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The study of affixes (prefixes and suffixes): An ESL and innovative approach

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Abstract

Learning of affixes is inevitable for the students of ESL as it expands the students' word knowledge to attain the mastery and command of language, and also to be competent and proficient in English. But, sometimes the students get confused in realizing the affixes in a word. As a result, the students' development of the word power and the knowledge of word analysis are hampered to big extent. It is noted that most of the first year students of Higher National Diploma in English (HNDE) at the Advanced Technological Institute (ATI) in Trincomalee, Sri Lanka, while studying their subject 'Introduction to Morphology', make the errors in the usage of affixes as they meet the difficulty in recognizing them in the words. Thus, this study focuses on an innovative approach which helps those students improve their knowledge of affixes. The participants of this study were 40 first year students of HNDE at the ATI in Trincomalee. Further, a student-friendly computational tool, known as 'Affix Learner and Tester' as an innovative method, was developed by using the computer language, Visual Basic 6, to facilitate the learning and testing of affixes. Then the participants' existed and gathered knowledge in affixes were tested through a pre-test (i.e. a questionnaire with the printed material) and a post test (with the tool), respectively. The results after the analysis of both tests revealed that the post test as an innovative method showed a good result than the result of the pre-test as a traditional method. Finally, the study concludes that the students of HNDE could develop their knowledge of affixes, i.e. prefixes and suffixes, to great extent by the utilization of the innovative method.

Keywords: Affixes, word power, word analysis, innovative tool, HNDE

Introduction

Words are generally considered to be the basic elements of language; and they are probably the most accessible linguistic units to the layman (Radford *et al.*, 2009: 127) ^[13]. Further, O'Grady and Archibald (2016: 100) ^[12] state that nothing is more important to language than words as they carry meaning. The term 'word' is part of everyone's vocabulary (McCarthy, 2002: 1) ^[9]. Moreover, words are the fundamental building blocks of effective communication. Thus, the word study is important for the students of ESL to develop their knowledge of English. Words in English are of two types: *simple* and *complex* (Akmajian *et al.*, 2001: 15) ^[2]. Unlike a simple word, a complex word can be divided into *morphemes*, the smallest meaningful units in a language (Brinton and Brinton, 2010: 82) ^[4]. For example, *unhappiness* is a complex word which contains three morphemes: *un-*, *happy*, and *-ness*. It is here noted that the morpheme *happy* is a word on its own as it can stand alone. Thus, it is called *free morpheme* and is also known as the *root*. The morphemes *un-* and *-ness* are *bound morphemes* as they are unable to function as free-standing words (Radford *et al.*, 2009: 140) ^[13] and further they must be attached to another element for their survival. The bound morphemes are called *affixes*. Matthews (1991) ^[8] defines an affix as any element in the morphological structure of a word other than a root. Thus, in the word *unexpected*, *un-* and *-ed* are affixes whereas *expect* is the root. English has two kinds of affixes: *prefixes* and *suffixes* (Brinton and Brinton, 2010: 85) ^[4].

The knowledge of prefixes and suffixes is essential for a student of ESL, for that knowledge enables him to predict the meaning of the words which he meets first time. Further, the affixes are helpful for a learner of English to develop not only his word knowledge but the knowledge on word structure, as well; and moreover they are useful for a learner to be successful in his academic English through building a rich vocabulary. What is more, the knowledge in prefixes and suffixes is an important part for creating or building better readers.

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As far as the language learning is concerned, Nunan (1991) [11] states that, to be able to recognize the component parts in the word is certainly the most important competence for learning a language. But as far as the learning of affixes in a word is concerned, it is sometimes problematic for students and one of their major difficulties is the recognition of the affixes in the word. The students face the difficulty in perceiving and recognizing the affixes, which hinders the development of their English. As a result, they commit the errors in the usage of affixes and they are unable to produce new words by adding either prefixes or suffixes to the root or base. And further, they come across the problems in the correct and effective usage of affixes in their learning activities. McCarthy (1990: 4) [10] also states that sometimes, recognizing the morphemes is not so easy. When morphemes combine to form words, sound changes and/ or spelling changes can disguise them, making their presence less obvious to the untrained ear or eye. Thus, the systematic learning of affixes, i.e. prefixes and suffixes, their types, functions, and how they can be identified, is quite needed and it can reduce the complexity in learning of them; and further help the students use them appropriately in their work.

Prefixes

Morphologists often use special terms for different kinds of affixes, depending on their position within a word. Based on this, Haspelmath and Sims (2010: 20) [7] say that *prefixes* are affixes that precede the main part of the word. The scholars Rowe and Levin (2016: 86) [13] and Brown and Miller (2013: 16) [5] also state that affixes added before a root are called ‘prefixes’. For example, *un-*, meaning ‘not’, is the prefix in the word *unkind* (here, *kind* is the root). Thus, *unkind* means ‘not kind’, *unnecessary* means ‘not necessary’, and so on. Prefixes in English are *derivational affixes* as they rarely change the grammatical category of the word, but bring the different lexical meaning. For example, *appear* is a ‘verb’; and *disappear* (meaning, the opposite of ‘appear’), is also a ‘verb’. Hence, the prefixes like *dis-* are called *class-maintaining derivational prefixes*. In English, *class-changing derivational prefixes* are also available. For example, *forest* is a ‘noun’ in the grammatical category which means ‘an area of land covered with trees and plants’. Then the word ‘forest’ becomes *reforest* by prefixing of *re-*, which is a ‘verb’, meaning ‘to plant trees on an area of land’. Here, *re-* is a class-changing derivational prefix. It should be noted that some prefixes can function as both ‘class-changing’ and ‘class-maintaining’ derivational prefixes. For instance, *write* is a ‘verb’; *rewrite* (meaning, ‘writing again’) is also a ‘verb’. Here, the prefix *re-* changes only the meaning of the word, not the grammatical category.

Thus, the *re-* can also function as a class-maintaining derivational prefix, as well. Though there are about 50 different prefixes in English language, some common prefixes, their meanings, and examples are given in the table, below:

Table 1: Prefix, meaning, and examples

Prefix	Meaning	Examples
bi-	two	<i>bicycle, bipolar</i>
de-	opposite	<i>degrade, degenerate</i>
dis-	opposite	<i>disagree, disable</i>
im-	not	<i>impossible, impolite</i>
in-	lacking	<i>inability, inaccuracy</i>
ir-	not	<i>irregular, irradiate</i>
mis-	incorrect	<i>misunderstand, misalign</i>
pre-	before	<i>prefix, precancerous</i>
re-	again	<i>reactivate, readjust</i>
un-	not	<i>unable, unhappy,</i>

Suffixes

Suffixes are affixes that follow the main part of the word (Haspelmath and Sims, 2010: 20) [7]. According to Aarts *et al.* (2014) [11], a suffix is an affix added at the end of a word or base to form a new word or an inflectional form of a word. For example, the word, *teachers*, contains two suffixes: *-er* (meaning, ‘one who’) and *-s* (means ‘more than one’); and *teach* is the root or base. Further, in *reader* and *readable*, *read* is the root or base, *-er* and *-able* (meaning, ‘capable of being’) are suffixes, respectively. Some common suffixes in English, their meanings, and examples are represented in the table, below:

Table 2: Suffix, meaning, and examples

Suffix	Meaning	Examples
-al	relation to	<i>elemental, spinal</i>
-ance	action	<i>disturbance, variance</i>
-er/ -or	one who...	<i>reader, director</i>
-ful	full of	<i>truthful, beautiful</i>
-ion	action	<i>action, dictation</i>
-ise/-ize	to make	<i>neutralise, visualise</i>
-ity	state	<i>unity, punctuality</i>
-less	without	<i>colourless, useless</i>
-ly	manner	<i>beautifully, truly,</i>
-ment	result	<i>agreement, amusement</i>

Suffixes are of two types: *derivational* suffixes and *inflectional* suffixes. Derivational suffixes can be further divided into two categories. They are *class-maintaining* derivational suffixes and *class-changing* derivational suffixes (Brinton and Brinton, 2010: 85) [4]. The divisions of the suffixes are presented in the following diagram:

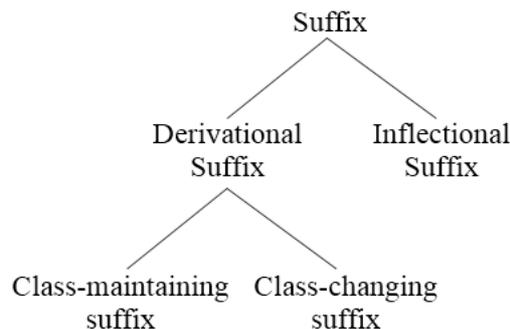


Fig 1: Divisions of suffixes

Class-maintaining derivational suffixes are affixes which are added to an existing lexeme. As a result, a new lexeme is formed, but the grammatical category of both lexemes remains the same. For instance, the word *economic* is an ‘adjective’; when the suffix *-al* is added to ‘economic’, then it becomes *economical*, again an ‘adjective’; and both words ‘economic’ and ‘economical’, though they are different lexemes or words, maintain the same word class. Thus, the suffix like *-al* is an example for class-maintaining derivational suffixes. Class-changing derivational suffixes are suffixes which are attached to an existing word. Then, a new word is formed, and the grammatical categories of both words are not the same. For example, the word *teach* is a ‘verb’; when the suffix *-er* is added to ‘teach’, then it becomes *teacher*, which is a ‘noun’; and both words ‘teach’ and ‘teacher’ are different words, and at the same time they belong to the different parts of speech, as well. Thus, the suffix *-er* is an example for class-changing derivational suffixes.

As far the inflectional affixes in English are concerned, they are all suffixes (Brinton and Brinton 2010: 85) [4]; and they are eight in number (Finegan, 2008: 54); and they are tabled, below:

Table 3: Inflectional suffixes and examples

Inflectional suffixes	Examples
regular plural - (e)s	<i>doors, boxes</i>
comparative - er	<i>clearer, dearer</i>
superlative - est	<i>dearest, easiest</i>
possessive - ’	<i>chomy’s mother</i>
3rd person singular- (e)s verbs in present tense	<i>plays, teaches</i>
present participle - ing	<i>looking, doing</i>
regular past - (e)d	<i>watched, tried</i>
past participle - en	<i>taken, eaten</i>

An innovative approach based on computer technology for the study of affixes

At present, computers are widely used almost in all the domains like education, commerce, industry, administration, transport, medicine, engineering, finance, and several others. As far as the educational domain is concerned, a computer plays a big role in a language classroom and it is the most effective instructional tool; and further the usage of this versatile device in teaching and learning of English is now inevitable and becomes essential because of the benefits it can bring to both stakeholders who are students and teachers. When the English language teaching and learning is considered, the computers help the students of ESL learn from the grammar and skills to the aspects of literature with the help of the already existing ample software (e.g. encyclopedias, subject-wise CDs, e-Thesaurus, e-dictionaries, etc.) and internet. Using computer applications in English as a Second or Foreign Language is becoming increasingly important in the educational environment around the world (Bailey, 1996). Further, as stated in the abstract, a student-friendly innovative computational tool, i.e. ‘Affix Learner and Tester’, has also been developed by the researcher to promote the knowledge of affixes, especially prefixes and suffixes, of the students at the ATI.

Methodology

For this study, 40 first year students of HNDE at the ATI, Trincomalee, Sri Lanka were taken as the participants. Then, hundred (100) complex words with different number

of morphemes from the books and materials relevant to the course of HNDE were collected as data; and this study was done in three phases: *phase 1, phase 2, and phase 3.*

In phase 1, a pretest in the form of a questionnaire in a printed material was conducted to know the participants’ existing knowledge regarding the affixes, their types, and functions. For this purpose, 20 complex words (out of 100 words) were used. Further, the pretest was evaluated out of 100 marks. The answers of the test were observed and noted down for the analysis of the results and findings.

In phase 2, the innovative learning and testing tool, i.e. *Affix Learner and Tester*, was developed by the researcher in a user-friendly manner with the help of the computer language, Visual Basic 6. For this purpose, 60 complex words (out of 100) as data were fed into the tool or programme. As far as the mechanism of the tool is concerned, it has two options, i.e. buttons: *Learning* and *Testing*. When a student clicks the ‘Learning’ button, he can learn about the prefixes and suffixes and their functions. Then he can go to the testing process by clicking the ‘Testing’ button. While clicking the ‘Testing’ button, the interface of the testing process would appear in which the student can find the first question and four answers in a multiple question format. Then the student can answer the question by clicking one of the four answers. Further, by clicking the ‘Check’ button in the tool, he can check whether his answer (which is displayed in the grid in the tool) is correct or not. Moreover, the next question can be accessed by clicking the button ‘Next Question’ in the tool. This is the operation of the tool. Further, this tool was practiced by the participants in the computer laboratory at the relevant ATI for one week.

Sample visual of the developed innovative tool

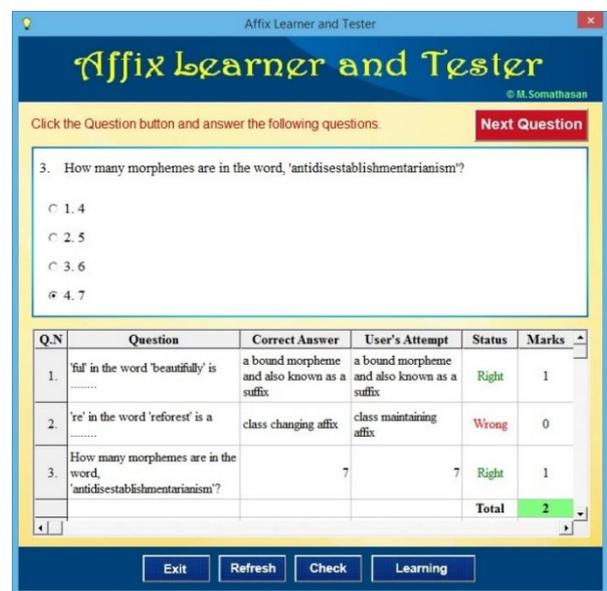


Fig 2: Sample visual of the tool, *Affix Learner and Tester*

In phase 3, a post-test was conducted with the help of the developed tool, to know the participants’ gathered knowledge regarding the affixes, their types, and functions. For this purpose, the rest of the complex words, i.e. 20 (out of 100 words), were used. Further, the post-test was evaluated out of 100 marks. The answers of the test were observed and recorded for the analysis of the results and findings.

Analysis of the results

On the basis of the study, the following results were analysed to make the findings by comparing the results of the pretest (i.e. the traditional method) with the results of the

post-test (i.e. the innovative method) regarding the participants' knowledge of affixes, their types, and functions in English.

Table 4: The results of pretest and post-test on affixes

The Results of Pretest and Post-test on Affixes				
Marks Range	Number of Participants (40)			
	Pretest	Percentage (%)	Post-test	Percentage (%)
0-24	3	8%	0	0%
25-29	2	5%	0	0%
30-34	3	8%	2	5%
35-39	6	15%	4	10%
40-44	7	18%	4	10%
45-49	6	15%	3	8%
50-54	4	10%	5	13%
55-59	3	8%	5	13%
60-64	2	5%	4	10%
65-69	2	5%	5	13%
70-84	1	3%	4	10%
85-100	1	3%	4	10%
	40	100%	40	100%

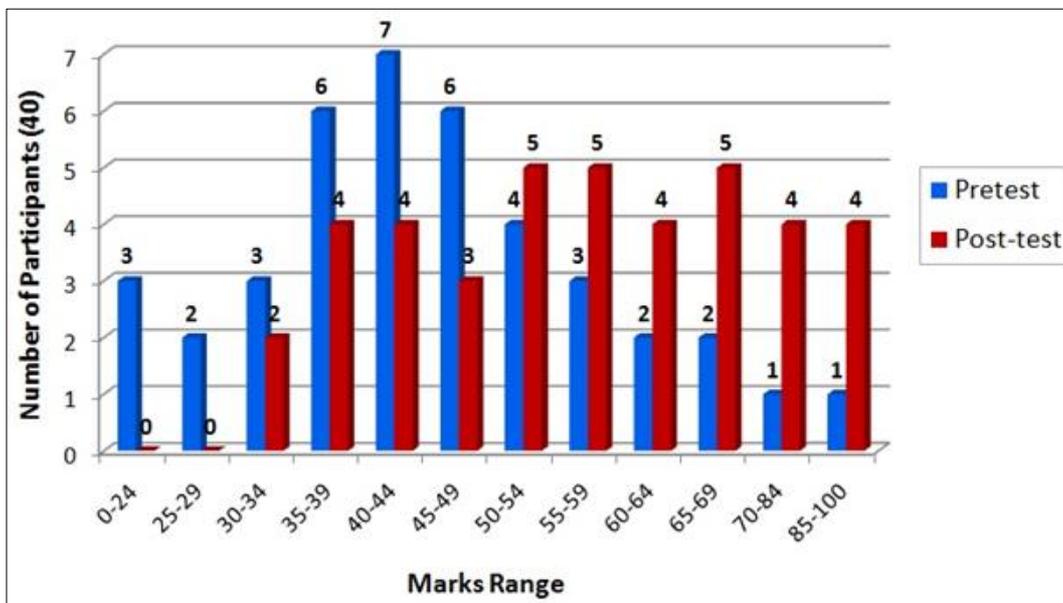


Fig 3: The results of pretest and post-test on affixes

The above graph (Figure 3) shows the results of the pretest and post-test in the knowledge of affixes, their types, and functions; and it is observed that a higher development in the knowledge of affixes has been achieved by the participants with the help of the developed innovative learning and Testing tool, 'Affix Learner and Tester'.

Findings

From the analysis of the results above, the finding is drawn by stating that the participants of this study have improved their knowledge of English affixes, their types, and functions to great extent by using the developed innovative method or tool, i.e. 'Affix Learner and Tester', rather than using the traditional method in the classroom.

Conclusion

The students of ESL have to concentrate on English affixes as the understanding the meanings of prefixes and suffixes along with the root words gives the students the ability to determine a word's meaning mostly without referring to a

dictionary. Further, learning prefixes and suffixes helps a person spell more correctly, read more fluently, and employ the use of more complicated words in a simple way. Moreover, the students who learn the affixes and use them effectively in their English activities, can become more proficient in English language. Today, most of the language classrooms are almost beyond the traditional uses in teaching and learning with the advent of technology, especially computer technology which has penetrated deeply into the English language teaching and learning. Thus, making the students get adapted to the current trend of learning situation is a teacher's duty. Based on this idea, an innovative tool, known as 'Affix Learner and Tester', was developed to help the participants of this study for mastering the knowledge in English affixes, their types, and functions. The tool was tested among the participants and the results evinced that the students could gain more knowledge in affixes with the help of the innovative method rather than the traditional method.

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