Effects of Form-Focused Instruction on EFL Students’ Use of Morphologically Complex Words

Piyapat Chuai-in 1 and Prachamon Aksornjarung 2
1. Graduate Student, M.A. (TEIL), Prince of Songkla University
2. Assistant Professor, Ph. D. (English), Prince of Songkla University

Abstract. Morphologically complex words are composed of base and one or more affixes. This study investigated a group of Thai EFL learners’ knowledge of derivational suffixes measured by their use of morphologically complex words. In particular, it sought to find the effects of explicit form-focused instruction (FFI) on the two research aspects. A total of 48 Thai EFL learners were equally assigned into an experimental and a controlled group. FFI was given to the former and non-FFI to the latter. Prior to the study, the word formation test was administered both groups. The sentence completion test was used as pre-test and post-test. Statistical results suggested that both groups were better able to form than to use morphologically complex words. Besides, it was found that difference of derivational made a difference to use of such word type. Finally, significant results of FFI were able to indicate that students given FFI performed better in both tasks after the treatment.

Key word: morphologically complex word, derivational suffix, form-focused instruction
Introduction

Since language is widely used as a channel of communication, words are considered as a primary tool for communication with language. Knowing a system of vocabulary is a part of knowing language and also a central aspect of language competence (Katamba, 1993; Mathew, 1993). In fact, knowledge of word in language includes knowledge of its spelling, standard pronunciation, definitions, syntactic class, and formation (Mathew, 1993; Fromkin, 2002). With knowledge of English words, both native speakers and non-native speakers, those learning English as a second language (ESL) and foreign language (EFL), have primarily entered English literacy (Nation, 1990; Brown, 2007).

Words, similar to phrases and sentences, have a predictable internal structure (Meyer, 2009). Each word is composed of elements which smaller than word called ‘morpheme’ (Katamba, 1993; Fromkin, 2002). Morpheme, the smallest indivisible unit, contains semantic content and grammatical function which together form a word (Meyer, 2009). In English, morphemes are classified as free and bound morpheme. Free morpheme can stand on its own as a word (e.g., boy, dog, cat), whereas bound morpheme must be attached to a free morpheme for its meaningfulness (e.g., -s, -ing, -ed, -ful, -ness). Inflection and derivation, two main types of English bound morphemes, have different functions (Mathew, 1993; Fromkin, 2002; Jackson, 2002). An inflectional morpheme is to modify the form of a word based on the syntactic rules. Thus, most English instructors are able to exemplify automatically when teaching lexical syntactic rules. A derivation, on the other hand, is the system of forming a new word by changing the meaning of the base, such as, kind VS un-kind. Further, a new word can be formed by a change of word class which a base belongs to (e.g., differ-different). Because main function of derivational morphemes is to create new word, derivational morphology is considered as a process of word formation (Mathew, 1993). This is why English instructors are, somehow, advised derivational process to give instruction on English word formation.

To language teachers, as well as researchers, knowledge of word formation is a way to enlarge students’ vocabulary repertoire (McCarthy & O’Dell, 1994; Carlisle, 2000; Mochizuki & Aizawa, 2000; Deacon & Bryant, 2005). Allen (1988) also claimed that teachers’ identifying the correspondence between forms and functions such as learning the verbs (e.g., accept, allow, and appear) together with the related nouns (e.g., acceptance, allowance, and appearance) could help learners increase vocabulary. In the same way, it is better if learning nouns (e.g., communication, impression, and production) takes place.
together with related adjective forms (e.g., communicative, impressive, and productive). Thus, noticing suffixes can help students to be able to distinguish among different forms of derived words. Therefore, deliberately planned teaching based on the language rules is vital in presenting the learners with knowledge of word formation in order to enlarge their vocabulary repertoire.

However, there might be some EFL learners who have hardly ever explained rules of word formation explicitly, especially, those who learn English in communicative language classroom. Because CLT is an approach in which the focus is placed on communicative language ability, some of certain language features may be hardly ever raised in the CLT classroom. This has been observed that CLT in EFL classroom may lack the emphasis on linguistics features (Spada, 1997; Hedge, 2000). In fact, knowledge of word formation which is a part of lexical knowledge is primarily important for the achievement to linguistic competence. Hence, the CLT seems to fail in enhancing linguistic competence and help all the learners become accurate and proficient in their foreign language ability. In other words, CLT is not really to focus on language forms (Lightbown, 2000; Norris & Ortega, 2000), so it seems that pure communicative classroom practice does not let students pay attention to correct production of language forms. This may let some students who are not accurate in morphological skill produce incorrectness of some morphological rules. This is why Schmidt (1990) claims that attention is necessary for learning language forms. Due to the fact that CLT may lack the emphasis of language features, EFL communicative classroom may need to combine to form-focused instruction (FFI) which includes a focus on language forms.

A great number of practice and research in ESL/EFL teaching and learning has provided strong supports for incorporating FFI in the CLT classroom (Long, 1991; Spada, 1997; Lightbown, 2000; and Noriss & Ortega, 2000). In particular, the communicative instruction complimented with an explicit focus on language features in the EFL classroom has been firmly advocated (Spada, 1997; Norris & Ortega, 2000). The present study is, therefore aimed, to examine whether Thai EFL students’ knowledge of derivational suffix in morphologically complex words can be enhanced by FFI in the communicative classroom.

Research Questions

(1) What is the extent of EFL students’ knowledge of word formation?

(2) What is the extent of EFL students’ performance on use of morphologically complex words?
(3) Do four types of derivational suffix make a difference to EFL students’ use of morphologically complex words?

(4) Does form-focused instruction enhance EFL learners’ ability to use morphologically complex words better?

**Technical Terms**

(1) **Derivational Suffixation** is a process of English word formation by combining a derivational suffix to base word. The created new word normally contains the original meaning, but its part of speech is often changed.

(2) **Knowledge of derivational suffixes** refers to EFL learners’ knowledge of the target derivational suffixes, measured by considering their ability to form morphologically complex words. In the present study, two syntactic word classes; noun and adjective were investigated.

(3) **Knowledge of morphologically complex words** refers to EFL learners’ knowledge of derivational suffixes, evaluated by considering their ability to use morphologically complex words at syntactic level.

(4) **Form-Focused Instruction (FFI)** refers to pedagogical event occurring in meaning-based teaching approaches to research participants in which a focus on language (limited to morphologically complex words containing target suffixes in the reading materials) is provided in predetermined ways (Spada, 1997). Target derivational suffixes in morphologically complex words were briefly and explicitly identified after EFL students’ reading.

(5) **Reading Passages** refers to 8 ESP reading passages used as course materials. All of the passages contain the target morphologically complex words.

**Framework of the study**

(1) The present study focused on two noun-suffixes (-ance/-ence, -ion/-tion) and two adjective-suffixes (-ant/-ent, -ive/-tive).

(2) It was designed to investigate two aspects of lexical knowledge: EFL students’ performance on word formation and their use of morphologically complex words at syntactic level.

(3) Instructional treatment used in the study was limited to Spada’s position on *form-focused instruction* (FFI) which refers to pedagogical events which occur with
meaning-based approaches to L2 instruction in which a focus on language is provided in predetermined ways. It was not identical to Long’s definition of focus on form which refers to pedagogical events in which attention is drawn to language as a perceived need arises.

(4) It was limited to a group of Thai EFL students taking an ESP course in the 2010/1 academic year at RMUTSV.

Methodology

Subjects

Forty-eight 3\textsuperscript{rd} year university students from the College of Hospitality and Tourism at Rajamangala University of Technology Srivijaya (RMUTSV) participated in the study. All participants were 7 males and 41 females at the average age of 21. All participants were taught morphologically complex words through reading lessons in ESP course ‘\textit{English for Hospitality 3’}.

Instrument

The research instrument consisted of 2 tests: a word-formation test which aimed to find out students’ knowledge of word formation, and a sentence completion test which aimed to find out their performance on use of the words. Both contained 32 target morphologically complex words; 16 nouns and 16 adjectives. Two noun-suffixes; [-\textit{ance/-ence}] and [-\textit{ion/-tion}] and two adjective-suffixes; [-\textit{ant/-ent}] and [-\textit{ive/-tive}] were chosen as target suffixes in the study. Eight of morphologically complex words were noun ending with suffixes [-\textit{ance/-ence}], and the other eight words were noun ending with suffixes [-\textit{ion/-tion}]. The remaining 16 morphologically complex words were adjectives; eight with suffixes [-\textit{ant/-ent}], other eight with suffixes [-\textit{ive/-tive}]. All base verbs were provided as a clue for the target words in both the word formation test and the sentence completion test. In the sentence completion test, 32 sentences were divided into two parts because the words sharing the same base were designed to test separately (e.g., \textit{difference-different}).

Procedure

The pre-test consisted of 2 steps: participants in both groups first completed word formation test, and then the sentence completion tests. For the treatment of an experimental group, reading lessons from ESP course ‘\textit{English for Hospitality 3’} was used to teach morphologically complex words by form-focused instruction (FFI) throughout the semester. That is, the instructor identified forms of morphologically words found in the passages during
the explanation of the meaning of the sentences. Rules of sentence structures that governed the conventional arrangement and relationship of words in the sentence were also the main concern of the instruction. On the other hand, the controlled group did not receive explicit instruction on derivational suffixation in their reading lessons. Reading lessons in the controlled group were focused on identifying main idea. Finally, the sentence completion test used at the stage of pre-test was administered to both groups at the stage of post-test again.

**Findings**

T-tests were employed to analyze data in the study. Mean scores of word formation test were measured to find out the extent of students’ knowledge of word formation, whereas mean scores of sentence completion test were measured to find out the extent of students’ performance on use of the words. Table 1 determined difference between the subjects’ prior knowledge of word formation and their performance on use of the words.

**Table 1:** Mean Scores of Pre-Test on Word Formation and Use of Words

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Test</th>
<th>Total Scores</th>
<th>Controlled Group</th>
<th>Experimental Group</th>
<th>t-test</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(\bar{x})</td>
<td>S.D</td>
<td>(\bar{x})</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formation</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>18.63</td>
<td>2.12</td>
<td>9.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>9.75</td>
<td>2.40</td>
<td>6.58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The mean scores on the word formation test and the sentence completion test, shown in Table 1, reveal that the former is lower the latter in both tests. Between the two groups, a controlled group better performed in both tasks. Between the two tests, both groups better performed word formation task than sentence completion task.

Besides, each suffix was designed to measure separately because the study was to find out effects of different suffixes on students’ use of morphologically complex words. By the mean scores of both pre-test and post-test shown in Table 2, effects of four types of suffixes on use of the words in both groups were presented below.

**Table 2:** Mean Scores of Pre-Test and Post-Test on Use of Morphologically Complex Words

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Suffix</th>
<th>Total Scores</th>
<th>Pre-Test</th>
<th>Post-Test</th>
<th>t-test</th>
<th>Sig</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(\bar{x})</td>
<td>S.D</td>
<td>(\bar{x})</td>
<td>S.D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-ance</td>
<td>-ence</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2.70</td>
<td>1.60</td>
<td>2.29</td>
<td>1.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-ant</td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3.16</td>
<td>1.60</td>
<td>3.04</td>
<td>1.30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The third research question was limited to find out the effects of different derivational suffixes on students’ use of morphologically complex words before the treatment. Mean scores of each suffix in the pre-test, shown in Table 2, illustrated that the scores of each suffix in both groups were not equal. Results also showed that there was no equality of mean scores among the suffixes in each group. Further, mean scores of the same suffix between the two groups were not equal. However, the two groups’ best and worst suffixes performed were the same. Both groups worst performed a suffix [-ive/-tive], and best performed a suffix [-ant/-ent] in the pre-test. The mean scores of each suffix were also separately measured in the post-test, so results, shown in Table 2, could indicate the effects of instructional treatments given to the participants.

Based on the results in Table 2, when mean scores of total difference between the pre-test and the post-test in a controlled group were compared, it was found that difference of the two tests was not significant (0.65). Further, when mean scores of each suffix were separately measured, it was found that three suffixes were also not significant although a suffix [-ion/-tion] was (0.04). In contrast, difference of mean scores in pre-test and post-test in an experimental group was found that it was statistically significant (0.01). Moreover, mean scores of two suffixes; [-ion/-tion] and [-ive/-tive], were also significant when they were separately measured. Therefore, results shown in Table 2 could indicate that students given form-focused instruction better developed performance on use of the words. In Figure 1, the increase of mean scores between pre-test and post-test in the two groups was shown.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Suffix</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Med</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
<th>Diff</th>
<th>Sig</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Controlled (N=24)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-ent</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2.04</td>
<td>1.19</td>
<td>2.83</td>
<td>1.37</td>
<td>-2.08</td>
<td>.04*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-ion -tion</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1.50</td>
<td>1.31</td>
<td>1.70</td>
<td>1.08</td>
<td>-.65</td>
<td>.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-ive -tive</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1.29</td>
<td>0.99</td>
<td>1.83</td>
<td>1.12</td>
<td>-1.12</td>
<td>.04*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>32</td>
<td>9.75</td>
<td>2.40</td>
<td>10.08</td>
<td>3.02</td>
<td>-1.46</td>
<td>.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Experimental (N=24)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-ance -ence</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1.87</td>
<td>1.19</td>
<td>1.87</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-ant -ent</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2.29</td>
<td>1.16</td>
<td>3.12</td>
<td>1.32</td>
<td>-1.89</td>
<td>.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-ion -tion</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1.29</td>
<td>0.99</td>
<td>1.83</td>
<td>1.12</td>
<td>-1.22</td>
<td>.04*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-ive -tive</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0.91</td>
<td>0.97</td>
<td>1.45</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>-2.32</td>
<td>.02*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>32</td>
<td>6.58</td>
<td>2.93</td>
<td>8.58</td>
<td>2.56</td>
<td>-2.72</td>
<td>.01**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* significant at 0.05 level  
** significant at 0.01 level
Figure 1: The Increase of Students’ Performance on Use of the Words after the Treatment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Controlled Group</th>
<th>Experimental Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-ance/-ence</td>
<td>-0.41</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-ant/-ent</td>
<td>-0.12</td>
<td>0.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-ion/-tion</td>
<td>0.79</td>
<td>0.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-ive/-tive</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>0.54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discussion

This study provided evidence that knowledge of derivational suffixation affected EFL students’ performance on word formation. Although bases were provided in both tasks, it seemed that students were not able to form all morphologically complex words correctly. Results found in the study were able to support the fact that root morphemes play a role in acquisition of derived words (Carlisle, 1988). Because root morphemes were considered as primary resource in order to guess the correct form of derived words, it might be problematic for those who were not familiar to the base form (Carlisle & Katz, 2006). Based on the results of the study, students who were not familiar to target base words might try hard to combine a suffix to base word. In addition, results found in the study showed that students better performed the word formation task than the sentence completion task. In fact, word formation task required only knowledge of base and suffix, whereas sentence completion task also needed syntactic knowledge. Therefore, the sentence completion task might be problematic for students who were not proficient in morphological and syntactic rules. In spite of the fact that both groups study in the same level and major program, the study surprisingly found that there was obvious extent of difference of knowledge of word formation between the two groups. In the word formation task, the latter’s performance on word formation task was not nearly to the former’s performance on. Moreover, the study also found that there were some differences between the two tasks in each group. A performance on word formation was not
nearly the same to their performance on sentence completion. It seemed that they were rather accurate in knowledge of word formation, whereas their syntactic knowledge was too low. In the experimental group, students’ accuracy of word formation was nearly the same to their accuracy of use of words in the sentence completion task.

With regard to the role of suffixes on the use of derived word in the sentence completion task, results shown by mean scores of the tests indicated that there was no equality among each suffix in both pre and post the instruction. This can be inferred that knowledge of suffixes also make a difference to form morphologically complex words, i.e. the amount of correct forms of morphologically complex words depend on the learners’ familiarity of the suffixes as well as the bases. As Chuenjundaeng and Ward (2009) found, different derivational suffixes made a difference to students’ use of morphologically complex words, so results found in the present study were able to support this previous study. To clarify results found in the study, some suffixes were mostly correct (e.g., -ant/-ent). Thus, it could be interpreted that certain suffixes are obvious. It seemed that a suffix (e.g., -ant/-ent) frequently occurs in daily communication (e.g., important and different). These are often found in students’ everyday English usage, for instance, ‘It is important to learn’ or ‘English is different from Thai’. Therefore, present study was able to agree that familiarity of suffixes influences students to produce derived words that was what Carlisle & Katz (2006) found.

To illustrate the last main purpose of research design, there was significant difference between different instructional treatments given to the participants. Evidence from students given FFI showed that their performance on use of the words was better developed than students who were not given FFI. Although mean scores in FFI-group were lower than non-FFI group, it was obvious results to show that there was no decrease of their performance after they were given instructional treatment. Because form-focused instruction was to prime for noticing and to make clear rules of suffixation, morphologically complex words were learned consciously in the experimental group. Results found in the present study, therefore, were able to indicate that students given FFI could better memorize what they learned in the class (Norris & Ortega, 2000). In contrast, non-FFI groups seemed to forget what they learned, so they failed to use morphologically complex words at the stage of post-test after the end of instruction. Finally, results found in the present study were able to support that FFI was still effective instructional treatment in CLT classroom. To sum up, explicitly identifying the suffixes in question is more effective for learning morphologically complex words in context.
Recommendation

Present study was limited to investigate only four items of derivational suffixes although there are several suffixes in the English language system. Thus, other suffixes existing in English words can also be explored in the future study. Further, current study investigated only derived words containing verb as a base, so it might be limited to indicate that all bases (e.g., noun, adjective) in derivational process are problematic for participants. Although evidence shown in present study found that difference of suffixes influenced use of morphologically complex words, the results were limited to some groups of EFL students. Further study may have to try form-focused instruction in other EFL classrooms, such as science technology, business administration, or those who are leaning English in communicative classroom. Moreover, other instructional treatments in EFL instruction which can enhance EFL students’ knowledge of lexical derivation should be explored.

References


