In the Name of God

Shahid Rajaee Teacher Training University

Faculty of Humanities

The Impact of Morphological Awareness on the Vocabulary Development of Iranian EFL Students

By: **Aylar Khadivar**

Supervisor: **Dr. Farhad Ghorban Dordynejad**

Reader: **Dr. Maryam Meshkat**

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Studies Office in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL)

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This thesis is dedicated to my mother, who taught me that the best kind of knowledge to have is that which is learned for its own sake.

Acknowledgments

My sincere gratitude goes to my supervisor, Dr. Farhad Ghorban Dordynejad, who encouraged me to learn about being a researcher and doing research. I owe him for his time reading the drafts, helping with the statistical analyses of the data as well as discussing the results with me. I am also grateful to my reader, Dr. Maryam Meshkat, for her insightful guidance and support, and reading and editing drafts of each chapter.

My deep gratitude goes to many people who were there when I needed them.
To Dr. Reza Nejati, thank you for your assurance and guidance. To Dr. Mehrak Rahimi, thank you for your steadfast patience and the considerable time you spent advising me. To my friends, thank you for your encouragement during the process of writing up the thesis.

I also owe thanks to the people who helped me to conduct the present study: to the students of shahid Soudi junior high school for their consent of participation; to the principal of the school for allowing me an access to the participants.

Last, but not least, I thank my mother for her understanding, and support. You are an amazing source of encouragement that has taught me to never give up.

Abstract

This study investigated the impact of explicit instruction of morphemic analysis and synthesis on the vocabulary development of the students. The participants were 90 junior high school students divided into two experimental groups and one control group. Morphological awareness techniques (analysis/synthesis) and conventional techniques were used to teach vocabulary in the experimental groups and control group respectively. The results of ANOVA revealed a statistically significant difference in post-assessment vocabulary test scores for the three groups (F = 59.02, p = .00), where the mean score of the two experimental groups were found to be significantly higher than that of the control group. The results also indicated that the mean of experimental group 1 and experimental group 2 put together was significantly different from the mean of conventional group (tc = 10.86 > tα = 2.49).

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IP: Input processing

ELLs: English language learners

L1: First language

L2: Second language

Chapter One

Introduction

1.1. Overview

Vocabulary is an important micro skill for language learning. Nation (2001) suggested four general goals that are important in a language classroom, Language, which includes vocabulary; Ideas, which covers content and subject matter as well as cultural knowledge; Skills; and Text or Discourse. Therefore, vocabulary must be a key part of any language-teaching program.

Vocabulary knowledge can predict other language skills including reading comprehension, writing, and listening (Llach & Gallego, 2009; Staehr, 2008; Tannenbaum, Torgesen, & Wagner, 2006). According to Nagy (2005) among the many benefits of having a large vocabulary, the most valuable one is the positive contribution of vocabulary size to reading comprehension.

Vocabulary knowledge can be developed through different vocabulary learning strategies. Nagy (2005) states effective vocabulary instruction should be multifaceted and encompassing: teaching individual words, exposing to rich language, both oral and written, and building generative word knowledge. He includes generative word knowledge in the description of multifaceted vocabulary instruction because he thinks that vocabulary knowledge that is made of memorized information is inadequate. Generative word knowledge is defined as vocabulary knowledge that can be used in learning of the new words, such as the use of context and word parts that can be taught to students to make them better word learners. He uses the term *word consciousness* in order to clarify generative word knowledge strategy. *Word consciousness* involves an interest in and awareness of various aspects of

words—their meanings, their histories, relationships with other words, word parts, and most importantly, the way writers use words effectively to communicate.

Anglin (1993), based on some previous studies referred to three approaches in the research literature to the development of vocabulary knowledge:

1) Direct instruction of vocabulary in school.

2) Learning words and their meanings from context, especially during reading activities.

3) Applying morphological knowledge to infer the meanings of words.

He focuses on the third approach in his article. It will consider the individual learners' application of morphological knowledge as a vocabulary learning strategy.

Nation (2001) introduces taxonomy of vocabulary learning strategies which consists of three general categories of "planning", "sources", and "processes". Each general category contains some subcategories. Subcategories of "sources" involve analyzing the word, using context, consulting a reference source in L1 or L2, and using parallels in L1 and L2. Analyzing the words is considered as a vocabulary learning strategy.

According to Wysocky and Jenkins (1987), morphemic information can expand students' vocabulary better than direct teaching methods (e.g., simple telling, massed drill, and dictionary tasks) and contextual analysis. They reviewed the results of studies that investigated the effect of morphological generalization on vocabulary knowledge of the learners and concluded that morphological generalization may impact vocabulary knowledge. Morphological generalization is the ability to analyze an unknown word into its components (for example, stem, suffix, and prefix), to access the meaning of the individual components and to try to derive the meaning of the whole word on the bases of the meaning of the individual words.

Morphemic instruction strategy that focuses on promoting learners' word consciousness is well supported by the VanPatten's model of input processing (IP). This model provides psycholinguistic explanation for the fact that L2 (and L1) learners in early stages of development often face difficulty with certain grammatical forms, particularly bound morphemes (Harrington, 2004). Input processing (IP) model is based on the metaphor of a limited capacity channel or processor. Capacity theories state that there is competition for attentional resources to be paid to incoming information and that what is paid attention to may depend on the amount of mental effort required to process the incoming information. By considering the fact that learners have a limited capacity to process L2 information, PI supports the idea of presenting one thing at a time.

The three main characteristics of PI are (a) grammatical explanation about the targeted form or structure prior to practice, (b) explicit information about processing strategies (in which learners' attention is explicitly oriented to what to pay attention to and why), and (c) participation in structured input activities (the input has been manipulated in order to make the targeted forms or structures more salient) to promote further processing of the input data (Leow, 2007).

Morphological knowledge as a strategy for vocabulary development by itself cannot contribute to language learning. Maybe all learners have some degree of morphological knowledge but all of them are not aware of it, this awareness is usually hazy and incomplete (Nunes & Bryant, 2006). Morphological knowledge can be activated by teaching the roots and affixes of a word. This explicit teaching of forms is the main characteristic of Processing Instruction theory.

Pressly, Disney, and Anderson (2007) after reviewing the evidence for the effectiveness of morphological instruction on vocabulary development concluded that teaching morphemes can improve children and adults' ability to understand the meaning of new words.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

The results of the studies that investigated the effect of morphological awareness instruction on vocabulary development (e.g., Wysocki & Jenkins, 1987; Long & Rule, 2004; Zhang & Koda, 2012) indicate that morphological awareness enhances learners' vocabulary knowledge, but this is not a common strategy among junior high school students in Iran. Most of the time either the teacher provides the students with the meaning of the new word by directly giving the Persian translation or the students themselves find the meaning of the new words from the glossary of the book. In very rare cases some students may use bilingual dictionaries for learning new words. Because students memorize the new words just through repetition without thinking about their structures, they forget them after a short period of time. So providing students with some useful strategies for vocabulary learning seems necessary. The main purpose of this study is to investigate the impact of morphological awareness techniques on vocabulary development of junior high school students in the EFL context of Iran. The ultimate goal of the study is to help students to become autonomous learners of English.

1.3. Significance of the Study

This study merit investigation for the following reasons:

Morphological awareness contributes to both general measures and components of reading such as decoding, reading comprehension, and vocabulary development (Kuo & Anderson, 2006). For instance, researchers have shown that morphological awareness contributes to lexical outcomes such as decoding (Carlisle & Stone, 2005) and vocabulary knowledge (Carlisle & Fleming, 2003; Kieffer, 2012). Morphological awareness also plays a role in

reading comprehension for both native and second language speakers of English (Carlisle, 1995; Goodwin, 2010; Kieffer & Lesaux, 2008; Kirby et al., 2012).

Carlisle (2010) reviewed the results of studies related to the effect of instruction in morphological awareness on literacy development including phonology, orthography, and word meaning. The results showed that morphological awareness affects students' literacy development; it deepens students' understanding of the morphemic structure, spelling, and meaning of written words (vocabulary).

Bryant and Nunes (2006) argue that new explicit knowledge about morphemes is important for schoolchildren because it is essential in learning to read and to spell and also in the vocabulary growth. And then they explain that morphemic knowledge is essential for reading and writing because morphemes influence the spelling of the words. Morphemes are important in spelling for three reasons:

1. The same sounds are spelled in different ways in different morphemes.

For example, there is a difference in the spelling of noun endings in *magician* and *education*. If the noun refers to a person or an animal, its ending is spelled as *-ian* (*magician*). If it does not refer to a person, it is spelled as *-ion* (*education*). There must be some reasons for it and the chances are that it is a morphemic one, since these written endings usually do represent morphemes.

2. It is often the case that a particular morpheme is spelled in the same way, even though it is represented by different sounds in different words.

A particular morpheme may have constant spelling in its variations, even though the sound of that morpheme differs from word to word. For example *heal* and *health* share the same root morpheme with the same spelling.

3. Some morphemes are represented in writing but not in speech.

For example, the apostrophe which represents either an elision (*can't* for *cannot* ; *it's* for *it is*) or the possessive (*the boy's cousin* ; *the girls' teacher*) is easy to identify in print but it is difficult to identify in some cases in spoken language.

Carlisle (1985) after investigating young students' knowledge of derivational morphology and the relationship between this knowledge and their ability to spell derived words concluded that explicit morphemic instruction might help students to improve their spelling of derived words.

1.4. Research Questions

The primary purpose of the present study was to investigate the impact of morphological awareness on the vocabulary development of Iranian junior high school students. Therefore the main research questions of the study are:

1. Are there any differences in terms of vocabulary development between EFL students who are instructed according to conventional instruction and those with whom the techniques of morphological awareness practice (analysis and synthesis) are utilized? If so, which one is more effective?

2. Is there any significant difference between analysis/synthesis groups and conventional group's vocabulary test results?

1.5. Research hypotheses

The two research questions of the present study can be reformulated in the following research hypotheses: