


A Study of Suffix -En Usage Comprehension in Words by EFL Students at Tadulako University

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the extent of EFL students' understanding of the suffix *-en* in English word formation at Tadulako University. The research employs a descriptive quantitative design involving 60 undergraduate students from the English Education Study Program in their second year. Data were collected through a multiple-choice test and a questionnaire focusing on recognition, word formation, and meaning of the suffix *-en*. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. The findings indicate that students experience low difficulty in recognizing the suffix *-en*, moderate difficulty in understanding its meaning, and high difficulty in word formation using the suffix *-en*. These results suggest that students' difficulties lie mainly in productive and semantic aspects rather than in formal recognition, highlighting the need for explicit instruction that emphasizes word formation practice and contextualized meaning analysis.

Keywords: *Morphological Awareness, Suffix -En, Derivational Morphology, EFL Learners*

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INTRODUCTION

Morphological awareness plays a pivotal role in second language acquisition, particularly in enabling learners to understand how words are constructed and how meaning is systematically developed through affixation. In English, derivational morphology serves as a key mechanism for lexical expansion, allowing learners to recognize how prefixes and suffixes modify both the grammatical category and semantic interpretation of base forms (Katamba, 1993; Plag, 2003). For learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), mastery of derivational processes is especially important, as it contributes significantly to vocabulary growth, reading comprehension, and grammatical accuracy (Carlisle, 2000; Schmitt & Zimmerman, 2002). Nevertheless, derivational affixes frequently present challenges for EFL learners due to irregular morphological patterns, semantic opacity, and varying degrees of productivity within the English morphological system (Bauer, 1983; Plag, 2003). These challenges often result in learners being able to recognize affixes receptively while struggling to apply them accurately and meaningfully in productive language use, highlighting the need for explicit instruction and focused practice in derivational morphology.

One derivational suffix that frequently causes difficulty is the suffix **-en**, which is primarily used to form verbs indicating a change of state, such as *dark* → *darken*, *wide* → *widen*, and *short* → *shorten*. According to Katamba (1993), derivational morphology involves morphological processes that create new lexemes and often change word class, a characteristic that applies directly to the function of the suffix *-en* in English word formation. Despite its relatively clear semantic function, the suffix *-en* is not fully productive, meaning it cannot be freely attached to all adjectives or nouns. Plag (2003) explains that English derivational suffixes are governed by morphological and semantic restrictions, which determine whether a derived form is acceptable or unacceptable. As a result, incorrect forms such as *strongen* or *beautifulen*

frequently appear in EFL learner production, reflecting a lack of understanding of the constraints governing suffix usage.

From a theoretical perspective, this study is grounded in the framework of derivational morphology and morphological productivity. Katamba (1993) theory provides the foundation for understanding how suffixes like *-en* function to change grammatical categories and express semantic shifts, particularly processes of becoming or causing change. Plag's (2003) word-formation theory further emphasizes that derivational processes operate under systematic rules rather than free combination, highlighting why certain *-en* formations are acceptable while others are not. In addition, Bauer (1983) theory of morphological productivity explains that the suffix *-en* demonstrates partial productivity, meaning it applies to a limited set of base forms and is restricted by both semantic and lexical factors. These theoretical perspectives collectively form the framework for analyzing EFL students' comprehension of the suffix *-en* in terms of recognition, meaning interpretation, and appropriate usage in English word formation.

Previous studies on English morphology have largely focused on highly productive suffixes such as *-ness*, *-tion*, or *-ly*, while relatively little attention has been given to semi-productive suffixes like *-en*, particularly in the EFL context. Moreover, existing research tends to emphasize learners' production errors rather than systematically examining their level of comprehension across different aspects of suffix usage. This indicates a research gap in understanding how well EFL learners recognize the suffix *-en* in words, interpret its semantic meaning, and differentiate its correct and incorrect usage based on morphological rules.

Addressing this research gap, the present study investigates the extent to which EFL students at Tadulako University understand the use of the suffix *-en* in English word formation. This study specifically examines students' comprehension from three interrelated aspects: (1) the ability to recognize the suffix *-en* in derived words, (2) understanding the semantic meaning and function conveyed by the suffix *-en*, particularly its role in expressing change of state, and (3) the ability to differentiate between appropriate and inappropriate uses of the suffix *-en* based on English morphological rules. These aspects are essential in assessing learners' morphological awareness, which plays a significant role in vocabulary development and grammatical accuracy (Katamba, 1993; Carlisle, 2000). Employing a descriptive quantitative approach and grounding the analysis in established theories of derivational morphology and morphological productivity (Bauer, 1983; Plag, 2003), this study aims to provide empirical evidence of EFL learners' understanding of a partially productive derivational suffix. Furthermore, the findings are expected to contribute to broader discussions on morphological competence in EFL contexts, particularly in understanding the gap between learners' receptive knowledge and productive use of English derivational affixes (Schmitt & Zimmerman, 2002; Noprianto & Purnawarman, 2019).

This study underscores the crucial role of morphological awareness in EFL learners' understanding of English derivational processes, particularly in relation to the partially productive suffix *-en*. Grounded in theories of derivational morphology and morphological productivity, the findings highlight that while EFL students may demonstrate adequate recognition of the suffix *-en*, they encounter greater challenges in interpreting its semantic function and applying it appropriately in word formation. These difficulties reflect broader issues in learners' morphological competence, especially the gap between receptive knowledge and productive use. By focusing on a semi-productive suffix that has received limited attention in previous research, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how EFL learners process derivational morphology. The results emphasize the need for explicit, theory-informed instruction that addresses not only formal recognition but also semantic interpretation and usage constraints of derivational affixes, thereby supporting more accurate and meaningful vocabulary development in EFL contexts.

METHOD

Research Design

This research employs a descriptive quantitative method to provide a comprehensive understanding of EFL students' comprehension of suffix -en usage in English words. The quantitative data are collected through tests and questionnaires with selected students. A non-experimental design is applied, as the study aims to observe and describe existing conditions without manipulating any variables. According to Creswell (2014), quantitative descriptive research focuses on measuring and describing characteristics of a population based on numerical data. Additionally, Thomas & Zubkov (2023) explain that descriptive research allows researchers to systematically outline the characteristics of a population without applying any form of intervention. In this study, the researcher analyzes students' performance data to determine the frequency of correct and incorrect responses and interprets questionnaire results to uncover potential factors influencing students' understanding of suffix -en.

Population and Sample

The population comprises 225 fifth-semester EFL students of the English Education Study Program at Tadulako University who have completed a morphology course (Shukla, 2020). A sample is selected using purposive sampling to represent the population, focusing on students from Class A, E, and F. Purposive sampling, as defined by Tongco (2007), is a non-probability sampling technique in which the researcher deliberately chooses participants who are knowledgeable or experienced in the studied phenomenon. Palys (2008) also emphasizes that purposive sampling ensures the relevance of participants to the research purpose. This technique allows the study to obtain comprehensive and meaningful quantitative data.

Research Instruments

This study uses two main instruments: a written test and a structured questionnaire. The test is used to measure students' comprehension of the suffix -en in English word formation, addressing recognition, formation, and meaning (Bauer, 1983; Katamba, 1993; Plag, 2003). The questionnaire explores students' perceived difficulties in using the suffix -en and consists of 12 statements on a four-point Likert scale. Cohen, Manion, & Morrison (2007) explain that structured questionnaires ensure consistency and comparability of responses across participants.

Data Analysis Technique

Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, including frequency counts and percentages, to determine students' level of comprehension and to identify dominant areas of difficulty related to the use of suffix -en. Descriptive statistical analysis allows researchers to systematically present numerical data and summarize patterns observed in the population (Creswell, 2014; Thomas & Zubkov, 2023).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Students' Understanding of the Suffix -en (Research Question 1)

This study found that EFL students at Tadulako University generally demonstrated a moderate level of understanding of the suffix -en in English word formation. Based on the test results, students showed better performance in recognizing words containing the suffix -en than in applying it accurately in word formation and interpreting its meaning. This indicates that surface-level recognition of the suffix is easier for students than deeper morphological and semantic processing.

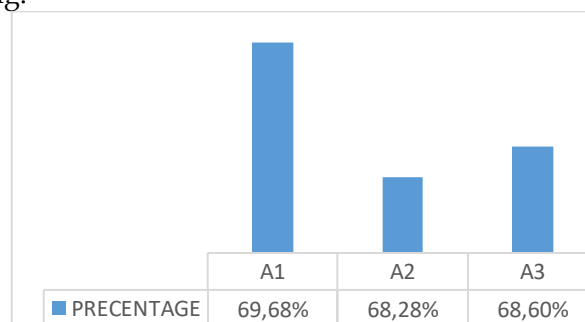


Figure 1. Recapitulation Results of Students' Test on Suffix -en Usage

Overall, the extent of EFL students' difficulties in using the suffix *-en* varies across aspects. The difficulty in recognizing the suffix *-en* is at a low level, while difficulty in word formation with *-en* is at a high level. Difficulty related to understanding the meaning and function of the suffix *-en* falls at a moderate level.

The findings suggest that students are familiar with the visual form of the suffix *-en* but still experience challenges when required to analyze its grammatical function and meaning in context. This result aligns with morphological learning theory, which states that form recognition usually develops earlier than productive and semantic mastery. The explanation is below:

Table 1. The Valid Statements in the Questionnaire

Aspect	Statements
Recognition of Suffix <i>-en</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> You can recognize when a word has the suffix <i>-en</i>. You can identify adjectives that turn into verbs by adding <i>-en</i>. You can distinguish between words with <i>-en</i> and those without it. You can easily notice the suffix <i>-en</i> when reading new words.
Word Formation with <i>-en</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> You can form a verb by adding <i>-en</i> to an adjective. You can give correct examples of words formed with the suffix <i>-en</i>. You can attach <i>-en</i> to adjectives without difficulty. You can use <i>-en</i> correctly when forming verbs.
Meaning of Suffix <i>-en</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> You can understand the meaning of words ending in <i>-en</i>. You can explain the difference in meaning between an adjective and its verb with <i>-en</i>. You can decide the meaning of new words ending in <i>-en</i>. You can understand the function of <i>-en</i> in English adjective word formation.

Table 2. Reliability Statistics

Variable	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha	Interpretation
Recognition of Suffix <i>-en</i>	4	≥ 0.60	Reliable
Word Formation with <i>-en</i>	4	≥ 0.60	Reliable
Meaning of Suffix <i>-en</i>	4	≥ 0.60	Reliable
Overall Questionnaire	12	≥ 0.60	Reliable

Table 4.1 shows the valid statements in the questionnaire about the common difficulties faced by EFL students at Tadulako University in understanding and using the suffix *-en*. The researcher tested the validity of the questionnaire by using the SPSS program. As presented in the table, there are 3 aspects comprising 12 statements. From this table, the researcher can answer the research question number two.

Table 3. The Frequency of Students Based on Aspect 1

COGNITIVE ABILITIES	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
a. Strongly Agree	74	19.89%
b. Agree	218	58.60%
c. Disagree	70	18.82%
d. Strongly Disagree	10	2.69%

In Aspect 1 (Recognition of Suffix *-en*), most students selected Agree and Strongly Agree, indicating that recognizing the suffix *-en* in words was not a major difficulty. However, a small proportion of students still reported uncertainty, suggesting that recognition problems persist for some learners.

Table 4. The Frequency of Students Based on Aspect 2

COGNITIVE ABILITIES	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
a. Strongly Agree	53	14.25%
b. Agree	183	49.19%
c. Disagree	121	32.53%
d. Strongly Disagree	15	4.03%

Aspect 2 (Word Formation with *-en*) appeared to be the most challenging. A relatively high percentage of students selected Disagree and Strongly Disagree, indicating difficulties in

attaching the suffix *-en* correctly to adjectives to form verbs. This finding suggests limited productive morphological competence among students.

Table 5. The Frequency of Students Based on Aspect 3

COGNITIVE ABILITIES	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
a. Strongly Agree	55	14.78%
b. Agree	205	55.11%
c. Disagree	106	28.49%
d. Strongly Disagree	6	1.61%

Aspect 3 (Meaning of Suffix *-en*) showed moderate difficulty. Although most students reported understanding the meaning and function of *-en*, a considerable number struggled to interpret new or unfamiliar words ending in *-en*. This indicates that students' semantic understanding of the suffix is not yet fully developed.

Common Difficulties in Understanding and Using the Suffix *-en* (Research Question 2)

The questionnaire was used to answer research question number two, which focuses on the common difficulties faced by EFL students in understanding and using the suffix *-en*. The results reveal that students experienced difficulties at different levels across the three aspects measured.

To conclude, the findings indicate that students' main difficulties lie not in recognizing the suffix *-en*, but in using it accurately and understanding its meaning in word formation. These difficulties suggest that instruction on derivational morphology should place greater emphasis on practice-based learning, including word formation exercises and contextual meaning analysis.

The results imply that explicit teaching of suffix functions, combined with examples and contextual usage, may help students overcome their difficulties. Strengthening morphological awareness may improve students' ability to use English derivational suffixes more accurately and confidently.

The findings of this study reveal that the extent of EFL students' difficulties in using the suffix *-en* varies across different aspects, with low difficulty in recognition, moderate difficulty in meaning, and high difficulty in word formation. This pattern is consistent with Katamba's (1993) theory of morphological awareness, which posits that learners tend to acquire surface-level recognition of morphological forms before developing deeper grammatical and semantic understanding. Similarly, Bauer's (1983) concept of morphological productivity explains that semi-productive derivational suffixes such as *-en* pose greater challenges in productive use due to lexical and semantic restrictions. Plag (2003) further supports this finding by emphasizing that derivational affixes are governed by strict morphological rules, making incorrect formations more likely when learners lack explicit knowledge of these constraints. In line with Schmitt and Zimmerman's (2002) study, the disparity between students' receptive recognition and productive word formation reflects a gap between receptive and productive morphological knowledge commonly observed among EFL learners. Moreover, Carlisle (2000) argues that limited morphological awareness restricts learners' ability to infer meaning and form new words accurately, which explains the moderate difficulty found in semantic understanding. The findings also align with Noprianto and Purnawarman's (2019) results, which indicate that EFL learners generally perform better in affix recognition than in affix application. Finally, Goodwin and Ahn's (2013) meta-analysis confirms that productive morphological skills require explicit instruction and sustained practice, reinforcing the present study's implication that learners' primary difficulties lie in productive and semantic dimensions rather than in formal recognition alone.

The low level of difficulty in recognizing the suffix *-en* indicates that most students are familiar with the surface form of derivational suffixes. This finding supports Katamba's (1993) view that morphological awareness often begins with the recognition of word forms before developing into deeper grammatical and semantic understanding. Similar findings were reported by Noprianto & Purnawarman (2019), who found that EFL learners generally demonstrate stronger ability in recognizing affixes than in using them productively. Their

study suggests that learners may identify affixes visually without fully understanding their grammatical roles or semantic implications.

However, the high level of difficulty found in word formation with the suffix *-en* contrasts sharply with students' ability to recognize the suffix. This result indicates limited morphological productivity, as described by Bauer (1983), who argues that learners often struggle to apply derivational rules consistently even when they are familiar with affix forms. According to Schmitt & Zimmerman (2002), as cited in *EFL Learners' Receptive and Productive Knowledge of Word Derivatives*, 2017, learners often show partial productive knowledge of derivative word forms. The present study reinforces previous findings that derivational morphology poses significant challenges for EFL learners, particularly in productive use.

Regarding meaning and function, the moderate level of difficulty suggests that students are generally able to understand familiar *-en* forms but encounter substantial challenges when dealing with unfamiliar or newly encountered derived words. This finding aligns with Plag (2003), who argues that derivational meaning is not always semantically transparent and often requires contextual and morphological interpretation. Similarly, Carlisle (2000) found that limited morphological awareness constrains learners' ability to infer the meanings of morphologically complex words, particularly when learners rely more on memorized vocabulary than on analytical strategies. Katamba (1993) further explains that derivational morphology involves abstract semantic shifts that are not always directly predictable from base forms, which may hinder learners' comprehension of unfamiliar derivatives. Bauer's (1983) theory of morphological productivity also supports this finding, as partially productive suffixes such as *-en* impose lexical and semantic restrictions that complicate meaning interpretation. In addition, Schmitt and Zimmerman (2002) highlight a persistent gap between learners' receptive recognition of derived forms and their deeper understanding of derivational meaning. Kieffer and Lesaux (2012) emphasize that learners with limited morphological analysis skills struggle to interpret unfamiliar words, even when they recognize their constituent morphemes. Consistent with this, Noprianto and Purnawarman (2019) reported that EFL learners often demonstrate weaker performance in semantic interpretation than in formal affix recognition. Moreover, Goodwin and Ahn (2013) suggest that explicit morphological instruction is essential for improving learners' ability to derive meaning from unfamiliar word forms. Finally, these findings resonate with the broader view of morphological learning proposed by Nation (2013), who asserts that vocabulary knowledge extends beyond form recognition to include meaningful and functional understanding within context.

In comparison with previous studies, this research both supports and extends existing findings on derivational morphology by demonstrating that affix recognition alone is insufficient for accurate word formation and semantic mastery. Previous research has shown that learners often acquire the ability to identify affixes earlier than the ability to apply them productively (Nagy, Berninger, & Abbott, 2006). The marked discrepancy between low recognition difficulty and high word formation difficulty observed in this study reflects a persistent gap between receptive and productive morphological knowledge, a phenomenon also reported by Deacon and Bryant (2006), who found that productive morphology requires deeper rule-based processing. Booij (2012) further explains that derivational morphology involves complex lexical and semantic constraints, which make productive use significantly more demanding than surface recognition. Similarly, Larsen-Freeman (2015) argues that grammatical competence in a second language develops dynamically, and learners often struggle to transfer passive knowledge into active use. In the context of EFL learning, McCarthy and O'Dell (2016) emphasize that without explicit instruction and repeated practice, learners are unlikely to internalize derivational patterns effectively. Finally, Nation (2013) underscores that vocabulary knowledge must encompass form, meaning, and use simultaneously, reinforcing the present study's conclusion that explicit instruction is crucial for developing learners' ability to use derivational affixes accurately and meaningfully.

Overall, this discussion shows that students' difficulties are highest in word formation, moderate in meaning interpretation, and lowest in suffix recognition. These findings suggest that instruction on the suffix -en should extend beyond identification activities and place greater emphasis on productive practice and contextualized meaning analysis. Enhancing students' morphological awareness may help reduce difficulties in understanding and accurately using derivational suffixes in English.

CONCLUSIONS

The study concludes that EFL students at Tadulako University demonstrate varying levels of comprehension regarding the suffix -en in English word formation. Students generally show low difficulty in recognizing the suffix, moderate difficulty in understanding its meaning and function, and high difficulty in correctly forming words using -en. These findings indicate that students are more confident in receptive morphological knowledge, such as recognition, than in productive and semantic aspects, such as word formation and meaning interpretation. The results also suggest that explicit instruction and practice in applying derivational rules, contextual analysis, and semantic understanding are necessary to enhance students' morphological awareness. Strengthening these skills may help students reduce errors and increase accuracy in using derivational suffixes, particularly the semi-productive suffix -en, in English.

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