

AN ANALYSIS OF STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON THE ROLE OF AFFIX MASTERY ON VOCABULARY DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

Affix mastery is a key component of vocabulary knowledge that enables learners to interpret unfamiliar words and enhance their overall language proficiency. In the context of EFL undergraduate students, affix mastery plays a vital role in supporting vocabulary development by fostering morphological awareness. This study investigates EFL students' perspectives on the role of affix mastery in vocabulary learning, focusing on eighth-semester students of the English Education Department at Universitas Pancasakti Tegal. Employing a case study design with a descriptive qualitative approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with selected participants via criterion-based purposive sampling. Thematic analysis revealed three major findings: (1) students recognized affix mastery as an effective strategy for understanding and expanding vocabulary; (2) unfamiliar affixes, particularly those of Latin and Greek origin, posed challenges in recognition and interpretation; and (3) some students preferred decoding word formation over memorization, while others relied on rote learning. Overall, students perceived affix mastery as a valuable skill for improving vocabulary comprehension, promoting independent learning, and increasing confidence in language use.

Keywords: affix mastery, vocabulary development, morphological awareness, EFL learners, semi-structured interview

1 INTRODUCTION

Learning a new language is not an easy task, and one crucial element in achieving language mastery is building a strong vocabulary. One powerful tool for expanding vocabulary is understanding affixes. As stated by Noprianto & Purnawarman (2019), Understanding affixes is regarded as a key component of vocabulary knowledge, as it enables learners to comprehend texts with unfamiliar words and enhances their vocabulary, especially their grasp of word derivations. Affixes can originate from various languages. For example, the prefix mono-, meaning 'one' or 'single,' comes from Greek. Other common affixes, such as re- (from Latin) and un- (from Old English), also demonstrate the diverse linguistic roots of these word-forming elements. These small elements can transform the meaning of a word or invent entirely new terms. For students learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL), mastering affixes can be a game-changer, helping them unlock the meanings of unfamiliar words and grow their vocabulary more effectively.

EFL students at the secondary level are an important concern, as many tend to remain quiet and passive in class Hidayat et al. (2019). However, many EFL students struggle with this, which is why this study focuses on how affix mastery can support vocabulary development. This research takes place in the English Education Department (FKIP) of Universitas Pancasakti Tegal (UPS), that consisted of eighth semester students. The reason is because the researcher needs a certain level of morphological awareness, this is based on the fact that morphosyntax courses was taught in the sixth semester, in which students studied affix explicitly. Therefore, the researcher considers that eighth semester students are the most potential research subject.

The students here are mostly non-native English speakers, and their contact with the English language is often limited to the classroom. Interference happens when bilingual individuals transfer features from one language into the other (Nabilla et al., 2024). Outside of class, they may not have many opportunities to practice or use English in real-life situations. This makes it harder for them to remember new words and use them correctly. Vocabulary is a key part of language learning, and without it, students can struggle to improve their overall language skills. Apriyani & Ilma (2020) stated that Vocabulary is a fundamental component of language that supports the application of other elements like grammar, pronunciation, and spelling, while also facilitating the development of the four language skills.

Many EFL students face difficulties when it comes to vocabulary development. For example, they often forget new words quickly or find it hard to understand and use them in sentences. Kurniadi (2022) stated

most foreign language learners prefer memorizing word lists over analyzing prefixes and suffixes when learning vocabulary. Many students don't fully understand how prefixes and suffixes work, so they either avoid using them or use them incorrectly. This not only limits their ability to figure out the meanings of new words but also makes it harder for them to express themselves clearly.

An essential component supporting vocabulary development is the use of affix knowledge learning vocabulary. As emphasized by Noprianto & Purnawarman (2019) Vocabulary learning strategies and affix knowledge have long been recognized as influential factors in learners' vocabulary acquisition. The study by Mitchell & Brady (2014) affirmed that morphological knowledge including affix awareness is strongly associated with vocabulary development. Specifically, students' knowledge of prefixes and suffixes contributes significantly to their ability to decode, understand, and construct new vocabulary. As stated by Bhatti & Mukhtar (2020) noticed that learning how words are formed improve students' vocabulary.

A study conducted by Chánh (2021) revealed that students generally have a positive attitude toward affixation, believing it helps them understand unfamiliar words without always needing a dictionary. While, Gusparia et al. (2022) investigated students' abilities and challenges in learning English affixation, particularly during online classes. Despite the identified difficulties, the study also revealed positive aspects of the students' abilities: they could interpret the meaning of affixes, provide examples, explain the affixation process, and summarize the affix material.

This study focuses on how EFL students view the role of affix mastery in their vocabulary development. By centering on students' perspectives, the study aims to uncover their experiences, challenges, and needs regarding affix usage. The case study method is especially suitable because it enables a detailed investigation of the particular context within the English Education Department, providing insights that can be applied to similar EFL settings. This research emphasizes the importance of listening to students' voices to create more effective and learner-centered approaches to vocabulary instruction.

2 METHODOLOGY

This research used a qualitative method to investigate students' views on how affix mastery influences vocabulary growth. Qualitative research focuses on understanding individuals' experiences, thoughts, and interpretations in a natural setting, allowing for an in-depth analysis of students' views. Qualitative research is ideally suited for exploring the nuanced views and experiences of participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). By utilizing qualitative data, the study captured rich, descriptive insights that reveal how EFL students perceived affix mastery as part of their vocabulary learning process.

A semi-structured interview is a qualitative data collection method that combines predefined questions with the flexibility to explore additional topics based on participants' responses. Engaging with students through interviews or focus groups can provide rich, detailed insights into their understandings and attitudes (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Unlike structured interviews with strict question sequences, semi-structured interviews provide flexibility for the researcher to delve deeper into relevant matters, balancing depth of understanding with a degree of uniformity (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

To ensure that the selected participants met specific characteristics relevant to the research objectives, this study employed a purposive sampling technique, specifically criterion sampling. According to Palinkas et al. (2015), criterion sampling involved selecting participants who meet predefined criteria that are essential to the focus of the study. In this case, the participants were eighth-semester students of the English Education Department who met conditions: those who had received formal instruction in affixes (through the Morphosyntax course) and those who had not. To obtain deeper and more comprehensive insights, the researcher employed thematic analysis. As stated by Braun & Clarke (2006), this approach involved recognizing, examining, and presenting recurring patterns or themes within qualitative data.

3 RESULTS

3.1 The role of affix mastery on vocabulary development

The interview was conducted using thematic analysis. It organizes your dataset in a minimal way while providing in-depth descriptions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method aimed to explore three key themes: students' perception of the importance of affix mastery, their difficulties in identifying or using affixes (due to unfamiliarity), and their views between decoding word formation and memorizing vocabulary.

3.1.1 Perception of Importance of Affix Mastery

According to the findings gathered from the interview, the first category that emerged is the importance of affix mastery in English vocabulary learning. Their responses highlight varying levels of comprehension and experience, which appear to influence the extent to which affix knowledge is effectively applied in real contexts.

One participant, P1, shared that affix mastery helps in interpreting unfamiliar vocabulary. He stated:

“In my opinion, it's important to understand affixes because by understanding them, we can guess the meaning of unfamiliar words we encounter.”

This shows that P1 views affix knowledge as a useful strategy for making sense of new words. His response reflects an awareness of affixation's utility, though it appears to stem from personal observation rather than structured learning

P3 demonstrated a more advanced understanding. He stated:

“In my opinion, understanding affixes is very important, especially for improving vocabulary. By mastering affixes, we can learn vocabulary more independently... words formed through affixation tend to be more polite and formal... like 'unattractive' instead of 'jelek' (ugly).”

P3 associated affix mastery not only with vocabulary development but also with sociolinguistic awareness. He emphasized that affixation contributes to more refined and formal language use, suggesting a deeper appreciation of its functional and communicative roles.

3.1.2 Difficulty in identifying or using affixes (unfamiliarity)

The second category that emerged from the interview is the difficulty in identifying or using affixes, particularly those derived from unfamiliar languages such as Latin and Greek. This category reflects how learners often struggle with affix recognition and interpretation due to unfamiliar origins, complex formations, and misleading affix-like components.

P2 expressed how unfamiliar affixes, especially those that seem foreign or derived from classical languages, make certain English words feel disconnected. She said:

“It's like they don't even sound like English... That makes them harder to remember, especially if the word is long and it's the first time I've seen it.”

This underscores how phonological unfamiliarity and word length amplify the difficulty in processing and recalling affixed vocabulary.

In contrast, P3 offered a different perspective rooted in personal interest. He shared:

“Personally, I'm fascinated by linguistics... I often get curious and even research its etymology... like 'arachnophobia'.”

While P3 does not find unfamiliar affixes difficult, he acknowledged that many learners do. His engagement with etymology allows him to treat difficult affixed words as learning opportunities, especially in technical or scientific contexts. However, his case highlights a more individual and exceptional response rather than the general trend.

when students are asked to describe situations where they misunderstood words due to affix unfamiliarity, P2 shared a real-life instance of confusion:

“I came across the word 'misinterpretation'... but the 'mis' at the beginning confused me.”

This case illustrates how prefix misunderstanding can result in complete misinterpretation of the overall word, reinforcing the need for explicit affix instruction.

P4 provided another notable reflection, explaining how visual similarity can lead to incorrect assumptions:

“I used to think 'supervise' had 'super' meaning 'great'... Not all word parts that look like affixes actually are.”

This highlights a deeper problem: false affix identification. When learners mistakenly perceive roots as affixes (or vice versa), it leads to semantic errors and growing confusion, which negatively impacts their confidence in vocabulary learning.

3.1.3 Decoding words formation instead of memorizing

The third category that emerged from the interview data is decoding word formation instead of memorizing vocabulary. This category explores students' preferences in vocabulary learning whether they favor memorizing word lists or analyzing word structure through affixes and how such strategies impact their comprehension of new vocabulary.

Some participants, particularly those without formal instruction in morphosyntax, indicated a preference for traditional memorization. P2 shared:

“I usually just memorize words directly... I'm not used to analyzing words by breaking them down into smaller parts.”

This reveals a dependence on repetition and rote learning, potentially due to the absence of prior exposure to affix-based instruction. While effective for short-term recall, this method may limit learners' ability to independently decipher unfamiliar words.

In contrast, other participants preferred a more analytical approach, favoring morphological awareness. P3 explained:

“I personally choose to understand how words are formed through affixes... we don't have to memorize every single word individually.”

This demonstrates a clear advantage of affix knowledge in reducing memorization load. For learners like P3, breaking down words into components makes vocabulary learning more manageable and memorable.

When asked how they approached unfamiliar words, participants who preferred decoding shared practical strategies and examples. P1 explained their process:

“I typically begin by analyzing the base word first... I understand that the meaning has certainly changed from that of the original base word.”

Although P1 preferred memorization in theory, this response suggests a developing awareness of affix patterns and their semantic impact, indicating potential growth with proper instruction.

P4 shared a more detailed analysis:

“When I see 'unhappiness,' I know 'un-' means 'not,' 'happy' means 'joyful,' and '-ness' means 'state of'... so I can immediately understand it.”

This reflects a high level of morphological awareness, where affix knowledge enables students to independently infer meaning without external support.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The results show that affix mastery positively influences vocabulary development, but the degree of impact varies depending on the student's familiarity and frequency of usage. Students who have received explicit instruction in affixation, such as through Morphosyntax courses, tend to use affix knowledge more actively and successfully when decoding difficult words. They are also more confident in applying this skill to understand word structure and meaning. In contrast, students with limited exposure may struggle to apply affix knowledge consistently, especially when dealing with words derived from unfamiliar languages like Latin or Greek. Some also encounter difficulties in distinguishing between true affixes and word parts that only resemble them. Despite these challenges, nearly all students reported at least occasional success in using affix knowledge to figure out word meanings, and many expressed a desire to develop this skill further.

In conclusion, the research clearly shows that students recognize affix mastery as a valuable tool in vocabulary development and view it as an effective strategy to support their learning. While their ability to apply affix knowledge varies based on individual experience and instruction, the overall findings affirm the role of affix mastery in not only improving vocabulary comprehension but also in fostering greater

learner autonomy and confidence in language learning. To maximize this potential, more structured, explicit, and engaging morphological instruction is recommended across the curriculum.

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