IMPORTANCE OF MORPHOLOGICAL AWARENESS TO ACADEMIC WRITING AMONG SECOND LANGUAGE POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS

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Abstract:

This conceptual paper emphasizes the importance of morphological awareness to academic writing. It aims to shed light on the importance of morphological awareness, affixes, morphemes, and morphological patterns to second language postgraduate students. It also aims to demonstrate the possible benefits of raising morphological awareness, such as increasing the students' vocabulary knowledge and making them capable of manipulating their vocabulary, which could lead to automatic control of vocabulary production while writing and, eventually, enhance their academic writing skill. Moreover, the current paper addresses the importance of morphological awareness to academic writing supported by the results of previous studies conducted and related to morphological awareness. The present study also presents the theoretical models of writing reported in the literature to make a prediction about the importance of morphological awareness and its role in improving the academic writing of second language postgraduate students.

Keywords: morphological awareness, academic writing, productive vocabulary knowledge, second language postgraduate students

1. Introduction

Vocabulary plays a central role in a language and has a vital significance for the learners of the language (Atasheneh & Naeimi, 2015; Karakoç & Köse, 2017;

Zimmerman, 1997). Having some vocabulary knowledge is necessary while comprehending or producing a language as well (Anglin, Miller, & Wakefield, 1993). The words of a language play a primary role in carrying meaning (Vermeer, 2001), and there is increasing evidence that there is a positive relationship between the vocabulary breadth (also known as vocabulary size) one has and the level of one's language proficiency (Zimmerman, 2004). For increasing vocabulary breadth, a learner needs to be familiar with the methods and strategies of vocabulary learning. Learners and teachers of English can adopt different strategies for learning and teaching vocabulary.

Morphology usage is one of the word-learning strategies. Carlisle (2000) defined "morpheme" as the name of meaningful word part that could be used by a reader so that the meaning of an unfamiliar word is determined. By being aware of the morphemes and internal structure of words, a learner can learn new vocabulary by using this knowledge in examining the unknown words and understanding their meanings. Morin (2003) hinted at the importance of morphological awareness and using it in understanding the meaning of unfamiliar words. The scholar described the ability to use the word-formation knowledge as an increasingly necessary skill that could be used by learners while being exposed to unfamiliar vocabulary.

Rules and patterns govern a language, and by being aware of these rules and patterns, a language learner can become more intentional in processing and producing the language (Northey, 2013). Morphological awareness is defined by Carlisle and Feldman (1995) as "*the conscious awareness of the morphemic structure of words and their ability to reflect on and manipulate that structure*". Morphology shows the internal structure of English words, which are composed of smaller meaningful units called *morphemes* (Northey, 2013). For instance, the word *books* contains two morphemes, *book* representing the object, and *s* representing plurality.

It can be seen that morphology assists in understanding the characteristics of English words orthographically and semantically, and in realizing how the English words are related to each other (Northey, 2013). This understanding about morphology is helpful for dictionary developers, in which they make up a new way of putting up the English words together in order based on word families, such as the *Webster Dictionary* that includes around 114,000 word families (Nation, 2001). Learners of English may encounter unfamiliar vocabulary during their texts reading; however, these unfamiliar words can be simplified to them by knowing the patterns followed in the English words and by understanding the context in which they are used.

This current study emphasizes the importance of morphological awareness to vocabulary and academic writing as well. It seeks to encourage the second language (henceforth referred as L2) postgraduate students to be aware of the morphological rules and patterns for increasing their vocabulary knowledge and making them capable of manipulating their vocabulary intentionally, which could lead to automatic control of vocabulary production while writing and, eventually, enhance their academic writing skill.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Role of Vocabulary Knowledge in Academic Writing

At the college level, a learner has a different goal, and that is to be successful academically and not learning English for communication. The language used for academic writing is different from the language used for communication (Nagy & Townsend, 2012). According to Nagy and Townsend (2012), the language used academically is characterized by the following features:

1. The vocabulary of Greek and Latin origin
2. Words are morphologically complex: the words contained in the academic language tend to be long with multiple parts, and this length feature in the academic vocabulary is due to affixes. As a typical feature of academic language, derivations are deployed to change one part of speech to another, such as (*different > differentiate, manipulate > manipulation, write > writer*). Unlike inflections, the acquisition of derivations occurs relatively late (Tyler & Nagy, 1990).
3. Nouns, adjectives, and prepositions
4. Grammatical Metaphor: Nagy and Townsend (2012) defined it as "a part of speech used with a meaning not prototypical of that part of speech." In other words, a grammatical class or grammatical structure is shifted or substituted for another by maintaining the meaning (Halliday & Martin, 1993). For example, *He evaluates the student's progress > His evaluation of the student's progress*. One of the most significant characteristics of grammatical metaphor is 'Nominalization.' This term is used to describe the process of changing a part of speech, such as verbs or adjectives into a noun by adding a suffix (e.g., smile> smiling, happy > happiness, depart > departure, imagine > imagination).
5. The density of information and vocabulary. The vocabulary and language used are dense; the meaning is hard to understand, concerning the information carried out in each unit of a text beside the density of academic vocabulary as a ratio of the total words in the text.
6. The abstractness of the academic vocabulary. In each subject, there are abstract words relating to the subject itself. For instance, in math, abstract words are used (*subtraction, width, addition*), while in biology, abstract words, such as *respiration and absorbent*, are included.

Abstract and dense academic words are possibly created by making changes to the syntactic and structural pattern in words, such as nominalization, in which some parts of speech change from one class to another. This process of altering in the parts of speech occurs typically by using derivations (Nagy & Townsend, 2012).

Several aspects of vocabulary knowledge can be drawn upon by L2 learners for deciding the vocabulary that should be used in their writing (Coxhead, 2012). Two aspects of vocabulary knowledge are required for effective writing, which are: acquiring plenty of words and having a good knowledge of these words (Brun-Mercer

& Zimmerman, 2015). It is necessary for L2 learners to be rich lexically in their academic writing and to be able to choose the proper academic vocabulary as well (Laufer & Nation, 1995). However, learners are required to have more low-frequency words as previous studies have shown that there was an association between low-frequency words and strong L2 writing performance (Coniam, 1999; Johnson, Acevedo, & Mercado, 2016; Laufer & Nation, 1995).

Productive knowledge of vocabulary, especially those words that are academically deployed, is demanded in writing. L2 learners require to know words that are used in writing by being aware of their meanings, forms, and use (Nation, 2001). Knowing about morphology and being aware of the parts of words and their meanings or functions in words and while creating sentences would help the L2 learners to increase their vocabulary knowledge as revealed by previous studies that morphological awareness was related positively to receptive vocabulary knowledge, such as Kieffer and Lesaux (2012) and Zhang and Koda (2012).

2.2 Morphological Awareness and Language Skills

According to Kuo and Anderson (2006), morphological awareness refers to the knowledge of both sounds and meaning in a language, and to the rules used as guidance in combining morphemes. Language learners employ this knowledge by following three phases: first by decomposing morphemes in complex words into their meaningful smallest parts (e.g. *childhoods* = *child* + *-hood* + *-s*), then by learning the meaning of the roots and affixes found in the words (*child* = *kid* (noun), *-hood* = state of being, and *–s* = to refer to a plurality), and finally by creating various new words with new meanings, such as *neighborhood*, *brotherhood*, *adulthood*, and *sisterhood*.

Being aware of morphological rules, the learners of English language gain knowledge about morphemes and the internal structure of English words. Consequently, they have the knowledge they need to manipulate the word-formation rules of these words (Carlisle & Feldman, 1995; Kieffer & Lesaux, 2007; Nagy, Berninger, & Abbott, 2006; Zhang & Koda, 2012). Morphological awareness has been demonstrated to be a significant predictor of first language vocabulary; however, a little attention has been paid to the role of morphology in the development of English vocabulary as a second language (Al Farsi, 2008).

Morphological awareness has been found, in previous studies, to be contributing to some language skills, such as reading comprehension and spelling (Nagy et al., 2006) among primary, middle, or secondary school students (Apel, Wilson-Fowler, Brimo, & Perrin, 2012; Carlisle, 2010; Deacon & Bryant, 2006; Singson, Mahony, & Mann, 2000; Wilson-Fowler & Apel, 2015). However, the importance of morphological awareness to the writing skill, beyond spelling, is still unknown.

Deacon and Bryant (2006) investigated the relationship between morphological awareness and spelling among children (Eighty six children from southern England, who were studying in the third, fourth and fifth year at school). An experimental *spelling test* was employed in which there were eight inflected words and eight control

words. Another task was the *morphological awareness task* in which a student was saying a word and another similar word like *stand* and *stood* or *rub* and *rubbed*. The finding of the study was confirming the role of morphological awareness in spelling. The findings of this study was emphasized by a study carried out by Kirk and Gillon (2009) who examined the impact of an intervention program by integrating morphological awareness with other kinds of linguistic awareness, such as phonological awareness, orthographic awareness, syntactic awareness and semantic awareness for the purpose of improving spelling and reading among children with spelling difficulties. Similarly, there was a significant effect of morphology on spelling.

McCutchen and Stull (2015) investigated the relationship between the fifth-grade USA children's morphological awareness and the morphological accuracy in their spelling during writing (175 native-speaking children from the urban areas in the USA). The respondents were asked to complete a task called *multiple-choice recognition task* to measure their morphological awareness by asking them to select the most suitable form of a word to complete a sentence. The test was adopted from Singson et al. (2000). Besides this task, a *word reading task* was used to measure the children's ability to read separate words. An *oral vocabulary test* was also used in which the children were asked to name the pictures provided. A *morphological sentence combining task* was done in McCutchen and Stull (2015)'s study as the children read several short sentences to produce longer sentences by combing them and changing the morphological forms of some words. Finally, a *sentence completion task* was conducted in which 20 fill-in-the-blank sentences were filled by choosing the appropriate word from the word bank given to them. The study concluded with the result that there was a relationship between morphological awareness and morphological accuracy among the fifth USA children. Additionally, it was found that knowledge of morphology assisted the children's spelling.

2.3 Importance of Writing

Writing is important to human beings. This importance of writing was summarized by Axelrod & Cooper (2001, as cited in Ali, 2016) in five points. i) writing affects people's thinking, ii) writing assists people in the way they learn, iii) writing enhances the people' personality, iv) writing is a tool to make people connect to each other, and v) writing helps in making learners successful at college and at their jobs. Students studying at college require writing different types of writing, such as dissertations, essays, and assignments. The importance of writing goes beyond the academic study to the professional field. Different forms of writing are required, such as emails, reports, and letters for communicative purposes. Additionally, writing plays a role in critical thinking, problem-solving, facilitating thought and deepening perception (Ali, 2016).

Literature has shown that the ability of children to recognize morphology, not just in spelling, had a role of vocabulary expansion and enhancing the fluency of word retrieval (Anglin, Miller, & Wakefield, 1993; Nagy & Anderson, 1984). The fluency of word retrieval is a skill that writers need in expanding their vocabulary and in selecting

the appropriate vocabulary in order to convey the semantic intended meaning and by increasing the writer's vocabulary, his/her ability to choose the proper word for the proper intent should be better (McCutchen & Stull, 2015).

The advanced skill of writing is important as an essential aspect of academic performance in higher education, in which its importance is not limited to the academic performance at university, but extends to the writing performance in the field of work (Kellogg & Raulerson, 2007).

2.4 Models of Writing

By reviewing the theoretical models of writing, predictions can be made regarding the importance of morphological awareness and the role it plays in academic writing. The first model was offered by Hayes and Flower (1980) as their model contained three components: *task environment*; the outside factor that influences the writing task, which includes the social factors, such as the writing assignment, and the physical factors, such as the text written so far, the *cognitive processes*: planning, translating, and reviewing, and the writer's *long-term memory*. This model is old; however, it has become the model used in many modern studies due to its features (Hayes, 2012).

Each writing process has a separate function. In planning, ideas are generated, organized for the goals that are set for. The second writing process involves translating a writer's ideas by transforming them into language written on a page. The last writing process includes reviewing the written text and editing it. This model is illustrated in Figure 1.

There was a development in the model of Hayes and Flower (1980) because they changed their opinion about the role of transcription with the different writing processes. They had a belief that adults were using transcription automatically and it was not affecting the writing processes significantly. However, this belief changed when Hayes and Chenoweth (2006) found that the reduction of verbal working memory brought about slowness in the transcription of adult's writings. Thus, in 1996, Hayes developed another model, in which he was focusing on working memory as a resource that played a central role in writing and that resource was presumably utilized by all the processes of writing (Hayes & Chenoweth, 2006).

Working memory is linked to the writing ability and undoubtedly the organization of the three cognitive processes (planning, translating and revising) is constrained by the limited working memory (Alamargot & Chanquoy, 2001). For most skilled adult writers, more working memory resources are needed for planning and reviewing than for translating (Kellogg, 1987). The writers have a self-regulatory control on the writings produced in case they possess enough working memory resources. Thus, if they could make the process of translating (the process of text generation and lexical retrieval) as much fluent and automatic as they could, more working memory resources would be allotted for the planning and review processes. The process of translating affects greatly on the process of writing and; consequently, on the written product as well.

Therefore, morphological awareness could play a role in increasing vocabulary, which leads to improve writing and increase working memory resources in order to make a writer pay attention to higher level processes, such as planning and reviewing. As mentioned earlier in this paper, previous studies in the literature review focused on the relationship between morphological awareness and different language skills, such as reading (Carlisle, 2000; Kirby et al., 2012; Nagy et al., 2006); word reading (McCutchen, Green, & Abbott, 2008; Singson et al., 2000); vocabulary (Carlisle, 2000; Nagy et al., 2006); and spelling (Deacon & Bryant, 2006; Green et al., 2003); however, to the best knowledge of the researcher, there is lack of research investigating the important role of morphological awareness to academic writing in general, and particularly among the L2 postgraduate students.
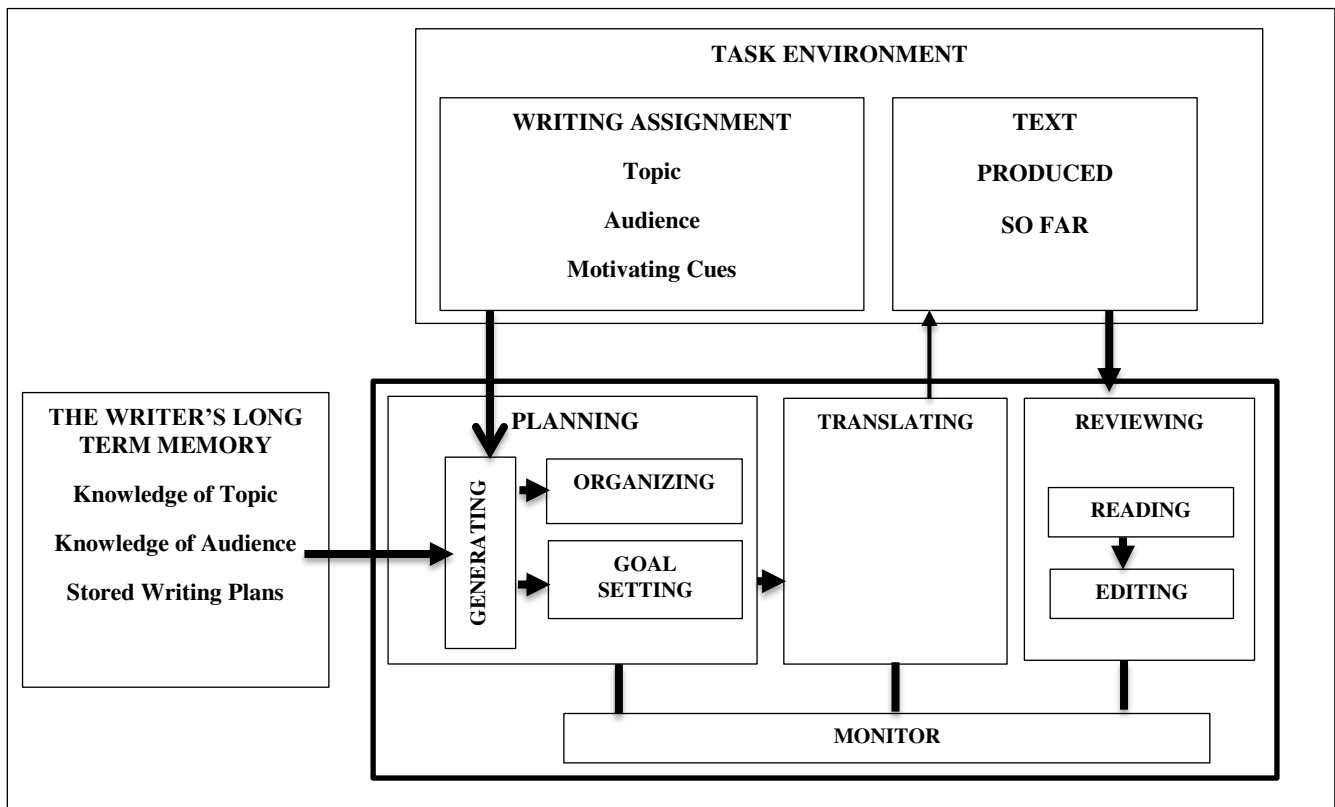
Figure 1: Hayes and Flower (1980)'s Model of Writing

3. Implications of the Study

The implications of the current study can be indicated and presented with respect to its possible usefulness and significance as a guideline for practical English language teaching and learning, material development and curriculum designing and empirical future researches.

This present study may provide an insight to guide both the learners and teachers of second English language by shedding light on the significance of being aware of morphology and what benefits they both can gain in improving the

performance of the students' academic writing; and suggesting a strategy that may enable the L2 postgraduate students to enhance their vocabulary knowledge and academic writing as well.

Morphological awareness is a possible way of independent learning in which the L2 postgraduate students would be able to use and strengthen their vocabulary knowledge and reduce the morphologically related errors made while writing. Consequently, their academic writing performance would become better eventually. They may also help them in realizing how much vocabulary and what type of vocabulary they know so that they become aware of what kind of vocabulary they should be putting more focus on to improve their learning outcomes, especially in academic writing.

The current study may draw the teachers' attention to the importance of teaching morphology and the different forms of words and encourage their students to employ different morphological forms of words in their writings. Implications of the current study may be represented in making material designers aware of the importance of including more morphology lessons and allotting more word formation exercises in the English teaching textbooks.

Finally, the present study provides evidence of the importance of morphological awareness to academic writing. On the basis of previous studies related to morphological awareness, and to the best knowledge of the researcher, there is a dearth of empirical studies concerning investigating the relationship between morphological awareness and academic writing. Thus, it would be more interesting and meaningful in future researches to test empirically the relationship between morphological awareness and academic writing.

4. Conclusion

This conceptual paper explores the important role of morphological awareness to academic writing among the L2 postgraduate students. The importance of morphological awareness and the possible role it could play to improve the L2 postgraduate students' academic writing is discussed in light of the findings of previous studies related to morphological awareness. The article provides theoretical models of writing, which may provide a theoretical basis in understanding how morphological awareness could help the L2 postgraduate students in enhancing their vocabulary knowledge and academic writing as well. Future researches are recommended to empirically examine relationship of morphological awareness to academic writing in the second language context and to contribute to the body of knowledge regarding morphological awareness and its relationship to the English language skills.

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