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Morphological awareness and reading comprehension in a foreign language: A study of young Chinese EFL learners

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Abstract

This study examined foreign language learners' morphological awareness and its contribution to reading comprehension, focusing on young Chinese EFL learners. Morphological awareness measures covered inflection, derivation, as well as compounding. Results showed that the learners' basic facet of inflectional awareness was better than that of derivational awareness; their compound awareness was better than derivational awareness, for both basic and refined facets; and the advantage of compound awareness over derivational awareness was smaller for the basic facet than for the refined facet. In addition, derivational and compound awareness independently predicted English reading comprehension, over and above vocabulary and grammatical knowledge. These findings were discussed in light of the joint effects of L2 lexical exposure and first language morphological experience on L2 morphological competence, and the importance of morphological awareness to English reading comprehension.
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1. Introduction

Morphological awareness, which commonly refers to the ability to reflect upon and manipulate morphemes and the morphological structure of words (Carlisle, 2003; Kuo and Anderson, 2006), is a multi-dimensional competence entailing different aspects and levels of insights that develop in disparate trajectories and necessitate different levels of print experience (Ku and Anderson, 2003; Tyler and Nagy, 1989). Studies on monolingual children have revealed that some morphological insights are acquired very rapidly from spoken language acquisition in early childhood, requiring limited print exposure (Berko, 1958). Other insights, however, develop rather slowly, necessitating considerable exposure to and experience with printed words (e.g., Mahony, 1994; Tyler and Nagy, 1989, 1990).

For learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), due to the lack of pre-literacy spoken language experience that monolingual children have, development of morphological awareness in the early stage of English learning seems

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to be heavily dependent upon their exposure to printed words in textbooks. In other words, beginning EFL learners' insights into the structure of English words appear to be a function of the quantity and quality of multimorphemic words in their textbooks. In addition to being an outcome of this input-driven learning, learners' morphological awareness could also be affected by their first language (L1) morphological experience (i.e., L1 transfer effect), as recent studies on L2 reading or biliteracy have shown (Koda, 2008; Ramirez et al., 2011). Therefore, EFL morphological awareness, presumably, should be a result of the joint effects of L2 print exposure and L1 morphological experience. Limited, if any, research, however, has so far tested this hypothesis empirically with L1 transfer and L2 input factors both incorporated in second language acquisition research.

In addition, because of its nature that entails morphological analysis, morphological awareness has been found to be instrumental to word learning in that meanings of unfamiliar words can be inferred by use of morphological analysis (Anglin, 1993); and consequently, it stands as an important predictor of learners' vocabulary growth (McBride-Chang et al., 2008). Previous research has also shown that morphological awareness is a unique contributor to reading comprehension (e.g., Ku and Anderson, 2003; Nagy et al., 2006). However, that line of research focused mostly on English monolinguals. It remains a question whether morphological awareness could also contribute to English reading comprehension among developing foreign language (FL) learners.

2. Literature review

2.1. Development of English morphological awareness

Morphological awareness emerges from early spoken language acquisition and later becomes refined with children's exposure to a large amount of print input. It essentially reflects the morphological structure of a target language (Carlisle, 2003; Kuo and Anderson, 2006). English morphologically complex words are largely formed through three processes: inflection, derivation, and compounding (Plag, 2003). Both inflected and derived words are formed through an amalgamation of a root and an affix(es). What differs between the two processes is that inflected words are formed by adding to a root an inflectional affix, such as *-s* (plural) or *-ed* (past tense), that only serves a grammatical function, while derived words are formed by adding a derivational affix, such as *-er* (agentive) or *-ly* (adverb), that changes the meaning and often the grammatical category of the root to which the affix is attached. In contrast, compound words are formed through the concatenation of root morphemes. English compound words are formed through different form–class combinations and largely observe the right-headedness principle. In other words, the right component of a compound is usually the head, and syntactic head and semantic head often converge (Plag, 2003). In accordance with the morphological structure of the English language, English morphological awareness can be of three types: inflectional, derivational, and compounding.

English inflectional affixes are small in number, and inflected words are largely regular structurally, with no or very limited phonological or orthographic shift (e.g., *jumps*, *jumping*, and *jumped*). Awareness of inflectional morphology is thus a comparatively early acquired competence. Studies have shown that very early in childhood, native English-speaking children have acquired some knowledge about rules of inflectional morphology. In a well-known study (Berko, 1958), children were first presented a picture of a bird and were then told that it is a *wug*. When presented with another picture with two of the birds, most four year olds accurately used the plural marking *-s*, saying that there are two *wugs*. Studies have shown that children's knowledge of inflectional morphology typically becomes well developed upon entering elementary school (Berko, 1958; Brown, 1973).

Derivational awareness is a type of morphological awareness that is relatively late acquired. This is not only because of the relatively large number of derivational affixes in English, but due to the nature of derivational process as well. Specifically, derived forms often involve phonological or/and orthographic changes (e.g., *decide* and *decision*), and adding a derivational affix to a base word usually leads to change of the meaning, and sometimes the grammatical category, of the base form. In addition, derivation is also constrained by the grammatical category of a base word. Research has shown that basic knowledge about derivational structure is acquired relatively early in school years. However, understanding the functions of derivational affixes and the distributional properties of derivational morphology, or the development of more refined derivational knowledge, requires extensive literacy experience and takes a long time to mature (e.g., Mahony, 1994; Tyler and Nagy, 1989, 1990).

Few studies have directly examined the development of compound awareness in school-aged children. Existing studies tend to focus on acquisition of compounding in early childhood. Clark and her colleagues, for example,

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