The Art of Derivation: Noun-to-Verb Transformations in Student-Written Sentences

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Abstract

The study investigates the use of affixes in the derivation process from nouns to verbs in sentences produced by EFL students at Tadulako University. This research employed a descriptive quantitative method, with data collected through written tests and questionnaires from 136 fifth-semester students. The data were analyzed using frequency distribution and descriptive statistics. From the written test, a total of 1.370 affixation errors were identified across seven targeted affixes. The prefix de- had the highest number of errors, accounting for 25% of the total. The questionnaire consisted of 50 items and was designed to measure five key variables: semantic clarity, parsing ability, affix frequency, productivity, and pars ability. The responses indicated that 78% of students found affixation confusing due to a lack of semantic transparency, while 65% admitted difficulty in segmenting complex words into base and affix. The reliability test of the questionnaire showed a high Cronbach's Alpha score of 0.988, confirming its internal consistency. The findings revealed that the prefix de- was the most difficult affix for students, with the highest error rate in the noun-to-verb derivation process. Several factors influenced students' difficulties, including semantic aspects, affix frequency, the ability to analyze word structure, affix productivity, and the ease of breaking words into their morphemes. This study highlights the importance of enhancing morphological awareness among EFL students, particularly in applying the derivational process as part of more effective English language learning. This recommendation is based on the observation that students' limited familiarity with certain affixes, combined with insufficient explicit instruction in morphology, directly impacts their writing proficiency. Therefore, integrating morphological instruction into ELT—through focused affix exercises, contextual application, and parsing training—can significantly enhance students' vocabulary growth, grammatical accuracy, and confidence in academic writing.

Keywords: Morphology; Derivation; Affix; Noun-to-Verb Derivation

INTRODUCTION

Morphology is a branch of linguistics that studies the structure of words and how words are formed. According to Haspelmath & Sims (2010), "Morphology is the study of the internal structure of words". Learning morphology is important for understanding language as a whole because words are the basic elements in sentence formation and conveying meaning in communication. We need to understand morphology because the process of morphology often involves the use

of affixes, which are common forms of modifying words to change their meaning or grammatical function. A prime example of morphology in action is the derivation of nouns into verbs through the addition of affixes. According to Simaremare, Silalahi, & Puba (2021), "Derivation is one of a morphological system which has to be understood well by the English learners". For example, the word "friend" can be turned into the verb "befriend" by adding the prefix "be-", changing the meaning from a concept to an action associated with friends or building friendships. This process shows how affixation is used to expand vocabulary.

Affixes play an important role in the derivation process, especially in transforming nouns into verbs. This transformation generally involves adding a prefix or a suffix to change the grammatical function or meaning of the word. According to Palupi, Latif, & Antika (2021), affixation is crucial in word formation across languages and is highly relevant in both historical linguistics and contemporary language analysis. Affixes can be both prefixes and suffixes in derivation because they are morphemes (the smallest meaningful units in a language) that are attached to a base word (a root or a stem) to create a new word with a different meaning or grammatical function. Their position relative to the base word determines whether they are prefixes or suffixes. For example, in the addition of the prefix "be-" to the noun "friend" to form the verb "befriend," transforming a noun (someone who is a friend) into a verb (to make someone a friend). Furthermore, the addition of the suffix "-ify" to the noun "beauty" to form the verb "beautify," transforming a noun (that which is beautiful), into a verb (that which beautifies) shows how affixation facilitates vocabulary expansion

and allows language to express new concepts through systematic morphological changes. Thus, affixes act as important tools in the derivational process, allowing language to adapt and evolve dynamically.

Learning about the use of derivation noun to verb usually started when students were in senior high school. According to Refat (2015), derivation-based learning has been shown to be more effective for vocabulary enhancement than traditional methods. Furthermore, a study by Lin (2019), found that explicit instruction in affixes had a positive effect on students' receptive learning and was well-received by learners.

However, in reality, some students of 5th semester at Tadulako University do not understand how to use derivational affixes from noun to verb. They often have difficulty determining the right affix and understanding its use can significantly change the meaning of the word. As a concrete example, they often do not realize that adding the affix "-ize" to a noun like "apology" will result in the verb "apologize" which means "to express regret". This kind of mistake often occurs due to the lack of understanding of proper affixation in English. As a result, the students often write sentences that are not grammatically or meaningfully correct. For example, the correct sentence is "She decided the problem quickly." This example demonstrates the correct use of morphological derivation, transforming the noun "decision" into the verb "decided." However, the students often make mistakes in this process. For instance, they might incorrectly write "She decision the problem quickly," clearly indicating a misunderstanding of how to use affixes to derivation noun to verb.

Previous studies have explored the topic of derivational affixes, though each has

concentrated on different focuses. First, Simaremare, Silalahi, and Purba (2021), focused on Derivational Affixes in Writing Analytical Exposition Texts, the second, by Kusumawardhani (2018) focused on Derivational Affixes in Writing Analytical Exposition Texts, and the last, by Mercy (2021), focused on The Morphological Analysis of Derivational Affixation on The Heroes.

Based on the explanation above, the researcher takes an interest in conducting a study on this topic. While other studies have focused on derivational affixes, this research aims to examine a specific aspect of derivation from nouns to verbs in students' sentences in writing. The researcher will observe the most difficult affixes used by the students to transform noun to verb. Another focus of this study which differentiates it from other studies is to identify the difficulty factors students face in making noun derivation to verb. Therefore, the results could help determine their problems. To provide a clearer understanding of how these difficulties occur, this study is grounded in several theoretical concepts related to morphological processing. These include morphological awareness, affix productivity, semantic transparency, affix frequency, and parsability. These frameworks serve as the foundation for analyzing the patterns of affix usage and the cognitive challenges encountered by students in the derivational process. A further explanation of these concepts is presented in the next section.

METHODOLOGY
Research Design

This study used a quantitative method with a descriptive approach, as it relies on quantitative data and statistical analyzed. This study uses a non-experimental design that utilizes quantitative data to identify the most difficult affixes used by the students to transform nouns into verbs and to understand the difficulties faced by the students in using derivational affixes from nouns to verbs. According to Herlina & Kholiq (2020), quantitative analysis is a research method that focuses on numerical data and statistical techniques to understand phenomena and draw conclusions. It involves collecting and analyzing data in the form of numbers rather than words. This approach is used to identify patterns, relationships, and trends within the data, and to generalize findings from a sample to a larger population. Therefore, in this study, the researcher will calculate the frequency of the data to be analyzed, including identifying the most frequently used and most difficult derivational affixes according to the students as well as calculating the frequency of variables related to factors that affect the students' understanding and use of derivational affixes based on their responses.

Literature Review

The role of derivational morphology in language learning, particularly the transformation from nouns to verbs, has been widely discussed in recent linguistic studies. Derivational affixes serve as critical tools in expanding vocabulary and expressing more precise meanings in

communication. Haspelmath and Sims (2010) emphasized that morphology—especially affixation—is central to understanding how language conveys complex ideas through structural word modifications.

Simaremare, Silalahi, and Purba (2021) highlighted the importance of understanding derivational affixes in students' analytical writing. Their study showed that students often misused derivational affixes due to a lack of understanding of affix functions, particularly in transforming base forms into grammatically correct verbs. This misuse contributes to reduced clarity and accuracy in student writing. Mercy and Simamora (2021) conducted a study on derivational affixes in online game character quotes. Although the context was different, their findings revealed that exposure to derivational affixes in authentic language settings helps students grasp meaning and usage. For instance, affixes like *re-* or *un-* were easier for students to recognize when encountered repeatedly, suggesting that affix frequency and context play important roles in learning.

In addition, Refat (2015) emphasized that derivation is an efficient way to enhance English vocabulary. Explicit knowledge of how affixes work allows students to infer meaning, build word families, and recognize patterns in academic and everyday texts. Similarly, Lin (2019) concluded that direct instruction in affixation significantly improves learners' receptive skills and vocabulary acquisition.

These studies collectively demonstrate that affixation is more than a mechanical grammar skill—it is a vital part of vocabulary development, reading comprehension, and accurate writing. However, many studies have not isolated the noun-to-verb transformation in student-produced sentences, which is the focus of this current research.

Theoretical Framework

This research adopts several theoretical perspectives relevant to derivational morphology. Central to this study is the notion that students must possess a functional understanding of how affixes modify base words to create new grammatical forms. According to Haspelmath and Sims (2010), morphology is essential in forming and modifying words to express various syntactic functions. This implies that noun-to-verb transformation is not arbitrary but follows established morphological rules. Hay and Baayen (2003) introduced the concept of affix productivity and parsability, which are crucial in understanding how students interact with different affixes. Productivity refers to how commonly an affix is used to generate new words across contexts. In contrast, parsability concerns how easily a word can be broken down into its root and affix. When affixes are both productive and parsable, students are more likely to apply them accurately.

Rice (2009) added that frequency and structural transparency determine how well students learn affixes. Affixes that appear more frequently in language materials tend to be acquired earlier and used more confidently by learners. Furthermore, affixes that maintain clear meaning from base to derived form (e.g., *beauty → beautify*) are easier for students to understand and apply.

These theoretical concepts underpin the framework of this study, which investigates not only the affix that causes the most difficulty but also why that affix is problematic based on productivity, frequency, semantic transparency, and word structure.

Based on the scope of this study, the analysis is framed within the context of morphological awareness and affix processing theories. Morphological awareness, as defined by Haspelmath and Sims (2010), refers to the ability to understand and manipulate the structure of words. This includes recognizing base words and affixes, and understanding how meaning changes through derivation.

Furthermore, this study draws upon the framework of morphological productivity and parsability as discussed by Hay and Baayen (2003). Morphological productivity refers to how often and easily a specific affix can be used to form new words. In contrast, parsability relates to how easily a complex word can be divided into its morphemic components. These two elements influence how effectively learners can process and apply affixes, particularly in word formation tasks. Rice (2009) emphasizes that affix frequency also plays a vital role. Affixes that appear more frequently in instructional materials or reading texts are more familiar and accessible to learners. This helps explain why certain affixes, like *-ize*, were more successfully used by students compared to less frequent ones like *-ify* or *be-*. Semantic transparency is another theoretical element considered in this research. It refers to how clearly the meaning of a derived word reflects the meanings of its parts. For example,

students more easily understood derivations like *modern → modernize* than more abstract ones like *value → devalue*, where the semantic shift is less transparent. These theoretical perspectives are used to interpret the students' performance in the affixation test and their responses in the questionnaire, offering a deeper understanding of the cognitive and instructional factors affecting their ability to derive verbs from nouns.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

To answer research questions number one and two, which ask about what the most difficult affix and what are the difficulty factors faced by the students in using derivational affixes from noun-to-verb identified by the students in sentences, the researcher takes the data from the test. For the first research question, the researcher provides a chart about the difficulties of the students in identifying argument structure
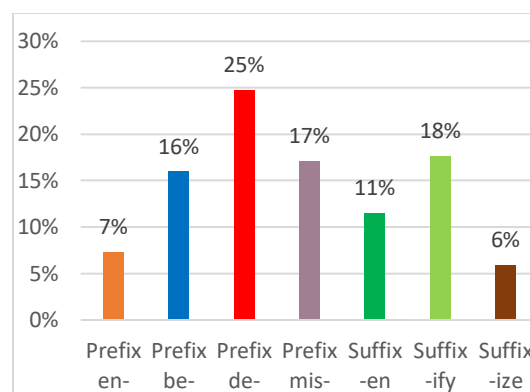
Figure 1. The Most Difficult Affix in Sentence Identified by EFL.

The frequency of students' mistakes in identifying affixation patterns varies

significantly. The prefix de- had the highest number of incorrect answers with (25%) mistakes, followed by the suffix -ify with (18%) mistakes, the prefix mis- with (17%) mistakes, and the prefix be- with (16%) mistakes. Meanwhile, the suffix -en in (11%) mistakes, the prefix en- had (7%) mistakes, and the suffix -ize had the fewest mistakes, totaling (6%). These findings indicate that the prefix de- and the suffix -ify posed the greatest challenges for students. As a result, the prefix de- had the highest number of incorrect answers, making it the most difficult affix for students.
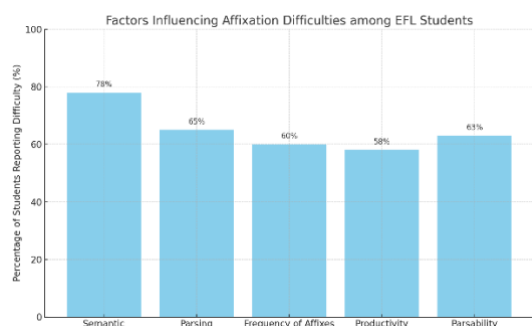
Figure 2. Percentage of Students Reporting Difficulties in Affixation

This figure illustrates the percentage of students who reported difficulty in noun-to-verb derivation based on five key factors identified through a validated questionnaire. The semantic factor was reported as the most influential, with 78% of students indicating that a lack of clarity in word meaning hindered their correct use of affixes. Parsing ability followed at 65%, reflecting students' struggles in segmenting words into base and affix components. The frequency of affix exposure (60%) and affix productivity

(58%) also contributed to students' challenges, especially with less commonly used morphemes. Lastly, 63% of students noted difficulty in recognizing parsable word structures, further affecting their ability to apply derivational rules effectively. These findings suggest that students' difficulties in noun-to-verb derivation stem not only from a lack of knowledge about specific affixes, but also from deeper issues related to word comprehension and morphological processing. The high percentages across all five factors emphasize the multifaceted nature of the problem, highlighting the need for instructional strategies that integrate semantic clarity, morphological parsing skills, and increased exposure to a wide range of affixes. By addressing both the internal and external factors identified in this study, educators can better support students in developing a more accurate and confident use of derivational morphology in academic writing.

Discussions

In analyzing the first objective, the researcher identified that verb formation, particularly with the prefix de-, posed the greatest difficulty for EFL students. To address the first research question, the researcher examined the frequency of incorrect responses in the students' test results. The findings revealed a total of 341 errors, including mistakes in using prefix de- in the root word "value" to "devalue" in question 8. This indicates that students struggle with understanding the function of the prefix de-, which conveys the meaning of "reducing" or "reversing" within a word. Additionally,

this finding is different from previous research by Mercy & Simamora (2021), this research discussed derivational affixes found in the online game, because the meaning within the words are studied in derivational affixes. It was specifically focused on identifying the types of derivational affixes on the heroes' quotes in Mobile Legends: Bang Bang, for example is prefix re- added, it becomes "return" which has a meaning to come or go back from one place to another. The addition of the prefix re- has caused a change in meaning. Overall, this research has novelty, as no previous studies have been carried out with the same objective. Beyond identifying the prefix **de-** as the most difficult affix, deeper analysis from the students' test responses revealed a pattern of semantic confusion and misapplication across various word forms. For instance, students often substituted valid derived verbs with unrelated forms or even with incorrect affixation attempts. Examples included incorrect transformations like *"deactive"* instead of *"deactivate"*, or misapplying the base word itself without affixation (*e.g., "value" as a verb in place of "devalue"*).

Furthermore, the analysis of test items also demonstrated that even when affixes were somewhat familiar—such as **be-** and **mis-**—students frequently failed to apply them in the correct syntactic or contextual environments. In many cases, this stemmed from an inability to match the affix meaning with the sentence context. This supports the conclusion that affix knowledge alone is insufficient; it must be integrated with syntactic and semantic awareness.

A key insight from the questionnaire results was the impact of semantic clarity and morphological parsing ability on student performance. The variable with the highest influence was semantic transparency, with 78% of respondents expressing difficulty using affixes when the meaning of the base word was ambiguous or abstract. Additionally, 65% of the students admitted they struggled to break down complex words into smaller morphemic parts—a skill essential to successful derivation.

The implications of these findings are consistent with Hay & Baayen's (2003) theory that internal (semantic and structural) factors heavily influence morphological processing. Moreover, Rice (2009) highlighted that affix productivity and frequency are crucial external contributors—something reflected in this study, where less frequently encountered affixes like **-ify** had high error rates, despite being conceptually simple.

Interestingly, students showed slightly better performance with **-ize** and **-en**, possibly due to more frequent exposure in academic texts and instructional materials. This aligns with previous studies by Lin (2019) and Refat (2015), which emphasized the positive effects of explicit morphological instruction in vocabulary growth.

Overall, this study reinforces the conclusion that students' challenges with noun-to-verb derivation arise from a combination of insufficient exposure, unclear semantic understanding, and a

lack of parsing ability. Addressing these issues through integrated affix instruction, contextual sentence construction, and explicit morphological parsing exercises is therefore crucial for improving EFL learners' academic writing skills.

In the last objective, the researcher examined the factors contributing to students' difficulties in learning noun-to-verb derivation, the researcher categorized these factors into two types: internal and external. The researcher utilized two sources to identify these factors. As explained by Hay & Baayen (2003), internal factors: semantics and parsing factors affect the extent to which students can understand and apply derivative affixes. If the basic meaning and morphological structure are clear, then it is easier for students to understand and use affixes correctly. However, if the meaning is less transparent or the word is difficult to break down into its morphemes, then the use of affixes becomes more challenging. Furthermore, the second study by Rice (2009), suggests that beyond grammatical principles, extra-grammatical factors such as frequency, productivity, and parsability are crucial in determining affix ordering. Frequency refers to how often an affix is used in the language, affecting its productivity. Affixes that are used more frequently tend to be more easily recognized and understood. Productivity reflects the tendency of an affix to be used in various linguistic contexts, while parsability refers to how easily a word with an affix can be broken down into its parts, which also determines the affix's use and acceptance in the language.

Based on the factors above, according to variable one, students face challenges in applying derivational affixes, particularly when the lexical meaning of base words influences their addition, as the affix must semantically fit to be used productively. The results for variable two, indicate that students struggle with the ability to parse complex words into their components. In relation to variable three, the findings reveal that students rarely use noun-to-verb affixes. Frequently used affixes tend to be more easily recognized and understood by students, contributing to the observed challenges. The fourth variable highlights the productivity of an affix, reflected in its use across various linguistic contexts, which significantly impacts students' ability for noun-to-verb derivation. Finally, the fifth variable demonstrates that parsability—the ease with which a word with affixes can be broken down into its base morpheme and affixes—plays a crucial role in influencing affix usage. As seen in the results of that study, the fifth-semester students of the English study program at Tadulako University experience difficulty in the use of derivational affixes, especially in the aspects of semantics, word parsing, frequency of affixes, productivity, and parsability. This finding is supported by previous research conducted by Hay & Baayen (2003) and Rice (2011) who likewise recognized that both internal and external factors influence students' ability to comprehend noun-to-verb derivation.

Implication and Recommendation

The findings from this study offer several implications for English Language

Teaching (ELT), particularly in improving students' morphological awareness and writing accuracy.

First, the data confirm that certain affixes, like *de-*, are particularly difficult for students. This may be due to the abstract nature of their meaning or their limited exposure in learning materials. Therefore, teachers should adopt a more targeted approach to affix instruction, focusing on those affixes that students are most likely to misuse. These include not only *de-* but also *-ify* and *mis-* which were among the most misapplied in this study.

Second, ELT programs should incorporate explicit affix instruction in both vocabulary and writing lessons. Rather than treating affixation as a minor grammar point, instructors should introduce it systematically, using real examples and guided practice. Students should be taught to break down complex words into their morphemes and explore how the meaning shifts with different affixes.

Third, assessments should include diagnostic tests to evaluate students' understanding of affixation. For instance, tasks requiring students to transform nouns into verbs within sentence contexts can reveal common errors and guide future instruction. Teachers can use the patterns of affix misuse identified in this study—particularly errors involving *de-*—as a basis for targeted remediation.

Finally, curriculum developers should ensure that textbooks and syllabi include regular and scaffolded exposure to a variety of affixes, especially those found to be less productive or less familiar to students. As Hay and Baayen (2003) and Rice (2009) noted, affix frequency and productivity play key roles in acquisition.

If students are expected to use complex academic vocabulary, then affixation must be actively taught, practiced, and assessed. In summary, improving students' mastery of derivational affixes—especially in the noun-to-verb process—requires instructional focus on affix meaning, structure, frequency, and contextual use. Through this, EFL learners can enhance their writing fluency, grammatical accuracy, and overall language competence.

It is noteworthy that the prefix *de-* caused a high error rate despite being a fairly common affix in academic language. This suggests that frequency alone does not guarantee mastery. Semantic ambiguity plays a crucial role. For example, while words like *devalue* or *deconstruct* may be present in students' reading materials, their meanings are often abstract or context-dependent, which hinders application.

The suffix *-ify*, which also showed high error rates, reflects a different kind of difficulty. This suffix typically applies to adjectives or nouns and creates verbs, often abstract in meaning (*beautify*, *simplify*, *intensify*). The challenge with *-ify* seems to stem from its formal usage and lower frequency in day-to-day interaction compared to affixes like *re-* or *un-*.

In contrast, *-ize* had the lowest error rate, suggesting that exposure and functional transparency play a larger role. Words like *realize*, *organize*, or *apologize* are commonly used in both spoken and written academic English, making them more familiar and accessible.

These nuances point to the need for instructional strategies that go beyond listing affixes and definitions. Teaching

affixation should include guided discovery, contextual usage, and exercises that highlight form-meaning relationships and register awareness (formal vs informal use). Teachers should also be aware that students might misapply productive affixes to incorrect stems (*successify*, *cleanify*)—a sign of partial understanding that should be addressed through feedback.

CONCLUSION

After completing this study, the researcher found that the prefix de- is the most difficult affix used by students to transform noun to verb, with a total of 341 incorrect answers. Based on these results, it can be concluded that EFL students still have difficulties in applying verbs with affixes, especially those using the prefix de- correctly. This can be seen from the number of students who chose the wrong verb tense, especially the word devalue in question number 8. In addition, the errors in using the prefix de- were caused by students' lack of familiarity or difficulty in remembering the tense. These findings show that EFL students face challenges in placing affixes correctly in the verb derivation process.

Secondly, the researcher identified the five factors faced by the students in using derivation noun to verb. Through the analysis of questionnaires, the researcher pinpointed five primary challenges influencing students' mastery of noun-to-verb derivation, which ultimately impacts their effective use of affixes. These challenges are particularly evident in the areas of semantics, frequency of affixes, word parsing, productivity, and parsability. Although this study provides valuable insights into the challenges faced by EFL students in applying derivational affixes, particularly

in transforming nouns into verbs, it is not without limitations. First, it was conducted in a single university context and may not reflect broader student populations. Second, the focus on written tests and questionnaires might not capture real-time affix usage in spoken or spontaneous writing tasks. Lastly, the study only focused on noun-to-verb derivation, excluding other types such as adjective-to-verb or verb-to-noun.

Based on these findings, future research should involve larger and more diverse student samples, include multiple derivational patterns, and apply mixed-method approaches such as interviews or classroom observations. Investigating longitudinal development or instructional interventions could also enrich the understanding of morphological awareness in EFL contexts. To address these issues in teaching, affix instruction should be embedded meaningfully into vocabulary and writing tasks. Teachers should prioritize affixes with lower accuracy rates—such as *de-* and *-ify*—and support them with contextual examples and parsing exercises. Additionally, instruction should highlight distinctions between productive affixes and those prone to overgeneralization. In conclusion, equipping students with strong morphological strategies will contribute significantly to their academic language development and overall writing proficiency.

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