



Morphological Awareness and Its Impact on Word Recognition among Iraqi Learners of English

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Abstract in English

This paper discusses how morphological awareness is helpful in word recognition among the Iraqi EFL university students and how student knowledge of the morphological structure of words, in particular, morphemes, roots, prefixes, and suffixes influence their ability to recognize and decode English words. The study focuses on determining the degree of morphological awareness of word recognition among third year university students. It hypothesized that students show the lack of awareness of the morphological structure in the formation of English words. A structured questionnaire with four sections was used to test this hypothesis by administering the questionnaire to 60 EFL students who are in the third year of the university level. The data gathered were measured through descriptive statistical processes in order to establish the general performance on the various morphological arenas. It was found that the students varied in their consciousness of the different morphological elements, and pedagogical suggestions to morphological teaching are made in EFL situations to enhance lexical and reading learning.

Paper Info

Keywords

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Introduction

Word recognition is a critical part of literacy acquisition and reading competence in general. The more complicated words become during the process of reading, the more necessary is the usage of the linguistic knowledge to provide the successful process of the word recognition and its understanding. One of the cognitive and linguistic abilities that have been identified to be one of the major predictors of the level of proficiency in

word reading is morphological awareness. Morphological awareness is the skill to identify, comprehend, and employ the tiniest units of language known as morphemes which are constituents of the word i.e. the roots, prefixes and suffixes (Levesque and Deacon, 2022; Grande et al, 2024; Cheng and Zhang 2026) . Reading of words is a prerequisite of the understanding of the combination of the units of words. When it comes to EFL learning, where the possibility of getting a genuine language input is limited, the usage of the morphological knowledge is paramount to the process of the word recognition, as the usage of such knowledge enables the learner to study the inner structure of words and cognize the meaning of the new vocabulary without having to implement the process of memorization alone.

Aims of the Study:

The current study aims at:

1. Investigating the connection between morphological awareness and word recognition among a multidimensional view of morphological processing by third-year Iraqi EFL university students.
2. Raising awareness of Iraqi EFL learners as well as instructors in investigating and recognizing simple and complex structure of words being learned.

Research Questions

The current study makes an effort to offer the answers to the following questions:

1. To which extent do Iraqi EFL learners are morphologically aware of word structure?
2. What is the impact of Iraqi EFL learners' morphological awareness on their word recognition?

Hypotheses of the study:

1. Iraqi EFL university students have an extremely low morphological awareness of words recognition.
2. Morphological awareness plays a fundamental role in recognizing and investigating words structure by Iraqi EFL university students.

Literature Review

1. Theoretical Foundations of Morphological Awareness

Morphological awareness is also considered as a metalinguistic skill that is considered as a construction above the phonemic awareness and that is described as the awareness of the internal aspect of words (Carlisle, 2000). Morphological awareness is the ability of students to perceive and examine the internal part of the words and the possibility to recognize the smallest-language unit known as morphemes. The role of morphological awareness has always been proved as significant in the process of lexical skills acquisition and the perception of words (Nagy et al., 2006). The first body of research was created by Bowers and Kirby (2010) who proved that the role of morphological awareness is significant in the prediction of vocabulary skills, spelling skills, and reading fluency development.

2. Morphological Awareness and Word Recognition

Word recognition is a fundamental part of fluent reading, and it is the quick and accurate word recognition. Competent readers apply multiple information when recognizing words. This data has phonological, orthographic, and morphological information. The morphological awareness is important in word recognition. This is because it facilitates the ability of the reader to break down the words that he or she has no idea of and finds out the morphemes that he or she knows about. This ensures that the reader is able to process new words effectively. Kuo and Anderson (2006) have established that there is a positive relationship between morphological awareness and word recognition. The

reader can identify the words by using the knowledge of the specific morphemes i.e. roots, prefixes, and suffixes. The reader can process the words in an efficient manner by identifying the morphemes of the unknown words. This way increases the speed with which the reader can decoding.

3. Morphological Awareness and Vocabulary Development.

Morphological acquaintance is critical in the growth of vocabulary. When learners know that morphemes can be combined to make new words, they can more easily deduce the meaning of new words, as well as they have the ability of making semantically related words. In this case, it will be assistive in the interpretation that such words as unhappy are made of the morphemes of the word happy and the un-prefix. Kieffer and Lesaux (2012) underline the role of word reconstruction and deconstruction as a factor that contributes to vocabulary development. Kieffer and Lesaux (2012) note that word reconstruction and deconstruction are important in vocabulary development. According to Goodwin and Ahn, one should be able to break down words, which is attributed to vocabulary and reading skills. This is from their study in 2013. The findings demonstrate that being good, at word breaking, will assist you to learn words. Morphological decomposition of words and develop vocabulary appear to be linked.

4. Instructional Approaches to Enhancing Morphological Awareness

The importance of explicit instruction in morphology in increasing the level of literacy has been supported by studies. It is reported that explicit teaching in the morphemic structure of words has proven to be very effective in improving the word recognition and comprehension of reading (Bowers et al., 2010). In this regard, instructional strategies have been determined to be successful in increasing the awareness of internal structure of words among learners. In their research, Rasinski et al. (2012) discovered that word family and root word instructions are useful in improving word internal analysis in learners. This implies that the EFL learners may be in a position to acquire the critical aspect of decoding and understanding words in an independent manner.

5. Previous Empirical Studies

There are also studies devoted to the investigation of the relationship between the morphological awareness and the literacy skills of various languages and people. One such study was a study conducted by Tighe and Binder (2012) and was known as “An Investigation of Morphological Awareness and Processing in Adults with Low Literacy”. This research was aimed at the independent role of morphological awareness, independent of phonological awareness and decoding, in reading comprehension among low-literacy adults. The findings indicated that the morphologically complex words had less accuracy and longer response time in low-literacy adults than in the control words. This paper concluded that morphological complexity posed a challenge to low-literacy adults, and morphological awareness is a factor that should be incorporated when teaching literacy among adults. In a study by Rispen, Chang and Reitsma (2007), the authors investigated the correlation between morphological awareness and word recognition and spelling in children who speak Dutch. The study was done on two experiments, the first experiment on Grade 1 students to study beginning reading and spelling skills, and a second experiment on Grade 6 students to study advanced reading and spelling. These results indicate that morphological contributions to the acquisition of literacy are developed. De Freitas, Deacon and Da Mota (2017) tested morphological awareness and its role in word reading and reading comprehension in Portuguese speaking children. Fourth grade children (n=132) were used as a sample. The morphological awareness was also tested together with the other

forms of reading such as accuracy, fluency and comprehension. The comprehension of reading was tested with the help of a closed loop test and question-answer items. In case of orthographically transparent languages such as Portuguese, it is essential to emphasize morphological features in the work. In one recent research, Marks et al. (2022) tried to examine the role of morphological awareness in early word reading among monolingual and bilingual children speaking English and Spanish-English and Chinese-English bilingual children. A morphological awareness scale was constructed and its validity to children between the ages of 5 and 9 years is supported. Two studies were carried; one was based on the relation of morphological awareness with concurrent word reading ability of children and another was based on the differences between bilingual and monolingual children. The researchers concluded that there were effects that were language-specific by bilinguals, which led to the finding that the contribution of morphological awareness in reading English words is different with regard to the linguistic background of children.

Research Gap

Several studies have been investigated to measure EFL University students' performance from different grammatical phenomenon, see among others (Hazem and Jasim, 2026; Kanaan et al, 2022; Salman and Hazem, 2022; Salman, et al, 2022). Empirical research has shown that morphological awareness is key to the acquisition of reading, as a large body of empirical evidence (see for example, Marks et al., 2021) indicates, though, most empirical studies have focused their attention on morphological awareness of young children in L1 contexts, specifically in English and other alphabets. Despite the evidence that morphological instruction will enhance reading performance in primary and secondary education, there is a gap in understanding whether highly developed EFL students possess sufficient morphological learning that will be used to assist the verbal recognition at tertiary level. The reason is that a relatively small amount of research has been conducted concerning the issue of morphological learning among EFL advanced students at the tertiary level, or Arabic language. The majority of researches utilise the experimental or longitudinal research design and offer less descriptive evaluations of the current morphological competence of learners. Specifically, the Iraqi EFL setting does not provide empirical data on the awareness of the morphological structure (i. e. the ability to distinguish between the inflectional and derivational processes, the understanding of the mechanisms of the word formation, the awareness of the paradigmatic relations) of the learners even though the morphological differences between the Arabic and the English language can influence the lexical processing strategies. The proposed research will fill this gap as it will perform a descriptive examination of morphological awareness in word recognition amongst EFL students at an Iraqi university and introduce further context-dependent evidence to the general literature on morphological awareness.

Methodology

Here we outline the idea of the research, sample, measures and methods of analysis of the present research. The results are analyzed with the help of a multidimensional model of morphological-awareness, in which the morphological processing is said to encompass the relational, syntactic and lexical dimensions of the lexical domain, and the model underlies the explanation of the performance of the learner on the different morphological dimensions.

1. Research design

The research design used in this study was a quantitative descriptive research to establish the level of morphological knowledge regarding word recognition among EFL learners at university level. The descriptive design was to objectively measure the morphological abilities of the students without experimental manipulation giving real picture of their current level of cognition.

2. Participants

The target group was the sixty third year students of the Department of English in the University of Al-Hamdaniya; the intervention was voluntary, the responses were coded in numerical format in order to maintain anonymity (the participants were accessible to the researchers and they were able to train the participants); research was the only purpose of the data. The reason behind choosing third year students in particuare as a case study is that those studednts are supposed to have well knowledge concerning morphology throughout the previous years of study so that their morphological awareness and knowledge needs to be evaluated to determine their ability and level of morphology.

3. Instrument

A questionnaire was designed to measure the morphological awareness in word recognition. it was constructed on the basis of the modern theories of multidimensional theories of morphological awareness, including the relational, syntactic and distributional elements of morphological processing. Four groups constituted the questionnaire:

Group 1: Morphological structure assessed the students in terms of knowledge about morphological forms, inflexion and derivation distinction, prefixes and suffixes.

Group 2: The ability of the students to understand the relationship between the morphological form and the syntactic function in particular, the change of words category, in other words, the ability of recognizing different parts of speech for each presented word.

Group 3: In this part, the students were tested on their knowledge of words formation through derivation, compounding, blending, and others.

Group 4: Paradigmatic Relations, in this part, the level of knowledge of the students concerning morphological alternations and lexical family relations was evaluated and it is a high-level concept of morphological abstraction.

The questionnaire had objective and short-answer questions that assessed the various facets of the students in relation to their level of knowledge pertaining to the morphological processes.

4. Validity and Reliability

The content validity was achieved through the correspondence of the research instrument with the sound theories of morphological awareness and lexical processing. The data can then be entered in the computer and the intra-consistency reliability could be calculated using Cronbachs Alpha. The acceptable Cronbach Alpha in research is 0.70 and onwards in the area of education.

5. Scoring Procedure

On the research tool, we allocated one point each to an answer on every question and zero points to a wrong answer. You would have received a maximum of 17.6 points.

6. Data analysis and Discussion

We examined the data that we had collected using an analysis. We added the scores and percentages on various components of morphological awareness. A spread sheet was used to do these calculations. We interpreted the data in a manner that took into account the various components of morphological processing such that we are able to view the relationship of how the subjects comprehended the links between words, the grammar and word use in varying contexts. Our study was aimed to observe the extent to which year Iraqi EFL university students comprehended morphological awareness and the correlation between this factor and word recognition. We were analyzing to find out the overall performance of the subjects and their performance in various sections of morphological awareness test which they were good and bad. Our research participants had 452 out of 60 questions on morphological awareness test. This is that the subjects obtained 44 percent of the answers, on the morphological awareness test. We did this by dividing the number of points they actually obtained by the number of points they could have obtained. Each participant had on average scored 7 out of 17 which is 53, therefore indicating that morphological awareness of the participants was moderate to high. A quantitative analysis results stand evidence of the fact that level of Iraqi EFL students' performance was very good in the identification process of the morphemes since they scored 4 out of five on average, and very poor in the part of the test involving parts of speech since they scored 2.02 out of 5 on average, or 40.3. Another trouble was also experienced with the word formation part of the test by the subjects. It was morphological awareness that we were examining. We were interested in knowing the level of understanding of the subjects. The findings of the research will assist us in knowing awareness and its relationship with word recognition. Our participants were third-year EFL Iraqi students in the university, and we were investigating awareness among our students. Morphological awareness is one of the topics, and we believe that our investigation will help to understand it better.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Morphological Awareness

Section	Mean Score	Percentage	Interpretation
Morphemes	4.00	80%	High
Parts of Speech	2.02	40.3%	Low
Word Formation	1.43	28.7%	Very Low
Paradigm	0.08	4.2%	Extremely Low
Overall	7.53	44.3%	Moderate-Low

The Eighty percent of students scored high in the morphemic identification which is in line with explicit morphological instruction (e.g.). The g. The g. They also score low in their parts of speech of 40.3% meaning that students fail to combine syntactic function and morphological form (e.g. The g. prefixes and suffixes, which could be a remnant of traditional instructional practice that emphasizes memorization of affixes and recognition of affixes by rule, but not analytical manipulation, and leads to minimal development of higher-order morphological ability).

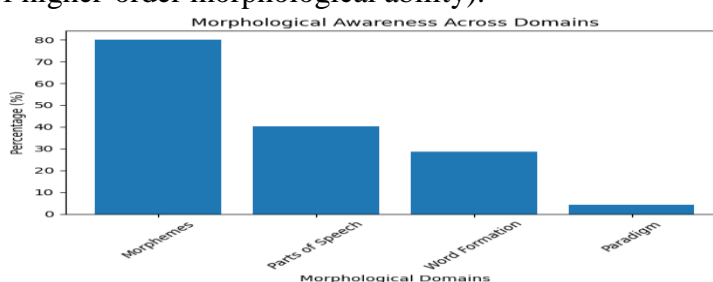


Figure 1. Percentage Distribution Across Morphological Domains

It is evident in the graph that the morphemic recognition (80) to the paradigmatic recognition (4.2) is decreasing which corroborates the statistical explanation of the discrepancy between skills in surface-level segmentation and morphological abstraction of deeper ability.

These findings indicate that there is a high level of difference between basic morphological segmentation and higher levels of morphological processing with high-performance on morphemic identification indicating instructional emphasis on affix recognition, but with a sharp decline in higher-order domains indicating that morphological knowledge is still recognition-based but not functional with the low score in parts of speech and word formation indicating that morphological knowledge is not being integrated with syntax. The extremely low paradigmatic performance (4.2) also implies a very small lexical connectivity in morphological families. The current research also adds to the modern knowledge on the concept of morphological awareness suggesting that it is a multidimensional phenomenon with a special focus on the relational, syntactic, and distributional knowledge. The findings indicate that acquisition of these skills is not even. On the whole, the findings indicate that the morphological awareness of EFL students of the Iraqi university is never wholesome but rather fragmented. Despite the ability of the students to identify the morphemes explicitly, they face challenges in putting the morphological information into the generative and relational application. This is a significant pedagogical gap that cues to the necessity of morphology teaching by means of application of network models. Theoretically, the findings endorse and make complicated current models of morphological awareness. The outcomes confirm the supposition that morphological awareness possesses a relational dimension but indicate that the rate of knowledge of the students in the syntactic and distributional dimensions is restricted. This leads to the fact that morphological awareness development is not linear, but rather uneven. Further, the lexical quality theories and morphological decomposition theories suggest that word recognition requires accurate and composite lexical coding. The extremely poor paradigmatic performance implies that the lexical connections are poor, which may impede automatic recognition of words and free reading. The question may arise, however, as to whether modern EFL instructional practice is adequately efficient in developing such preciseness. The other probable cause of these weaknesses may be because there is cross-linguistic influence. The Arabic morphology is stranded on the root and pattern system, that is in contrast to the English derivational morphology. The fact that these two are structurally different may cause difficulties in the transfer. Thus, one can say that the low result in the complex morphological tasks may not only be a result of the teaching methods but may also be the structural difference between the Arabic and English. One can say that the findings indicate that morphological awareness of the participants is recognition-based and not generative. The students can determine the morphological components and they cannot manipulate it. As such, it can be said that the teaching of reforms that transcend beyond the affix recognition needs to be taught. On the whole, these findings indicate that the morphological awareness among the Iraqi EFL university students is not well-developed and fairly distributed, as the simpler segmentation and separation skills are developed, but more complicated morphological abstraction and lexical connectivity ones are immature, which prompts the request to introduce explicit morphological analysis, paradigmatic searching, and mapping of their word-family into the university-level EFL curriculum.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis and findings, the study concludes the following:

1. Iraqi EFL university students have different levels of morphological awareness, in that they have high awareness of words recognition in certain aspects of morphology, while having low awareness in other aspects. This outcome rejects the first hypothesis proposed in this study.
2. The more the students are morphologically aware, the more they can identify and recognize different types and relations of words. Accordingly, the second hypothesis of the current study is achieved.

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Appendix

The following questions were conducted with students to measure their performance. The authors attached a sample of the students' performance.

Dear Third Year Students,
This questionnaire has been designed to measure your morphological awareness of word recognition. It consists of four groups, each containing specific questions related to a different aspect of morphology. Your participations are appreciated.

Group 1 / Morphemes

Q1/ How many morphemes do the following words consist of?

1. Miskirt 1 2 3	2. Misunderstandings 3 4 5	3. misjudgment 2 3 4	4. Untruthfulness 3 4 5	5. cheap 1 2 3
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Q2/ Identify the type of the underlined affixes in the following words:

1. Treatment Infixes Prefixes suffixes	2. Enlarge Infixes Prefixes suffixes	3. Womgn Infixes Prefixes suffixes	4. Playing Infixes Prefixes suffixes	5. Re-write Infixes Prefixes suffixes
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Q3/ State whether the underlined suffixes included within the following words are inflectional or derivational:

1. Readable Inflectional Derivational	2. biggest Inflectional Derivational	3. Activate Inflectional Derivational	4. Speaks Inflectional Derivational	5. Friendship Inflectional Derivational
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Q4/ Are following words singular or plural?

1. friends Singular Plural	2. car Singular Plural	3. meeting Singular Plural	4. trousers Singular Plural	5. hosepipe Singular Plural
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Q5/ Decide whether the following words are simple, complex or compound words:

1. knavish Simple Compound Complex	2. pure Simple Compound Complex	3. greenhouse Simple Compound Complex	4. include Simple Compound Complex	5. long Simple Compound Complex
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Group 2 / Parts of Speech

Q/ Identify the parts of speech of the following words:

1. ability Noun Verb Adjective Adverb	2. interesting Noun Verb Adjective Adverb	3. matricide Noun verb Adjective Adverb	4. read Noun Verb Adjective Adverb	5. midnight Noun Verb Adjective Adverb
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Group 3 / Process of Word Formation

Q/ The following words are formed by a specific process of word formation. Choose the appropriate one for each word:

1. Flu Acronymy Clipping Blending backformation	2. VIP Acronymy Clipping Blending Reduplication	3. Smog Antonomasia Acronymy Blending compounding	4. Sandwich Clipping Blending backformation Antonomasia	5. Flipflop Clipping Blending Reduplication Antonomasia
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Group 4 / Paradigm

1. Give a suppletive form of any English verb:.....
2. An example of suppletive allomorphs:.....

Abstract in Arabic

تتناول هذه الدراسة أهمية الوعي الصرفي لدى طلاب اللغة الإنكليزية في تحسين قدرتهم على معرفة تراكيب الكلمات، ومدى معرفتهم بالبنية الصرفية لتلك التراكيب، ولا سيما المورفيمات والمصادر والبادئات واللواحق، وتأثيرها في قدرتهم على تمييز الكلمات باللغة الإنكليزية وفك رموزها. تركز الدراسة على تحديد مستوى الوعي الصرفي لدى طلاب المرحلة الثالثة في الجامعة. وتفترض الدراسة أن الطلاب يفتقرون إلى الوعي بالبنية الصرفية في تكوين الكلمات الإنكليزية. ولإختبار صحة هذه الفرضية، ضمنها إستبياناً مكوناً من أربعة أقسام، كل قسم مكون من سؤال يختبر الأداء والوعي الصرفي لدى الطلاب ووزع الاستبيان على 60 طالباً من طلاب المرحلة الثالثة في الجامعة. وحللت البيانات باستخدام أساليب الإحصاء الوصفي لتحديد الأداء العام في مختلف المجالات الصرفية. وقد تبين أن الطلاب يختلفون في وعيهم بالتراكيب الصرفية لمختلف الكلمات، لذا تُقدّم الدراسة اقتراحات تربوية لتدريس الصرف في سياقات اللغة الإنكليزية بوصفها لغةً أجنبية، بهدف تعزيز تعلم المفردات والقراءة. الكلمات المفتاحية: الوعي الصرفي، التعرف على الكلمات، الاشتقاق، التصريف، اللغة الإنكليزية كلغة أجنبية.