

Effectiveness of Morphological Awareness in English Writing Composition of Pakistani Students at the Undergraduate Level-Case Study

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Abstract

Word formation is a key part of morphological awareness (MA) which is essential for vocabulary increase but neglected by the teachers and course planners (Tahaineh, 2012). In Pakistan, students of English language are not explicitly given morphological awareness and most of the courses are taught in English for general purposes. The study explores the development of students' knowledge to use prefixes and suffixes meaningfully, in a paragraph writing. For this, they were given morphological awareness on the word formation to construct, identify and to self-correct the words. Data was collected quantitatively through pre-test and post-test. Students were given treatment to check the effectiveness of MA before the post-test. Participants of the study were 30 students of BS English Language and Literature, 3rd semester's students of a private university of Pakistan. The study found that morphological awareness is effective and improves students' writings. It further indicates that there is a need to include word formation as key component of English writing composition as undergraduate level.

Keywords: Morphological Awareness (MA), prefixes, suffixes, word formation

1. Introduction

Morphological awareness is a skill that allows language learners to understand the structure of words. Researchers believed that when language learners understand the morphological nature of words, they show impressive results in the development of different literacy skills such as reading, speaking, listening and writing (Oz, 2013). As English language contains number of words, the better way to learn new words and to increase the vocabulary is to understand common prefixes and suffixes. By knowing prefixes and suffixes, their meanings and rules, students get aware of the morphological structures of the new words of English language. According to Carlisle (1995), morphological awareness refers to individual's explicit knowledge. It also brings awareness of the internal structure of words and their capacity to reflect upon and manipulate upon their structure. Kuo and Anderson (2006), highlighted that understanding of word formation is necessary whereas Liu, McBride and Chang (2010), stated that MA is frequently associated with the development of reading and writing skills. They further added that MA and reading comprehension play important role in learning language. Oz (2013), mentioned that learners who understand affixation with word formation process perform better and become proficient in language.

1.1. Some Basic Terminologies

To completely understand the morphological process, it is essential to understand the origin of word **morphology**. Credit goes to German philosopher Johann Wolfgang who invented it in 19th century with the help of two Greek words; one is "morphē" which means 'form, shape' and other is "logos" which means science. So, morphology means 'the study of form or forms. According to Celik (2007), and Yule (2010), in reference to linguistics, it can be defined as the study of the internal structure of **words** and the rules governing the formation of words in a language. Further, Aronoff and Fudeman in (2010), mentioned it as a branch of linguistics which investigates structure of words as well as how they are formed. Another addition was pointed out by Bauer (1983), where he said that morphology can be divided into two main branches; and one is word formation. Tahaineh in (2012), categorized words as simple, compound and complex. He defined simple word which consists of a single morpheme; compound word consists of two or more simple or complex words, on the other side, complex word consist of a root plus one or more affixes. This further leads to define this term of **morpheme** more clearly. Lieber (2009) and Yule (2010) defined that morphemes are the minimal units of meaning or grammatical function that are used to create new words. The creation of new words and this whole grammatical function denotes different word forms. English language has clearly two categories of morphemes, free and bound; where a free morpheme is independent and does not need any support to form a word. For example word "teach" is a free morpheme; it can stand on its own and has its own complete meaning. On the other side, a bound morpheme is added to another form to create meaning. For example, the plural morpheme -s can only occur when it is attached to nouns. Here comes the term **affixation**; which consist of prefixes as well as suffixes. Tahaineh in (2012), mentioned affixes as bound morphemes where prefixes, suffixes & infixes are

included and which are attached to a base (root or stem). **Prefixes** are those bound morphemes which are added before the start of free morpheme to form new meaningful word. On the other side **suffixes** are those bound morphemes which are attached to the end of another morpheme. Oz in (2014) mentioned some bound morphemes (e.g. cran-) are called “bound base morphemes” and they do not have meaning on their own; they are meaningful when attached to other morphemes.

1.2. Word Formation Situation in Pakistan

In Pakistan, English as second language is struggling to make students aware about the meaningful construction of sentences in paragraph writing using prefixes and suffixes. Students with multiple language backgrounds are unable to construct English sentences correctly, where prefixes and suffixes are involved. The difficulty faced in word forming highlights multiple issues in students’ writing such as unnecessary addition of prefixes and suffixes, lack of vocabulary, and overall weak word formation.

1.3. Objectives

Objectives of the study included:

1. To assess the effectiveness of morphological awareness through writing activity based on prefixes and suffixes meanings.
 - a) To analyze students’ ability to write meaningful sentences after understanding prefixes and suffixes.
 - b) To check if students are able to identify and make corrections in prefixes and suffixes in already written paragraphs

2. Literature Review

Students of English language are increasing day by day, it has become a huge challenge for language teachers to provide their students help to understand English as second language. Researchers believed that due to the morphological differences between English and other languages, students feel difficulty to comprehend meanings of the words (Comrie, 1989; Birch, 2007). On the other side, few believed that instruction methods are not sufficient enough to make students aware about the smallest meaningful units of language (Kieffer & Box, 2013).

Oz in (2013), explained morphological awareness while mentioning different researches that there is a clear difference between students who understand morphemic structures and who do not. He added that students must have strong grip on reading comprehension perform better in writing.

Whereas, Carlisle (2010) discussed the importance and effects of instruction in Morphological awareness and found that students’ literacy development and educational value can be increased if they are given proper instruction. He further highlighted the need to provide clear understanding of morphological awareness instruction and teaching strategies. In Pakistan, very little study has been done to check the effectiveness of prefixes and suffixes instruction treatments. In consequence, the present paper attempts to explain the significant impact of MA on the writing performance of English language students. It also attempts to highlight the need of induce word formation in teaching practices, which can help students understand and then help them to use prefixes and suffixes in their writings. This work further presents feedback of students what they feel after this treatment and experimental activity. It is expected that this study will help English language learners as well as language teachers to adequately structure their lesson plans for English courses to meet this language learning need of students.

2.1. Word Formation and Teaching

Schmitt and Zimmerman (2002), stated that L2 learners have little knowledge about derivative word forms. Word Family consists of noun, verb, adjective and adverb but L2 learners are not capable to use all forms. They have knowledge about noun and verbs and this result indicate that knowledge about verb and noun do not necessarily imply productive knowledge of word forms of the family.

Laufer (1991) and Nation (2001) indicated that teachers should explicitly teach derivative word forms while introducing new words during L2 teaching. They further added that teachers should not assume that learners will automatically learn all word forms. Schmitt and Zimmerman (2002) also suggested that teachers should instruct affixation to English language learners, it definitely brings improvement in vocabulary. Oz (2013), also suggested the same strategy to teach students about the break-down of words into morphemes.

3. Methodology

Researchers used quantitative research method to collect data.

3.1. Participants

Participants of the study were selected through convenient sampling. One section of 30 students from BS English Literature degree program were selected as participants of the study. All of the participants have completed pre-requisite courses of English 1 (English Grammar and Comprehension) and English 2 (Composition and Communication) in their previous semesters of the same program.

3.2. Data Collection

Data was collected in three different parts.

1. Pre-Test Writing Activity
2. Post-Test Writing Activity
3. Exit Activity Feedback Questionnaire

3.3. Method and Procedures:

3.3.1. Pre-Test

A pre-test was conducted to check the students' level of morphological awareness.

3.3.2. Treatment

Detailed treatment was provided to the students about the understanding of prefixes and suffixes. Time of the treatment was recorded as fifteen minutes for five days. A list of common prefixes and suffixes (with meanings) provided to the students for understanding the basic concepts. Instructions and examples were also provided to the students in written form. Secondly, prefixes and suffixes usage was also pointed out in the short stories of their textbooks/course materials. Students were also showed their pre-test mistakes. It made them alert and they were found anxious to be morphologically aware in their next English writing activities.

Students were given awareness on the following prefixes and suffixes. (See table 1 for prefixes and 2 for suffixes).

Table 1

PREFIX	MEANING	EXAMPLE
dis	not, opposite of	<i>Discomfort</i>
mis	wrongly	<i>Misfit</i>
un	not	<i>Undo</i>
re	again	<i>Replay</i>
inter	between	<i>Interact</i>
pre	before	<i>Prevent</i>
anti	against, opposing	<i>Antiseptic</i>

Table 2

SUFFIX	MEANING	EXAMPLE
able	capable of	<i>attainable</i>
ary	related to	<i>honorary</i>
ary	a place for something	<i>library</i>
ate	office	<i>decorate</i>
ation	cause or act of causing	<i>decoration</i>
en	to make	<i>shorten, fasten</i>

3.3.3. post-Test

A Post-test was designed to check students' learning; and to know the effectiveness of morphological awareness given to the students as treatment.

3.3.4. Design of Pre-Test and Post-Test

Both tests followed the similar pattern to check morphological awareness of students. Tests included two different parts i.e. writing part and identification part. In the first part, researchers asked students to write a

paragraph and include at least five words with prefixes and five words with suffixes. Time limit for paragraph writing was 20 minutes.

In the second part, researchers asked students to exchange their papers with classmates and encircle prefixes and suffixes in classmate's paper. Additional instruction to correct the wrong usage of prefix and suffix was also given to the students. For this part time limit was 10 minutes.

3.3.5. Exit Activity Feedback

At the end of the post-test, a questionnaire was distributed among the students to take the feedback of the activity.

3.4. Results and Observations

The overall results show that students' were focused on the formation of words with prefixes and suffixes.

3.4.1. Pre-Test Results

3.4.2. Part 1 (Paragraph Writing)

The results of part 1 show that out of 30 students, only 4 were able to fulfill the requirement of using 5 prefix and 5 suffix. Students formed suffixes more than prefixes. Out of 30, 10 students were able to write 5 or even more suffixes in a paragraph. Average prefixes rate used by the students is 4. Average suffixes rate used by the students is 5. On average each student made two mistakes in word-formation.

Three significant issues i.e. weak word formation, lack of vocabulary and spelling confusions and lastly, unnecessary addition of prefix and suffix were observed in the paragraph writing of students.

Below mentioned are some examples taken from students' writings that show above mentioned issues. (See table 3, 4 and 5).

Table 3

Weak Word Formation

Passionful when one student wanted to use word **passionate**.

- *"From the childhood I was not much **passionful** or **dutyful**....."*

Dissatisfied when one student wanted to use **unsatisfied**

- *"I am **dissatisfied** with the **terror spread**....."*
-

Table 4

Lack of Vocabulary and Spellings Confusion

Easyness: when one student wanted to write **easiness**

- *".....**many difficulties** as well as **easyness**."*

Helpful when three students wanted to write **helpful**

- *"**Goal that could be helpfull** to others..."*

Responsible when one student wanted to write **Responsible**

- *"**We should responsible** to our deeds....."*
-

Table 5

Unnecessary Additions of Prefixes and Suffixes:

Unnecessary addition of prefix "**Pre**"

- *"to understand the students and **preguide** them....."*

Unnecessary addition of prefix "**in**"

- *"The main purpose of this language is to make a person better at speaking it **influently**"."*

Unnecessary addition of suffix "**en**" in word shorten.

- *"You want to get in with shorten methods....."*
 - *"Life is very shorten for every person....."*
-

3.2.1. Pre-Test Results

3.2.2. Part 2 (Identification and Correction)

The results of part 2 show that on average, all the students were able to encircle *eight* prefixes and suffixes in classmate's paper. None of the student was able to found any mistake in prefixes and suffixes that was spelled or used incorrectly. Wrong identification of words average was 2 words per student.

3.4.3. Post-Test Results

3.4.4. Part 1 (Paragraph Writing)

Similar observations were made regarding the checking of post-test. The results of part 1 show that out of 30

students, 26 were able to fulfill the requirement of using 5 prefixes and 5 suffixes. Average rate of both prefixes and suffixes used by the students was recorded as 5. Results showed that unnecessary additions of prefixes and suffixes (which were noticeable in pre-test results) were now extinct from students' writings. Students conveniently formed prefixes and suffixes and only two significant issues i.e. lack of vocabulary and poor spellings were observed in the paragraph writing of students.

Below mentioned are some examples taken from students' writings that show above mentioned issues.

Table 6

Weak Word Formation

Discomfortable when two students wanted to use word **uncomfortable**.

- ▶ "Do not... *discomfortable* because success and failure
- ▶ *Life is itself a very discomfortable path....*"

Table 7

Lack of Vocabulary and Spellings Confusion:

Uncountless when one of the students wanted to write **uncountable**.

- ▶ "A success person do *uncountless* workhard"

Misguidance when one of the students wanted to write **misguidance**

- ▶ "Problem most of the people face is *misguidance* and unavailability of career counsellors"

3.4.5. Post-Test Results

3.4.6. Part 2 (Identification and Correction)

The results of part 2 show that on average, all the students were able to identify and correct prefixes and suffixes in classmate's paper. The above highlighted mistakes were corrected by students when classmates' papers were given to them for checking.

3.4.7. Comparison between Pre-Test and Post-Test

A visible change was observed in both tests as students were more focused on making meaningful sentences. Students also improved in the identification and correction part of the writing activity. Students who were reluctant to form sentences with prefixes and sentences in the pre-test were able to write confidently.

3.4.8. Exit Activity Feedback Results

After the activity, a close-ended questionnaire was distributed among the students to get their opinion about word-formation activity. Options were agree and disagrees except for one question, options were daily, weekly and bi-weekly.

This part results also helped us to explore the answer of the last question of our research i.e. to what extent testing activity based on prefixes and suffixes meanings was effectiveness. The below mentioned table clearly shows that maximum number of students opted the option "agree".

Table 8

No.	Question	Agree	Disagree	
1	Do you think previous knowledge of word-formation helps?	70%	30%	
2	Do you feel knowing meanings of prefix and suffix help to make new words?	83%	17%	
3	Did this activity give you a basic understanding of word-formation with the help of affixation?	73%	27%	
4	Do you feel the treatment provided before the activity was helpful?	83%	17%	
5	Did this activity enhance your writing skill?	77%	23%	
6	How often do you want this kind of activities to improve your writing skills?	Daily	Weekly	Bi-Weekly
-----		14%	40%	46%

4. Discussion

Mathew (1974), mentioned that English word formation is taken for-granted by teachers, book writers and course planners. The same case was observed in the private university of Pakistan. Tahaineh (2012), highlighted that textbooks play vital role in the realm of language learning and they are "indispensable tool".

The immediate response of this morphological based activity was bit surprising for students. None of the students seemed to have any formal morphological processing instructions in the English courses completed already. This morphological awareness activity can act as an initial step in word formation awareness and students may become more motivated to conduct their own word formation tasks in the upcoming English conversations and writings. The findings support the theoretical question raised by the Dryer in 2005. The question is why suffixes are more frequent than prefixes. Similar finding is found in our results. Most of the students used suffixes correctly and more than what they were required in writing. According to various

researches, idea is that prefixes make lexical recognition more difficult, especially if it is more difficult to identify the beginning of stems (Cutler, 1986). Another element of rote memorization was also observed as stated by Huang in (2001), that students who lack in meaningful construction of words rely upon rote memorization.

5. Conclusion

It can be concluded that morphological awareness is a critical factor in enabling students to clear understand prefixes, suffixes and word formation. Students made few mistakes in word-formation, which show the lack of morphological awareness in their previous English language learning. But, at the same time, they tried to create new words using the prefixes and suffixes which shows their excitement towards learning of word formation. Students use words repeatedly because they have limited vocabulary. It can be concluded that word formation activity was interesting for students and they wanted to learn through it. These kind of activities should be a part of English courses and according to the students' want, such kind of activities should be conducted weekly or bi-weekly. Several researches managed to get the similar outcomes that students who get familiar with the formation and meaningful construction of prefixes and suffixes show better performance in English language exercises (Kieffer & Box, 2013).

6. Implications and Suggestions

Given the increasing number of English language learners across the world, it is emerging that language teachers can also help these learners recognize and manipulate new words by promoting their MA (Kieffer and Lesaux, 2009). Practically, language learners who are familiar with the formation of new English words through prefixes, suffixes and roots comprehend texts better (Kieffer & Box, 2013). Thus, the current study attempts to explain the significant impact of MA on the language performance of English learners and provide language teachers with the relevant information and implications that may help promote their learners' MA.

Kieffer and Lesaux (2009), state that students who understand how words are created by joining suffixes, prefixes, and roots have greater breadth of vocabulary. The paper first gives conceptual insights into morphology, morphemes and morphological awareness, and then presents some pedagogical implications for English language teaching. It is expected that language educators will get the relevant information to adequately structure their instructional program in a manner that would suit their students.

The highlighted issues after the writing activity raise the further question about the level of teaching. There is a need to check what teaching strategies have been used in the previously passed English grammar and comprehension course. Proper instruction and word formation activities should be included in the English language and grammar courses. Teachers should give individual attention to students to form new words. Students should benefit from the rules of how English words are formed. Students should be taught morphological rules so that they perform better in writing.

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