

## Investigating Morphological Problems Encountered by EFL University Students in Using Inflectional Morphemes

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### Abstract

This study aimed at investigating morphological problems encountered by EFL university students in using inflectional morphemes. It is a descriptive-analytical study. The tool of the study was a diagnostic test. The test has been checked and confirmed for reliability and validity. The sample of the study was the students of the 4<sup>th</sup> year majoring English at Sudan University of Science and Technology, College of Languages. They were one hundred. Eighty of them were given the test and that twenty of them were absent. The data collected was statistically analyzed by the Statistical Package of Social Sciences (SPSS) analytical program. The results of the study revealed that the students encountered difficulties and problems in using inflectional morphemes. Such difficulties were represented in forming irregular nouns, irregular verbs, irregular adjectives and polysyllabic adjectives. In addition to this the findings had shown that the students committed some mistakes. These mistakes were misapplication of rules and overgeneralization in forming irregular adjectives and irregular verbs. Moreover, the students have made mistakes in forming sentences with third person singular. The sentences had no subject verb agreement. These problems and difficulties led the researcher to recommend the following: Inflectional morphemes should be taught as independent courses. Remedial lessons and more practice on all inflectional morphemes are needed in order to solve these problems. Then the researcher has proposed some suggestions for further studies; More of which are on inflectional morphology should be carried out. Syllabus designers should include inflectional morphology in the university syllabus and more concentration on forming irregular nouns, irregular verbs and irregular adjectives. Educational institutions' awareness should be raised about the importance of teaching inflectional morphemes for EFL university students.

**Key words:** polysyllabic adjectives-lexemes-morphological processes-suffixes.

### المستخلص

هدفت هذه الدراسة إلى تقصي الصعوبات الصرفية التي تواجه طلاب المرحلة الجامعية الذين يدرسون اللغة الانجليزية لغة أجنبية عند استخدام الوحدات الصرفية. أُستخدم في هذه الدراسة المنهج الوصفي التحليلي. تم استخدام المنهج الوصفي التشخيصي لجمع البيانات. ولقد تم فحص الإختبار وأعيد اختباره وتأكدت صلاحيته وموثوقيته. عينة الإختبار هم طلاب المستوى الرابع الذين يدرسون اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في جامعة السودان للعلوم والتكنولوجيا بكلية اللغات. وعددهم مئة. خضع ثمانون منهم للإمتحان وذلك لغياب عشرون منهم. ولقد تم تحليل البيانات التي تم جمعها باستخدام البرنامج التحليلي (SPSS) وأظهرت النتائج أن الطلاب الذين يدرسون اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية يواجهون صعوبات ومشكلات في استخدام المفردات الصرفية في الاسماء و الافعال و الصفات غير المنتظمة. بالإضافة إلى ذلك أظهرت النتائج أن الطلاب ارتكبوا أخطاء في سوء التطبيق و التعميم المفرط في صياغة الاسماء و الافعال و الصفات. وكذلك ارتكب الطلاب في اخطاء في صياغة الجمل ذات الفاعل المفرد.



فلا يوجد توافق بين الفعل والفاعل في الجملة الواحدة. قادت هذه الصعوبات و المشكلات التي تواجه الطلاب الباحث إلى أن يوصي بالآتي: تدرس جميع وحدات بناء الكلمات الصرفية بشكل منفصل عن المقررات الاخرى . على أن يتم التركيز على الاسماء و الصفات و الافعال غير المنتظمة والصفات متعددة المقاطع. و ان يعطى الطلاب دروس معالجة و التدريب على كل وحدات بناء الكلمات الصرفية. و أخيرا إقترح الباحث الآتي: إجراء المزيد من البحوث في علم الصرف على أن يكون التركيز على وحدات بناء الكلمات الصرفية. وعلى مصممي المقررات الجامعية إدخال علم الصرف في المقررات الجامعية على أن يتم التركيز على وحدات بناء الكلمات الصرفية وأن يرفع وعي المؤسسات التعليمية عن اهمية تدريس علم الصرف بشكل واضح و صريح.

### Introduction

Morphology has a great importance on the processes of teaching and learning English as a foreign language. Azmi khalil (1999, p. 32) stated that “English has only eight inflectional suffixes.” Inflectional morphemes are vital in English language and inflectional morphology is a major word-formation process. The inflectional morphemes have two characteristics in common: First, they never change the grammatical category of the words which they are attached to. Second, they do not create new words. According to Cambridge Advanced learner’s Dictionary, inflectional morpheme is “a change in or addition to the form of a word that shows a change in the way it is used in sentence.” Francis Katamba (1994) stated that the term morphology refers back to the Greek origins **morph-** means *shape* or form of something and **-ology** which means the **study of**. Then students of language have borrowed the term morphology from biological contexts in early nineteenth century and applied it on the study of word-formation processes. Mark Aronoff and Kristen Fudeman (2011, p. 2) state that, the concept of **morphology** in general, refers to as the study of form or forms of something. Its origin is Greek. They stated that, the German poet,

playwright, novelist and philosopher Johann Wolfgang Goethe has coined the term morphology in biological contexts in early nineteenth century. Morphology was only used in biology and not in word formation. The linguist Rochelle Lieber (2009, p.88) defines inflection as “inflection refers to word formation process that does not change category and does not create new lexemes, but rather changes the form of lexemes so they fit into different grammatical contexts.” which means that, the inflectional morphemes never change the part of speech of the word they added to or create new word. Khalil. A (1999) clarifies that inflectional morphology in English is divided into two major fields, inflectional and derivational morphology the former is concerned with inflectional categories that reflect grammatical processes in forming words. Oxford advanced Learner’s Dictionary defines it as “A change in the form of a word, especially the endings according to its grammatical function in a sentence.” The definitions above make it clear that inflectional morphology is the study of the processes such as affixation and vowel change in words or the sort of morphology that expresses grammatical distinction.

E.g. (man -men- go-goes-going- -went and gone) these processes enable us to distinguish the forms of words in certain grammatical categories. These inflectional morphemes which are suffixes that could be added to a word to assign different forms that word can have. These grammatical morphemes serve as grammatical markers that indicate tense, number, gender, mood and voice. These different forms of words enable us to use words in different grammatical contexts. For instance, regular *nouns* are inflected by adding -s or -es to a singular noun (Bird-birds. Beach- beaches) *verbs* can be inflected differently, whether they are used in past, present or in future according to the subject of the sentence. *Adjectives* on the other hand have different forms, whether they are *comparative* and *superlative*. These different uses of the inflectional morphemes are very important and have essential roles in speaking and writing, especially for EFL university students who face serious problems in using these inflectional morphemes. Lack of knowledge of using these inflectional morphemes properly influences the students' academic performance.

#### Statement of the problem

Up to this vital role of inflectional morphemes are usually neglected or ignored in the process of teaching and learning. Based on the long experience of the researcher as a learner, a teacher and a lecturer he noticed that EFL students at university level had encountered difficulties in using inflectional morphemes. This is why the researcher has chosen to spot a light on the eight English inflectional suffixes of English language. This should help in solving

these difficulties and the problems that encounter EFL university students.

#### Inflectional morphemes

1.-s/-es plural marker of the nouns. E.g. cats, dogs, churches. Dogs are one of the cats family. Churches are places of worship for Christians.

2. **Genitive case ('s)** it is a possessive marker and indicates that an object belongs to a noun or noun phrase. Adam's apple, Women and men's days of lives, Lion's mane and teachers' books.

3. **Third person singular-s/-es** 3<sup>rd</sup> person present simple tense of the verb, .e.g. works, goes and judges. He goes slowly. She works for a bank. Adam judges things correctly.

4. The **past tense** is used for something happened in the past. For example, called, liked, wanted and worked. I called you yesterday.

5. **Past participle** refers to an action that was started and completed entirely in the past. It is an identical to the simple past tense. It formed with -ed or -d to the infinitive form of the verb. The context can determine whether it is past tense or past participle.

6- **ing** present participle of the verb. We can form present participle by adding -ing to infinitive form of the verb. I am writing a research paper.

7.-er comparative form of the adjectives is used to compare two objects. Comparative adjectives are also used in sentences when two nouns are comparing with each other or used to compare differences between the two objects. For example, my house is *larger* than yours. You are faster than me. Mona's English is better than mine. I am *quicker* and taller than my brother.

8. **-est** superlative form of the adjectives. The superlative adjectives are used to describe an object which is at upper or lower limit of quality or the highest extent or degree of something. Khalifa tower is the **highest** building in the world. For one syllable adjectives, we use **-est** and for the adjectives that have more than one syllable we use **more** to form comparative adjective and **most** to form superlative adjective. E.g. more beautiful and the most beautiful. The most important thing in our life is education. Forming comparative is easy and depends on the syllables of the adjectives, there are some spelling rules: for example, one syllable adjective that has consonant +vowel+ consonant. We double the last consonant. E.g. big, bigger and the biggest. Hot, hotter and the hottest. English words are inflected according to the following types: George Yule (2010,p.58) "The prototypical inflectional categories include number, tense, person , case, gender and others, all of which usually produce different forms of the same word rather than different words."

The following are examples of the types of inflectional morphemes:

**Number** in linguistics refers to the form of a word that shows whether one or more than one person or thing we talk or write about. One person or thing is being talked about. In other words, the subject of a sentence and its verb must agree in number. Nouns, pronouns, verbs and adjectives should agree in gender, number, and case.

**Person** is a category used in the classification of pronouns, possessive determiners, and verb forms and whether they indicate the speaker (first person), the addressee (second person), or third party (third person). In grammar, person refers to first, second, and third person and is used to

denote any of these three classes of personal pronouns.

**Case** In linguistics, is grammatical function or pronoun. Modern English has only three types of cases also called noun cases. They are; subjective, objective and possessive nouns. E.g.(we) subjective, (me) objective, and (my) possessive.

**Gender** has been defined in Oxford Research Encyclopedia as "Gender is a grammatical feature, in a family with person, number, and case." In English, gender refers to a system of grammatical categorization, whereby every noun is treated as either masculine, feminine or neuter. The grammatical gender is a noun classification that includes masculine and feminine categories.

**Mood** In grammar is used to denote a verb category or form which indicates whether the verb expresses a fact, a command, a question, a condition, a wish or possibility. Rochelle Lieber (2009, p.98) defines mood "The inflectional categories of mood and modality have to do with a range of distinctions that include signaling the kind of speech act on which the verb is deployed." The following are sentences in different moods. The indicative mood is a form of a verb that is used to express statements or facts. E.g. Bats **are** mammals, not birds. We will visit Sudan and Chad next year. I liked you as soon as I met you. They are meeting you tomorrow morning. Imperative mood sentences are used to give commands or prohibitions. E.g. do not open the door, Confirm your attendance by writing your name, Fill in this application form and Come tomorrow with your spouse and children. The interrogative mood sentences are used to ask questions and end with question mark, which is the easiest way to know them.



E.g. do you want cake? Don't you know me? What are you doing here? Conditional mood sentences or subjunctive mood are used to make requests or expression under what condition something would happen. Helping or auxiliary verbs are used in conditional mood sentences. You might be able to solve the problem if you come earlier, I would like a cup of tea please, if I were you, I could have done it, If I were in Khartoum, I would meet my friend, If you had come here, I could have given you the present, I wish if I were more educated and If I were taller, I would have been a basket player.

**Tense and aspect** have been defined in Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary as "any of the forms of a verb that may be used to show the time of the action or state expressed by the verb." Aspect has two types, the progressive aspect and perfect aspect. It is formed with auxiliary **be** to reflect the tense and the addition of **-ing** to the main verb. It usually describes an event which taking place during a limited time, e.g. I am staying with you while my house is decorated. It is often being used when we are more concerned with the action rather than the time frame or result. **Voice:** according to Oxford Online Dictionary voice has been defined as "The form of a verb that shows whether the subject of a sentence performs the action (the active voice) or is affected by it the passive voice.)" In English the voice is used to describe the form of the verb that shows whether the subject of a sentence performs the action (the active voice) or is affected by it (the passive voice) or it is a particular mode of inflecting or conjugating verbs, or particular form of a verb, by means of which indicated the relation of the subject of the verb to the action which the verb

expresses. Sentences written in active voice are easier to understand than sentences written in the passive voice. Switching the passive voice into the active voice is straightforward, but it requires a bit of practice. Here are some examples written in both active and passive voice. There are two basic rules for converting sentences from active to passive voice, which are common for all tenses. The places of subject and object will be interchanged in the sentence and only past participle of the verb will be used in the passive voice and the verb **be** with its different forms must be used. This should be done regarding nouns, tense, person, number, voice mood, tense and aspect. Knowing language is not only reading and writing sentences but also knowing how words are formed, their internal structure and their vowel change. The inflectional morphemes are also break down words to fit into different forms. Despite this significance of the inflectional morphemes, they are neglected and ignored in the process of teaching at the Sudanese universities. This is why the researcher carried out this research.

#### **Related review of literature**

Ramadan (2015) has carried out a related research on morphological errors made by Jordanian university students. The study aimed at investigating, identifying, classifying, describing and finding out the causes of morphological errors made by the students of the fourth year university students majoring in English in Jordanian universities. The researcher has used the descriptive and analytical method in the study. The researcher used essay writing as a tool for data collection, the participants were given many topics for essay writing. A number of twenty were chosen as a sample for the study.





The students were asked to write essays about different morphological aspects throughout the semester. The data collected were statistically analyzed. The results revealed that students' competence in English morphology is poor and the errors were caused by some factors such as the inconsistency in English as well as misapplication of rules. In addition to errors in inflectional morphemes; they omitted the -s of plural nouns. Some of the students were added-s to form irregular nouns as plural marker. The results revealed that the students were unable to form correct sentences in third person present simple tense. Moreover, the results shown that the students were weak in both derivational and inflectional morphology. Then the researcher recommended the following: Courses of teaching morphology should be compulsory for the students who are majoring in English at university level.

The second related study has been carried out by Hammad (2007) at Sudan University of Science and Technology; College of languages. The study aimed at investigating major difficulties in using English morphemes. Namely, the problems in using English compound nouns in their plural forms, the order of adjectives in a sentence, the suffix -er in forming comparative forms and nouns, the prefixes (un) and (not) plus adjective when forming negation and antonyms. The descriptive and analytical method is used in this study. The researcher has used two tools for collecting data, a questionnaire for the teachers of English and a diagnostic test for the students. The questionnaire and the test have been tested and confirmed for reliability and validity. Then the researcher has randomly chosen a number of twenty students from both

genders from four governmental schools at Khartoum Bahri locality. The students have been equally chosen and have given the test. Also a number of twenty of English teachers from different schools at Khartoum Bahri locality have been chosen and responded to the statements of the questionnaire. The data collected from both the test and the questionnaire have been analyzed statistically by using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS). The findings have shown that, the students encountered major morphological difficulties in using the inflectional morphemes. Most of these difficulties were in using pluralisation of irregular nouns, inflecting irregular verbs and order of adjectives. Majority of the teachers were unaware about the problems that the students face in using inflectional morphemes. These findings led the researcher to recommend the following: Teachers should get special training on how to make students learn grammar without being demotivated towards language. Besides, efforts in morphological awareness are needed and syllabus should be taught with work books and tape-recordings. Remedial lessons and drills are needed to those students. Then the researcher has suggested that more researches in English morphemes should be carried out in future researches. Educational institutions should be aware about teaching these morphological processes. .

#### **Questions of the study**

1. To what extent do EFL university students encounter problems in using inflectional morphemes?
2. What is the most problematic one of the eight inflectional morphemes for EFL university students?

### Hypotheses of the Study

1. EFL university students encounter problems in using inflectional morphemes.
2. The most problematic suffix for EFL university students is how to form regular and irregular nouns.

### Objectives of the Study

1. To investigate problems encountered by EFL university students in using inflectional morphemes.
2. To assess students' ability in forming words using different inflectional morphemes

### Methods and Materials

This study was conducted through a descriptive and analytical method as an appropriate way of investigating EFL university students in using inflectional morphemes.

The sample of the study was EFL university students of the fourth year majoring in English at Sudan University of Science and Technology, College of Languages, English Department. Academic year 2018-2019. They were from both genders and their ages were

between 22-24 years. The tool for this study is a diagnostic test. Twenty of the students were absent so eighty of them have given the test. A diagnostic test is used as a tool for data collection. For testing reliability and validity of the tool, the test was shown to some teachers of English, they checked it and confirmed that it was valid and reliable. Alpha's method for measuring reliability and validity of the tools was used and confirmed that the test was highly reliable and valid. The test consists of two questions for testing students' ability in using class changing and class maintaining affixes. It is also meant to test which is more problematic area for EFL university students, whether class is changing or class maintaining prefixes. Then a number of eighty students were given the test because twenty of them were absent. Then the data collected were statistically analyzed by using (SPSS) program and the results are as follows:

### Statistical analysis of the students' test

**Table (1):** By using inflectional suffixes, write full sentences with each of the inflectional morphemes.

Percentage	Frequencies	Participants
50%	40	Pass
50%	40	Failure
100%	80	Total

Table (1) above shows the students' answers to the statement. Forty of the students have passed and their percentage is (50%). And forty of the students have failed and their percentage is (50%). The total number of the students is eighty.

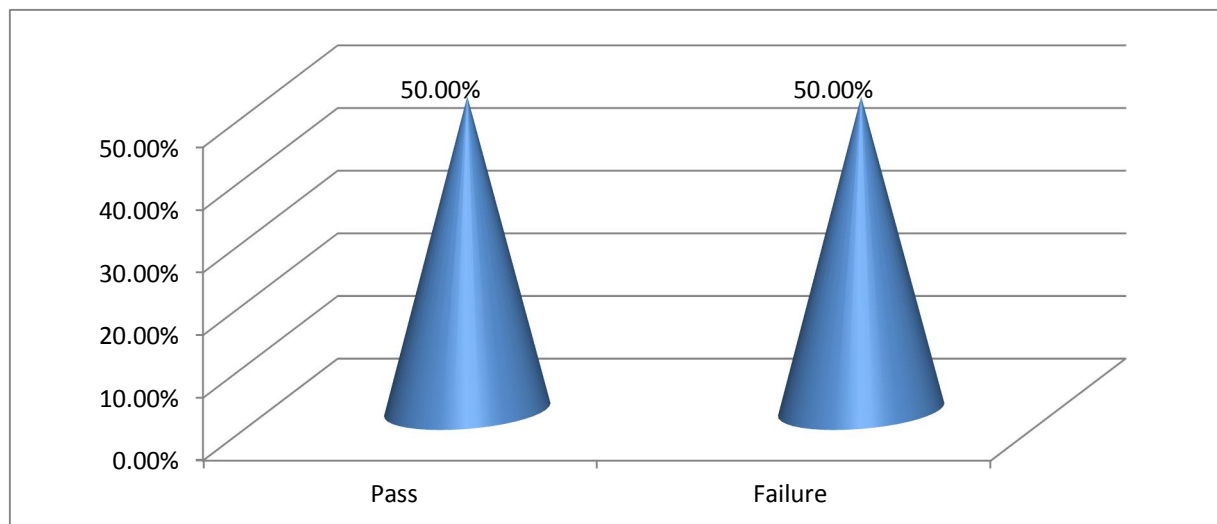


Figure (2) above illustrates the views of the distribution of the sample by Pass (50%) and Failure by (50%). Both the table and figure above show the statistical

### Results and Discussion

On the basis of the results above, it has been observed that EFL university students encountered problems in English inflectional morphemes. Table (1) and figure (2) above shows that, fifty percent of the students have passed the test and their percentage was (50%). Fifty percent of them have failed and their percentage was (50%). It clearly noticed from the results above the students who have passed were equal to those who have failed. the problems of using the inflectional morphemes were extended among half of EFL university students. The results shown that:

1. The results were shown that, fifty percent of EFL university have passed the test.
2. Fifty percent of EFL university students have failed the test.

analysis for: By using inflectional suffixes, write full sentences with each of the inflectional morphemes.

### Findings

- 1 Irregular nouns and irregular verbs were the most problematic area for EFL university students. They were mostly used overgeneralization.
2. Using correct sentences with -S -ES in third person singular was also problematic for EFL university students.
3. EFL university students were unable to use (**more** and **most**) when forming comparative and superlative adjectives.

### Recommendations

1. In order to solve these difficulties, all inflectional morphemes should be taught as independent courses.
2. More concentration should be put on teaching irregular nouns, verbs, adjectives and polysyllabic adjectives.
3. EFL university students should practice on using more and most to form correct comparative and superlative adjectives.





### Suggestions for further studies

On the basis of the findings of the study the researcher is going to suggest the following:

1. More researches on morphology should be carried out and more concentration should be on inflectional morphemes.

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