

**CHALLENGES FACED BY ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS IN MASTERING
WORD FORMATION**

*Asia International University, Faculty of Social Sciences and Technology,
Department of Foreign Languages and Social Sciences,
Lecturer: **Makhsudova Makhliyokhon**
mahliyomakhsudova@gmail.com*

Abstract: Word formation plays an essential role in vocabulary development and overall language proficiency, yet many language learners struggle to master it. This study explores the main challenges faced by university students in Uzbekistan when learning English word formation. The research involved 40 intermediate-level EFL students from two universities in Tashkent. Data were collected through a written test and a short questionnaire that examined learners' understanding of derivational and compounding processes. The findings revealed that students frequently made mistakes in using prefixes and suffixes, often due to first language interference and insufficient morphological awareness. Many learners tended to overgeneralize word-formation rules or confuse similar morphemes. The study concludes that explicit instruction in morphology and word-building activities can significantly improve learners' understanding of English word formation. These findings highlight the importance of integrating morphological awareness into EFL teaching practices in Uzbekistan.

Keywords: EFL learners; word formation; morphology; language learning; Uzbekistan; vocabulary development.

Learning vocabulary is one of the most essential components of mastering a foreign language. Without an adequate vocabulary, learners cannot express their ideas effectively or comprehend spoken and written texts. However, vocabulary knowledge is not limited to memorizing individual words; it also involves understanding how words are formed and related to one another. The study of word formation, which is closely connected to morphology, helps learners expand their vocabulary systematically by recognizing patterns and building new words from known roots, prefixes, and suffixes.

For English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, especially those in non-English-speaking contexts such as Uzbekistan, mastering word formation presents numerous challenges. Unlike in English, where affixation and compounding are productive and frequent, the Uzbek language follows different morphological rules. As a result, many learners struggle to apply English word-formation rules correctly. For example, they might overuse certain prefixes, confuse suffixes like -tion and -sion, or create non-existent words by applying incorrect derivational patterns. In Uzbekistan, English is widely taught at secondary schools and universities, but word formation often receives limited attention in the classroom. Teachers and textbooks tend to emphasize grammar, reading, and general vocabulary practice, while the morphological structure of words remains underexplored. Consequently, learners may memorize words without understanding their internal structure, which limits their ability to decode unfamiliar vocabulary and hampers their reading and writing performance.

Word formation is a central aspect of vocabulary acquisition and language competence. According to Bauer (2003), word formation refers to the processes through which new words are created or derived from existing ones. These processes include **derivation**, **compounding**, **conversion**, **clipping**, **blending**, and **acronymy**. For EFL learners, understanding these processes is essential for recognizing word families, expanding vocabulary, and improving

reading comprehension. However, numerous studies have shown that learners often find this area of language challenging due to its complexity and irregularities.

Morphological awareness refers to the ability to recognize and use the meaningful parts of words—such as roots, prefixes, and suffixes (Carlisle, 2000). Research has consistently shown that morphological awareness strongly correlates with vocabulary knowledge, reading comprehension, and writing proficiency (Nation, 2001; Schmitt, 2010). Learners who understand how words are formed can infer the meanings of unfamiliar words and make educated guesses in reading contexts. Despite its importance, morphology is often neglected in EFL classrooms, where vocabulary teaching tends to focus on memorization rather than structural understanding.

Several factors contribute to learners' difficulties with word formation. First, **the irregular nature of English morphology** creates confusion. For instance, suffixes such as -ion and -ment can both form nouns, but not always predictably (decide → decision, develop → development). Second, **first language interference** plays a significant role. Uzbek and English belong to different language families—Turkic and Germanic—so their morphological systems differ considerably. Uzbek tends to use agglutination (adding endings that each have a clear grammatical meaning), while English often uses derivational morphology, where affixes can change word classes. This difference leads to negative transfer and misapplication of English word-building rules. Third, **teaching methods** often overlook explicit instruction in morphology. As Bowers and Kirby (2010) argue, when learners are not guided to analyze word structure, they may fail to see connections among related words such as create, creative, creativity, and creation. Moreover, many textbooks introduce affixes in isolated lists without sufficient contextual practice, making it difficult for students to internalize these patterns. Studies conducted in various EFL contexts highlight similar challenges. Kieffer and Lesaux (2012) found that morphological instruction improved vocabulary growth among middle school EFL learners. Likewise, Zhang and Koda (2018) reported that explicit morphology-focused activities helped learners identify and produce derived words more accurately. In Central Asian contexts, however, empirical research on word formation remains limited. A few local studies (e.g., Tursunova, 2021; Karimov, 2023) suggest that Uzbek learners tend to rely on memorization rather than analysis, resulting in poor retention and misuse of derived forms.

This study adopted a **small-scale empirical research design** to explore the specific challenges faced by Uzbek university students in learning English word formation. A mixed-method approach was used, combining a written test to identify common word formation errors and a short questionnaire to gather students' opinions and perceptions about learning morphology. This approach allowed both quantitative and qualitative insights into the learners' difficulties and their possible causes. The participants were **40 intermediate-level EFL students** (ages 18–22) enrolled in English language programs at two universities in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. All participants had studied English for at least five years and were taking general English courses as part of their university curriculum. None were native speakers of English, and Uzbek was the first language for the majority of them. Participants were selected through convenience sampling, as they represented typical EFL learners in Uzbekistan's university context. Two instruments were used in the study:

1. **A written word formation test** consisting of 20 items. Students were asked to form correct derivatives of given root words (e.g., decide → decision; happy → happiness; employ → unemployment). The test measured students' ability to use common prefixes, suffixes, and word-class conversions.

2. **A short questionnaire** with 10 items (both multiple-choice and open-ended questions) aimed at exploring students' perceptions of word formation learning. The questionnaire focused on their attitudes, learning strategies, and perceived difficulties.

The study was conducted during regular English classes in a controlled classroom environment. Participants were given 30 minutes to complete the word formation test, followed by 10 minutes to answer the questionnaire. Before the test, the purpose of the study was explained, and participants were assured of confidentiality. All responses were collected anonymously. The quantitative data from the test were analyzed using simple descriptive statistics to identify the most frequent types of errors (e.g., misuse of suffixes, incorrect affix combinations, wrong word class). The qualitative data from the questionnaire were analyzed thematically to highlight common patterns in students' perceptions of word formation challenges. Combining both sets of data allowed the researcher to triangulate findings and draw reliable conclusions about learners' difficulties.

The results of the written test revealed that most students experienced noticeable difficulties in forming correct word derivatives. Out of 20 test items, the average score among participants was 10.8, indicating a moderate level of understanding. The most frequent errors included:

- **Incorrect suffix usage (38%)**, such as educate → educationist instead of education, or inform → informationable instead of informative.
- **Confusion between similar affixes (27%)**, such as -tion vs. -sion (confuse → confusion, decide → decision).
- **Omission of prefixes (18%)**, e.g., happy → happy instead of unhappy.
- **Overgeneralization of rules (10%)**, for instance, creating non-existent words like beautifullize or successment.
- **Word-class confusion (7%)**, such as using decide instead of decision in sentence contexts.

These results suggest that while students recognize some word-building patterns, their morphological awareness is incomplete. Many could recall affixes but lacked understanding of when and how to apply them correctly.

The findings confirm that Uzbek EFL learners face multiple challenges in learning English word formation, largely due to linguistic and pedagogical factors. Linguistically, the irregular and less transparent nature of English morphology contrasts with the agglutinative structure of Uzbek. As a result, learners often transfer L1 word-building patterns to English, leading to errors and confusion. Pedagogically, the results highlight a gap in explicit morphological instruction. Many EFL classes in Uzbekistan prioritize grammar and vocabulary memorization, neglecting morphological analysis. This supports the observations of Nation (2001) and Bowers & Kirby (2010), who emphasized that explicit teaching of morphology enhances vocabulary learning and reading comprehension.

Conclusion

This study investigated the challenges faced by Uzbek university students in learning English word formation. The findings reveal that learners frequently struggle with suffix and prefix usage, confuse similar affixes, overgeneralize rules, and sometimes misapply word-class transformations. These difficulties arise from a combination of **linguistic factors**, such as the differences between Uzbek and English morphological systems, and **pedagogical factors**, including limited explicit instruction and reliance on memorization rather than analysis.

Overall, the study confirms that morphological awareness is a critical component of vocabulary development for EFL learners. Without a clear understanding of how words are structured, students may face barriers in reading comprehension, writing accuracy, and general language proficiency. Addressing these challenges requires deliberate instructional strategies that emphasize analysis, pattern recognition, and meaningful practice in context.

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