

# A Case Study on difficulties in Inflection and Affixation Forms in English Words for L2 learners

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## Abstract

This case study examines L2 learner's knowledge on English affixes. Some research suggested the extent of understanding L2 vocabulary can vary according to their L2 proficiency level in vocabulary, and suggest difficulty of acquiring inflection and affixation can be predicted by L2 learner's lexical proficiency level. We conducted an experiment to examine which affects more for L2 learners to understand English words with affixes most, word frequencies or learners' lexical proficiencies. The results suggest that word frequencies tend to affect understanding English words with affixes more than L2 learners' lexical proficiencies.

## Keywords

L2 vocabulary acquisition, English affix knowledge

## Introduction

To expand L2 vocabulary knowledge, it is important for L2 learners to acquire affix knowledge. And also, understanding affix knowledge development by L2 learners is valuable for both researchers and practitioners. (Mochizuki & Aizawa, 2000). Bauer and Nation (1993) suggest "Once the base word or even a derived word is known, the recognition of other members of the family requires little or no extra effort" (p. 253). However, some other researchers report that in the case of L2 learners, the extent of understanding L2 vocabulary can vary according to their L2 proficiency level in vocabulary, and suggest difficulty of acquiring inflection and affixation can be predicted by L2 learner's lexical proficiency level. (Mochizuki & Aizawa, 2000; Schmitt & Meara, 1997).

## 1 Word Family and Affixes

Bauer and Nation (1993) proposed a word family, a unit of words which are semantically related but have different word forms. Concerning the word family, seven levels are proposed, which are "set up for practical reasons and have no theoretical value" (Bauer & Nation, 1993, p.257). The seven levels are set according to the criteria: frequency, regularity, productivity and predictability. Each level is defined as follows:

Table 1: Definitions of Each Level

Level 1	Each form is a different word
Level 2	Inflectional suffixes
Level 3	The most frequent and regular derivational affixes
Level 4	Frequent, orthographically regular affixes
Level 5	Regular but infrequent affixes
Level 6	Frequent but irregular affixes
Level 7	Classical roots and affixes

Examples for affixes in Level 3 are: *-able*, *-er*, *-ish*, *-less*, *-ly*, *-ness*, *-th*, *-y*, *non-*, and *un-*. The affixes included in Level 4 are: *-al*, *-ation*, *-ess*, *-ful*, *-ism*, *-ity*, *-ize*, *-ment*, *-ous*, and *in-*. The affixes in Level 5 are as follows:

*-age*, *-al*, *-an*, *-ance*, *-ant*, *-ary*, *atory*, *-dom*, *-eer*, *-en*, *-ence*, *-ent*, *ery*, *-ese*, *-esque*, *-ette*, *-hood*, *-i*, *-ian*, *-ite*, *-let*, *-ling*, *-ly*, *-most*, *-ory*, *-ship*, *-ward*, *-ways*, *-wise*, *-ante*, *anti*-, *arcj*-, *bi*-, *circum*-, *counter*-, *en*-, *ex*-, *fore*-, *hyper*-, *inter*-, *mid*-, *mis*-, *neo*-, *post*-, *pro*-, *semi*-, *sub*-, *un*-

Affixes in Level 7 are "all the classical roots which around in English words and which occur not only as bound roots in English but also elements in neo-classical compounds." (Bauer &

Nation, 1993, p.262). They are: ab-, ad-, com-, de-, dis-, ex-, and sub-.

## 2 Difficult English Affixes for L2 Learners

Mochizuki and Aizawa (2000) report that L2 learner's affix knowledge has correlation with their vocabulary size, and suggest L2 learner's acquisition order of affixes. Its order is as follows (Here, '<' represents 'is acquired earlier than'):

Prefixes: *re-* < *un-* < *pre-* < *non-* < *anti-* < *semi-* < *ex-* < *en-* < *post-* < *inter-* < *counter-* < *in-* < *ante-*

Suffixes: *-ation* < *-ful* < *-ment* < *-ist* < *-er* < *-ize* < *-al* < *-ly* < *-ous* < *-ness* < *-ism* < *-able* < *-less* < *-ish* < *-y* < *-ity*

The results show that affixes in each level set by Bauer and Nation (1993) cannot be totally related with difficulties in understanding them by L2 learners.

## 3 A Case Study

In this case study, we focus on what English affixes L2 learners understand and whether there is any difference in understanding English affixes among L2 learners with various proficiency levels.

### 3.1 Research Questions

In this case study, we examine (1) what affixations are difficult for L2 learners of English, and (2) whether L2 proficiency levels affect understanding English words with affixations.

### 3.2 Materials

The test items, English words with affixes were created based on affixes mainly in Level 3 to 5 in the list of Bauer and Nation (1993) and from the results of Mochizuki and Aizawa (2000). We created four types of test items to examine L2 learner's knowledge of affix knowledge for nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs.

The participants were asked to choose one appropriate word form out of four choices. For example, a test item to examine knowledge about noun form of 'poor', contains four choices: 'poorer', 'poverty', 'poorness' and 'poorly'. Some of the choices were pseudo-English words. In total thirty-nine test items were created: nine

for nouns, ten for adjectives, ten for adverbs and ten for verbs. Test items for nouns and their results were from the test items created by Ueda, Tsutsui, Kondo, Owada and Nakano (2012), where the test data were already calculated the learner's vocabulary levels based on Latent Rank Theory (Shojima, 2011).

### 3.3 Participants

Japanese university students with different English proficiency levels participated in this case study. Almost all of them have studied English for seven years or more.

### 3.4 Results

The results show that (1) participants who got high scores tend answer words with correct affixes; however, even the participants who got low scores can answer correctly, if they are words with high frequencies. This suggests that word frequencies can affect L2 learners' understanding affixes.

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