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## TERTIARY EFL STUDENTS' MORPHOLOGICAL AWARENESS OF ENGLISH

### *Research Article*

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### Abstract

Morphological awareness is regarded as a significant predictor of vocabulary acquisition, reading comprehension, and the advancement of various literary competences. Thus, the present study sought to investigate tertiary EFL students' morphological awareness of English in terms of morphological identification and morphological structure awareness. By making use of the total sampling technique, 51 tertiary EFL students from one of the universities in Bengkulu, Indonesia, were involved as the participants. Their English morphological awareness was assessed using a valid and reliable test already developed by a previous researcher. The results indicated that their English morphological awareness was moderate. Such condition became a positive potential which might contribute to consolidate them in the process of English vocabulary acquisition, in dealing with reading comprehension, and in fulfilling various English literary needs. This study recommends that both deductive and inductive English morphological interventions be given to tertiary EFL students in tandem with adequate practices that can continuously train their English morphological awareness.

*Keywords:* EFL morphological awareness, morphological identification, morphological structure

### 1. Introduction

Morphological awareness is a visual processing ability to analyze morphemic features in order to be able to construct meaning (Ke & Xiao, 2015). The ability as such refers to a metalinguistic ability to understand, reflect on, and manipulate morphemic properties wherein this ability allows one to develop words into more complex and detailed forms (Hamavandi, Rezai, & Mazdayasna, 2017; Kuo, Ramirez, de Marin, Kim, & Unal-Gezer, 2017; Wolter & Gibson, 2015). The properties of morphology in common extend to roots, affixes, inflection, derivation, compound words, blends, and phrasal words (Carstairs-Mccarthy, 2002; Harley, 2006). The metalinguistic ability in terms of morphological awareness also aligns with deliberate awareness of morphemic constituents (Vaknin-Nusbaum & Raveh, 2019).

For learners who learn English as the other language, the case of morphological awareness development to some extent is determined by the degree of L1 and L2 similarity. A study conducted by Xue and Jiang (2017) revealed that in the context of EFL learners, if the morphological features of L1 and L2 and the bilingual speakers' proficiency between their L1 and L2 have adequate similarities, their morphological awareness can be a unique predictor of their reading skill for both languages. The aforesaid study implies that sufficient similarities in the aspects of proficiency and linguistic forms between L1 and L2 become the bridge of morphological awareness improvement.

Morphological awareness is correlated with reading comprehension ability (Ke & Xiao, 2015). It becomes an important predictor of reading comprehension (Tighe & Binder, 2015) so that students with good morphological awareness can improve their reading comprehension in an effective way (Vaknin-Nusbaum, Sarid, Raveh, & Nevo, 2016). Otherwise, the lack of morphological awareness is related to the lack of comprehension in reading (MacKay, Levesque, & Deacon, 2017). A study conducted by Deacon, Holliman, Dobson, and Harrison (2018) indicated that morphological awareness independently contributes to students' literary ability in terms of word reading, the accuracy of reading, and reading comprehension. With adequate morphological awareness, learners will be assisted in dealing with extensive reading activities (Y. Zhang & Li, 2016). In addition, morphological awareness is also associated with writing skill. A study conducted by McCutchen and Stull, (2015) informed that morphological awareness affects students' writing skill in the aspects of both spelling accuracy and word production.

Besides being associated with reading comprehension, morphological awareness also influences vocabulary acquisition (Bae & Joshi, 2017; Sparks & Deacon, 2015). The study undertaken by Gottardo, Mirza, Koh, Ferreira, and Javier (2018) showed that morphological awareness alongside the knowledge of syntax positively contribute to the acquisition of vocabularies in depth. The improvement of morphological awareness positively aids the extent and depth of ESL vocabularies, and it can also equip learners with detailed understanding of word features alongside the related words and phrases (Haomin & Bilü, 2017), lexical inference (Zhang, Koda, & Leong, 2016), and word spelling (Wilson-Fowler & Apel, 2015; Zhao, Joshi, Dixon, & Chen, 2017).

In the context of teaching and learning, drawing upon prior studies, the efforts made to improve students' morphological awareness have been carried out in both deductive and inductive ways. In a deductive way, in the context of foreign language learning, the study conducted by Leonet, Cenoz, and Gorter (2020) revealed that translanguaging pedagogy, teaching morphology across languages, has a significantly positive effect on students' foreign language morphological awareness. The foregoing study indicates that students' first language knowledge and competence can be good modes that help students understand foreign language morphological rules better. In line with the foregoing, learning from the study conducted by Kim et al. (2015), morphological awareness is influenced by both instruction and cross-language transfer. In this sense, bilingual education has a positive impact on the improvement of learners' morphological awareness by means of a cross-language transfer. Bilingual education also enhances students' sensitivity to the structure of language features (Kuo et al., 2017).

Morphological instructions potentially develop students' morphological awareness so that students are able to effectively extract meanings from texts (Vaknin-Nusbaum & Raveh, 2019). The study undertaken by Amirjalili and Jabbari (2018) revealed that morphological instructions can effectively improve EFL students' morphological awareness and reading comprehension. This study recommended that morphological instructions be applied in EFL

classrooms for the sake of improving students' English literacy. Good, Lance, and Rainey (2015; and Wolter and Gibson (2015) also revealed that direct morphological instructions designed to enhance morphological awareness have a significantly positive impact on the improvement of literary skills. Zhang (2016) recommended that morphological instructions be applied in order to develop bilingual students' reading skill.

According to the study conducted by Kraut (2015), drawing upon the data solicited from ESL learners, it is found out that L2 learners' morphological awareness does not necessarily affect their automatic morphological decomposition. The aforesaid study recommended that non-native English learners need to be deliberately provided with morphological exposures and also to be trained to compose as well as decompose English morphological families in practices in order that they can improve their automatic morphological decomposition that can assist them in dealing with efficient and speed reading. In addition, teaching students sufficient knowledge *vis-a-vis* morphology and inductive reasoning can improve students' morphological awareness (Yeh, Joshi, & Ji, 2015).

A study conducted by Lin, Cheng, and Wang (2018) with respect to morphological awareness interventions amid Chinese bilingual speakers who use English as the other language, in teaching compound structures to bilingual learners, the teacher is expected to teach students to identify the compound head and to understand how it works in meaning making towards the entire words. In addition, the teacher is also suggested to teach students the compound structure similarities between the two languages. The aforementioned studies highlight the importance of implicit or deductive teaching of morphological awareness to help develop students' vocabulary acquisition, reading comprehension, and literary developments.

In an inductive way of teaching and learning, the study conducted by Reynolds (2019) suggested that a variety of word formations can be acquired through extensive reading. In this sense, morphological awareness can be enhanced by means of incidental learning. However, this study also suggests that if more complex varieties of word formations are expected to be acquired, direct morphological instructions that deliberately expose learners with the explanations of morphemic parts are needed. In addition, learning vocabularies in context will improve students' morphological awareness. As the foregoing, students will acquire morphological knowledge, word definitions, the usages of words, and other necessary knowledge such as synonyms and antonyms of words (Spencer et al., 2015). In this regard, learning vocabularies in context refers to part of incidental learning or the so-called inductive learning.

Anchored in a range of studies above that prove the paramount importance and the pivotal roles of morphological awareness in vocabulary acquisition, reading comprehension, writing skill, and other literary needs, the present study is proposed to assess EFL tertiary students' morphological awareness in terms of morphemic identification and morphemic structure. Two research questions are formulated as follows:

1. How is tertiary EFL students' morphological awareness of English in terms of morphemic identification?
2. How is tertiary EFL students' morphological awareness of English in terms of morphemic structure?

## 2. Method

This study applied a descriptive quantitative method to measure tertiary EFL students' morphological awareness of English. The morphological awareness examined in the present study was comprised of analytical and structural aspects of morphology. The rationale

beyond the application of this study method was because this study sought to solicit rigorous data that could be generalized, and the data could also be the source of developing English morphology teaching materials in order to meet EFL students' needs. This study was conducted in one of the universities in Bengkulu, Indonesia.

### **2.1. Participants**

The participants of this study were the first-year tertiary EFL students who were going to take an English morphology subject in the following year. 51 tertiary students were engaged, and they were collected using a total sampling technique. They aged between 18-20 years old. Resting upon the proficiency test of college students' enrolment, the participants of this study were categorized as pre-intermediate to intermediate English students.

### **2.2. Technique of Collecting Data**

The data were collected using an English morphology test adopted from an instrument constructed by Farsi (2008). A part of his study measured tertiary students' English morphological awareness in the analytical and structural components. The two components aligned with the aspects measured by the present study. In addition, the participants' conditions in his study also had a range of similarities compared to those of the present study, wherein they were the first-year college students and non-native English users. They used English as a foreign language. The range of participants' ages was also adequately similar. Hence, adopting a test already constructed and used by Farsi (2008) was ideal. This test was assigned to measure tertiary students in reflecting on and manipulating English morphemic constituents. The framework of this test was comprised of the analyses and structures of word formations which were further called the morphological identification and morphological structure tests.

#### **2.2.1. English morphological identification test**

This test was deployed to measure tertiary EFL students' English morphological awareness in terms of analyzing and breaking down English words into smaller meanings. The test consisted of 15 items. In this test, tertiary EFL students were provided with a variety of complex English words which were free from contexts, and they were demanded to segment the morphemic constituents of those words into the morphemes that represented the smallest meaning each. Both validity and reliability of this test had already been verified by Farsi (2008) so that this test was ready to be used by other researchers who studied similar cases.

#### **2.2.2. English morphological structure test**

The function of this test was to measure tertiary EFL students' English morphological awareness in terms of synthesizing morphemes to form new meanings. This test subsumed 15 items. All items were displayed in the form of incomplete sentences. The students were further asked to modify words needed to complete the English sentences in an accurate way. Each item was preceded by a sentence example having the same concept but modifying a different word. In detail, this test examined students' knowledge with regard to word structures, the connections between words and within words, and word parts. Both validity and reliability of this test had already been verified by Farsi (2008) so that this test was ready to be used by other researchers who studied similar cases.

### **2.3. Technique of Data Analysis**

The data were analyzed using descriptive statistic calculations to obtain the percentages of tertiary students' English morphological awareness. The following formula was deployed to analyze the data:

$$X = R / (T \times n) \times 100 \%$$

Note:

x = The percentage of each kind of the tests

R = Total number of correct answers

T = Number of samples

n = Number of items

The mean score was further calculated resting upon the total score of the two kinds of test.

$$M = (\sum\%) / N$$

Note:

M : Mean

$\sum\%$  : Total percentage of overall scores

N : Number of samples

The next step was to determine the levels of students' morphological awareness. The following tabulated scales are the five point scales adopted from Nurgiyantoro's (2010) classification.

Table 1. *Nurgiyantoro's (2010) score classification*

No	Score Percentages	Interpretation
1	90 %-100%	Very good
2	75%-89%	Good
3	60%-74%	enough
4	40%-59%	Less/low
5	0%-40%	Poor / very low

### 3. Results and Discussion

The following presentation provides a quantitative description of tertiary EFL students' morphological awareness of English in terms of morphological identification and morphological structure awareness.

#### 3.1. Tertiary EFL Students' Morphological Identification Awareness of English

Resting upon the data gained from the morphological identification test containing 15 items that measure students' ability to analyze and break down English words into smaller meanings, the results are obtained as presented in the following diagram.

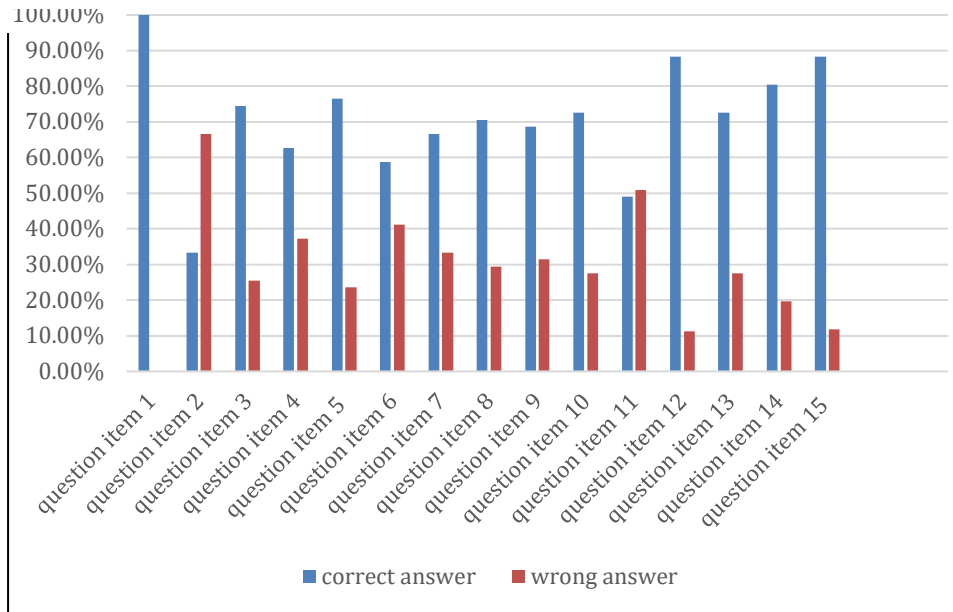


Diagram 1. The results of tertiary EFL students' morphological identification awareness test

Diagram 1 displays the condition of the overall data. Subsequently, from the statistical calculations, the total of correct answers gained was 542, and that of incorrect answers was 223. The percentage of the correct answers gained was 70.84%.

### 3.2. Tertiary EFL students' morphological awareness of English

Anchored in the data garnered from the morphological structure test comprising 15 items that measure students' ability to synthesize English morphemes to form new meanings, the results are obtained as presented in the following diagram.

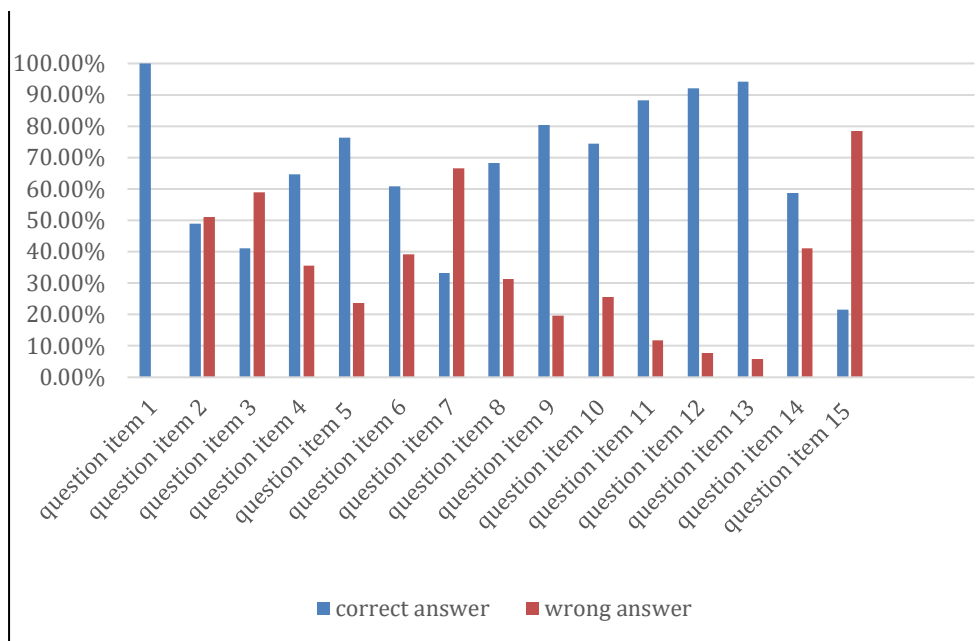


Diagram 2. The results of tertiary EFL students' morphological structure awareness test

Diagram 2 displays the condition of the overall data. Subsequently, from the statistical calculations, the total of correct answers gained was 515, and that of incorrect answers was 250. The percentage of the correct answers gained was 67.32%.

The next stage undertaken was to classify the level of tertiary EFL students' morphological awareness of English based upon Nurgiyantoro's (2010) classification. The following diagram highlights the distribution of data based on the related percentages.

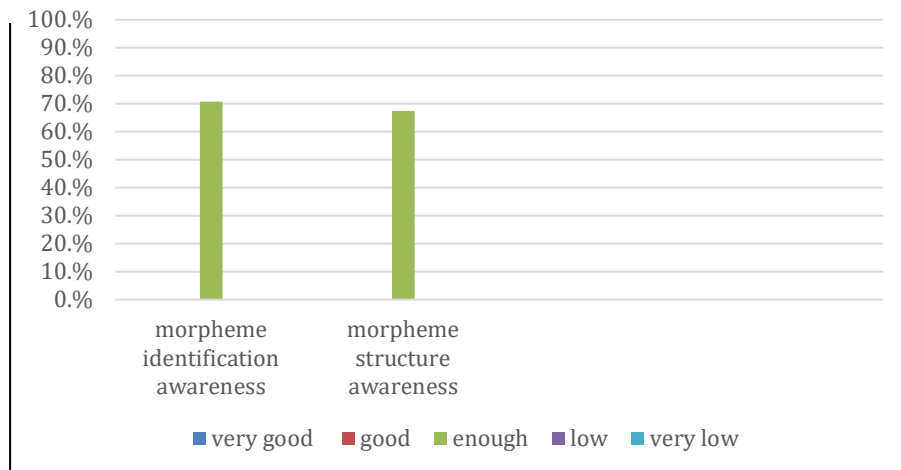


Diagram 3. The level of students' morphological awareness of English

Diagram 3 indicates that the classification of tertiary EFL students' morphological identification and morphological structure awareness was in enough category because Nurgiyantoro (2010) elucidated that if the scores emerge in the percentage from 64% to 74%, the scores represent an "enough" category. The result of students' morphological identification awareness was 70.84%, and that of students' morphological structure awareness was 67.32%. It means that students' morphological awareness level was enough in terms of both morphological identification and morphological structure awareness.

The results of the present study indicate that tertiary EFL students have sufficiently been capable of analyzing as well as breaking down English words into smaller meanings and synthesizing English morphemes to form new meanings (Carlisle, 2000; Farsi, 2008). This efficacy will moderately consolidate tertiary EFL students in the process of vocabulary acquisition (Bae & Joshi, 2017; Gottardo et al., 2018; Haomin & Bilü, 2017; Sparks & Deacon, 2015; Wilson-Fowler & Apel, 2015; Zhang et al., 2016), in coping with reading comprehension, and various literary needs (Ke & Xiao, 2015; Tighe & Binder, 2015; Vaknin-Nusbaum et al., 2016). However, the moderate level of English morphological awareness owned by tertiary EFL students in this study merely lies as the temporary English morphological potential which can increase or perhaps decrease dependent upon the further English morphological interventions that will be given to students. The researchers recommend that their English morphological potential be improved by provisioning both deductive and inductive interventions alongside adequate practices that continuously train their English morphological awareness.

As an implication for the context of English education in Indonesia, considering the scientific consensus which internationally positions English as the world lingua franca whose users are multicultural people in the world (Baker, 2016; Deniz, Özkan, & Bayyurt, 2016; Fang, 2017; Ishikawa, 2016; Kirkpatrick, 2018; Kusumaningputri & Widodo, 2018; J. Liu & Fang, 2017; K. L. Liu, 2019; Matsuura, Rilling, Chiba, Kim, & Rini, 2016; Mauranen, 2018; Rahatlou, Fazilatfar, & Allami, 2018; Sherman, 2018; Si, 2018; Sung, 2017) and the nature



of Indonesian people, including students, that is multicultural *in situ* (Hamied, 2012; Morganna, Sumardi, & Tarjana, 2018a, 2018b, 2020; Sukyadi, 2015), the natural English interactions that Indonesian English students take part in will always be across cultures, and such interactions willy-nilly call for their English linguistic competences which meet the adequate extent of English fluency and accuracy. English morphological awareness is a part of the aforesaid linguistic competences. Thus, the English morphological awareness of Indonesian students has to meet both fluent and accurate degrees. In this regard, English teaching and learning processes undertaken in the classrooms have to assist students in learning English morphology in both deductive and inductive ways. Deductive English morphological interventions can improve students' English morphological awareness in terms of accuracy (Amirjalili & Jabbari, 2018; Good et al., 2015; Kim et al., 2015; Kraut, 2015; Kuo et al., 2017; Leonet et al., 2020; Lin et al., 2018; Vaknin-Nusbaum & Raveh, 2019; Wolter & Gibson, 2015; Yeh et al., 2015; D. Zhang, 2016). Subsequently, inductive English morphological interventions can improve their English morphological awareness in terms of fluency (Reynolds, 2019; Spencer et al., 2015). The present study really supports English teachers to teach students English morphology deductively and inductively.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The present study reveals that tertiary EFL students' morphological awareness of English is moderate. This condition becomes a positive potential which may contribute to consolidate them in the process of English vocabulary acquisition, in dealing with reading comprehension, and in fulfilling various English literary needs. Nonetheless, such morphological potential can either increase or decrease dependent upon the English morphological interventions that will further be given to them. This study recommends that both deductive and inductive English morphological interventions be given to them in tandem with adequate practices that can continuously train their English morphological awareness.

Further studies are expected to address the practices of English morphological interventions in the contexts of Indonesian EFL students.

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