Challenges Libyan English Language Learners Encounter for Guessing Word Meaning in English Based to Their Morphological Knowledge and Etymological Analysis

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Abstract – **It is a matter of fact that learning a foreign language starts from learning its vocabulary and grammatical rules. So, it is a must that English language learners (ELLs) start learning English through learning its vocabulary and grammar. As English is a loaned language, which has been barrowing vocabulary from other languages, it is essential that ELLs know some ideas about some foreign languages as Latin and Greek to guess the meanings of unfamiliar words in English. In this regard, morphological knowledge and etymological analysis might work perfectly in helping ELLs guess meanings of unfamiliar words and attain new vocabulary. This study, so, is directed to investigate about the challenges Libyan ELLs encounter for guessing meanings of unfamiliar words or attaining new vocabulary in English. Studies and research in this vein reveal that there are some challenges, so this study tries to provide some remedies. The findings of this study reveal that Libyan ELLs encounter challenges regarding using morphological knowledge and etymological analysis per se. The paper presents some recommendations regarding paying more attention to these two fields of study in teaching and learning English in Libya.**

Keywords: Morphological knowledge; morphology; etymological analysis; etymology; eponym

I. INTRODUCTION

It is a matter of fact that English is a loaned language and changes over time. English is considered as international language as it belongs to no specific native speakers. This is why there are various Englishes, which is called World of Englishes, defined by Kachru (2006) as "a distinction between language as a medium and language as a message. The medium refers to the form of language – its phonology, morphology, and syntax – and the message embodies the functions in which the medium is used" (p. 447). Thus, Omar (2013) believes that World of Englishes "stresses the fact that English has no single stand of prestige and authority as it used to have in the past" (p. 320).

The variations of Englishes, as a result, generates American English, British English, Australian English, Indian English, African English, and others, yet there is the standard one spoken by a minority in England. The history of English tells us that English has been borrowing words from various languages. An example of words added to the English dictionary from other languages include the follows: calendar and verbatim from Latin; bureau and restaurant from French; cookie and drug from Dutch; jungle and shampoo from Hindi; democracy and eureka from Greek; gestalt and angst from German; fog and floe from Danish; alligator and mosquito from Spanish; bazar and candy from Farsi; studio and umbrella from Italian; robot and pistol from Czech; sputnik and troika from Russian; ski and krill from Norwegian; Tsunami and manga from Japanese; yo-yo and adobo from Tagalog; kebab yoghurt from Turkish; coffee and alcohol from Arabic; and ketchup and kung fu from Chinese.

However, Hiebert, Scott, Castaneda, and Spichtig (2019) had estimated the number of the loaned words from other language to English with roughly 88, 500, claiming that "knowledge of a word's meaning is not isolated to simply one word. Rather, a word's meaning is embedded in networks of relationships to the meanings of other words" (p. 4). If we take this claim into account and consider the inflectional and derivational morphological levels of these words, the number of loaned words

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in English might exceed 300, 000. Williams (1986) had estimated the percentage of the loaned words used in scientific, medical, and legal texts in English from other languages with Latin 29%, French 29%, Germanic 26%, Greek 6%, and other languages 10%.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

To cover the topic of the study, we need to dig deeply in the literature review that deals with this topic. The literature review covered included articles, books, journals, and online websites.

A.   Word Meaning

As language is a way of communication, it might be a way of miscommunication. Sometimes, people either misinterpret or misunderstand meanings of words, so confusion and miscommunication take place. Omar (2014) clarifies that "when the interaction between the sender and the receiver fails, the means used for interaction, language, does not fulfill its main target of communication. In other words, the receiver should have the ability to decode the codes sent by the sender in order for communication to take place"(p. 44).

According to Omar (2012), "people use meaningful sounds and symbols in form of words to convey meaning in different cultural contexts. Hence meaning is what distinguishes words from any other sounds" (p. 327). Omar's quotation indicates that meaning is core in communication to take place. This indicates that learning vocabulary is the basic stone for learners to communicate in English. In this regard, Wilkins (1972) emphasizes that "without grammar, very little can be conveyed; without vocabulary, nothing can be conveyed" (p. 111).

Hence, Morimoto and Loewen (2007) demands that successful language learners master at least 3000 words with their word families; whereas, Schmitt (2008) suggests the number from 5000 to 7000 word families for ELLs to communicate with native English speakers in reality. The question that might be raised in this context is that how can ELLs gain this number of vocabulary in English language learning setting?

In this regard, Carter (1998) suggests teaching etymology of words for enhancing the store of learners' vocabulary. He believes that etymology expands the store of vocabulary through narrating a story relevant to the word; exposing a history of the word in different languages as Latin, Greek, Old German, French, or Arabic; or tracing the

developmental changes the word has passed through history.

Nassaji (2007) agrees with Carter in using etymology in teaching vocabulary, basing on the idea of association, in which human brain associates any piece of information or vocabulary with images or symbols. The process of association, in fact, makes learning and acquiring languages easier and faster. This association process is known as Schema Theory, which Richard and Schmidt (2002) explain as "schemata serve as a reference store from which a person can retrieve relevant existing knowledge and into which new information is assimilated" (p. 469).

Based on the idea of Schema Theory, etymological analysis of words can work as an aid for ELLs to expand their store of vocabulary. But as etymology helps ELLs use vocabulary, it might work in the opposite side. ELLs might use words incorrectly, so misunderstanding and misinterpretation take place. In this vein, Crystal (2006) believes that "words like guns, can be loaded. And, like guns, they can threaten, hurt, and wound. They can even kill – relationships and reputations. There are always risks, when we use words" (p. 127).

B.   Morphological Knowledge

We all know that English is known as a morphophonemic language, based most often on sounds, morphosyntax, and spelling of words to get various meanings of a word. This feature of English enables ELLs most of times to guess various meanings of a word based to its morphological levels (derivational or inflectional). Aronoff and Fudeman (2011) believe that being aware of the morphological levels of words is essential in learning foreign languages in general and English in specific, emphasizing that "a major way in which morphologists investigate words, their internal structure, and how they are formed is through the identification and study of morphemes, often defined as the smallest linguistic pieces with a grammatical function" (p. 2).

This, of course, indicates that being aware of morphosyntax of words helps ELLs understand the meaning of a specific word and work to guess the meanings of derivational and inflectional bound morphemes associating to this word. For example, ELLs can associate bound morphemes as "personalize", "personalized", "personal", "personally", "personality", "persona",

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"personable", "personablesness", "personae" "personage", "personalia", "personalism", "personably", "personalist", "personate", "personify", "personalization", and others to the free morpheme "person" and guess the meanings of all the above bound morphemes.

Morphological knowledge, in fact, helps foreign language learners guess meanings of unfamiliar words easier and faster. Foreign language learners can benefit from morphological knowledge in two different aspects: (1) Familiarity with Words and Concepts: This includes using prior knowledge to contact with others in various contextual situations. In this aspect, learners associate new words with images to remember meanings. (2) Complexity of Words: This includes identifying meanings of words correctly in various contextual situations (Nagy and Hiebert, 2011).

Similarly, Seidenberg and Gonnerman (2000) argue that "language users have a remarkable ability to create, produce and comprehend complex words. Words such as undercut and bakery appear to be composed of units, traditionally called morphemes, that recombine in rule-like ways to form other words" (p. 353). However, it is vital that teachers teach derivational and inflectional morphemes so that ELLs know how to identify meanings of words when the change is in meaning, class, or grammar. Derivational morphology is concerned with change of meaning as "happy" to "unhappy" or class as "play" to "player". Whereas, inflectional morphology is concerned with change of gender as "visit" to "visits", number as "boy" to "boys" or tense as "play" to "played". Derivational and inflectional morphology provides an aid to ELLs to guess meanings of words through decomposing words into their roots.

As ELLs can guess meanings of words based to their morphological knowledge, they sometime guess incorrect meaning based to this knowledge. For example, ELLs can guess the meanings of harmonize (go together), harmonizer (the one who specializes in adding harmony), harmonist (person who produces musical harmony), harmonic (compatible), harmonica (small musical wind instrument), harmonically (do in a compatible way), harmoniously (do with pleasant sound), harmonious (having a pleasant sound), harmoniousness (being in agreement),harmonization (being in agreement), harmonizing, harmonized, and harmonizes from the word "harmony".

As we have seen above that the morphological knowledge of the morpheme "harmony" brings about 15 derivational and inflectional bound morphemes, if we take plural forms of singular ones, in addition to expressions that collocate the morpheme "harmony". On the other hand, misunderstanding or guessing the meanings of these bound morphemes might be incorrect and misleading when ELLs associate these bound morphemes to irrelevant free morpheme, such as harm (hurt or injury). So, the meanings of the 15 bound morphemes above and potential expressions will be understood in the opposite way. For example, harmonizer becomes the one who specializes in hurting others. This indicates that morphological knowledge might be an aid or not for ELLs in guessing meanings of words in English.

From the above discussion, we can see that ELLs consider and analyze words according to how they are represented in their lexicon in a systematic way, based on their morphological knowledge. This, of course, enhances their knowledge and performance of words in various contexts. Yet, we should not neglect the fact that "aspects of the morphological structure of words also contribute to the challenge of word learning. The speed of accessing a word's meaning is affected by the morphological structure, including the transparency and frequency of the root word, inflected endings, and derivations" (Hiebert, Scott, Castaneda, and Spichtig, 2019, p. 4).

C. Etymological Analysis

Generally speaking, learning English starts from learning its vocabulary and grammar rules. Then learners use the amount of vocabulary attained to communicate with native speakers in various contextual situations. So, it is significant for learners to start learning vocabulary and use them in their context. The problem is that there might not be sufficient time for learners to memorize the vocabulary needed for conducting various conversations. In addition to morphological knowledge, etymology might provide a great help to foreign language learners to do so. Behera (2013) claims that "etymology helps us learn a new language. The ESL students can learn new words easily and faster using etymology through the comparison and contrast of each foreign word similar in their native language (p. 23).

In its wider sense, etymology is a branch of lexicology–which depends on information derived from phonology, morphology, and semantics–in linguistics. Etymology, in its narrower sense, is the science that is concerned with study of origin and history of vocabulary and meaning in different languages. The word etymology was originally

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originated from ancient Greek from "etymon", which means "true sense", and "logos", which means "word". Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2019) defines etymology as

> the history of a linguistic form (such as a word) shown by tracing its development since its earliest recorded occurrence in the language where it is found, by tracing its transmission from one language to another, by analyzing it into its component parts, by identifying its cognates in other languages, or by tracing it and its cognates to a common ancestral form in an ancestral language.

As etymology gives historical information about the origin and formation of words, etymological information, based to Ilson (1983) covers mainly four aspects as:

1.   Original Words and Cognates: Etymons and cognates aid ELLs to trace the history of English words, which helps them memorize the word more easily. Etymon is defined by Your Dictionary (2109) as "an earlier form of a word, as at an earlier period in the development of a language". For example, the Indo-European "duwo" and Old English "twa" are etymons of Modern English "two". Whereas, cognate is defined by Nordquist (2019) as "a word that is related in origin to another word" with slight change. For example, the English word "brother" and the German word "bruder" or the English word "history" and the Spanish word "historia" are cognates. Of course, this feature in language helps Indo-European English language learners as many words in English are cognate to words in Indo-European languages, specifically German.

2.   Morphological Analysis of Word Structure: This aspect falls between etymology and morphology as it includes, in addition to the origin of a word, morphological knowledge about the root of the word. This aspect helps ELLs not only memorize words, but also guessing the meaning of an unfamiliar word. For example, the root of the words "flatulent", "conflation", "deflation", "inflation", and "reflation" is "flat", which is originated from the Latin word "flare" meaning "blow". So, ELLs can base on their morphological knowledge and etymological analysis to guess the meaning of these words, for example, "inflate" meaning "to fill with air" or "blow up".

3.   Morphological Analysis of Word Formation: This aspect is concerned with the process of how a word is formed. Of course, word formation takes

various forms, the most important of which are: (1) affixation, which includes prefix as "impossible" and suffix as "information"; (2) coining, which includes words invented by scientists as "laptop" and "google"; (3) clipping, which is a process of shortening long words as "dorm" from "dormitory" or "lab" from "laboratory"; (4) blending, which is mixing two words to be one as "motel" (motor + hotel) and "smog (smoke + fog); (5) acronym, which is using the first letter of a phrase as "IELTS" (International English Language Testing System) and "NATO" (North Atlantic Treaty Organization); and (6) compounding, which is a process of adding two words to make a new word as "boyfriend" (boy + friend) and "policeman" (police + man).

4.   Allusion: This aspect is concerned with the words that are derived from old stories, namely from the Bible, literature, names of people or places, and fairy tales. ELLs might find it easy to remember a word if they associate it with a place, event, or a person. For example, the word "hamburger", is derived from the German city Hamburg. Sailors and emigrants brought steak from the port Hamburg to the United States. Americans call this steak as "hamburger" as a reference that it is brought from Hamburg in Germany.

Schmitt (2008) seems go with these aspects, claiming that "overriding principle for maximizing vocabulary learning is to increase the amount of engagement learners have with etymological items, mainly the roots" (p.352). Also, Hassan (2002) believes that ELLs ability to guess various meanings of unfamiliar words in various contexts depends mainly on the skill of deriving information on words based to etymology.

Jie (2013), however, presents four main points regarding the significance of learning etymology as:

1. Expanding Vocabulary: ELLs can expand their store of vocabulary through understanding the etymology of words. For example, if ELLs are aware of the Latin word "vis" and "vid", which mean see, they can guess the meanings of words that contain these words as "visible", "vision," "visit," "revise", "visual", "video", and "evidence".

2. Reducing Spelling Errors and Distinguishing Similar Words: Several studies and research regarding etymology reveal that one of the challenges ELLs encounter is spelling errors for

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similar words. For example, ELLs might interchange words as "proceed", which means "go on" and "precede", which means "come first". Etymology facilitates the process of distinguishing between the two words as "pro" means "pro" in proceed means "towards", and "pre" in "precede" means "before."

3. Improving the Ability of Guessing Word Meanings: Etymology helps ELLs guess meanings of words based to their schematic knowledge that includes culture, background, and setting. For example, ELLs can guess the meaning of the word "biography", derived from the Greek and Latin word "biographia" when they refer to their etymological analysis to the morphemes "bio", which means "life" and "graphia", which means record. So, they can guess the meaning of this word as "description of life."

4. Memorizing Long and Complicated Words Efficiently: Sometimes ELLs find difficulty to remember words in English, namely when they rarely practice this word in communicative situations. Hence, etymology helps ELLs remember words in English through associating them to words or images in other languages. For example, the English word "pomegranate" is difficult to remember. So ELLs might associate it to its French origin as "pome" meaning "apple" + "granum" meaning "seeds", so it is the apple that has many seeds.

Moreover, etymology includes also using names of people and places for forming new lexemes. This phenomenon in etymology is called eponym, defined by Cipri (2011) as "proper names are obviously important in human communication as cultural, linguistic and ethnic symbols, and as signs of social identity" (p. 258). For example, the word "McJob", which means a low-cost job or part-time position that requires no skills is derived from fast-food chain McDonald's as it is a cheap restaurant. ELLs can benefit from eponyms in various ways as a large number of eponyms are invented due to inventions.

In general, there are four groups of eponyms as:

1. Eponyms that are based on personal names, for example, "boycott" (for Charles Boycott, an English land agent in Ireland); "dahlia" (for Anders Dahl, a Swedish botanist); "guy" (for Guy Fawkes, Catholic conspirator); "nicotine" (for Jacques Nicot who introduced tobacco in France in 1560); "sandwich" (for the 18th century British nobleman, the Earl of Sandwich).

2. Eponyms that are based on geographical names, for example, "bikini" (which is the islands where the atom bomb was tested); "hamburger" (which originally came from Hamburg steak found in Hamburg in the 19th century and brought to the US by German immigrants); "jeans" (which came originally from the Italian city of Genova, where the cloth was first made, as in blue jeans); and "turkey"(which is an American bird, confused in America at first with an African bird, brought into Europe through Turkey).

3. Eponyms that are based on fictitious names from literature, mythology and folklore, for example, "morphine" (which came from Morpheus was the son of the Greek God of sleep); "panic" (noises which caused fear in the flocks by night were attributed in Ancient Greece to Pan, God of Misdeeds); and "atlas" (Atlas was condemned by Zeus to support the earth on his shoulders)

4. Eponyms that are based on commercial brand names, for example, "Band-aid" (a brand name referring to all small bandages); Levis (a brand name referring to all denim-like trousers); "Xerox" (a brand name referring to copying by any dry process); and "Kleenex" (a brand name referring to all facial tissues).

D. Conclusion

The discussion above shows that learning English starts from learning its vocabulary and grammar rules. There are various ways for learning vocabulary, amongst of which are morphological knowledge and etymology. Behera (2013) claims that "knowing about the origin of the English words is a valuable asset for L2 learners; it could benefit L2 instruction too. Moreover, the knowledge about the historical perspectives and changes in the forms of the English language words helps understand the real spirit of the English language learning and can make it a meaningful learning" (p. 20).

III. METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

The researcher has used qualitative research method to fulfil this study. He bases on literature review as a secondary resource, in which he resorts to books, journals, articles, and online websites concerning the topic of the study. As for primary resources, the researcher has based on observation and interviewing ten Libyan learners of English.

A. Participants of the Study

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The participants of this study are ten Libyan learners of English, who has taken a class of Introduction to Linguistics in the Department of English at Faculty of Arts at the University of Benghazi, Libya. The participants were selected randomly though they have had almost-similar background. The participants' first language is Arabic, and English is their foreign language. The participants are taking the class of Introduction to Linguistics at the time of interviewing, so they have an idea about morphology and etymology. The participants English is quite good though. The participants are volunteers and willing to conduct the interviews.

B.   Problem of the Study

Various studies and research reveal that morphological knowledge and etymological analysis play a great role in guessing meanings of unfamiliar words in English. Yet, ELLs encounter challenges while decomposing words or tracing the word history. For instance, Omar (2019) claims that "inflectional and derivational processes cause problems to ELLs, namely when decomposing words into their morphological structures" (p. 28). Similarly, Naseeb and Ibrahim (2017) argue that "students of public schools actually encounter different morphological problems manifested in a great number of errors and mistakes committed in the realm of derivations and derivational suffixes" (p. 178). Other studies by Zughoul (2002); Politzer and Remirez (1973); and Kharma and Hajjaj (1989) reveal the same findings regarding committing errors based to ELLs' morphological knowledge.

Attaining new vocabulary in a specific period of time is considered another challenge for most ELLs. For instance, Jie (2013) argues that "vocabulary acquisition is of fundamental importance in learning English, but little importance has been attached to how to grasp more words and how the words are better understood in senior stage of language acquisition" (p. 834). Hence, the researcher sees that there is a problem that requires more investigation.

C.   Importance of the Study

Learning English starts from learning vocabulary and grammar. As it requires ELLs time to attain a store of vocabulary that enables them to communicate effectively in communicative situations, this study exposes some strategies that might work in this field. The importance of this study lies in its endeavor to highlight the significance of morphological knowledge and etymological analysis of words for attaining new vocabulary and guessing meanings of unfamiliar words. This study, hence, is directed to investigate the challenges that Libyan ELLs encounter while guessing meanings of unfamiliar words or attaining new vocabulary.

D. Objectives of the Study

This study is directed to investigate about the challenges that Libyan ELLs encounter while using their morphological knowledge and etymological analysis for guessing meanings of unfamiliar words or attaining new words in English. So, the main objective of this study is to find out some of the potential challenges. Also, the study aims at findings some strategies or techniques Libyan ELLs might use to benefit from their morphological knowledge and etymological analysis for guessing meanings of unfamiliar words and attaining new vocabulary. The study, moreover, might be used in further research in a similar educational setting.

D.   Questions of the Study

To achieve the objectives of this study, the researcher has set a main question followed with other sub-questions. The main question of this study is: What are the main challenges Libyan ELLs encounter for guessing meanings of unfamiliar words or attaining new vocabulary in English based to their morphological knowledge and etymological analysis?

This main question is followed with other sub-questions as:

What are potential remedies for such challenges?

How do morphological knowledge and etymological analysis affect on Libyan ELLs guessing of meanings of unfamiliar words or attaining new vocabulary?

E.   Data Collection

The researcher collected the data of this study through literature review, as a secondary resource, and interviewing ten participants, as a primary resource.

F.   Data Analysis

After gathering the data of this study, the researcher started analyzing the interviews to reach findings. The data collection has taken almost 20 days, and transcription of the interviews has taken almost seven days. The researcher analyzed the data obtained based to his own interpretation armed with literature reviews regarding the topic of the study.

IV. FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

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After analyzing the data obtained, the researcher has reached the following findings:

- The analysis of the data obtained reveals that morphological knowledge and etymology provide a great help for the participants for guessing meanings of unfamiliar words in English and attaining new vocabulary. The participants interviews show that most of times use their knowledge about morphology and etymology to understand meanings of unfamiliar words. Yet, there are some challenges that the participants encounter while using morphology and etymology. Saad, for example, said, "I still need to know how and when I use morphology and etymology to guess meanings of words".

- The analysis shows that as morphological knowledge and etymology help the participants guess the meanings of unfamiliar words, they sometimes get confused and misunderstand meanings of words due to their full lack knowledge about morphology and etymology. For example, Ahmad said, "For me, every word with lot of letters is a word with morphemes, so I sometimes get the meaning of the word incorrectly." Saleh said, "I don't know how to say that the word has more than one morpheme or not. For example, I see that 'undertake' a word with two morphemes".

- The analysis shows that the participants sometimes misuse morphological knowledge due to lack of awareness of the semantic relationships required for the morphemes that compose one word. Hamed said, "I think of every word with more letters as a word with morphemes". Salah expresses his frustration due to misunderstanding words based on his morphological knowledge. He, for example, understands the word "understand" as a word of two morphemes: "under" and "stand".

- The analysis shows that there is no care about teaching morphology and etymology more deeply. The participants have just known about these fields after taking the class of Introduction to Linguistics. Yet the class does not cover morphology and etymology thoroughly. Salma, for instance, said, "This is the first time I know about that. I know little, but it helps me really. Thank you for this". Hanin, also, said, "That is good I take this class or I will have no idea about morphology and etymology". Nour said, "In the past I guess meaning with no rules, but now I have. Thank you."

- The analysis shows that the participants are motivated to learn more about morphology and etymology to enhance their store of vocabulary to practice English in communicative situations. Ahlam, for instance, said, "I wish I can learn more about this. I need to add more words so I talk in English in real situations."

- All the participants agree that learning vocabulary is the first step for learning English and use it in communicative situations later.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings obtained, the researcher is presenting the following recommendations:

- More attention should be paid for teaching separate classes of Morphology and Etymology at earlier grades at the university.

- ELLs ought to practice their morphological knowledge and etymological analysis of unfamiliar words continuously till they get the correct rules for using them in reality.

- Teachers need to encourage ELLs to decompose and compose words based to their morphological levels.

- Teachers need to enhance peer work, in which each group of learners search about the etymology of specific words and expressions.

- ELLs should fill the gap between their morphological knowledge and etymological analysis from one side and using English in reality from the other side.

- ELLs should be aware of some concepts and rules in other languages, such as Greek, Latin, and French in order to remember and recognize meanings of unfamiliar words in English.

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