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Word derivational knowledge and writing proficiency: How do they link?



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ABSTRACT

Although word derivational (WD) knowledge, i.e., how new words are formed from existing words with help of derivational affixes, is considered important for learners of second or foreign languages (L2), there is still no clear answer as to what aspects comprise the construct of L2 English word derivational knowledge and how it develops. The present study adds to our knowledge on how the ability to derive English words develops among L2 English learners. More specifically, it sheds light on how word derivational knowledge relates to communicatively defined Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) language proficiency levels regarding learners' writing skills. In the study, 117 10th grade learners of English in Estonia and Finland were administered two writing tasks as well as nine measures which were hypothesised to tap learners' word derivational knowledge. The findings indicated that the learners' performance on almost all WD measures were significantly and fairly strongly (at .4–0.6 level) correlated with their writing proficiency. The findings also suggest that some aspects of WD ability develop rather steadily between CEFR levels, but others may increase more rapidly after level A2 or B1. These findings thus demonstrate a relationship between word derivational knowledge and language proficiency.

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1. Introduction

Studies that combine language testing and second language acquisition (SLA) research have become more common in the past few decades (e.g. Glaboniat, Müller, Rusch, Schmitz, & Wertenschlag, 2005; Bartning, Martin, & Vedder, 2010; Carlsen, 2013; see also Bachman & Cohen, 1998). One reason for this development is the introduction of the Common European Framework of Reference, CEFR, (Council of Europe, 2001). The development of CEFR has created an interest in Europe in how language learners' communicative ability in a foreign or second language (L2), as described in the CEFR levels, develops in terms of linguistic elements of proficiency, that is, vocabulary and structures (Bartning, Martin, & Vedder, 2010). Some of the questions that arose in relation to CEFR included finding out whether the CEFR levels can be distinguished with reference to particular linguistic features or their combinations or to what extent such patterns of linguistic features might depend on learners' first language (L1) or the language they are learning. An interest in finding answers to such questions has characterised the work of several projects across Europe and across several languages such as English (English Profile; e.g., Green,

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2012; www.englishprofile.org), German (Profile Deutsch; [Glaboniat et al., 2005](#)), and Norwegian (Norsk profil; [Carlsen, 2013](#)). The European-wide SLATE (Second Language Acquisition and Language Testing in Europe; www.slate.eu.org) network brings together researchers who share an interest in examining the linguistic basis of the CEFR.

The CEFR has become central to European language education, and it is widely used for setting targets for language learning in curricula and for describing the level of language courses, textbooks and tests ([Huhta, 2012](#); [Martyniuk & Noijons, 2007](#)). CEFR levels are also used for such high-stakes purposes as defining language proficiency requirements for citizenship ([Extra, Spotti, & van Avermaet, 2009](#)). Despite its widespread use, the CEFR has been criticised, for instance, for its uncertain basis on second language acquisition research. The framework scales that appear to describe stages of L2 development are not based on empirical research on how proficiency actually develops ([Hulstijn, 2007](#)). These criticisms notwithstanding, the fact that the CEFR does not describe the use of any particular language but a language in general means that there is a need to understand how learners coming from a particular L1 background develop in linguistic terms in a particular L2 they are learning.

Word derivation (WD) is a linguistic feature that has received relatively little attention in SLA research so far. Word derivation is the process of forming new words on the basis of existing words, such as *lucky*, *unlucky* and *luckless* from *luck*. It involves the addition of a morpheme such as a prefix or a suffix or both (in the above examples *un-* is an example of a prefix and *-y* and *-less* are examples of suffixes), or an infix (e.g., *Tenne-bloody-see*), which is very rare in English. It should be noted that derivation produces new lexemes and thus differs from inflection which produces grammatical variants of the same lexeme (e.g., *luckier*, *luckiest*).

The present study adds to our knowledge on how the ability to derive English words develops among L2 English learners. More specifically, we aim at shedding light on how word derivational knowledge relates to CEFR levels defined with reference to learners' writing skills.

Below we will first describe the nature of vocabulary and word derivational knowledge and then present a review of research on derivation and its development, after which we will introduce the current study.

2. Multidimensional and incremental nature of word derivational knowledge

Knowing a word can be defined in several ways. Different lexical models have been presented by, for example, [Milton and Fitzpatrick \(2013\)](#), [Nation \(2001\)](#) and [Ringbom \(1987\)](#). These models can be broadly classified as either dimensional or developmental (see, e.g., [Read, 2000](#); for a discussion). In the following two sections, we will define the two approaches and outline research proposing a) multidimensional and b) incremental models of lexical development.

2.1. Multidimensional nature of vocabulary and word derivational knowledge

The first approach to defining vocabulary knowledge seems to be influenced by the connectionist epistemology (e.g., [Seidenberg & Gonnerman, 2000](#)), according to which the development of L2 lexical knowledge happens in several knowledge domains, such as orthography, phonology, syntax, and semantics. It dates back to [Richards' \(1976: 83\)](#) influential discussion of the possible dimensions of lexical competence, i.e., knowledge of associations, syntactical properties of words, their form (including derivatives), constraints of use, among others.

One of the well-known dimensional vocabulary knowledge models has been proposed by [Nation \(e.g., 2001\)](#), who outlined three broad aspects of vocabulary knowledge, i.e., form, meaning, and use, and further classified them into subcomponents, e.g., spoken, written, and word parts in the *form* component, as well as differentiated between receptive and productive knowledge of these subcomponents. [Ringbom's \(1987; 1990\)](#) model of lexical knowledge (see [Fig. 1](#)) is similar to [Nation's \(2001\)](#) model. The difference is that it also incorporates the development within each dimension. The developmental approach will be discussed in more detail in the following section.

No comprehensive dimensional model of word derivational knowledge appears to exist. However, research on L2 (and L1) English word derivational knowledge has found that many of the dimensions listed in the vocabulary knowledge models above are also relevant to WD knowledge. These include, for example, syntactic knowledge (e.g., [Schmitt, 1998](#); [Schmitt & Meara, 1997](#); [Schmitt & Zimmerman, 2002](#)), knowledge of semantics of derivational affixes (e.g., [Chuenjundaeng, 2006](#)), and L1/L2 morphophonology/morpho-orthography (e.g., [Alegre & Gordon, 1999](#); [Friedline, 2011](#)). Another dimension is accessibility/control, which has also been labelled as productive/receptive knowledge, or recognition/recall of vocabulary (e.g. [Schmitt & Meara, 1997](#); [Hayashi & Murphy, 2010](#)).

2.2. Incremental development of vocabulary and word derivational knowledge

An alternative approach to defining vocabulary knowledge is the developmental one. As the name suggests, this approach stresses development and developmental stages. Research has shown that vocabulary knowledge develops incrementally and correlates positively with learners' proficiency (e.g., [Nation, 2001](#); [Schmitt, 1998; 2010](#)). Similarly, learners' word derivational knowledge appears to develop incrementally, both in L1 and L2 English. For example, [Tyler and Nagy \(1989\)](#) found that while at grade four, learners were able to recognise frequent L1 English stems and derivatives, by grade eight, they increased their syntactic knowledge of derivational affixes. Later, [Nagy, Diakidoy, and Anderson \(1993\)](#) found significant differences in the

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