

# **Structural Irregularities within the English Language: Implications for Teaching and Learning in Second Language Situations**

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## **Abstract**

It is pertinent to observe that the vagaries of the English language grammar constitute a major problem in the teaching and learning of English in a second language situation like Nigeria. The inherent structural irregularities within the English language have made it difficult for users and learners of English to grapple with the unconventional patterning that are experienced at the various levels of linguistic analysis. These irregularities that are inherent within the grammar of English, which impede teaching and learning, have always been mentioned in passing by scholars. There is hardly any systematic attempt at isolating and describing them for pedagogic purposes. This paper, therefore, surveys and isolates these irregularities at the levels of spelling, phonology, and morphology, and describes them in order to aid the teaching and learning of English in ESL situations like Nigeria. It was observed that these problems are prominent, for instance, in “-ough” forms which can be pronounced in so many different ways: (/oʊ/ as in “though”, /u:/ as in “through”, /ʌf/ as in “rough”, /ɒf/ as in “cough”, /ɔ:/ as in “thought”, /aʊ/ as in “bough”, /ə/ as in “thorough” or even where some letters are silent in pronunciation as in *knee* and *knock*, *science* or in *ghost* amongst others.

**Keywords:** history of the English language, irregularities, phonology, morphology, spelling.

## **Introduction**

As the world’s international language, English has a lot going for it. For one thing, it is quite easy for speakers of other European languages to learn English than speakers of English as a second language. English spelling, on the other hand, is complicated and often illogical. English is the native mother-tongue of only Britain, Ireland, USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and a handful of Caribbean countries. But in 57 countries (including Ghana, Nigeria, Uganda, South Africa, India, Pakistan, Singapore, Philippines, Fiji, Vanuatu, among others), English is either the “official language” or a majority of its inhabitants speak it as a second language.

The English lexicon includes words borrowed from an estimated 120 different languages. Attempts have been made to put in context the various influences and sources of modern English vocabulary.

Some studies like that of Bryne (n.d.); Baugh and Cable (2002), Hoad (2006), and Singh (2005) have evaluated the irregular structure of the grammar of English language tracing its roots to the history of English and the influence of Germanic, French, Greek and Latin sources including some words with no clear etymology. As we have seen, English has throughout its history accumulated words from different sources which started with the early invasions by Vikings and Normans, and continued with the embracing of the classical languages during the Renaissance and the adoption of foreign words through trading and colonial connections. Pink and Thomas (1974, p. 5) attributed these inconsistencies to historical reasons which border on the commencement of printing in English in the fifteenth century. They state that the modern English spelling was fixed in the fifteenth century and so it represents the spelling of that century. According to Pink and Thomas (1974, p. 50), the reference list gives the year as 1994, please check which is correct

Before that time the scribes had observed no uniformity in the matter of spelling but when printing was invented and books began to multiply, it was found necessary to adhere to some definite system. Thus, the early printers reduced a system of spelling which has persisted with few changes, ever since.

And for Umera-Okeke (2008), despite the fact that the spelling system of the fifteenth century persisted, English pronunciation on the other hand has undergone many far-reaching changes since Caxton's time which is one of the obvious reasons why there is no correspondence between the written word and the spoken word.

Mastin (2011) observes that largely as a result of the vagaries of its historical development, modern English is a maddeningly difficult language to spell correctly. The inveterate borrowing from other languages, combined with shifts in pronunciation and well-meaning reforms in orthography have resulted in a language seemingly at odds with itself. Mastin (2011) also explains that there are a large number of possible spelling rules (up to 100 by some counts), and a large number of exceptions to those rules, and the language continues to confound both native speakers and foreigners alike. Often, the desire to standardize the language, like the introduction of the printing press, has in itself led to anomalies and inconsistencies in its spelling. Spelling reform, which took place at various times, both in Britain and particularly in the United States, has further complicated the picture, despite a professed desire for simplification, and we now have many differences between American and British spellings to add to its intrinsic difficulties (e.g., *realize/realise*, *center/centre*, *dialog/dialogue*, *aging/ageing*, *traveler/traveller*, among others).

Solati's (2013) paper on the irregularity of the English language spelling sees the problem of irregular spelling in English as the product of its history. In Oz's (2014) paper on morphological awareness, he exposed students to

some strategies for not only understanding the meanings of words but also recognizing different morphological forms of the word in reading texts as opposed to students who are not exposed to such strategies. Oz (2014, p. 99) in this paper, quoting Ginsberg, Honda and O'Neil (2011) observed that "some metalinguistic skills such as phonological awareness, orthographic knowledge, and morphological awareness have a significant positive impact on an individual's ability to perform better in learning a new language." Of the three aspects mentioned above, however, Karimi (2012) and Kieffer and DiFelice Box (2013) assert that morphological awareness has recently been a focus in both first language (L1) and second/foreign language (L2) literacy development and has especially been examined with regard to skills including reading, writing, and spelling development as well as vocabulary acquisition. Ephraim Chambers (1743) wrote:

In the English, the orthography is more vague and unascertained, than in any other language we know of. Every author, and almost every printer, has his particular system. Nay, it is scarce so well with us as that: we not only differ from one another; but there is scarcely any that consists with himself. The same word shall frequently appear with two or three different faces in the same page, not to say line. (Metacalfe & Astle, MCMXCV, as cited in Umera-Okeke, 2008, p. 65)

Abubakar (2015) investigates the seeming inconsistencies in the use of –er suffix among ESL learners and categorically states that "these inconsistencies can be a source of problem to successful second language learning" (p. 4015). Venezsky (1967) presents and organizes sets of orthographic patterns, based upon an analysis of the spellings and pronunciations of 20,000 most common English words; thus, allowing clear separate rules based primarily upon orthographic considerations from those based primarily upon morphemic and phonemic considerations (Venezsky, 1967, p. 75).

Cook (2004, p. 1) in her book *The English Writing System* puts it that:

English writing system is connected to our lives in many ways, not something that is an ancillary to other aspects of language but vitally important to almost everything we do, from signing our wills to sending a text message.

While Ida (2006, p. 5) in his paper on "English Spelling in Swedish Secondary School: Students' Attitudes and Performance", states that "one crucial factor to take into account when discussing writing is spelling". Also, Solati (2013, p. 201), quoting Cronnell (1979) in his paper states that:

Spelling is important for at least two reasons. First, a writer may not

communicate well if s/he cannot spell; that is, a reader must be able to interpret marks on the page as meaningful words and s/he cannot do this easily when words are spelled. Second, contemporary societies consider misspelling a serious social error, marking a person as, at best, “illiterate”, if not outright “ignorant”.

It is, therefore, pertinent to observe that the vagaries of the English language lexicon constitute a major problem in the teaching and learning of English in a second language situation. Conventionality in a language allows for the use of the language according to unwritten laws of the linguistic community. The inherent structural irregularities within the English language have made it difficult for users and learners of English to grapple with the unconventional patterning that are experienced at various levels of linguistic analysis. These irregularities that are inherent within the grammar of English, which impede teaching and learning, have always been mentioned in passing by scholars. There are no systematic attempts to isolate and describe them for pedagogic purposes in the literature. There is, therefore, the need to systematically survey and isolate these irregularities and describe them in order to aid the teaching and learning of English in a second language situation like Nigeria. Despite the sheer volume of words in the language, there are still some curious gaps, which have arisen through quirks in its development over the centuries. This is prominent in the letters “ough” which can be pronounced in so many different ways (/oʊ/ as in “though”, /u:/ as in “through”, /ʌf/ as in “rough”, /ɒf/ as in “cough”, /ɔ:/ as in “thought”, /aʊ/ as in “bough”, /ə/ as in “thorough” or even where some letters are silent in pronunciation as in the *k* in *knee* and *knock*, the *c* in *science* or the *h* in *ghost*. Therefore, it is obvious, in a second language situation that learners and users of English are bound to encounter errors from these irregular and sometimes incredibly inconsistent and confusing structures of the English language, since these changes are born out of a system that is a mixture of different factors.

### **Irregularities at the level of spelling in the English Language**

Although English has “only” 40 to 50 different sounds still much more than many languages, there are over 200 ways of spelling those sounds. For instance, the sound “sh” can be spelled in a bewildering number of different ways (as in *shoe*, *sugar*, *passion*, *ambitious*, *ocean*, *champagne*); a long “e” can be spelled as in *me*, *seat*, *seem*, *ceiling*, *siege*, *people*, *key*, *machine*, *phoenix*, *paediatric*.

It is well known that English words are derived mainly from old German and Norman French, and that its alphabet of 26 letters makes it impossible to represent its over 43 speech sounds with just one symbol. It is only in English that numerous spellings become highly unreliable guides to pronunciation (sound, southern, soup), and spellings for identical sounds have ended up exceptionally varied (blue, shoe, flew, through, to, you, two, too).

Scragg (1974) and Sampson (1985) observed that the settlements of Vikings in England also contributed to the alienation of spelling from pronunciation. For instance, the sound /sk/ was spelled with “sk” as in “skate” and “sketch”, which are Dutch in origin, but was spelled with “sc” as in “scarce” and “scorn”, for words which are French in origin. With the dawning of the Renaissance, an increased awareness of Latin became evident and scribes were responsible for latinizing spellings such as “debt, island, and receipt”, which can be traced to Latin words such as “debitum,” “insula,” and “receptum”. Even during the pre-Renaissance Middle English period, these words were spelled “dette,” “yland,” and “receite”.

### **Irregularities at the level of phonology in the English Language**

There is a whole catalogue of silent letters in English. Often, they are letters that were added to spellings during the English Renaissance out of a misplaced desire for etymological authenticity, or existing letters that have ceased to be pronounced for one reason or another. In fact, of the 26 letters of the alphabet, only 5 (F, J, Q, V and X) are never silent. There are too many to detail, but some examples include: the silent “b” in *comb, debt, climb*; the silent “c” in *scene, scent, science, scissors*; the silent “k” in *knife, knock, know*; the silent “n” in *damn, hymn, column*; the silent “p” in *psalm, psychiatry, psychology*; the silent “gh” in *night, through, taught*; the silent “g” in *gnash, gnaw, sign*; the silent “l” in *palm, salmon, yolk*; the silent “u” in *biscuit, building, tongue*; the silent “w” in *wreck, knowledge, sword*; and the silent “h” in *hour, honour, honest*, as well as in *annihilate, vehement, vehicle, ghost, rhyme, rhythm, exhaust, exhibition, exhort*. Also, the vowel sound /ʊə/ can be written as in *go, show, beau, sew, doe, though, depot* and /eɪ/ can be written as in *hey, stay, make, maid, freight, great*. In *muscle*, *sc* is *s*, while in *muscular*, it is *sk*. In *architect* “chi” is *k* while in *arch* it is the other way.

Interestingly, the poem by Lord Cromer of England titled “Our Strange Language” highlights some of the inconsistencies that seem to exist between spoken and written words in the English language. It reads thus:

When the English tongue we speak,  
 Why is “break” not rhymed with “freak?”  
 Will you tell me why it’s true?  
 We say “sew” but likewise “few”;  
 And the maker of a verse  
 Cannot rhyme his “horse” with “worse”?  
 “Beard” sounds not the same as “heard”;  
 “Cord” is different from “word”;  
 Cow is “cow” but low is “low”;  
 “Shoe” is never rhymed with “foe”,  
 Think of “hose” and “dose” and “lose”;  
 And think of “goose” and yet of “choose”,

Think of “comb” and “tomb” and “bomb”;  
 “Doll” and “roll” and “home” and “some”,  
 And since “pay” is rhymed with “say”,  
 Why not “paid” with “said”, I pray?  
 We have “blood” and “food” and “good”;  
 “Mould” is not pronounced like “could”.  
 Wherefore “done” but “gone” and “lone”?  
 Is there any reason Known?  
 And it short, it seems to me  
 Sounds and letters disagree.

English has many words which are identical in meaning but different in spelling and pronunciation, otherwise known as synonyms. But it also has homophones or heterographs (words with different spellings and different meanings, but identical pronunciation), such as *hour* and *our*, *plane* and *plain*, *right*, *wright*, *write* and *rite*, *sight*, *site*, *cite*. English is not a static language. Historically, it has been shaped and changed over the years by numerous political, social, and multicultural influences. Hurst recognizes that sometimes, the change in a word is the way it is pronounced; sometimes the change is in the spelling, like in the words *come*, *son*, and *love* which used to be spelled with the vowel “u” (until the Normans replaced it with an “o” when it preceded the letters *m*, *n*, and *v* because a series of similar-looking letters was difficult to read). Roughly speaking, the earlier lengthened vowels which came to be produced at the highest tongue position became diphthongs. Thus, an item such as “sweet” changed from /swe:t/ to /swi:t/, “spoon” from /spo:n/ to /spu:n/, “ride” changed from /ri:d/ to /raid/, and so forth. Rogers states that this shift in the pronunciation of the vowels was made without a corresponding shift in spelling. Crystal (1987, p. 214) states that:

the great vowel shift of the 15th century was the main reason for the diversity of vowel spellings in such words as *name*, *sweet*, *ride*, *way*, and *house*. Similarly, letters that were sounded in Anglo-Saxon became silent, e.g. the “k” of *know* and *knight*, or the final “e” in *stone*, *love*.

### **Irregularities at the level of morphology in the English Language**

At the level of morphology, the irregularities seem to be more pronounced than what is experienced at the other levels. The plural system, for instance, has problems of different kinds in achieving its plurality. The plural forms of the words below exemplify these irregularities. *Dog-dogs*; *boy-boys*; *ray-rays*; *bus-buses*; *tax-taxes*; *lunch-lunches*; *child-children*; *ox-oxen*; *goose-geese*; *man-men*; *teeth-tooth*; *mouse-mice*; *wolf-wolves*; *belief-beliefs*; *sheep-sheep*; *series-series*; *deer-deer*; *sheep-sheep*; *criterion-criteria*; *stadium-stadia*; *phenomenon-phenomena*; *radius-radii*; *lineup-lineups*; *show-off-show-offs*; *brother-in-law-brother-in-laws*; *chief-of-staff-chiefs-of-staff*. The

formation of the plural system in the words presented here creates confusion because there are many conventions. The plural system requires that plurality be achieved in regular nouns with the /s, z, iz/ morphemes while the irregular nouns realize their plurality in different and irregular ways. Some nouns realize their plurality through zero morphemes as in “sheep and deer”. Some realize plurality through internal vowel change as in “man-men”, others realize their plural forms through other radical morphological manipulations that have no direct relationship with the singular form as in “ox-oxen”. The irregularities seem to be more pronounced in words that are not of English origin, especially such words that are of Greek and French origin as in *stadium-stadia*, *radius-radii*. According to Onuigbo & Eyisi (2008, pp. 110-111):

The inherent irregularities within the plural system in English are so complex that no one has successfully devised a rule to capture the whole possibilities. Such words as “show-offs” and “lineups” cannot be conventionally subjected to any [grammatical rule]. The problem gets more complex as we experience compounds of two nouns separated by a preposition or a preposition and a modifier. The compounds like “brothers-in-law and chiefs-of-staff” follow a special pattern but other words like “justices-of-the-peace” follow quite a different pattern.

In English, some direct cognates like “drink, drank, drunk”; “sing, sang, sung”; “bring, brought, brought”; even trip up native speakers, who either assume the pattern is constant (*\*I brang him the book*), mix up different patterns (such as using *\*have drunken* and *\*have broughten* as the past perfect forms of drink and bring), or just confuse verbs (*\*I am syncing my iPhone tomorrow, because I haven't sunk it in a while*). And since language is constantly in flux, many verbs may change what patterns they follow, such as hung/hanged or dreamt/dreamed. Some non-standard usages, like *bring, brang, brung* are as common as to be standard in some dialects. The whole matter is confusing even to the native speakers, and has become a headache for learners. Just about every language has highly irregular features that seem normal to native speakers. Despite the march towards regularization, modern English retains traces of its ancestry, with a minority of its words still using inflection by ablaut (sound change, mostly in verbs) and umlaut (a particular type of sound change, mostly in nouns), as well as long-short vowel alternation. For example:

- *Write, wrote, written* (marking by ablaut variation, and also suffixing in the participle)
- *Sing, sang, sung* (ablaut)
- *Foot, feet* (marking by umlaut variation)
- *Mouse, mice* (umlaut)

- *Child, children* (ablaut, and also suffixing in the plural). This kind of irregularity creates the kind of problem which is very difficult to handle in a second language situation.

The big question however, is, “why is English so irregular?” Even though this paper has attempted at different grammatical levels to discuss the problem of irregularities in the English language in the above sections, it is very necessary to expatiate on the origin of irregularities in the English language structure. In this regard, this paper gives an account of how the influence of Norman French, the Printing Press, the Great Vowel Shift, Loan words, and Etymological Respelling resulted in the problem of inconsistencies or irregularities in the English language.

## **The influence of English History on English Language: The trouble with English**

### *The Norman conquest*

When the Vikings invaded England in the eighth century, it was perceived that they could understand what the Anglo Saxons were saying because the Germanic languages which included the language of the Vikings were closer than they are today. But when the Normans invaded in 1066, they spoke French. And they had no intention of learning English. For the over 200 years they ruled, French was the language of the English aristocracy, government, and the courts. Most aristocrats did not bother to learn English but the common people continued to speak English. When the Normans lost Normandy, they started switching to the English language of the land they ruled. But English had hardly been written for over 200 years; all official text had been written in French and anything related to the universities or clergy was in Latin. So the scribes tried to write down what they heard and were pretty inconsistent.

They applied French spelling conventions to English words, so *cwen* became *queen*, *cirice* became *church* and *c* was used instead of *s* in words like *cell* and *circle*. They also struggled with English handwriting, where *u*, *v*, *n* and *m* all looked very similar. So they replaced *u* with *o* in words like *done* and *come*. At the same time, thousands of French and Latin words were entering the English language. The scribes kept the original French spelling for some (*table*, *double*, *centre*) but changed the spelling of others to reflect their English pronunciation (e.g., *beef*, *battle*, *government*, *mountain*). This was a wild time for English spelling as the concept of “correct” spelling did not really exist. People also spelled according to their local dialect.



### ***The printing press***

By the time William Caxton brought the printing press to England in 1497, French and English had become well and truly mixed. English was also filling up with new foreign words to describe the concepts that arrived with the Renaissance, as people rediscovered classical texts and became open to new ideas for which English had no words. Unlike most languages, English happily took words from other languages, often with no attempt to officially anglicise them. Irregular spelling was a problem for the printers, who wanted consistency but had to appeal to the maximum possible number of readers. Which dialect should they choose as the basis of written English? They chose the London English of Chaucer, whose *Canterbury Tales* was the first book printed in English (Hammond, 2011).

The printing press brought with it the idea of correct spelling. But it also brought some spelling confusion to English. For example, because many of the printers were Dutch, they used Dutch spellings for words like *ghost*, *aghost*, *ghastly* and *gherkin*, which keep their silent *h* to this day. Other words like *ghospel*, *ghossip* and *ghizzard* lost their Dutch *h* over the years. What is more? Caxton's timing was unfortunate for future generations of English spellers.

### ***The great vowel shift***

The printing press gave English spelling a big push towards standardization. English pronunciation, on the other hand, was anything but steady and the century after the arrival of the printing press saw major changes in the way English was spoken. For example, words like *he*, *she*, *knee*, *name*, *fine* and *be* were pronounced as they were spelled when the printing press arrived. Much like a German would pronounce those letters nowadays. But during the next century, the pronunciation changed to roughly what English people use today. But spelling did not change to reflect the new pronunciation. At this point, English was full of unusual pronunciations and silent letters. The situation was not helped by scholars.

### ***Etymological respelling***

During the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries in particular, lots of scholars came up with ideas for improving English; the practice of spelling words in a manner that would reflect their etymological origin. Enduring examples of this influence was to alter spelling to reflect the classical roots of some words. For example, a *b* was added to the word *debt* to reflect its relationship to the Latin *debitum* found in the spelling of the words *debt*, *doubt*, *receipt*, and *salmon* (formerly spelled *dette*, *doute*, *receite*, and *samon*), all of which were given a “silent” consonant to make them look more like the Latin words from which they descended (O'Grady, Dobrovolsky, & Katamba, 1996, p. 615). *Rime* became

*rhyme* (from the Greek *rhythmus*) and so on. These letters have never been pronounced in English. But the scholars did not always get it right. For example the *s* in *island* was added because they thought the word came from the Latin *insula*, whereas it is really an Old English word. At the same time, changes were made illogically to other parts of English spelling, for example the *ght* from *night* and *light* was added to *delight* and *tight*, but not to *spite* and *ignite* (Hammond, 2011). Solati (2013) observed that some examples of words that were altered according to their etymology but kept their former pronunciation include *debt* and *doubt*, which had formerly been written as *detten* and *doute*. The letter *b* was inserted to indicate that the words originated from the Latin *debitum/dubitare*. The same is true for the *p* in the word *receipt* and the *c* in *indict* (from Latin “recipere” and “indictio”). The respelled words of the second group are significant as they show a change in their pronunciation (Solati, 2013, p. 206). Barber (1993) asserts that what was formerly written and pronounced as *aventure* was, after the etymological respelling, written and pronounced *adventure*. The same happened with *assault* (formerly *assaut*), *describe* (formerly *descrive*) and *verdict* (formerly *verdit*) (Barber, 1993, pp. 180-181).

### ***Loan words***

In the late 16th and early 17th centuries, many new loan words entered English from languages such as French, Latin, Greek, Spanish, Italian and Portuguese (Solati, 2013, p. 205). As stated by Crystal (1987), loan words are one of the reasons behind the spelling varieties that exist in English today. According to Venezky (1967, p. 121), “more irregular spellings in English are due to borrowings than to any other cause”. Rogers (2005) also states that in addition to a change in the phonology and grammar of the language, English had also borrowed a huge number of French words. These were often related to government and warfare- duke, judge, government, county, general, army, but also very ordinary word- stable, very, single, beef. Moreover, Rogers (2005, p. 192) points out that for words borrowed from languages using the Roman alphabet, the original spelling for most words has been kept. For example, from French, there is *soufflé*, *ballet*, *lingerie*; from German there is *Kindergarten*, *Fahrenheit*, *Umlaut*; from Italian, *spaghetti*, *concerto*, *bologna*”.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has attempted to look at the irregularities or inconsistencies in the structure of English. The history of English contributed to the problem of the structural irregularities in English. These irregularities cannot be totally addressed without recourse to the history of English. The irregularities, however, are discussed at the levels of orthography, phonology, morphology and syntax. However, “irregularity” is often just another way of talking about grammatical complexity, and linguists tend to believe that all languages are

more or less equally complex, because languages tend to compensate for complexity in one domain (e.g. word-structure) with simplicity in another (e.g., clausal syntax). Therefore, languages with a high degree of polysynthesis (complicated word structure) are much more likely to have exceptional word forms than languages with isolating word-structure. Contrariwise, languages like English with very little word-structure often have very complicated syntactic systems unlike anything you will find in a polysynthetic language like Mohawk in North America. It is, therefore, pertinent to agree with Dr Albrecht Classen when he narrated the frustration of a retired English teacher with regards to the irregularities in English language grammar in a piece he captioned “English Language Crazy Inconsistencies” thus:

There is no egg in egg plants, nor ham in hamburger; neither apple nor pine in pineapple. Sweet meats are candies while sweetbreads, which aren't sweet, are meat. We take English for granted. But if we explore its paradoxes, we find that quicksand can work slowly, boxing rings are square and a guinea pig is neither from Guinea nor is it a pig. And why is it that writers write but fingers don't fing; grocers don't groce and hammers don't ham? If the plural of tooth is teeth, why isn't the plural of booth beeth? One goose, two geese. So one moose , two meese? If teachers have taught, why haven't preachers praught? If a vegetarian eats vegetables, then what does a humanitarian eat? Sometimes I think all the English speakers should be committed to an asylum for the verbally insane. In what kind of language do people recite at a play and play at a recital? Must we ship by transport and transport by ship? Who else has noses that run and feet that smell? How can a slim chance and a fat chance be the same, while a wise man and a wise guy are opposites?

You have to marvel at the unique lunacy of a language in which your house can burn up while it's burning down, forms are filled out by being filled in, and an alarm that's gone off is still going on. English is a world where a woodcarver's magazine editor might add ads for adzes, and a chemist might use a vile vial. People can sit on a bough, though, and cough through the night as they re-read a red book to say they re-read it; and whoever finishes first has won one!

Why had the cops sought the sot? The photographers knot all fought for the shot and not just for naught. Does the fuzz think there was proof of blood on a wood floor? And what was that word that occurred by the bird turd? At the height of their leisure, neither had the sleight to seize the feisty weird sovereign poltergeist, so they had to forfeit the foreign heifer's counterfeit protein. [With apologies to “i before e”.....] English was invented by people, not by computers, and it reflects the creativity of the human race—which of course is not a race at all. That is why, when the stars are out, they are visible, but when the lights are out, they are invisible. But please—could someone explain why “Buick” doesn't rhyme with “quick”? (Classen, 2018)

It may also be argued in a second language situation that “if the plural of knife, calf, and thief are knives, calves, thieves respectively why shouldn’t the plural of chief be chieves?” Similarly, if the plural of box is boxes, why is oxes not the plural of ox? It is, therefore, important to state that the inconsistency in the English language has a serious implication in the teaching and learning of English by ESL learners because it is very difficult if not impossible to master all the exceptions there are to the numerous rules that exist in English. This can be a source of problem to successful second language learning. It is no wonder that teachers and students can become overwhelmed and confused with some English words. However, Hurst (2013, p. 190) assures ESL learners that there is good reason to take heart as Moats (1995) points out that at least 20 sounds in the English language have spellings that are more than 90% predictable, and Pinker (1994) notes that for about 84 percent of English words, spelling is completely predictable from regular rules.

### **Implications for Pedagogy**

It is hoped that the presented study has provided some insights into the problems of inherent structural irregularities in the English language. It has allowed readers to make several observations which carry important pedagogical implications. The English plural system, orthography, phonology and word structure with their irregularities and exceptions are genuine challenges. That is to say that as the quest by scholars to find answers to such questions by second language learners like “If a thinker is somebody who thinks, then, is a tinker somebody who tinks?” continues, possible answers like this paper tries to provide will emerge. For the question above, however, the word ‘tinks’ does not seem to exist in the English language. These and perhaps many other such inconsistencies, coupled with the issues of poor and inadequate mastery of English and other socio-economic factors are issues that can never be totally overcome in a second language learning situation.

Therefore, understanding these irregularities from linguistic and functional perspectives will be very useful for ESL learners. Reading is also the ultimate reflective process. As one continues to read and reflect, one will become conversant with most of the irregular forms in the English language and attempt to use them appropriately. Henry (2010) suggests that the goal for teachers therefore, is, to teach the very common letter-sound patterns and the history of as many irregular words as possible. When teachers and students understand the consistent patterns of written English, as well as the historical basis of words, they can better understand the regularities and the relatively few irregularities in English words.

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