

The Impact of Affixes on EFL Students' Sentence Comprehension

Lecturer

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Abstract:

From first sight, the relation between the morphological units, i.e., affixes, and sentence comprehension seems to be remote, yet deep scrutiny reveals that the relation is quite close as these units, in addition to other factors, have a crucial role in determining word meanings and consequently sentence meanings. This paper investigates this role and highlights the impact of the affixes on EFL students' sentence comprehension. A test has been conducted on (29) BA students randomly chosen for the test using Google Forms. Each student is required to answer (15) items. Each item contains a word with an affix. Based on students' responses, where one - third of their responses were erroneous, the study concludes that suffixes harm students' sentence comprehension, which indicates students' unawareness of the importance and contribution of these suffixes in the construction of sentence meaning. As far as prefixes and their role in students' sentence comprehension are concerned, it has been clear that they have less impact on sentence comprehension as their meanings are relatively predictable standing for prepositions or negation, unlike the suffixes that have numerous flexible meaning facets.

Keywords: prefixes, semantic change, sentence comprehension, suffixes

Introduction:

Sentence comprehension is thought to involve a sequence of processing steps starting with the perception of phonological components, (consonants and vowels), morphological components (morphemes), the syntactic component represented by the arrangement of words and then the semantic component which works with the syntactic component to produce the meaning of the sentence. Due to the importance of affixes and their role in the construction of the meaning, a study has been conducted to highlight that role and to attract EFL students' attention and raise their awareness of the factors that affect the meaning of the sentence. This study also shows the need for dedicating a full course for studying affixes and how they help in determining the part of speech and consequently attain the intended meaning of words.

2. Comprehension

Comprehension involves a number of components that work together to enable the listener or reader to understand, and derive the intended meaning from the text. These components are listed below.

2.1 Sound comprehension

It is quite interesting to start a research paper addressing the impact of affixes on students' sentence comprehension with sound segments comprehension though they have no intrinsic meaning by themselves. As stated by Yule (2010: 15) that "human language is organized into two levels...the level of producing distinct sounds that have no intrinsic meaning such as /t/, /d/ and the level of distinct meanings resulting from different sound combinations as in tip and pit". Yet, phonemes have a linguistic function which is distinguishing the meaning of words as in fin, win, bat, boot, bet, bed (Katamba, 1989: 21) (Schane, 1973: 5).

As for the recognition of sounds being the most fundamental level of comprehension, it is believed that humans have an innate ability to recognize the minute distinctions between speech sounds. This ability is called categorical perception. Psycholinguists discovered that humans are born with the ability to focus on the VOT (Voice Onset Timing) difference in speech sounds and they categorize the minute phonetic differences in a binary fashion. For instance, the most important difference between /p/, and /b/ is the onset of voicing in the larynx, which is initiated by the vowels that follow the consonants, as in pet, bet (Scovel, 2009: 50-53).

Moreover, the grammar of the sentence and the meaning of the words, i.e., the syntactic and the semantic contexts, strongly influence our ability in the identification of the linguistic units, sounds or words (Crystal, 2009: 47).

Furthermore, a sub-morphemic sequence of sounds could reflect some meaning, i.e., phonosemantic associations (phonesthemes), as in glimmer, glitter, glare, glow, where /gl/ convey the meaning of light (Nida, 1875: 113; Crystal, 2009:424; cf. Yule, 2010: 13).

2.2 Word comprehension

Another component of comprehension which consists of more than one sound and conveys meaning is the word (Scovel, 2009: 55). Haspelmath (2002: 16) states that words can be segmented into meaningful parts called morphemes as in read-abil-ity, which in turn can be defined as the smallest meaningful constituents of a linguistic expression (cf. Brown and Miller, 1998: 173). Words are classified into grammatical categories called parts of speech based on their properties semantically (i.e., meaning), morphologically (i.e., their internal structure and the types of morphemes that they have) and syntactically (i.e., the position they occupy within a sentence) (Radford, 2009: 2).

Words also fall into two categories: content words and structure words. Content words or contentives, nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs, carry the content of the intended message and have a stateable lexical meaning. Structure words, on the other hand, such as, prepositions, conjunctions, articles and pronouns, are used primarily to express grammatical relationships (Yule, 2010: 68; Crystal, 2003:103).

As an important U-turn in this presentation of words and their meaning, Nida (1975: 26) mentions that "a word is only a behavioral event which cannot be said to possess anything and meaning must be related to the conceptions which the participants in a communicative act have and come to share and which they associate with a particular lexical unit."

2.3 Sentence comprehension

Leech (2006: 104) defines the sentence as "the largest unit of language that it is the business of grammar to describe." As far as the meaning of the sentence is concerned, Trask (1999: 48) indicates that it depends on two things: the meaning of the words in the sentence and the grammatical structure of the sentence, as shown in the following examples:

- a-The dog bit the milkman.
- b-The dog bit the postman.
- c-The postman bit the dog.

The first two sentences (a & b) have the same grammatical structure, but they contain different words, thus they express somehow different meanings. Alternatively, sentences (b & c) have the same words, but arranged into the grammatical structure differently, thus they express different meanings too. Scovel (2009: 59) addresses sentence comprehension issue and the possible roles played by syntax and semantics in this regard. On the other hand, some psycholinguists attribute the difficulty in sentence comprehension to the number of transformations added to the original phrase structure of the kernel sentence, as illustrated by the following sentences:

- 1-The dog is chasing the cat.
- 2- The dog isn't chasing the cat.
- 3- Isn't the cat being chased by the dog?

It seems logical that simple sentences like sentence (1) above are easier to comprehend than complex sentences that have more transformations as sentences (2 and 3) above, where sentence (3) looks the most complex, because it has more transformations (i.e., interrogative, negative and passive) (Ibid:60).

Another viewpoint states that semantics plays a decisive role in comprehension difficulty as shown in the following sentences:

- 1-The struggling swimmer was rescued by the lifeguard.
- 2- The struggling swimmer rescued the lifeguard.

Where the passive sentence number (1) takes less time to process than the active sentence number (2), because (1) is semantically more plausible to comprehend irrespective of its syntactic complexity (Ibid:26).

2.4 Text comprehension

Widdowson (2007: 46) differentiates between the sentence and the text by saying that the text is the actual use of language, whereas the sentence is an abstract unit of linguistic analysis. Any piece of language can be identified as a text on the condition that it has been produced for a communicative purpose. For instance, the label "keep away from children" on a medical bottle, is taken to mean a warning referring to the content of the bottle, consequently it is a text. As a matter of fact, the length of the linguistic units is not a criterion for the distinction between them, as texts range from a single word, such as STOP in a road sign, to a novel of indefinite length (Crystal, 2006: 262).

As for text comprehension, the presence and absence of background knowledge about the text can be of a great influence. Furthermore, the context, linguistic and extra-linguistic, plays a significant role in facilitating text comprehension process. Texts fitting into a context which we understand and expect are comprehended more quickly than texts presented without a context (Scovel, 2009: 67-69).

3. Affixes and meaning change

An affix is a bound morpheme that occurs before, within or after a base called prefix, infix and suffix respectively (Stageberg, 1981: 89). The morpheme is a minimal unit of meaning or a grammatical function (Yule, 2010: 67). When affixes are added to bases, they produce complex words, for instance, books, pre-war, childish, whose meanings are the combinations of their parts (Akmajian et al, 1995: 27). The addition of affixes effects a number of changes as follows:

- 1- Phonological change, where some suffixes like(-eous, -graphy, -ial , -ic, -ion , -ty, -ive) shift the primary stress to the last syllable of the stem as in (advantage- advantageous), (photo – photography), (climate- climatic). Other suffixes such as (-ee, -ese, -ette) receive the stress themselves as in (refuge -refugee), (journal – journalese), (cigar – cigarette)(Roach, 2009: 83-84). In addition, the phonological change could include instances as when -ion, -ian are added to verbs and nouns respectively, they cause a sound change in the stem. For instance, in "relate – relation" /t/ in "relate" becomes /ʃ/ in "relation", and "magic – magician" where /k/ in "magic" becomes/ ʃ/ in magician (Akmajian et al, 1995: 30).

- 2- Morphological change (i.e., part of speech change), as in "act – active", where the addition of –ive changes the verb "act" into an adjective "active"(Stageberg, 1981: 41).
- 3- Semantic change (meaning change) as in (move- movable) (break- breakable) (believe- believable), where –able introduces a new element of meaning (able to be X'd) (Akmajian et al, 1995: 30). Nida (1975: 142) mentions that the derived forms may represent two domains: base domain and derived domain. For instance, in the word "student" (which is a derived form from study), the base domain is an activity (i.e., study) and the derived domain is an entity (i.e., student). Thus the relation between these two forms is activity- entity or action- actor. Other relations exist as in wide-widen (quality- process), gift- give (affected- action).
- 4- Word type change (i.e., simple into complex), for instance, the word "act" is made of one free morpheme, i.e., it is a simple word. The addition of affixes changes it into a complex word as in "active, inactive, actively, activity" ...etc. (Ibid).
- 5- Pragmatic change as in the case of using diminutive suffixes e.g., -y, -ie in "dad - daddy", "aunt- auntie", " dog- doggy", which are added to nouns to indicate smallness or endearment. These suffixes do not cause phonological changes in the base word, neither do they change the part of speech (both forms dog-doggy are nouns) nor do they produce a semantic change(dad- daddy indicate the same person). Yet, these diminutives change the context of the appropriate use (the form daddy is used by children or in intimate family contexts).

In view of the preceding, affixes vary with regard to the changes that they cause in the stem to which they are attached (Ibid: 33).

4. Data Description and analysis

This section discusses the frequencies and percentages of students' correct and erroneous answers regarding the use of affixes in words and their impact on EFL students' sentence comprehension. 29 fourth-year students from the Department of English, College of Arts/ University of Baghdad in the academic year 2021-2022, have been randomly selected for the test, using Google forms. Each student is required to answer (15) items. Each item contains a word having an affix (i.e., the effects of 15 affixes have been tested). The total number of items is (435). The affixes used in the test along with their meanings and example sentences are presented in table (1) below:

Table (1) List of affixes, their meanings and example sentences

No.	affix	Example	Meaning	Sentences
1	-ite	suburbanite	Resident of	-The huge malls mostly attract suburbanites and tourists.
2	-let	Droplet	Small drop	-The flies are not bigger than a droplet of water.
3	-osis	Psychosis	Disease, condition	-This new understanding of psychosis challenges traditional approach to treatment.
4	-path	Sociopath	One who is engaged in	-Police described the killer as a sociopath.
5	-pathy	Apathy, neuropathy	Feeling, disease	-These problems are difficult as they decrease productivity and contribute to feelings of apathy in the company.
6	-phobia	Hydrophobic	Abnormal fear of	-In order to prevent hydrophobia, dogs may only be kept under certain restrictions.
7	-tude	Multitude, servitude, fortitude, longitude	A great number of, a great amount of	-Multitude of years should teach wisdom.
8	in-	Infamous	Unpleasant, , having bad reputation	-History is filled with infamous war criminals.
9	-wise	Moneywise	With regard to	-It's definitely not the best job money wise, but it's a lot of fun, and I definitely enjoy it".
10	-ware	Kitchenware, software, hardware	Things of the same type	-We have recently extended our trade to include kitchenware.
11	-some	Foursome, troublesome	A group of, Characterized with	-irregular verbs are troublesome to learn.
12	-ee	Appointee	A person employed to do Sth.	-The appointee must be medically qualified and eligible.
13	be-	Befriend	Become	-We are willing to befriend the weak and the poor.
14	a-	Amiss	Out of place, wrong	-There was something amiss about these calculations
15	-aholic	Shopaholic	A person addicted to Sth.	Newsaholics are always updated.

The analysis of the students' answers for the test items (listed in the appendix) for each affix yields the following results as shown in table (2) below:

Table (2): Numbers and percentages of correct and incorrect responses for each affix

No.	Affix	No. of correct answers	%	No. of incorrect answers	%
1	-ite	11	2.52	18	4.13
2	-let	20	4.59	9	2.06
3	-osis	9	2.06	20	4.59
4	-path	23	5.28	6	1.37
5	-pathy	24	5.51	5	1.14
6	-phobia	24	5.51	5	1.14
7	-tude	22	5.05	7	1.6
8	in-	20	4.59	9	2.06
9	-wise	20	4.59	9	2.06
10	-ware	2	0.45	27	6.2
11	-some	26	5.97	3	0.68
12	-ee	8	1.83	21	4.82
13	Be-	29	6.66	0	0
14	a-	28	6.43	1	0.22
15	-aholic	22	5.05	7	1.6
Total		288	66.2	147	33.79

In view of the statistics, it has become clear that the most frequently wrongly used suffix is (-ware) recording (27) wrong responses standing for (6.2%) i.e., the highest percentage among the incorrect answers. This suffix has a significant negative impact on students' sentence comprehension, among other factors, as it hinders their comprehension of the word meaning and consequently prevents them from grasping the sentence intended meaning. This could be attributed to the confusion with the suffix (-wear) which is used for types of clothing. The second most negatively impacting suffix is (-ee) with (21) incorrect responses standing for (4.82%) of the errors. That is due to the fact that this suffix could be added to transitive verbs to form words meaning the object of that verb e.g., examinee, and intransitive verbs forming the subject of that verb, for instance, respondee, absentee. In addition, students are unaware of the difference between this suffix and the silent (-e) at the ends of some English words, where they have been told through their syllabus that it is a matter of orthography.

The least instances of incorrect answers have been observed in words having the prefix (be-) that no wrong answers have been found with regard to this prefix as shown by the figures stated in table (1) as this prefix changes the part of speech only, i.e. a noun into a verb. Next in sequence is the prefix (a-) indicating negation or absence of, that there is only 0.22% incorrect answers, thus no significant impact is stated.

The total number of answers shows that there are 147 incorrect responses constituting (33.79%), i.e., one third negatively impacting students' sentence comprehension. This refers to students' unawareness of the importance and contribution of these affixes in the construction of the sentence meaning. It is also attributed to the curriculum design which does not shed enough light on the semantic aspects of these segments, due to the fact that the emphasis is mainly on the morphological change and the syntactic function of words having these affixes.

5. Conclusion

In view of the results of the study, such a percentage of errors indicates that suffixes have a negative impact on sentence comprehension. It also indicates that students are unaware of the semantic role played by these suffixes as they are misconceived of as being merely an orthographic matter. Due to the fact that some suffixes combine with words arbitrarily, and that no clear rules govern their use, students do not regard their effect on word meaning and consequently on sentence comprehension. In addition, the syllabus studied by the test subjects sheds light only on the morphological status of suffixes in terms of classifying them into inflectional (having a grammatical function such as indicating tense and number) or derivational (changing the part of speech such as changing verbs into adjectives and so on) ignoring their semantic contribution.

It has also been concluded that prefixes have less impact on comprehension, because their meanings are either indicating prepositions or negation unlike suffixes that have numerous meaning facets.

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Appendix

Test items

- 1-The huge malls mostly attract **suburbanites** and tourists.

a- Locals	b- strangers	c- people living nearby
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- 2-The flies are not bigger than a **droplet** of water.

a- one drop	b- small drop	c- big drop
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- 3-This new understanding of **psychosis** challenges traditional approach to treatment.

a- State of mind	b- psychological state	c- disease
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- 4- Police described the killer as a **sociopath**.
a- A person socially unacceptable b- a person who does not interact positively with society c- a person loved by the society
- 5- These problems are difficult as they decrease productivity and contribute to feelings of **apathy** in the company.
a- Feeling sympathy towards b- siding with 3-lack of interest
- 6- In order to prevent **hydrophobia**, dogs may only be kept under certain restrictions.
a- Love of water, b- hatred of water c- fear of water
- 7- A **Multitude** of years should teach wisdom.
a- A large number b- different kinds c- specific
- 8- History is filled with **infamous** war criminals.
a- Not famous b- their deeds are not famous c- famous for their bad quality
- 9- It's definitely not the best job **moneywise**, but it's a lot of fun, and I definitely enjoy it".
a- despite of money b- away from money c- With regard to money
- 10- We have recently extended our trade to include **kitchenware**.
a- Different items in the kitchen b- things of the same type
c- expensive items in the kitchen
- 11- Irregular verbs are **troublesome** to learn.
a- easy to learn b- causing difficulty c- need less attention
- 12- The **appointee** must be medically qualified and eligible.
a- The person who employs b- the person employed
c- the person who interviews the employees
- 13- We are willing to **befriend** the weak and the poor.
a- leave them as friends b- Become friends with
c- avoid being friends with
- 14- There was something **amiss** about these calculations.
a- Interesting b- familiar c- wrong
- 15- **Newsaholics** are always updated.
a- Someone who hates news b-Someone who likes news
c- Someone who makes the news

تأثير اللواحق على فهم الجملة لدى متعلمي اللغة الانجليزية لغة اجنبية

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الملخص:

للهولة الاولى، يبدو لدارس اللغة الانجليزية لغة اجنبية ان العلاقة بين الوحدات الصرفية، اي اللواحق، واستيعاب الجملة علاقة بعيدة ولكن التدقيق العميق يظهر ان العلاقة قريبة جدا حيث ان هذه الوحدات، اضافة الى عوامل اخرى، لها دورا مهما في تحديد معاني الكلمات وبالتالي دلالات الجمل.

يهدف هذا البحث الى التحقق من هذا الدور والى تسليط الضوء على أثر اللواحق في فهم الطلاب لدلالات الجمل.

تم عمل اختبار لعينة تتكون من (تسعة وعشرين) طالبا من طلبة السنة الرابعة متعلمي اللغة الانجليزية لغة اجنبية تم اختيارهم عشوائيا باستعمال (نماذج كوكل). كانت طبيعة الاختبار الذي وجه لهؤلاء الطلبة ان يجيبوا عن (خمس عشرة) فقرة، كل فقرة منها تتضمن كلمة تحتوي على أحد اللواحق. بناءً الى اجابات الطلبة، حيث ان ثلث اجاباتهم كانت خاطئة، خلصت الدراسة الى ان اللواحق تأثير سلبي على فهم الطلبة للجمل، مما يشير الى عدم وعي الطلبة بأهمية تلك اللواحق ومساهمتها في بناء دلالات الجمل.

اما البادئات الصرفية ودورها في فهم الطلبة لدلالات الجمل، فقد اتضح ان تأثيرها اقل من اللواحق على فهم الجملة لان معانيها يمكن التنبؤ بها نسبيا حيث انها تمثل حروف جر او ادوات نفي على عكس اللواحق الصرفية التي لها اوجه معان متعددة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: البادئات، التغير الدلالي، فهم الجملة، اللواحق