradable boosters such as *very*, non-gradable adjectives such as *impossible* should be associated with non-gradable maximizers such as *absolutely*. Therefore, as the author noted, “combinations such as *very nice* and *absolutely impossible* are natural, whereas *\*very impossible* and *\*absolutely nice* are awkward” (p. 159).

Another study by Biber et al. (1999) investigated the use of amplifiers based on 40-million-word corpora of American and British spoken and written English. The results of the contrastive analysis between the two regionally different corpora indicated that there existed both similarities and differences between British and American English in the use of amplifiers. While certain amplifiers such as *very*, *so*, *really*, *extremely*, *highly*, *entirely*, and *fully* were frequently used in both British and American English, other amplifiers such as *bloody* (prominent only in British English) and *real* (prominent only in American English) revealed different distribution in both regional varieties. With regards to the collocational possibilities between amplifiers and adjectives, the authors noted that although speakers and writers have a vast choice of amplifiers in modifying adjectives to convey the same semantic meaning, some amplifiers (e.g., *fully* and *strongly*) are not interchangeable. They cautioned that amplifiers should be carefully chosen since “even for similar degree adverbs, there are differing preferences across registers, and associations with different adjectives” (p. 564).

In a similar vein, Kennedy (2003) examined the use of amplifiers in a 100-million-word collection of both spoken and written texts in the British National Corpus. Collocations associated with the selective 24 amplifiers (8 maximizers and 16 boosters) were examined, with a focus on which adjectives are strongly bonded with the given amplifiers. The analysis of the strength of the bonding between the two elements revealed that amplifiers tended to collocate strongly with particular words. For example, while “*appalling* is associated strongly with both *absolutely* and *utterly*, *appalling* is not preceded by *entirely*, *fully*, *perfectly*, or *totally*” (p. 474). The author suggested that in addition to gradability, certain grammatical and semantic factors (e.g., whether the meaning of the adjective has negative or positive associations) should be considered in determining which amplifiers are appropriate in a given context.

Although the aforementioned studies of Altenberg (1991), Paradis (1997), Biber et al. (1999), and Kennedy (2003) have offered corpus-based evidence on the frequency and distribution of amplifiers and their collocational use by NS speakers and writers, there still exists a paucity of research on the use of amplifiers in EFL learner corpora which can provide valuable insights into how L2 learners of various backgrounds use amplifiers in naturally occurring data. In this respect, the following three studies are noteworthy since the use of amplifiers in EFL learners’ corpus was investigated in comparison to that of NS counterparts.

Granger (1998) conducted a comparative analysis of amplifier use by using two corpora (a learner corpus of essays produced by advanced French-speaking EFL students and a corpus of essays produced by NS college students). She limited her analysis to amplifiers ending in *-ly*. The analysis of the overall frequency of *ly*-ending amplifiers in the two corpora revealed a statistically significant underuse of them in the NNS corpus. Of the individual amplifiers, however, it was found that only one amplifier *highly* was underused by the learners, and *completely* and *totally* were overused by the learners. An independent analysis of *very*, which the author termed “all-round amplifier” (p. 151) was also reported in the study. The analysis showed a highly significant overuse of *very* by NNS learners, confirming the NNS learners’ tendency to use some amplifiers as “general-purpose” items. The results of the study should be carefully interpreted, however. Although the author reported the general underuse of amplifiers in the NNS corpus, it was true only when *ly*-ending amplifiers are concerned. When aggregated with *very*, the most frequently used amplifier in the NNS corpus, the total number of amplifiers used by NNS learners was in fact higher than that of NS counterparts (NNS: 512 versus NS: 457).

Focusing more on functional aspects of amplifier use, Lorenz (1998) set out to contrast the ways in which NS and NNS writers deal with the problem of how to amplify adjectival qualities. For this study, two NS argumentative essay corpora produced by British teenagers and British university students and two NNS argumentative essay corpora by German teenagers and German university students were used. Rather than checking the corpora for a pre-defined set of amplifiers, the author extracted any amplifier which modified an adjective and had an intensifying function. In the analysis of overall frequency of amplifiers across the four corpora, it was found that the German learners used far more amplifiers than the native speakers. Among the two NNS groups, NNS teenagers used far more amplifiers than NNS college students, implying that “low adjective intensifier counts correlate with linguistic maturity and native-like argumentative writing” (p. 55). In probing the issue of why German learners tended to over-intensify, the author speculated that for lack of a native-like command of vocabulary, NNS writers seemed to feel a greater need to use amplifier-adjective combinations in many contexts where NS students simply used a single suitable adjective. The author further argued that in several cases where the intensifiers are not essential to the argument even to the point they potentially distract from the main points, unwarranted intensification was prevalent in NNS corpora. The overuse of amplifiers by NNS students, as the author evaluated, made their sentences appear wordy, or stylistically out of place.

More recently, Recki (2004) attempted to contrast amplifier-adjective collocations across NNS writing and NS academic spoken discourse. The NNS corpus included argumentative essays produced by Czech, Spanish, Dutch, French, Finnish, Brazilian, and Polish EFL learners. The Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English was used as a NS

reference corpus which included 152 speech events including colloquium, lecture, discussion, defenses, interview, advising, etc. In an analysis of the use of a set of pre-selected amplifiers, it was found that the frequency of amplifier-adjective collocations produced by the EFL learners outnumbered that of NS. The primacy of a few frequent items such as *quite*, *very*, *really*, and *so* was also obvious in the EFL learner corpus. As for the overuse of amplifiers by EFL learners, the author speculated that it could be associated with a colloquial style and an exaggerated tone of the EFL learners that is considered to be inappropriate in formal academic texts. The results of the study, however, should be interpreted with some caution because the learner corpus is in a written mode and the reference corpus is spoken.

As attested by the studies reviewed above, even though several attempts have been made to explore the frequency of amplifiers and the nature of amplifier-adjective collocations in NS versus NNS corpus, little research has been done to examine the use of amplifiers in the Korean EFL learner corpus. As a notable exception, S. Lee (2006) conducted a corpus-based study on amplifiers by using Korean EFL learners' argumentative essays. She, following Granger (1998), limited her analysis of amplifiers to adverbs ending in *-ly*. By using two sets of corpora, argumentative essays produced by Korean EFL university students and argumentative essays produced by American university students, she conducted a descriptive frequency analysis of amplifiers between the two corpora. The overall frequency analysis of the *-ly* amplifiers in the two corpora revealed that Korean EFL student used fewer *-ly* amplifiers in their writing than the NS counterparts. As with Granger (1998), a separate analysis of *very* indicated the Korean EFL learners' overuse of this particular amplifier. The examination of individual *-ly* amplifiers indicated overuse of certain amplifiers such as *really* and underuse of certain other amplifiers such as *highly*. Although S. Lee used the terms such as overuse and underuse in her discussion of the data analysis, there was no way of confirming statistically the overuse or underuse of certain amplifiers since no further statistical analysis was conducted in this study. In addition, since the range of amplifiers included only *-ly* ending adverbs (with a separate analysis of *very*), frequently used amplifiers such as *quite*, *so*, *more*, and *most* were excluded from her analysis. Another qualification of this study is that the study used NS student essays as a reference corpus in which case the assumption is that the "target model" for EFL students is the writing of other students. Following Bolton, Nelson, and Hung (2002), we challenge that assumption, and would instead argue that a better set of reference corpus can be provided by a corpus of professional writers. Thus the present study will use a collection of argumentative essays produced by professional writers as a reference corpus. In addition, as the brief review of the previous studies on amplifiers indicates, there exist virtually no studies conducted on the misuse of amplifiers in EFL learner corpora. Further studies are necessary to probe the dominant features of misused amplifier-adjective collocations in the

learner corpus.

### III. METHOD

#### 1. Data Sources

Two sets of corpora were employed in order to investigate the use of amplifiers in written texts: the Korean EFL students' corpus and the NS professional writers' corpus. The Korean EFL students' corpus was compiled by collecting argumentative essays at Chonnam National University in Korea from 2006 to 2012. The students' self-reported proficiency level was mostly intermediate. The EFL student essays addressed internationally and domestically controversial issues. The Korean EFL corpus contained 159 essays and consisted of 149,190 words. The NS professional corpus was collected from Opinions in the New York Times published online in the year of 2012. Opinions were mainly written by professors, scholars, and senior officials. The NS professional corpus contained 174 essays and consists of 148,257 words. The average length of the essay produced by Korean EFL students and NS professional writers was 938 and 852 words, respectively. Care was taken to ensure that the two corpora are of compatible size and belong to argumentative writing genre.

#### 2. Data Analysis Procedures

Consolidating the frameworks of Quirk et al. (1985), Biber et al. (1999), and Kennedy (2003) who presented two major subcategories of amplifiers, namely, maximizers and boosters, a total of 38 amplifiers were investigated, among which maximizers include 13 devices and boosters include 25 devices. The operating definitions and the devices of maximizers and boosters used in this study are illustrated in what follows.

- (1) Maximizers denote the upper extreme of the scale of an entity (*fully, completely, entirely, absolutely, totally, perfectly, utterly, dead, quite, thoroughly, extremely, altogether, most*).
- (2) Boosters denote a high degree, a high point on the scale of an entity (*very, really, particularly, clearly, highly, very much, badly, heavily, deeply, greatly, considerably, severely, terribly, enormously, incredibly, much, far, heartily, so, well, a lot, by far, bitterly, more*)

The 38 amplifiers and the adjectives they modify were retrieved from the Korean EFL

student corpus and NS professional corpus by means of a software program, Antconc. 3.2.4. The occurrence of each individual amplifier was counted, with the assistance of the concordance results as well as manual work of eliminating unrelated use of each device. Following Altenberg (1991), only the relevant amplifier uses of these devices were included in the analysis. For example, *quite* was included as a maximizer in the collocation of *quite sure* but not as a compromiser in the collocation of *quite long*. A Chi-square test was used to determine whether there existed any statistically significant differences in the use of amplifiers between the two corpora.

In the stage of the misuse analysis, Korean EFL students' use of amplifiers collocated with adjectives was investigated. For this analysis, a trained native English speaker and the second author of the study examined the corpus data thoroughly and marked the misused cases of amplifier-adjective collocations, categorizing them into three different groups: semantic misuse of amplifiers, semantic misuse of adjectives, and unnecessary use of amplifiers. The two raters' initial agreement on the misuse of amplifiers reached over 90%. Any discrepancy between the two raters was resolved by further probing the data in wider contexts.

## IV. RESULTS

### 1. Frequency Analysis of Amplifiers Used in the Two Corpora

In the analysis of the overall frequency and distribution of amplifiers used in the corpora of Korean EFL students and NS professional writers, it was found that Korean EFL students used 904 amplifiers in a corpus of 149,190 words while NS professional writers used 729 amplifiers in a corpus of 148,257 words. Since the size of the two corpora was approximately the same, raw frequency rather than normalized frequency was presented.

According to the result of the Chi-square test shown in Table 1, there was a significant difference between Korean EFL students and NS professional writers with respect to their overall frequency of amplifiers, indicating the Korean EFL students' overuse of amplifiers. The overuse of amplifiers by EFL learners of various backgrounds has been identified in earlier studies such as Lorenz (1998) and Recski (2004). In the analysis of subcategories of amplifiers, it was shown that there was no significant difference in the frequency of maximizers between Korean EFL students and NS professional writers while the Korean EFL students' overall frequency of boosters was significantly higher than that of NS professional writers. Another prominent feature in Table 1 was the great predominance of boosters among the amplifiers manifested both in the Korean EFL corpus and NS professional corpus. There were more than three times as many combinations with boosters

as with maximizers in the Korean EFL corpus and more than twice as many combinations with boosters as with maximizers in the NS professional corpus. As Altenberg (1991) notes, it seems that the boosters are both more “versatile” and more “productive” than the maximizers (p. 132). A further comparative analysis of the individual devices used by the two groups within two subcategories of amplifiers is presented in Tables 2 and 3.

**TABLE 1**  
Overall Frequency of Amplifiers in Both Corpora

	EFL students	NS professional writers	$\chi^2$
maximizers	194	198	0.070
boosters	710	531	24.708*
Total	904	729	17.672*

\* $p < 0.05$

**TABLE 2**  
Frequency of Individual Maximizers

Maximizers	EFL students	NS professional writers	$\chi^2$	EFL results
most	112	143	3.966*	underuse
quite	27	6	13.232*	overuse
totally	16	8	2.617	
absolutely	13	2	NA	
extremely	10	9	0.047	
perfectly	5	4	NA	
fully	5	3	NA	
completely	4	10	NA	
entirely	2	8	NA	
utterly	0	4	NA	
thoroughly	0	1	NA	
dead	0	0	NA	
altogether	0	0	NA	

*Note.* Cells with less than five counts were marked as not applicable (NA).

\* $p < 0.05$

**TABLE 3**  
Frequency of Individual Boosters

Boosters	EFL students	NS professional writers	$\chi^2$	EFL results
more	261	213	4.464*	overuse
very	197	60	72.175*	overuse
so	67	69	0.043	
really	66	17	28.621*	overuse
too	47	50	0.113	
much	34	35	0.021	
highly	12	14	0.167	
well	9	6	0.581	
deeply	4	17	NA	
far	3	19	NA	
clearly	2	4	NA	
particularly	2	15	NA	
heavily	2	1	NA	
very much	1	0	NA	
greatly	1	3	NA	
considerably	1	0	NA	
incredibly	1	4	NA	
a lot	0	1	NA	
severely	0	3	NA	
badly	0	0	NA	
terribly	0	0	NA	
heartily	0	0	NA	
by far	0	0	NA	
enormously	0	0	NA	
bitterly	0	0	NA	

Note. Cells with less than five counts were marked as not applicable (NA).

\* $p < 0.05$

A Chi-square analysis which was performed to investigate whether there was a significant difference in the use of individual maximizers between Korean EFL students and NS professional writers revealed that *quite* was overused by Korean EFL students and *most* was underused by Korean EFL students compared to NS professional writers. The predominance of *quite* in the NS spoken corpus was identified by Altenberg (1991) and Paradis (1997). The overuse of *quite* by Korean EFL learners seems to indicate their strong dependence of the spoken device of *quite* in intensifying their point in written English.

Although a chi-square test was not applicable, another frequently used intensification device by Korean EFL learners was *absolutely*. The NS professional corpus displayed only 2 cases of the use of *absolutely* (e.g., *absolutely appalling*, *absolutely undecided*) whereas Korean EFL student corpus exhibited a variety of combinations such as *absolutely clear*, *absolutely different*, *absolutely impossible*, *absolutely necessary*, *absolutely new*, *absolutely positive*, *absolutely sure*, and *absolutely true*. The amplifier *most*, in contrast, was underused by the Korean EFL learners. The amplifier *utterly*, was never used by the Korean EFL learners while the NS professional writers used the same device in combinations such as *utterly false*, *utterly indistinguishable*, *utterly slick*, and *utterly unequal*.

The results of the Chi-square test presented in Table 3 showed that a total of 3 boosters (*more*, *very*, and *really*) were found to be overused. Although a chi-square analysis was not applied, such boosters as *deeply*, *far*, and *particularly* were underused by Korean EFL students. The result of the overuse of the boosters *very* and *really* by the EFL students is in line with the findings of Lorenz (1998), Granger (1998), Recski (2004), and S. Lee (2006) who all speculated that the EFL learners tended to prefer the amplifiers that mark a spoken style and represent “general-purpose” items. In contrast, the amplifiers such as *deeply* and *particularly* that were perceived as written intensification markers were seldom employed by the Korean EFL students. The NS professional corpus, however, displayed versatile use of the amplifiers in combinations such as *deeply pleasurable*, *deeply reliant*, *deeply unrealistic*, *deeply rooted*, *particularly adept*, *particularly attractive*, *particularly notable*, and *particularly well-suited*.

## 2. Analysis of Korean EFL Students' Misuse in Amplifiers

In addition to the analyses of the frequency and distribution of amplifiers used in Korean EFL student corpus and NS professional corpus, this study also investigated the misuse of amplifiers and their collocated adjectives in Korean EFL students' writing. We attempted to analyze major types of misuse revealed in Korean EFL students' writing, categorizing them into three types, including semantic misuse of amplifiers, semantic misuse of collocated adjectives, and unnecessary use of amplifiers.

In Table 4 which presents the overall misuse of amplifiers in Korean EFL students' writings, it was found that Korean EFL students misused maximizers with a total number of 34 tokens among 194 tokens while boosters were misused with a total number of 99 tokens among 710 tokens.

The results of both the misused maximizers and the misused boosters were shown at fewer than 20 %. The percentage of the misused maximizers (17.53%) is higher than that of the misused boosters (13.94%), implying that NNS students had more trouble using

maximizers than using boosters.

**TABLE 4**  
Misuse of Amplifiers in Korean EFL Corpus

Amplifiers	Total frequency	Number of misuse	% of misuse
Maximizers	194	34	17.53
Boosters	710	99	13.94

Table 5 shows the number and the percentage of misused maximizers and collocated adjectives in Korean EFL students' writing in three areas. Out of 9 maximizers, except 4 maximizers which are not used by Korean EFL students, 7 maximizers were found to be misused in Korean EFL students' writing. It is noteworthy that out of 7 misused maximizers, 3 maximizers (*totally*, *quite*, and *absolutely*) accounted for 52.95% of the total number of 34 cases and corresponded to overused maximizers in Korean EFL student corpus.

**TABLE 5**  
Misused Maximizers in Korean EFL Corpus

Maximizers	Semantic misuse of maximizers	Unnecessary use of maximizers	Semantic misuse of adjectives	Total	%
most	0	0	6	6	17.6
quite	1	4	0	5	14.7
totally	3	2	2	7	20.5
absolutely	3	2	1	6	17.6
extremely	1	2	0	3	8.8
perfectly	3	0	1	4	11.7
fully	2	1	0	3	8.8
Total	13	11	10	34	100

In terms of semantic misuse of maximizers, there were 13 cases of misused maximizers. The followings are examples of misuse of maximizers in Korean EFL students' writing. The year of submission of the essays and the essay number of the specified year were provided in parenthesis.

Example 1 (2009-#15): After men do the duty and return to their usual lives they often feel alienated from the society, because they had an **absolutely**

**different** life through that time. (Correct form: completely instead of absolutely)

Example 2 (2011-#10): Once you choose a major, it is really hard to change to another one. Many students have trouble studying **perfectly different** subjects and lessons. (Correct form: completely instead of perfectly)

According to Paradis's (1997, p. 78) list which contains examples of combinations of maximizers and adjectives, as in Examples 1 and 2, the maximizers *absolutely* and *perfectly* tended not to combine with the adjective *different*.

Another area regarded as misuse is unnecessary use of maximizers in Korean EFL students' writing. In this area, a total of 11 cases were found to be misused.

Example 3 (2012-#18): Exploring an Earth's only natural satellite will lead us into much deeper awareness of the development of the universe. According to the Bing Bang theory, the space was so **extremely hot** and dense that it exploded, and created millions of planets. (Unnecessary: extremely)

Example 4 (2009-#29): Second, it is **quite great** to raise salaries of the service men. By extending budget for it and lessening expenditures from other useless parts, it may be effective and service men can save the money for tuitions of universities and their future plans. (Unnecessary: quite)

It seems obvious that some overused maximizers are more likely to be used unnecessarily as in Examples 3 and 4. In Example 3, the word *so* already intensifies the meaning of the adjective *hot*, and in Example 4, the word *great*, which is used to "emphasize the size or degree of a characteristic or quality" (COBUILD, 2009, p. 693), involve reference to something extreme. When writing essays, Korean EFL students seemed to believe that the more maximizers they use, the more maximally the sense of an adjective is intensified in their essays and consequently, their intention is well expressed. However, they in fact made their essays less cohesive with the redundant use of maximizers when they are not necessary. As Lorenz (1998) observed, such unwarranted intensification seems to make the impression of "bookishness" and of "overstatement" which are often cited as "typical of non-native style" (p. 61).

The other area regarded as misuse is semantic misuse of adjectives in Korean EFL students' writing. In this area, a total of 10 cases were found to be misused. It was noteworthy that out of 10, 6 cases came from *most*.

Example 5 (2006-#7): The second one is falling in love. Now I'm doing this. It's not really easy. The **most different** thing is getting other's heart. I suffered hard time in getting my lover's heart. (Appropriate form: difficult instead of different)

Example 6 (2010-#16): These days, people can fly to the space and get back to the Earth. It is **absolutely true** that the space science skills lifted up our lives to the next stage. (Appropriate form: certain instead of true)

In Examples 5 and 6, Korean EFL students did not use semantically appropriate adjectives in the given context. Korean EFL students seemed to be confused about the two adjectives *difficult* and *different*, and *true* and *certain*. The commonly used adjective *different* which is used to indicate that “you are talking about two or more separate and distinct things of the same kind,” (COBUILD, 2009, p. 427), and another common adjective *true* which implies “based on facts rather than being invented or imagined, and is accurate and reliable” (COBUILD, 2009, p. 1678) were misused and should be replaced by *difficult* and *certain* respectively.

Table 6 presents the number and the percentage of misused boosters and adjectives in NNS students' writing in three areas. Out of 17 boosters, except 8 boosters which are not used by Korean EFL students, 12 boosters were found to be misused in Korean EFL students' writing. It is worth noting that out of 12 misused boosters, 3 boosters (*more*, *very*, and *really*) accounted for 63.63% of the total number of 99 cases and corresponded to overused boosters in the Korean EFL student corpus.

In terms of semantic misuse of boosters, there were 33 cases of misused boosters, showing a prominent frequency in *so*, *much*, and *really*.

Example 7 (2012-#46): Many people believe superstition. In my opinion it is **really irrational** thing. However many people believe superstition. (Correct form: extremely instead of really)

Example 8 (2010-#7): One never can get such a chance to do some activities in one's life and it is more valuable than getting a scholarship. Therefore, it is **much effective** to give a scholarship to the students who are ready for sudden change and try to improve themselves. (Correct form: more instead of much)

In Example 7, according to Lorenz (1998), non-gradable words tend to be combined with non-gradable adverbs such as *extremely*, so the non-gradable adjective *irrational* is fitting when it co-occurs with the maximizer *extremely*. In Example 8, Korean EFL student

writers seemed not to understand the use of *much*, which is “used in front of ‘too’ or comparative adjectives and adverbs in order to emphasize that there is a large amount of a particular quality”(COBUILD, 2009, p. 1022) and used *much* in a context where the boost *more* is required.

**TABLE 6**  
Misused Boosters in Korean EFL Corpus

Boosters	Semantic misuse of boosters	Unnecessary use of boosters	Semantic misuse of adjectives	Total	%
more	1	20	8	29	29.29
very	2	15	4	21	21.21
so	10	4	1	15	15.15
really	5	5	3	13	13.13
too	2	0	0	2	2.02
much	11	0	0	11	11.11
highly	1	0	0	1	1.01
well	0	1	1	2	2.02
far	1	1	0	2	2.02
clearly	0	0	1	1	1.01
heavily	0	1	0	1	1.01
incredibly	0	1	0	1	1.01
Total	33	48	18	99	100

Another area regarded as misuse is unnecessary use of boosters in Korean EFL students’ writing. In this area, a total of 48 cases were found to be misused.

Example 9 (2007-#12): But those ties can only be possible by excluding some week in terms of they are not made possible to drink a lot. Therefore it is **more true** that drinking in an official meeting without any consideration about non drinkers is making our meeting separated rather than unifying. (Unnecessary: more)

Example 10 (2009-#23): Third, papers are easy to take a look and editorial articles are **very unique**. Papers have their own voices, which makes them more attractive than other sources. (Unnecessary: very)

Paradis (1997, p. 41) noted that non-gradable adjectives can take neither degree modifiers nor the comparative form (e.g., *\*very divorced*, *\*more divorced*). Lorenz (1998, p. 161) also argued that non-gradable adjectives which are already “marked for superlativity” should not be given further weight unnecessarily. In Examples 9 and 10, the adjectives *true* and *unique* are non-gradable adjectives, so they do not need to co-occur with boosters.

The other area regarded as misuse of boosters is semantic misuse of adjectives in Korean EFL students’ writing. In this area, a total of 18 cases were found to be misused.

Example 11 (2011-#21): People have been striving to save money for all their lives. However those celebrities get money so easily and the amount of money is **really big**. As for top stars, their salaries amount to billions of won. (Appropriate form: large instead of big)

Example 12 (2008-#29): At the same time, the grades for passing the exams have been increasingly higher. Thus, whether to pass or fail would be determined by **very slight** points like 1 or less than 1. (Appropriate form: few instead of slight)

In Examples 11 and 12, Korean EFL students misused adjectives in the given context. That is because Korean EFL students seemed not to understand the use of *big* which means “a big person or thing is large in physical size” (COBUILD, 2009, p. 140), and *slight* which means “very small in degree or quantity” (COBUILD, 2009, p. 1472) and they carelessly used these adjectives in a context where *large* and *few* are appropriate.

## V. DISCUSSION

The results of the study showed that some striking differences existed between the Korean EFL students and the NS professional writers in the use of amplifiers. The result of the first research question regarding the overall frequency of the use of amplifiers in both corpora indicated that the overall frequency of the amplifiers in Korean EFL students’ writing is higher than that of NS professional writing. This result corresponds to the findings of previous studies such as Lorenz (1998) and Recski (2004) who revealed that NNS learners of English used far more amplifiers than NSs of English.

In terms of the second research question about the overuse and underuse of individual amplifiers, the result showed that, compared to NS professional writers, Korean EFL students significantly overused the maximizer *quite*, and some boosters such as *more*, *very*,

and *really*. The overuse of such amplifiers as *quite*, *very* and *really* in the EFL student corpus can be attributed to the frequency of input in EFL textbooks and grammar reference books because those amplifiers were identified as frequently used in English textbooks (I.-S. Kwon, 2002). In addition, those three amplifiers were also perceived as prominent markers of spoken discourse (Altenberg, 1991; Kennedy, 2003; S. Lee, 2006). The overuse of these amplifiers may be due to the learners' tendency to use informal spoken amplifiers in the formal argumentative writing contexts. The Korean L2 learners' tendency to resort to *very* and *really* as the "all-round" or "general-purpose" amplifiers which can combine with more adjectives than any other amplifier also seemed to contribute to the highly significant use of the amplifiers (Granger, 1998, p. 151). In contrast, the less frequent use of such amplifiers as *utterly*, *deeply*, and *particularly* by Korean EFL learners may be due to the infrequent presentation of the devices in English textbooks and reference books as intensification markers.

The findings in response to the third research question on the features of misused amplifiers in Korean EFL students' writing suggested that Korean EFL students misused maximizers in terms of semantic misuse of maximizers (13 cases out of 34), unnecessary use (11 cases out of 34) and semantic misuse of adjectives (10 cases out of 34), and that they misused boosters in terms of semantic misuse of boosters (33 cases out of 99), unnecessary use (48 cases out of 99) and semantic misuse of adjectives (18 cases out of 99). It is noteworthy that about 53 percent of misused maximizers were those which were identified as overused maximizers (*quite* and *absolutely*) and that about 64 percent of misused boosters were those which are overused boosters (*more*, *very*, and *really*) in Korean EFL students' writing. This suggests that the Korean EFL students may have a tendency to overstate through "unwarranted intensification" by resorting to a few general-purpose amplifiers (p. 60).

Another misused pattern of the amplifiers was found in the form of mismatch between amplifiers and adjectives in terms of gradability. As Paradis (1997) argued, on semantic grounds, "the gradable feature in the adjective must harmonize with the grading function of the degree modifier in terms of totality and scalarity to make a successful match" (p. 158). The Korean students' tendency to violate the gradability principle resulted in such odd combinations as *\*very divorced* and *\*very unique*.

In sum, the Korean EFL learners not only used more amplifiers, but also used them in places where they were semantically incompatible, communicatively unnecessary or stylistically undesirable. As for the main functions of amplifiers, Lorenz (1998) argued that amplifiers can be used to "(a) focus the reader's attention, and (b) to specify and enhance the meaning of an otherwise vague and colorless adjective" (p. 58), but should be used only when the discourse context calls for the use of them. As attested by the results of the study, Korean EFL students seemed to overextend the legitimate boundaries of the

amplifier functions. In order to draw the reader's attention and enhance the meaning of an adjective in an exaggerated fashion, the Korean EFL students seemed to generate surplus in amplifiers (e.g., overuse of certain amplifiers and unnecessary use of amplifiers) in contexts where NS professional writers simply used a single suitable adjective. In other words, the Korean EFL students' surplus in amplifiers has been used to "cover up lexical insufficiencies" (Lorenz, 1998, p. 58).

Regarding the potential sources of this over-keen marking of amplifiers on the part of the Korean EFL learners, a certain insecurity regarding the effectiveness of their own writing among the Korean EFL students can be singled out. In a zeal to make a strong impression within the limitations of their linguistic repertoire, they might feel a pressing need to stress the importance of what they have to say. This attitude might be partly induced by writing classes where teachers encourage the students to make their argument *very interesting*, *very important*, or *\*very unique*. In this respect, it seems desirable to make the Korean EFL students aware of the fact that intensification through the simple addition of amplifiers is not the only device that they can upgrade adjectival meaning and that a single suitable adjective alone would do in many contexts.

Another pedagogical effort should be made to encourage Korean EFL students to be more geared towards arguing a case rather than creating an impression in their argumentative essays. As Lorenz (1998) suggested, writing teachers should address the fact that intensification through the use of amplifiers is not a good thing per se, but that "it must be instrumental to the coherence of an overall argument" (p. 64). The students need to develop a sensibility for the economy of information: "not every noun needs to be premodified by an adjective, and not every adjective in turn needs to be intensified" (p. 64). Rather than resorting to the surplus of amplifiers, improving the argument structure itself can lead to a more native-like style of writing. For example, As Lorenz (1998) observed, the use of amplifiers would seem to be most effective when solely focused on an adjective, as in the case of predicative constructions. One specific example of such predicate constructions was extracted from the NS professional corpus of this study (e.g., Ordinary people today confront well-financed, sophisticated organizations capable of carpet-bombing the public with insistent one-way exhortations. Relations between these callers and their targets are *utterly unequal*). The use of amplifiers in predicate constructions as revealed in the NS professional corpus can be suggested to Korean EFL learners as a desirable argument structure. With regards to the overuse of such amplifiers as *very* and *really* by Korean EFL learners, which mark both "general-purpose" items and represent a characteristic feature of informal conversation, it can be suggested that writing teachers should coach the students "not to mix spoken-mode forms with written-mode forms in order to make their formal writing more competent" (S. Lee, 2006, p. 11).

In addition, it seems advisable to expose Korean EFL learners to the input materials that

contain some underused amplifiers such as *utterly*, *particularly*, and *deeply*. The Korean learners' difficulties in using such amplifier collocations as *deeply reliant*, *deeply rooted*, *particularly adept*, *particularly notable*, and *particularly well-suited* which were only manifested in the NS professional corpus can be attributable to their incomplete knowledge of such amplifier-adjective collocations and lack of experience in using them in their argumentative writing. As Kennedy (2003) argues, a substantial part of linguistic competence appears to be based on a huge store of memories of previously encountered words and groups of words stored in units of use. The more frequently learners are exposed to these units of use, the faster they can process these units, the more often they exploit probabilistic knowledge about the use of those units, and the more fluent they become (Bybee & Hopper, 2001). Consequently, Korean EFL learners need huge amounts of exposure to authentic texts which contain such highly specialized collocations in order for them to internalize the unfamiliar amplifier-adjective collocations.

Lastly, to address the issue of gradability, it must be taught explicitly to the EFL Korean students that while gradable adjectives can combine in a natural way with gradable amplifiers such as *very* (e.g., *very good*), nongradable adjectives normally reject gradable amplifiers (e.g., *\*very unique*). The NS professional writers' essays available online such as the very corpus that this study utilized would constitute good sources of such materials. NS corpus data can also be used to help Korean EFL students solve problems of lexical choice in a given context. Writing teachers can help the EFL students notice the difference between the similar amplifier-adjective collocations (e.g., *really big* versus *really large*) by using concordance searches of NS professional corpus. If students become more aware of appropriate amplifier-adjective collocations through these processes, they may be able to use them appropriately in their essays.

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**예시언어(Examples in): English**  
**적용가능 언어(Applicable Languages): English**  
**적용가능 수준(Applicable Levels): Tertiary**

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