

Word Formation Mastery in Efl Context : An Inquiry Into Derivational Processes in Student Writing

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Abstract: This study analyzed the use of derivational suffixes that transform root nouns into adjectives in the writing of EFL students at Tadulako University. This study aims to identify the types of adjectival suffixes that are difficult to use and the common errors students make. Using quantitative descriptive method, data were collected from the students' writings and analyzed morphologically. The results show that suffixes such as -ful, -ous, -ly, -al, -ic, -able, -less, and -ive are frequently used. However, many errors were found, especially in choosing the wrong suffixes and in spelling. These findings highlight the need for more explicit instruction in morphological rules to help the students form words more accurately.

Keywords: Adjectival suffixes; Derivational suffixes; EFL writing; Morphology; Word formation

1. Introduction

Vocabulary mastery is an important component in writing skills, especially for students learning English as a foreign language. One aspect of vocabulary development is the ability to form new words through derivational affixation, especially suffixes that can change word classes. Derivative suffixes play an important role in helping the students produce more complex, accurate, and contextually appropriate expressions. One of the most common morphological processes in English is changing a noun root word into an adjective, such as changing “nature” into “natural” or “care” into “careful”. However, this process is often a challenge for EFL students who do not fully understand the grammatical rules behind the change.

According to Katamba (1993), morphology is a branch of linguistics that studies word structure and how words are formed from the smallest meaningful units called morphemes. In the morphological process, derivational affixation includes the addition of prefixes or suffixes that not only change the form of words, but can also change the meaning and class of words. As Lieber (2009) explains, derivational affixation creates new lexemes and allows for more flexible language expression. Understanding morphemes such as suffixes -al, -ous, -less, -ive, and others is crucial for EFL students in expanding their vocabulary as well as writing with better structure. However, there are still many students who cannot correctly identify the changes in form and word class due to the addition of suffixes, which often leads to errors in sentence structure and meaning.

This difficulty is also influenced by internal and external factors that have been mostly discussed in previous studies. Ahmed (2020) states that errors in the use of derivational

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suffixes can come from internal factors such as derivation errors and inability to articulate, as well as external factors such as lack of in-depth teaching, lack of practice, and limited exposure to real context in language use. This is reinforced by Anwar and Rosa's (2020) findings which show that morphological awareness and explicit teaching of affixation can significantly improve the students' vocabulary acquisition. Therefore, it is important for teachers to provide special attention to word structure learning through a systematic morphological approach.

Based on the background above, this study focuses on the use of derivational suffixes especially adjectival suffixes by EFL students at Tadulako University. The purpose of this study is to identify the most difficult types of suffixes used in transforming noun root words into adjectives, as well as to analyze the factors that influence these difficulties. The result of this study are expected to provide a clearer picture of the morphological obstacles faced by the students in writing, as well as reference for the development of more effective morphology learning strategies in the EFL environment.

2. Research Method

This study uses a quantitative descriptive approach to examine the use of derivational suffixes in the writing of EFL students at Tadulako University. The purpose of this approach is to systematically describe the types of suffixes that are most difficult to use and analyze the factors that influence the difficulty. This method was chosen because it allows the researcher to collect and to interpret numerical data obtained from test results and questionnaires.

The population in this study were fifth semester students of English Education Study Program at Tadulako University, especially class D. The sample was purposively selected as many as 27 students who were considered to have a basic understanding of the use of adjectival suffixes. The purposive sampling technique was chosen so that the data obtained is relevant to the focus of the research, namely the difficulty of using derivational suffixes in academic writing.

The data collection instruments consisted of two types, namely tests and questionnaires. The test was used to assess the students' ability to form adjectives from root words through the addition of suffixes, while the questionnaire was used to identify the factors causing the difficulties. Data from the test was analyzed to determine the frequency of errors in the use of each type of suffix, while data from the questionnaire was analyzed using the SPSS program to measure validity, reliability, and group the factors of difficulty into internal and external categories.

To measure the validity of the instrument, the researcher used content validity, namely by asking expert lecturers in the field of Linguistics to evaluate whether the questions prepared had represented the purpose of measuring the derivation ability of root words. As for

reliability, the researcher used Cronbach's Alpha test through the help of SPSS software. The reliability results showed that the instrument used had good internal consistency with a reliability coefficient value of 0.976, which means very high.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Result

This study aims to find out the most difficult types of adjectival suffixes used by EFL students in converting root nouns into adjectives, as well as identify the factors that cause these difficulties.

3.2 The Most Difficult Adjectival Suffixes

Based on the analysis of the written test given to 27 students of English Education Study Program, it was found that the suffix -al became the most challenging for the students in converting root nouns into adjectives. As shown in table 1, 39 errors were recorded related to the use of this suffix, making it the most frequently used form. A common error was the students trying to form an adjective from a root word like “nature” by adding an inappropriate suffix, such as “naturely” or “natureable”, when the correct form is “natural”. This shows that many students do not understand that the addition of suffixes cannot be done carelessly, but must follow certain morphological patterns that have been standardized.

Meanwhile, the suffix -ful shows the lowest error rate, with only 15 errors recorded. This shows that this form is more familiar or easier for the students to understand, possibly because it is more often used in everyday contexts, such as “careful”, “hopeful”, and “useful”.

Table 1. Frequency of Students' Error in Using Adjective Suffixes

Suffixes	Number of Errors	Persentage
-al	39	19%
-ous	36	18%
-less	35	17%
-able	34	16%
-ive	29	14%
-ly	22	11%
-ic	17	8%
-ful	15	7%

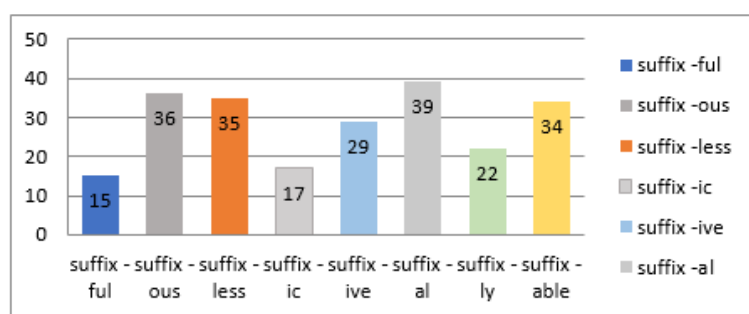


Figure 1. Recapitulation of the Number of Errors in Using Adjectival Suffixes

The visualization shown in Figure 1 provides an overall picture of the number of student errors in applying each adjectival suffixes in the written test. This graph shows the frequency distribution of errors based on the type of suffix, such as -al, -ous, -less, -able, -ive, -ly, -ic, and -ful. From the results shown, the suffix -al is the form that most often causes errors, namely 39 cases, while the suffix -ful is recorded as the least causing errors with a total of 15 cases. This graphical presentation makes it easier to trace the error patterns comprehensively and supports the quantitative findings that have been presented in table form previously. Thus, Figure 1 not only serves as a complement to the numerical data, but also clarifies the tendency of suffix types that need the most attention in teaching morphology for EFL learners.

3.3 Factors Influencing Student Difficulties

To answer the second question in this study, the researcher analyzed data from a questionnaire that had been tested for validity and reliability. The reliability test results using SPSS show a Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.976, which indicates that the instrument is highly reliable. From seven variables tested, three main factors were found the most influence students' difficulties in using derivational suffixes.

Table 2. The main factors affecting student difficulties

Factors	Description
Inarticulacy	Hesitation in choosing derivative word
Underinstruction	The lack of in-depth explanation of word
Suffixation-impoverishment	Lack of examples or use of suffixes in real context

3.4 Inarticulacy

The variable of "inarticulacy", which is the lack of linguistic intuition in choosing the right word form. A total of 49% of students agreed, 5% strongly agreed, 43% disagreed, and 3% strongly disagreed. The data show that there is a fairly balanced distribution, although half of the respondents find it difficult to use words appropriately in the context of a sentence. This shows that this factor is quite significant, although the distribution of answers tends to be balanced, it still shows an influence on the students' linguistic uncertainty.

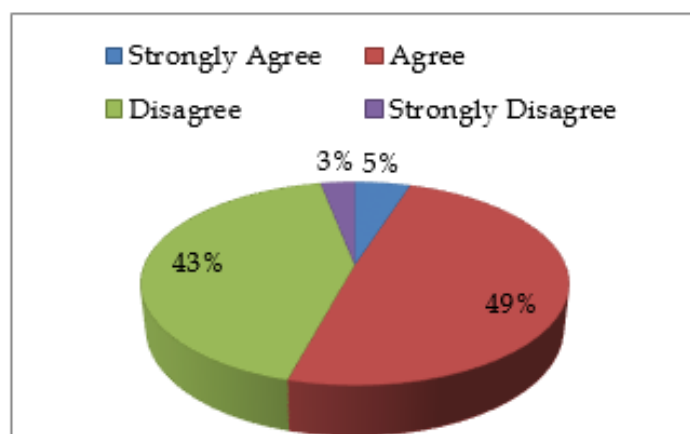


Figure 2. The Percentage of Students' Answers Based on Inarticulacy

3.5 Underinstruction

The variable named “underinstruction”, which is the lack of adequate explanation or learning, where 67% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed, indicating that the majority of the students felt that they had not received sufficient explanation about derivational suffixes. Only 27% disagreed, and 6% strongly disagreed. This shows that the current teaching approach is not fully effective in helping the students understand and apply patterns of word derivation, especially in the context of changing root words to adjectival forms.

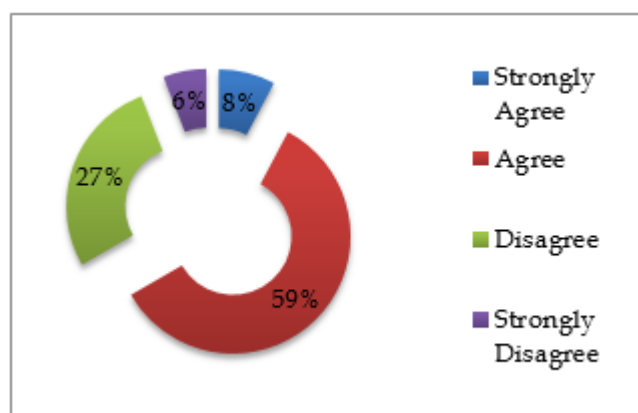


Figure 3. The Percentage of Students' Answers Based on Underinstruction

3.6 Suffixation-impoverishment

Based on the data below, 54% of the students agreed or strongly agreed, while the other 46% disagreed or strongly disagreed. This shows that almost half of the students felt that they did not see or use suffixes often enough in real contexts such as class discussions or writing assignments. Although the difference is not very striking, it still shows that more than 50% of the students agree that they do not see suffixes used enough in real contexts. This factor is categorized under “suffixation-impoverishment”, which refers to limited exposure and practice with suffixes in meaningful language use. Thus, this factor is quite significant in causing applicative difficulties.

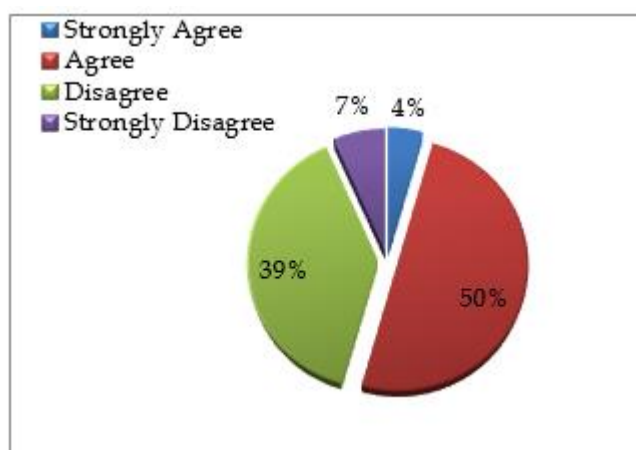


Figure 4. The Percentage of Students' Answers Based on Suffixation-impoverishment

4. Discussion

This study found that EFL students at Tadulako University still face significant challenges in the use of derivational suffixes, particularly in forming adjectives from root nouns. Frequent errors include inappropriate suffix selection, spelling mistakes, as well as mismatches in word class formation. For example, the students often make forms such as "naturely" or "natureable" as derivatives of "nature", whereas the correct form is "natural". This shows that many students do not understand that the process of derivational affixation is not a process that can be applied carelessly, but must follow certain morphological rules that have been conventional in English.

This finding is in line with Katamba's (1993) view that morphology not only studies word forms, but also changes in word structure and class as a result of the affixation process. In this context, derivation not only adds form but also changes the meaning and function of words in sentences. The students' mistakes reflect their lack of understanding of these structural relations. The suffix -al is the most frequently misused form, with 39 errors recorded. This shows that although these suffixes are commonly used in academic language, the students are not able to use them correctly due to their lack of understanding of morpheme distribution in English.

On the other hand, the low error rate in the suffix -ful is 15 errors. This shows that forms that are more frequently found in everyday contexts such as "hopeful", "careful", and "useful" are easier for students to learn and remember. This supports the findings of Schmitt and Zimmerman (2002), who state that frequency and exposure to lexical forms greatly influence vocabulary acquisition by second language learners. In other words, words that are frequently used in real contexts tend to be faster and easier for learners to mentally process.

The difficulty of using derivational suffixes in this study is influenced by three main factors, namely inarticulacy, underinstruction, and suffixation-impoverishment. The inarticulacy factor refers to uncertainty or doubt in choosing the right word form, which is

caused by weak linguistic intuition. In line with Ellis (2008), linguistic intuition is crucial in language production because the students cannot always rely on explicit rules when forming or recognizing new words, but rather need to build sensitivity to linguistic patterns through repeated exposure.

The second factor is underinstruction, was recognized by 67% of respondents, indicating that the morphological learning provided has not been in-depth or explicit enough. This supports the findings from Anwar and Rosa (2020) who emphasized the importance of systematic and continuous teaching of affixation to increase the students' morphological awareness. Without direct guidance from the teachers regarding the correct derivational patterns and common mistakes to avoid, the students tend to guess and make word forms that are not in accordance with English rules.

Meanwhile, suffixation-impoverishment refers to the lack of exposure to the use of suffixes in real contexts, both in learning materials and communication practices in the classroom. Almost 54% of respondents stated that they rarely see examples of suffix usage in discussions, writings, or learning materials. This finding is in line with the concept of lexical richness proposed by Nation (2001), which emphasizes that second language learners need a lot of exposure to word variations and contexts of use in order to internalize lexical forms effectively. The lack of contextual exercises causes the students to only recognize word forms passively without being able to use them productively in writing or speaking.

Overall, students' difficulties in understanding and using derivative suffixes indicate a gap between theoretical morphological knowledge and applicative skills in writing. Mastery of word formation, especially in the aspect of derivation is a complex ability because it involves knowledge of form, meaning, syntactic function, and context of word use. Therefore, morphology learning strategies should be more structured and integrative, taking into account the principle of focusing on form as proposed by Doughty and Williams (1998), namely the incorporation of attention to linguistic form and meaning in authentic communication. With this approach, the students are expected to increase their morphological awareness and gradually be able to apply the derivational process more precisely and naturally in academic and daily contexts.

5. Conclusion And Suggeston

5.1 Conclusion

The results show that EFL students' ability in applying derivational suffixes, especially in converting root nouns into adjectives, is still relatively weak. The suffix -al was recorded as the most frequent error, while suffix -ful was the least. These types of errors reflect the students' limited understanding of morphological patterns in word class change. Some of the factors contributing to these difficulties include the lack of ability to apply linguistic

knowledge practically (inarticulacy), lack of in-depth learning of affixation (underinstruction), and low exposure to the use of suffixes in authentic contexts (suffixation-impoverishment). These findings underscore the importance of improving the learning of morphology in the English language teaching curriculum in EFL settings.

5.2 Suggestion

Based on the findings of this study, it is suggested that the teaching of morphology in EFL environments, particularly in the area of derivational affixation, be delivered in a more systematic and explicit manner. Teachers should go beyond theoretical explanations to include practical exercises that expose the students to the use of suffixes in real life, such as in writing activities, class discussions, and presentations. The students are also encouraged to take a more active role in expanding their vocabulary through authentic reading materials and by utilizing additional learning tools such as morphological dictionaries and digital apps. In addition, future researchers are advised to explore the relationship between morphological awareness and productive language skills, and consider using a mixed methods approach to gain a more comprehensive understanding of word formation acquisition among EFL students.

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