

The effect of teaching the etymology of words to learn and reinforce vocabulary by Iranian children

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Abstract

This study was an attempt to investigate the effect of teaching morphemes on young EFL learners. To this end, 23 young EFL learners in two different classes who studied at intermediate level were selected to participate in the present study. The participants were divided into two groups. One of the groups was treated as experimental and the other one was considered as the control group. Furthermore, the pre-test of word parts was administered to both groups. The researcher chose 27 prefixes, suffixes, and roots and taught the selected morphemes to the experimental group in 9 sessions. At last, the researcher administered post-test to both groups. The results showed that experimental group outperformed the control group regarding their knowledge of word parts. It should be noted that the present study has some implications for teachers, material developers, and EFL learners.

Key words: Etymology, Vocabulary Learning, Young language learners

Introduction

There is no doubt that vocabulary is a crucial component of language proficiency since It provides a base for how well learners speak, listen, read, and write and a limited vocabulary in a second language impedes successful communication (Alqahtani, 2015). Rivers and Nunan in 1991 declared that the acquisition of an adequate vocabulary is essential for successful second language use because without an extensive vocabulary, we will be unable to use the structures and functions

we may have learned for comprehensible communication. Vocabulary knowledge and language use have complementary relations; that is, knowledge of vocabulary enables language use and conversely, language use leads to an increase in vocabulary knowledge (Nation, 2001).

Wilkins (1972) argued that “There is not much value in being able to produce grammatical sentences if one has not got the vocabulary that is needed to convey what one wishes to say. While without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed (p.97).

Although acquiring vocabulary is considered as one of the important aspects of language proficiency, Until the 1980s, teaching and learning vocabulary was not considered as important as mastering grammar, pronunciation, reading, or writing (Richards, 1976). Vocabulary acquisition was a neglected aspect of language learning and claimed that vocabulary acquisition research at that time had been theoretical and unsystematic (Meara, 1980). However, there has been a revival of interest in words and the trend has been changed; according to Nation, (2001); Schmitt, (2010), learning vocabulary is perhaps the most challenging aspect of becoming proficient in a second or a foreign language.

Moreover, it should be noted that around the 1980s, L2 vocabulary development began to attract attention of SLA researchers and second and foreign language education research interests also shifted from the methods of teaching to the processes of learning. According to Schmitt (1997), what garners the attention of SLA researchers is vocabulary learning strategies.

It is worth mentioning that language learning strategies are defined different according to the research interests and foci. Oxford (1990) mentions that learning strategies are all behaviors and actions that learners use to make language learning more successful, self-directed, and enjoyable.

One potential vocabulary learning strategy is the use of etymology (Trench,1998). Trench also argues that etymological analysis as a significant technique in the presentation of new vocabulary and explicit etymology teaching as a must feature for retaining the words. As Saussur cited in Malkeil, etymology amounts to special application, to early stages of word history, of principles generally valid in linguistic research. Saussure refers to four pairs of words in defining etymology. That is, sound change, semantic change, simultaneous change of sound and meaning, and derivation. He also included the study of suffixes and prefixes in the definition of etymology. According to Fekri (2011),the knowledge of etymology enables learner to construct many English words correctly by learning to put the building blocks (e.g., roots and affixes) together in the proper

way and to determine the meanings of thousands of English words that have never seen or heard before.

At last, it should be noted that this study also sheds light on teaching etymology to Iranian young EFL learners and the researcher aims at examining whether applying etymology is considered as useful technique to improve vocabulary learning or not.

Statement of the Problem

Brich in 2007 stated that increased understanding of morphological processes may lead to better comprehension of complex words and understanding word stems as well as the function and meaning of affixes would be useful in getting meaning of the novel lexical items.

Moreover, vocabulary forms the meaningful part of any language (McCarthy, 1988; as cited in Hamzah, Kafipour, & Kumar Abdullah, 2009) and Second language acquisition largely depends on the development of vocabularies. Hence, researchers have focused their attention on the need for second language learners to optimize their vocabulary knowledge (Singleton, 1999; Schmitt, 2000). Guo, Roehrig, and Williams (2011) pointed out that knowledge of word formation mechanisms might make it easier for learners to understand and learn new words.

Considering the importance of acquiring vocabulary for being proficient in English language as the foreign language in Iran and reviewing the studies of vocabulary teaching and learning in Iran, the researcher explored the effect of teaching etymology on learning vocabulary of Iranian young EFL learners. Reviewing researches on vocabulary acquisition of Iranian EFL learners shows that mostly Iranian Scholars have focused on the relationship between motivation of Iranian EFL learners and their using vocabulary learning strategy (Delzendehrouy, Zamanian, and Tayyebi, 2014), the relationship between language learning strategies and vocabulary size in Iranian EFL learners (Ansarin, ZohrabiandZeynali, 2012), the improvement of Iranian Intermediate EFL Learners' vocabulary knowledge through watching video clips (Sirmandi and AbbasnasabSardareh, 2016), use of word formation strategy in terms of the number of affixes by EFL intermediate students (Hasani, Mousavi and Zarei, 2014), vocabulary learning strategies and the vocabulary learning of Iranian EFL learners (Rashtchi & Rezvani, 2011), and the effect of teaching etymology on Iranian intermediate adult EFL learners (Fekri, 2011).

However, there has been scant attempt to teach vocabulary to young EFL learners through teaching etymology as a vocabulary learning strategy. So, this study is the step to this direction. The researcher made an attempt to teach Iranian young EFL learners vocabulary through teaching the etymology of the words.

Significance of the Study

Firstly, it is worth mentioning that vocabulary has been acknowledged as L2 learners' greatest single source of problems (Meara, 1980). It shows that the openness of a vocabulary system is considered to be a cause of difficulty by learners. Oxford (1990) also stated that vocabulary is "by far the most sizeable and unmanageable component in the learning of any language, whether a foreign or one's mother tongue, because of tens of thousands of different meanings (p. 120)." So, the results of the present study may provide Iranian EFL learners with effective and comprehensible strategies to learn new vocabularies and increase the size of vocabulary which they have learned.

Secondly, many EFL learners see second language acquisition (SLA) as essentially a matter of learning vocabulary and therefore they spend a great deal of time on memorizing lists of L2 words because of the importance of vocabulary learning. So, the results of the present research may facilitate the vocabulary learning process among Iranian EFL learners.

Thirdly, mostly Iranian EFL learners aim at participating in high stake and international tests such as IELTS and TOEFL. So, this study will have teaching, testing, and materials development implications; in that teacher will become more aware of the merits involved in applying etymology strategy in teaching reading, vocabulary and other related parts.

Review of the Literature

Nation (2001) elaborates the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and Language use as complementary: knowledge of vocabulary enables language use and, conversely, language use leads to an increase in vocabulary knowledge. Alqahtani (2015) considered vocabulary

knowledge as a critical tool for second language learners because a limited vocabulary in a second language impedes successful communication. Nation (2011) stated that foreign language (EFL) learning vocabulary items plays a vital role in all language skills (i.e. listening, speaking, reading, and writing). Rivers and Nunan (1991) also argued that without an extensive vocabulary, we will be unable to use the structures and functions we may have learned for comprehensible communication.

Cunningham and Stanovich (2003) mentioned that most vocabulary is acquired outside of formal teaching and opportunities to learn new words occur more often when reading rather than listening. In the same vein, Jitendra et al. (2004) suggested that the most effective independent word learning strategy is the development of proficient reading skills. Hence, it seems that scholars believe in extensive reading for the natural exposure to the vocabulary.

On the other hand, teachers believing in using direct approach of teaching vocabularies may teach students using dictionaries to learn the meaning of a word, teach students to use graphic organizers or semantic mapping to derive word meaning, teach students how to use context clues to derive word meaning, and teach students how to use morphological analysis to derive word meaning.

As far as graphic organizer and brain storming are concerned, Rupley and Nichols (2005) mentioned that graphic organizers combine with brainstorming is a common approach teacher use for specific vocabulary instruction in content areas. Rupley and Nichols stated that teachers let students share what they "think" an unfamiliar word might mean. This provides an opportunity to evaluate students' background knowledge associated with the new words, when brainstorming. This practice encourages students to think about words and concepts that are unknown and opens

up discussion and discovery in hopes that they will make connections and engage in thinking and reasoning skills.

Considering word mapping, Rupley and Nichols (2005) stated that semantic word mapping incorporates many vocabulary strategies that include building background knowledge, teacher-student discussions, and visual cues. In semantic word mapping, teachers list information categorically so that students can see relationships between new words, concepts, and information studied previously.

Another approach to teaching vocabulary is morphemic approach. According to (Stahl & Nagy, 2006), morphemic approach is a vocabulary instruction in which students are taught new words as well as the meaning of word parts that might be used to derive the meaning of novel words. In morphemic instruction students separate the word into small, meaningful parts, or into morphemes, in order to determine possible meaning for the entire word. This strategy focuses on teaching students about language and meaningful parts-not just to memorize words and recite definitions.

English is a member of Indo-European family of languages. This broad family includes most of the European languages spoken today. The Indo-European family includes several major branches:

Latin and the modern Romance languages (French, Spanish, etc.); the Germanic languages (English, German, Swedish, etc.); the Indo-Iranian languages (Hindi, Urdu, Sanskrit, Persian, etc.); the Slavic languages (Russian, Polish, Czech, etc.); the Baltic languages of Latvian and Lithuanian; the Celtic languages (Welsh, Irish, Gaelic, etc.); Greek.

Yule (2006) mentioned that Etymology is a branch of lexicology in linguistics that investigates the origin and history of words and their meanings. In other word, etymology is the

study of the roots and history of words; and how their form and meaning have changed over time. In other words, etymology is all about word formation and definition of roots from which learner can understand the meaning of the word.

According to Yule, the etymological theory is classified into certain categories including coinage, borrowing, compounding, blending, clipping, backformation, conversion, acronyms, and derivation.

In etymology “common factors” are involved in many words, and they help understanding of words and understanding helps remembering better (Davoudi and Yousefi, 2009). Some words consist of building blocks that are fit together. Suffix, prefix, and root of words are fundamental elements which are common to many English words. Suffixes and prefixes cannot stand on their own as words (p.17).

In the same vein, Farid (1985) declared that learning roots can be helpful in two ways: first, when reading one comes across a new word containing the root or prefix, one will be helped in his/her efforts to guess what the word means. She/ he will be able to make a good guess by his/her knowledge of prefix or root meaning. Second, learning words in this way makes it easier to remember the definitions of new words.

Anglin (1993) referred to the process involves morphological analysis in which learners break complex words into constituent meaning elements called morphemes (bases, prefixes, and suffixes). Anglin described morphological problem solving as a process by which the meaning of previously unknown complex words can be deciphered. Nagy and Anderson (1984) estimated that about 60% of the novel words students encounter in texts could be worked out through problem solving morphological structure and their use in a sentence. This metalinguistic process has garnered growing interest in the literature as an important word-learning skill.

Morphology is the study of the word structure (Katamba, 1993, p. 19). Birch (2007) mentioned that morphology is the part of linguistics that deals with word formation and analysis of the smallest units of meaning called morphemes. Katamba also provided more comprehensive definition of morphemes as the smallest, indivisible units of semantic content or grammatical function which word made up of.

According to Katamba, there are different kinds of morpheme including roots and affixes. Roots are standing on their own. Roots which are capable of standing independently are called free morphemes. Free morphemes are divided into lexical morphemes and function words mainly signals grammatical information or logical relations in a sentence.

According to Bauer and Nation (1993), “a word family consists of a base word and all its derived and inflected forms that can be understood by a learner without having to learn each form separately (p.253). A group of words that a learner considers to be a part of one words family will grow as the learner becomes more proficient and incorporates other words into the group (Nation, 2001). Therefore, the size of a word family for a given lexical item will vary based on the learner’s language proficiency.

Researchers have proposed that there are three aspects of morphological awareness that contribute to derivational competence: relational knowledge, syntactic knowledge, and distributional knowledge (Tyler & Nagy, 1989). Relational knowledge is characterized by being able to recognize individual morphemes in a morphologically complex word and identify the semantic relationship between words that share a common morpheme. Syntactic knowledge indicates an understanding of how the syntactic category of a word and its function in a sentence are affected by the addition of a derivational suffix. Distributional knowledge describes an

awareness that certain syntactic categories of words can be combined with certain types of affixes and that some combinations of stems and affixes are prohibited.

The ability to apply word formation rules in receptive language use involves identifying word parts in lexical items, knowing what those parts mean and understanding how the meaning of a whole word is affected by its parts (Nation, 2001).

Introducing vocabulary learning strategies to our students, we need to consider the learners themselves and their overall learning context (Cohen & Apeh, 1981). They argued that proficiency level seems to be important, with one study showing word lists to be better for beginning students and contextualized words to be better for more advanced students. According to O'Malley & Chamot (1990), it is also important to gain the cooperation of the learners, because another study showed that students who resisted strategy training learned worse than those who relied on their familiar rote repetition approach. Additionally, they argued that learning strategies are the tools that learners use for active, self-directed language learning, and research shows that the conscious, orchestrated and tailored use of such strategies is strongly associated with language achievement and proficiency.

Gu (2003) referred to two kinds of vocabulary learning strategies including Task-dependent vocabulary learning strategies and person-dependent vocabulary learning strategies. He noted that there are two important factors including task and person in selecting the vocabulary learning strategies. Task-dependent vocabulary learning strategies are those which are applied by students depending on a kind of sub-task. Among those strategies, Gu lists different strategies used by students, for example, guessing, dictionary strategies, note-taking, and rote rehearsal.

On the other hand, Gu mentioned that in person-dependent vocabulary learning strategies there are individual differences which influence the choice of strategies, for example motivation, self-efficacy, gender, learning background, and learning styles.

A number of studies have revealed that L2 (second or foreign language) inflectional morphology poses problems for learners (e.g., Clahsen, Felser, Neubauer, Sato & Silva, 2010; Felser & Clahsen, 2009; Jiang, 2004; Lardiere, 1998).

Bauer and Nation (1993) classified L2 English affixes (both derivational and inflectional) into seven levels. The levels ranged from considering each form a different word (Level 1), to classical roots and affixes (Level 7). Later, Nation (2001) refined the classification, adding a number of affixes to the levels and limiting the list to derivational affixes only.

Bauer and Nation (1993) suggested that the levels could be used as a frame work for teaching/learning affixes for reading in English. They further proposed that the levels could reflect what should be included in word families at different levels of learners' morphological awareness and be used as a reference point in empirical research on the development of word derivation knowledge. Nevertheless, up until the present time, this order has not been unambiguously confirmed or rejected empirically both as a difficulty order and the order in which learners do indeed acquire derivational affixes, or at least some of their aspects.

Bauer and Nation (1993) based their classification of affixes on the following criteria:

- Frequency,
- Productivity,
- Predictability of the meaning of the affix,
- Regularity of the written/spoken form of the base,
- Regularity of the spelling/phonological form of the affix,

· Regularity of function.

Schmitt and Meara (1997), for example, used the levels when creating their instruments in a longitudinal study of 95 learners of English. Being the first to test the interplay between different aspects of vocabulary knowledge empirically, the authors used word derivation knowledge as one of these aspects. There was a significant, albeit small, increase in the participants' suffix knowledge over the course of the academic year (5% in the productive measure and 4% in the receptive one). The authors, however, did not find any noticeable differences between the suffixes in terms of their difficulty, which could have resulted from the fact that they used only two or three different suffixes at each level and only one Level-7 suffix.

Pongweni and Alimi(2013) used data collected from the students' academic writing of Botswana' university over a period of twenty years to examine their specific problems relating to the etymology of English words. They addressed two questions including what problems the etymology of English words pose for ESL students and what measures can be adopted to alleviate these problems. They discussed confused pairs of words, pairs erroneously considered synonymous, and coinage resulting from student's lack of appropriate vocabulary. At last, they concluded that teaching the etymology of words used in academic discourse would assist students to improve their fluency in English.

Bowers and Kirby (2010) investigated the effects of a 20-session intervention targeting morphological word structure on vocabulary knowledge in four Grade 4 and 5 classes, assigned randomly to treatment and control conditions. The first research question addressed whether students learn to identify the bases of morphologically complex words as a result of the instruction. If targeting the morphology system as a tool for generative word knowledge for elementary students is to be successful, it must be established that these children master morphological

linguistic content that they would not master as a result of typical classroom instruction. The Base identification results were clear. After controlling for initial vocabulary, the instructional group was significantly better at identifying the base of complex words for each level of transfer. The second research question was whether instruction about morphological structure would lead to gains in vocabulary learning. After controlling for the significant correlation between initial vocabulary and Morphological Vocabulary, instruction had an effect on the near and mid transfer measures of Morphological Vocabulary. Instruction did not have any effect for the far transfer vocabulary words—those words outside of the morphological families that were taught.

Rashtchi and Rezvani (2011) investigated whether vocabulary learning strategies had any impact on the vocabulary learning of Iranian EFL learners. The standardized proficiency test for homogenizing the participants as well as the same standardized achievement test as a pre-test and post-test were administered to the participants. As a result, it was found that those participants who worked on text-specific activation strategy as a vocabulary learning strategy outperformed the subjects in the other two groups.

Hasani, Mousavi and Zarei (2014) explored the use of word formation strategy (morphology) in terms of the number of affixes by English as foreign language (EFL) intermediate students in Qazvin Province in Iran. The results showed students who used word formation strategy have highest mean on the vocabulary test belongs to the root words followed by the single affixes and the third highest mean belongs to the double affixes.

Sirmandi and Sardareh (2016) studied the improvement of Iranian Intermediate EFL Learners' vocabulary knowledge through watching video clips with English Subtitles. The result showed that the participants in the bimodal subtitling group outperformed and learned more new vocabulary items.

NsarinZohrabi, Zeynali(2012) examined the relationship between language learning strategies and vocabulary size in Iranian EFL learners. The results showed that the advanced level learners have higher vocabulary size in relation to other proficiency levels.

The purpose of this study is to extend vocabulary research using a morphemic, instruction approach.

Research Question

The question posed in the present study was as follow:

Does teaching etymology strategy help intermediate level Iranian young EFL learners to improve their word knowledge?

Method

Participants

Participants of the present study were females and 34.78% of them were males. Regarding their age all of them were between 10 to 12 years old. It should be noted that all the participants were elementary school students and 26.78% of the participants were 10 years old, 39.13% of them were 11 years old, and the rest were 12 years old.

Data collection Procedure

The researcher underwent the following steps to conduct the present study:

First, 23 young EFL learners divided in two different classes. To cross check the proficiency level of the young learners, the researcher administered the Oxford Placement Test.

However, two groups remained intact and the participants were not assigned to each group randomly due to the institute's limitation. One of the groups was treated as experimental and the other one was considered as the control group.

Second, on the first session of the course, the researcher introduced the etymology approach to young learners in the experimental group and the test of English morphemes as a pre-test was administered to two groups. It should be noted that the test involves 27 items asking the meaning of roots, suffixes, and prefixes which were chosen by the researcher based on the lists of most frequent suffixes, prefixes, and roots (White, Sowell and Yanagihara, 1989).

Third, the researcher taught the selected morphemes to the experimental group in 9 sessions. Each session lasted about 30 minutes and 3 morphemes were taught in each session. The experimental-group students were asked to follow two steps when trying to find out the definition of an unknown word: 1. Break the unknown word into parts: This step requires students to be able to recognize prefixes and suffixes when they occur in words. 2. Relate the meaning of the word parts to the meaning of the word: This step requires students to know the meanings of the common word parts. It also requires learners to be able to re-express the definition of a word including the meaning of its prefix and, if possible, its root and suffix.

Fourth, the researcher administered the post-test the same as the pre-test to both control and experimental group. Then, Mann Whitney U test was used to compare the performance of two groups and analyze the result of the experiment.

Data Analysis

The major question addressed in the present research was whether the use of etymology strategy would improve Iranian young EFL learners' vocabulary learning at the intermediate level of language proficiency. Before the implementation of treatment (i.e., etymology instruction a researcher-made vocabulary pretest to experimental and control groups was administered in order to compare the two groups 'means obtained from the pretest, so; ManWhitney U Test was applied.

Furthermore, after providing the experimental group with the treatment, the test used as the pre-test was administered again to both control and experimental group as a post-test.

Results

The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test (K-S) and Shapiro-Wilk (S-W) test are designed to test normality by comparing the data to a normal distribution with the same mean and standard deviation of the sample.

There was skewedness in the scores' scattering and the distribution is not normal. Histogram indicates that scores of the learners clustered to the right, with the tail extending to the left. That is, learners' scores are negatively skewed.

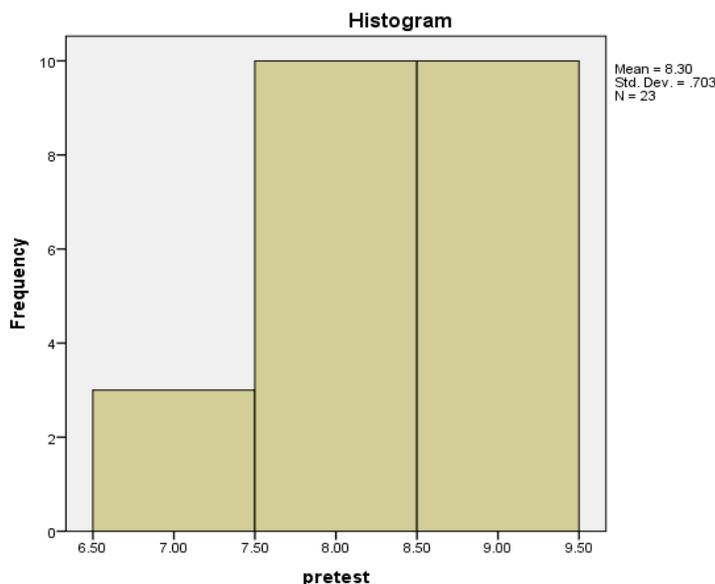


Figure 4.1. *Histogram of EFL Learners' Score on Pre-test*

As Pallant (2001) mentioned, non-parametric tests are used for the non-normal distribution and very small samples. It should be noted that the number of the participants in this study was small and the data was not normally distributed. Hence, to compare the learners' performances in experimental group after and before the instruction on morphology, Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test

is used instead of paired T-test and to compare the performance of the control group and experimental group before and after instruction, the researcher used Mann-Whitney U Test.

Results of Pretest for Both Groups

The major question addressed in this study was whether the use of etymology strategy would improve Iranian young EFL learners' vocabulary learning at the intermediate level of language proficiency. Before the implementation of treatment (i.e., etymology instruction), a researcher-made vocabulary pretest to experimental and control groups was administered in order to compare the two groups' means obtained from the pretest. To indicate the initial differences between the two groups' means on pre-test, the researcher applied Mann-Whitney U Test.

There was no statistically significant difference between experimental and control groups regarding their overall performance on the vocabulary test as a pre-test.

Results of the Post-test for Both Groups

To realize whether the treatment given to the experimental group had caused any significant change in this group and to understand if the participants in this group had performed significantly different on the post-test, another Mann-Whitney U test was run. The Mann-Whitney U test indicated that the mean difference between the experimental and control groups' scores measured at the time of post-test was significant.

There were statistically significant differences between experimental and control groups regarding their overall performance on the vocabulary test as a post-test.

Conclusion and suggestions

The present study investigated the effect of explicit teaching of morphology to Iranian young EFL learners. Comparing the performance of experimental and control group after instruction indicated that students in experimental group significantly outperformed the students in control group in vocabulary learning through the explicit teaching of morphology. The results of this study showed that Iranian young EFL learners in experimental group learned all three vocabulary parts and they benefit from the explicit teaching of word parts.

As a conclusion, the learning of English vocabulary is the basis of language learning. Learning the morphology of the words provides learners with a good perspective to enlarge vocabulary. Hence, mastering the formation rules of affixation is crucial to enlarge vocabulary size of EFL learners.

The results of this study may have potentially useful implications for teachers, material developers, and learners. They are as follows:

First and foremost, Iranian EFL teachers are recommended to use morphology instruction to improve the vocabulary size of their learners and enhance learners' knowledge of vocabulary.

Secondly, this study also provides material developers with useful information. In fact, it is suggested that they should also include morphology instruction in the books designed for young English learners.

Thirdly, the findings of the present study suggest learners to equip themselves with the knowledge of morphology.

As it was reported, the effect of explicit instruction of morphemes on Iranian young EFL learners was investigated in the present study. However, this research also suffers from some limitation. Hence, the researcher suggests further areas of research as follows:

First, this study employed explicit morphemic instruction for young EFL learners. In fact, similar study can be conducted and employ the explicit teaching of morphemes to adult EFL learners.

Second, this study did not employ any instrument for teaching morphemes to young EFL learners. Other studies can be conducted and software or flashcard can be used to teach the morphemes to young EFL learners.

Third, this study investigated the effect of teaching etymology on young EFL learners. Another study can be conducted to explore the attitude of young EFL learners toward learning morphemes.

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