The Effect of Affix knowledge on English Vocabulary Learning

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ABSTRACT
Many researchers think that the knowledge of using affixes for vocabulary learning is one of the most effective strategies (Nation, 2001). This study presents an attempt to find out the relationship between the affix knowledge and vocabulary building. And how it is vitally important as a systematic means of increasing vocabulary. The problem is that the topic of prefixation and suffixation is not taught in a systematic way to secondary school learners. Therefore, students at this level face difficulties in identifying derived words when they come across them. Data for this study was collected by using two tools, a written test for learners and a questionnaire for teachers. The results show that the affix knowledge does play an important role in language learning, and it has a positive impact on vocabulary building. It also shows that teachers generally have a limited focus on the teaching of the prefixes and suffixes however, by incorporating systematic teaching into a lesson, we can enforce the students’ vocabulary. Moreover, the results show that female students have more knowledge of affixes than their male counterparts.

Keywords: Affixation, Affix knowledge, Prefix, Suffix, Vocabulary learning, EFL

Introduction
Milton (2009) states that understanding of prefixes and suffixes as well as root of the word is essential for comprehension. The understanding of affixation enables learners to deduce the meaning of vocabulary. Knowledge of some basic principles of affixation will serve to broaden the learner’s range of expression. Moreover, understanding how to handle prefixes and suffixes is vitally important in learning vocabulary (Schmitt 1997). In a result of a questionnaire conducted by Schmitt (1997) focusing on a situation of Japanese EFL learners shows that 69% of them think studying words by analyzing affixes and roots is helpful. On the other hand, the learners who actually used this strategy were reported to be only 15% (Schmitt 1997). While it may be feasible to teach the learners some generative rules concerning the formation of words with affixes, this linguistic phenomenon has not been given the importance it deserves when teaching English as a foreign language at intermediate levels in Libya. The topic of this research has been chosen as a reply to some questions. Firstly, teaching prefixes and suffixes is almost neglected in the process of teaching English as a foreign Language in secondary schools. Secondly, it is important to teach affixation as one of language aspects in both productive and receptive skills. Thirdly, this aspect has been rarely investigated. And finally, the study is likely to develop the teacher’s awareness, interest and better understanding of prefixes and suffixes.

Problem statement
It is noticed in teaching English to secondary school learners that affixation is either taught in a random way, or not taught at all. Most of secondary school learners face some difficulties concerning of affixes, such as the difficulties in identifying derived words when they are presented for the first time because they lack knowledge of affixes. The learner may know the word (happy) (adj), but cannot easily identify the derived noun (happiness) unless he has enough knowledge of the derivational suffix (-ness). The learner’s lack of knowledge about the correlation between various affixes and their function and meaning affects their ability to utilize the lexical system, such as (-tion) signaling a noun, (-able) an adjective (-ly) an adverb of manner.

Study significance
This study can reassure teachers, syllabus designers, and textbook authors about the role of teaching affixation in secondary schools. Moreover, the findings of this work could help textbook
writers to emphasize affixation and to concentrate on the problematic aspects that the learners might face when dealing with this linguistic phenomenon. In addition, this study is expected to draw the teacher’s attention to the importance of affixation when teaching English as a Foreign Language.

Research questions

The main research question of the study is: To what extent does the lack of teaching affixes hinder the learning of vocabulary?. Does systematic teaching of affix knowledge lead to better vocabulary retention than not teaching it? The sub-research question is: Are Libyan Secondary School Students able to recognize the existence of affixation?

Methodology

Participants

The subjects of this study were two classes of two secondary school students, second-year English Specialists, in Misurata, Libya, (25 students in each class), (one class of girls and the other of boys), and 20 teachers of English of both sexes, from different secondary schools in Misurata, Libya.

Tools of Data Collection

Two instruments were used, a questionnaire for language teachers and a written test for students. The questionnaire aimed to establish the extent to which teachers focus on affixation in their teaching. It also aimed to determine the teachers’ views regarding the students’ ability of using affixation. The questionnaire consisted of five multiple-choice questions. It requires the teachers to select one of the given alternatives. Twenty teachers of English were participated in this questionnaire.

The test. The test subjects were fifty students of both sexes, twenty five males and twenty five females of second year English Specialist in two different schools in Misurata. The subjects who took part in the study had almost similar educational background. That is, they have been studying English for six years. The items included in the test had been designed to test some affixes in English which students might have come across during their years of studying English. The test consists of six completion–type questions. All the questions are related to word affixation, forty five items representing different types of affixes.

Analysis and Discussion

Analysis and Evaluation of the Questionnaire Results

The first question asked how important the teachers considered the teaching of prefixes and suffixes to be: (a) very important indeed (b) Quite important (c) not very important (d) Not important at all, when teaching vocabulary. (see table 1)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Options</th>
<th>Very important indeed</th>
<th>Quite important</th>
<th>Not very important</th>
<th>Not important at all</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No. of teachers</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Mean is calculated as following: (12x4)+(8x3)+(0x2)+(0x1)=72 72÷20=3.6

The majority of teachers (60%) emphasized the very importance of using affixation in vocabulary teaching. The Mean of this question is (3.6). Table (1) shows the result of this question.
The second question asked the teachers how often they teach affixation when teaching vocabulary. Table (2) shows that 65% of teachers said that they sometimes teach affixation, 30% chose ‘usually’, while 5% stated that they never teach affixation. The Mean of this question is (2.45).

Table 2
Answers to Q2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Options</th>
<th>Always</th>
<th>Usually</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No. of teachers</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>2.45</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In question three, the teachers were asked about their options on whether the teaching of affixation facilitates vocabulary learning. All the teachers agreed, with (45%) strongly, but none disagreed or strongly disagreed. The other teachers had different viewpoints, such as 45% of them emphasized facilitation. The Mean of this question is (3.45). Table 3 shows the result of this question:

Table 3
Answers to Q3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Options</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No. of teachers</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>3.45</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The following table is concerned with the way teachers deal with affixation when they come across it in their teaching, as required in question four. 50% of the teachers said it depends on the word, while 20% of them said they explain it in detail, and the same percentage (20%) of them answered that they just teach it. However, 10% of the teachers neglect the teaching of this aspect of the grammar. The Mean is (2.5). Table (4) shows the result of this question:

Table 4
Answers to Q4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Options</th>
<th>Explain it in detail</th>
<th>Teach it</th>
<th>It depends on the word</th>
<th>Ignore it</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No. of teachers</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Question five asked the teachers how the textbooks deal with affixation. A high percentage (55%) of the teachers asserted that the textbooks deal quite well with this aspect of grammar, while 20% said that the presentation of affixes in textbooks is not very good. The same percentage (20%) of teachers answered that the textbooks do not deal with affixes at all. However, only 5% chose the option (very well indeed). The Mean of question five is (2.45). Table (5) shows the answers of this question:

Table 5
Answers to Q5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Options</th>
<th>Very well indeed</th>
<th>Quite well</th>
<th>Not very well</th>
<th>Not well at all</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No. of teachers</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Conclusion of the questionnaire

From the above analysis, it is clear that the teachers’ responses give us a detailed view on which we can rely. All the teachers agreed and assured that the teaching of prefixes and suffixes is an important, helpful way, and it facilitates vocabulary comprehension. However, the result showed that the majority of teachers were not really concerned with the teaching of affixation, except when they came across it by chance, and they generally had a limited focus on it. It is also clear, from the teachers’ responses that the text books do not focus very well on this aspect. This result encourages us to revise the way of teaching this problematic area and devote more time to explain it.

Analysis and discussion of the vocabulary test results

Table 6 presents the result of the students’ test. In question one, students were asked to derive new word classes of some given words by using the proper derivational suffix to complete the sentences meaningfully. Nearly two thirds of the students were unable to give correct answers. Only (36.8%) of them provided correct ones. Question two was to form nouns from verbs, by using different noun suffixes (-tion, -ment, -er, al). Four male students were unable to answer this question correctly, whereas eleven students including only one male student, had full marks. 65.2% was the percentage of correct answers of this question. In question three, the students were asked to choose the proper negative prefix form (un-, in-, il-, non-) to complete the sentences. The results showed that more than a half gave correct answers to this question, with a percentage (68%). Sixteen female and only one male students had full marks. However, four students failed to give correct answers. The fourth question was related to suffixed words of different parts of speech, in order to determine the students’ ability to recognize the suffix, which shows the grammatical function of the word. The percentage of the correct answers was 65.2%. However, five students were unable to answer the question. In question five, the students were asked to derive adjectives from the given underlined words to complete the sentences. The percentage of the correct answers was less than a half (44%).

Table 6
Result of students’ vocabulary test.  \( Q = \) question, \( M = \) mark

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Q1</th>
<th>Q2</th>
<th>Q3</th>
<th>Q4</th>
<th>Q5</th>
<th>Q6A</th>
<th>Q6B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No. of students</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of test items</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Correct answers</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>163</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>326</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average score per item</td>
<td>0.368</td>
<td>0.652</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td>0.652</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>0.516</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>36.8%</td>
<td>65.2%</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>65.2%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>51.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall percentage</td>
<td>0.5453 (54.53%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The average score per item of question (1) was calculated as follows:

\[ \frac{184}{50} \div 10 = 0.368 \quad 184 = \text{No. of correct answers}, \quad 50 = \text{No. of students}, \quad 10 = \text{No. of test items} \]

The overall percentage of the correct answers of the test is calculated as follows:
\[
1227 \div 50 \div 45 = 0.5453 \quad (54.53\%)
\]
1227 = total of correct answers, 50 = number of the students, 45 = total items of the test

**The test interpretation and conclusion**

It can be concluded from the above analysis that most of the students have difficulty in deriving a new word class by using affixes. However, a good percentage (65.2%) of the students succeeded in changing some verbs into nouns by using common suffixes, such as -ment, -tion, -er. It is expected that because such common suffixes are used frequently in the textbook, and by the teachers, students are familiar with them. Similarly, in choosing common negative prefixes, such as il-, un-, non, students scored more than a half (68%) of correct answers, However, in question six, where the students were asked to add suitable suffixes and prefixes to little used words, such as conglomerate, dilute, legitimate, they scored less than a half (44%) of correct answers. This result shows that students lack the simple rules of affixes, such as most of the verbs which end with ‘ate’ could be changed into nouns by adding ‘tion’ and vice versa. It also indicates that the teachers do not focus on affixation in their teaching.

It may be worth mentioning that in the vocabulary test, the female students scored much higher marks than the male students. In fact, there is no clear reason behind this big difference between the performance of male and female Libyan students. However, in general, it is believed that females acquire languages at a faster rate than males (Coates, J. 2004).

**Conclusion**

The results have shown that students face some difficulties in the use of affixation. This has been statistically validated by overall percentage of the correct answers (54.53%) in the test (see table 6). This result supports the assumption that such aspect causes difficulty to learners, and that special treatment is needed to acquaint the students with this linguistic phenomenon. Furthermore, errors committed in the use of affixes vary according to their type and use. The results also show that the learners lack the knowledge about the correlation between various affixes and their function and meaning which affects their ability to utilize the lexical system. Moreover, the teachers’ answers to the questionnaire asserts that explicit teaching of affixation helps learners to become familiar with ways of building new words by attaching affixes and it is also helpful in recognizing the meaning as well as parts of speech of words from affixes attached to them. However, the majority of teachers are not really concerned with the affixes teaching. It has also been noticed that affixes to which students are commonly exposed have recorded the least errors.

**References**


Appendix A

Teacher's Questionnaire

Dear teacher,

This questionnaire is designed for Libyan teachers of English of secondary schools in Misurata. It aims to probe opinions of secondary school teachers about the teaching of prefixes and suffixes at all levels of secondary school. It also aims to determine the teachers' views regarding the students' ability to learn and understand affixes.

It consists of five multiple-choice questions and will take you less than five minutes to complete.

The data collected in this questionnaire will be used as a tool to conduct my study for the requirements of the MA TESOL at the University of Nottingham, UK; it will not be used for any other purposes.
I am very grateful for your cooperation.

Name (optional): …………………………….. School: …………………………… Tick the year(s) that you teach: 1st year □ 2nd year □ 3rd year □

Please tick one option only in each of the following questions:

1. How important do you think the teaching of prefixes and suffixes is when teaching vocabulary?
   a) Very important indeed □ b) Quite important □
   c) Not very important □ d) Not important at all □

2. Do you teach affixation when teaching vocabulary?
   a) Always □ b) Usually □ c) Sometimes □ d) Never □

3. Do you think that the teaching of affixation will facilitate vocabulary learning?
   a) Strongly agree □ b) Agree □ c) Disagree □ d) Strongly disagree □

4. How do you deal with affixation when you come across it in your teaching?
   a) Explain it in detail □ b) Teach it □
   c) It depends on the word □ d) Ignore it □

5. In your own view, how does the textbook deal with affixation?
   a) Very well indeed □ b) Quite well □
   c) Not very well □ d) Not well at all □

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Appendix B

Students' Vocabulary Test
Secondary School of Social Sciences
English Specialization - Second Year

Vocabulary Test (Total marks 45) Time allowed: 1 hour

Question One. Use the words between brackets to form words which can complete the sentences: (some of the words do not need to be changed) (10 marks)

1. We were delighted to hear about his ………………..……….. in football and volleyball. (achieve)
2. It is essential to train people in the basic elements of ………………..……. at sea or in the mountains. (survive).
3. Industries often…………………………..the land, sea and air around them. (pollution)
4. This problem concerns the whole country. It is a ……………………….……. problem. (nation)
5. The …………………..of these machines requires plenty of manual and mental skills. (operate).
6. It is very kind to wish your friends a life full of .......................... (happy)
7. It is so ................................. I cannot read the paper. (darkness)
8. You can swim .....................................in this water. (safe)
9. A ................................. is one who serves other people. (serve)
10. The house was a hive of ................................. on the day before the wedding. (activity)

Question Two
Change these verbs into nouns: (5 marks)
1. inform .................................
2. develop .................................
3. write .................................
4. invent .................................
5. arrive .................................

Question Three: (5 marks)
Choose the prefixes in the box to complete the sentences:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>un / in / il / non</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>If an action is against the law. It is ............................................ legal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>A person who does not smoke. He is a ......................................... smoker.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Having no good or positive features. It is ...................................... attractive.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Not completely correct or exact. It is ........................................... accurate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>He speaks without stopping. He speaks ............................................stop.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Question Four: (10 marks)
Indicate whether each word in the following list is: a verb, a noun, an adjective, or an adverb; and underline the part of the word which shows its grammatical function.

Example: emphasize = verb

| 1. | recognize = ......................... 2. | sadness = ......................... |
| 3. | careful = ......................... 4. | happily = ......................... |
| 5. | suggestion = ......................... 6. | selfish = ......................... |
| 7. | punishment = ......................... 8. | carefully = ......................... |
| 8. | warmth = ......................... 10. | driver = ......................... |

Question Five: (5 marks)
Form adjectives from the underlined words, and use them to complete the sentences:

1. I am interested in the art of Iran. I am interested in ......................... art.
2. After you find out how ......................... the room is, write its width here.
3. It is easy to read. It is a ......................... article.
4. They like music. They are very ......................... family.
5. If an adult behaves badly in a way that would be expected of a child, he is .........................

Question Six: (10 marks)
A. Add a suitable suffix to these words to form what is asked between brackets.

| 1. | conglomerate → ............................................ (noun) |
| 2. | wary → ............................................ (adverb) |
| 3. | dilute → ............................................ (noun) |
| 4. | anticipation→ ............................................ (verb) |
| 5. | gravitational → ............................................ (noun) |

B. Add a suitable prefix to these words to form what is asked between brackets.

1. ...................tell. (tell something again)
2. ................ legitimate. (not legitimate)
3. ................ history. (before history)
4. ................ serviceman. (a man who was a member of the armed services in the past)
5. ................ harmed. (not hurt or damaged).

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