

Irregular Verb Acquisition Among EFL and ESL Learners in Cameroon: Peculiarities of Group 4 and 5 Verbs

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Abstract

Acquisition patterns of irregular verbs by Second and Foreign Language learners of English in Cameroon present remarkable peculiarities that emanate from the country's unique linguistic identity, where French, English and a multiplicity of local languages are spoken. Following on a previous study (see Ngasu Betek 2020) this study documents these peculiarities, but with a focus on Group 4 and 5 irregular verbs, to ascertain the mastery of English irregular verbs. From a population of nine hundred (900) students from six selected schools in Cameroon, samples of their production in English irregular verb usage were collected. The specific classes were Forms One, Three, Five, (of the Anglophone sub-system of secondary education), and Sixième, Quatrième and Seconde students (from the Francophone sub-system of secondary education). Using Simple Random Sampling Technique, completion tasks were administered and the results analysed to identify and map traceable frequency patterns of use by students. A comparative analysis of the two learner clusters was carried out which revealed ESL and EFL learners of English in Cameroon both exhibited challenges in using irregular verbs either through overgeneralizations or through morphological distortions of irregular verbs especially at the past tense. This paper thus informs on best practices for successful learning, specifically in the acquisition of irregular verbs by L1 and L2 learners in schools in Cameroon.

Keywords: EFL and ESL learners, irregular verb acquisition, peculiarities

1. Introduction

Attempts at illuminating the acquisition of irregular verbs in English in a pluri-linguistic environment are important as they can inform academic planning and teaching strategies. This is most important in Cameroon where grappling with teaching English as ESL and EFL are the dominant markers of the Cameroonian teaching and learning environment. Ashu (2002) in his investigation of the use of basic tenses by Form Three learners of English of G.B.H.S Etoug-Ebe reveals that learners do not master the rules of regular and irregular verb inflection. In addition, they have difficulties with subject-verb agreement, the use of conditional tenses, as well as with direct and indirect speeches. Neba (2002) in a related study on irregular nouns and verbs related inflectional morphology in English by Form One students of G.B.H.S Bonaberi, attributes the poor performance to insufficient material in the textbook, interference of the French language, pidgin English and finally poor teaching methods. This paper goes a step further as it attempts to explore the process of acquisition of groups 4 and 5 verbs. This paper gives a brief introduction of language acquisition, especially verb acquisition and proceeds to map out acquisition patterns among ESL and EFL learners in Cameroon. Morphological patterns are analyzed based on developmental and comparative paradigms from six selected schools in Cameroon; Forms One, Three, Five, (of the Anglophone sub-system of secondary education), and Sixième, Quatrième and Seconde students (from the francophone sub-system of secondary education). The participants had to complete sentences by filling the blanks with the appropriate irregular verb form from given choices, and provide the appropriate form of a given irregular verb to complete a sentence. Data was analysed by identifying and mapping traceable frequency patterns of use and performing a comparative analysis.

In Cameroon, French speaking Cameroonians study English as a foreign language while their English-speaking counterparts study it as a second language. Against the background of the multiplicity of indigenous languages and the widespread use of French, English language is inevitably learnt with the interference of French. Due to this, it is obvious that some morphological traits from both official languages (English and French) will be observed to migrate

across from these two languages as the learners engage in communicative task such as the one in this study. This is especially common in the use of verbs in indicating tenses. A problem is thus posed in that second and foreign language learners of English face morphological difficulties when inflecting verbs to indicate various verb tenses as they are exposed to a variety of factors such as; teachers with different teaching strategies and methods, different learning context, socio-cultural variations and local language peculiarities.

MC Dougal, (1989), presents four different forms of the verb which in this study is used to categorize irregular verbs, the focus of this study. These are; Present, the present participle, the past, and the past participle.

Table 1. Principal Parts of the Irregular Verbs

	Simple form	Simple past	Past participle	Present participle
IRREGULAR	See	Saw	Seen	Seeing
VERBS	Make	Made	Made	Making
	Sing	Sang	Sung	Singing
	Eat	Ate	Eaten	Eating
	Put	Put	Put	Putting
	Go	went	Gone	Going

Source: Researcher's compilation

As seen above, irregular Verbs are verbs in which the past tense is not formed by adding the usual “ed” ending for the past simple and past participle forms. MC Dougal, L (1989), divides irregular verbs in to five groups (earlier explored in Ngasu Betek, 2021), however in this paper Group 4 and group 5 irregular verbs shall be explored. These are presented below.

Verb groups

- a) **Group Four:** In this group of irregular verbs, the vowel “i” in the present changes to “a” in the past and “u” in the past participle.

Table 2. List of Verbs in Group Four

Present	Present Participle	Past	Past Participle
Begin	Beginning	Began	Begun
Drink	Drinking	Drank	Drunk

- b) **Group Five:** These verbs are grouped together because the past participle is formed from the present rather than the past form.

Table 3. List of Verbs in Group Five

Present	Present Participle	Past	Past Participle
Blow	Blowing	Blew	Blown
Draw	Drawing	Drew	Drawn

2. Material Studied

This study focuses on irregular verbs of groups 4 and 5 which arguably present more complex challenges to learners of English in Cameroon. The tables below present samples of group 4 and group 5 verbs.

Group Four: In this group of irregular verbs, the vowel “i” in the present changes to “a” in the past and “u” in the past participle.

Table 4. List of Verbs in Group Four

Present	Present Participle	Past	Past Participle
Begin	Beginning	Began	Begun
Drink	Drinking	Drank	Drunk
Ring	Ringling	Rang	Rung
Shrink	Shrinking	Shrank	Shrunk
Sing	Singing	Sang	Sung
Sink	Sinking	Sank	Sunk
Spring	Springing	Sprang	Sprung
Swim	Swimming	Swam	Swum

e) Group Five: These verbs are grouped together because the past participle is formed from the present rather than the past form.

Table 5. List of Verbs in Group Five

Present	Present Participle	Past	Past Participle
Blow	Blowing	Blew	Blown
Draw	Drawing	Drew	Drawn
Fall	Falling	Fell	Fallen
Give	Giving	Gave	Given
Go	Going	Went	Gone
Shake	Shaking	Shook	Shaken
Write	Writing	Wrote	Written

According to Parrot (ibid) learners can possibly face the following difficulties in the acquisition of verbs:

- 1) Learners may sometimes drop the third person singular morpheme. For example:
My sister like singing.
- 2) They may also over generalize the third person singular rule. For example:
Does she * plays handball?
- 3) Learners could mix up various tenses and use one in the place of another. For example:
You are coming instead of will you come?
- 4) It is equally common that in cases where an irregular verb has a past participle form that is different from the past simple form; learners may mix them up, thereby using one in place of another. For example: She has *ate the rice. They have *went.
- 5) Learners may turn to feel that all verbs, including state verbs, depict actions. This may lead them to use progressive forms with all verbs. For example:
 - I am knowing her.
 - She is not hearing you.

Davy (2004) categorizes student's English usage errors thus;

1. Complex tenses tend to be avoided.

*It would have been much better if this was dealt with by competent men. ×

It would have been much better if this were dealt with by competent men y'

2. The use of verb-ING constructions is extended.

* I am having your book. ×

I have your book. y'

3. Phrasal/prepositional verbs used differently.

- * They are avoiding for free primary education. ×
 They are avoiding free primary education y'
4. The use of –S markers is over generalized
- *He had too many luggages ×
 He had too much luggage y'
5. Articles and other determiners tend to be omitted.
- *Everyone has car. ×
 Everyone has a car. y'
6. In speech, most inflectional endings are not always added to the verb.
- *It consist of many cells. ×
 It consists of many cells. y'
7. The basic interrogative word order is not maintained in indirect speech.
- *Do you know what will be the price? ×
 Do you know what the price will be? y'

Krashen (1985) defines language learning as “a conscious process that results in knowing about language.” In a language situation error detection and correction are central, as is typically the case in classroom settings, where formal rules and feedback provide basis for language instruction.

The theoretical underpinnings of interlanguage (Selinker, 1972) are adopted for this study because it discusses the general trends and stages that all second-language learners undergo towards learning a second language, in the absence of native-speaking peers of the second language. The theory stipulates that in the process of learning a second language, the learner is bound to commit certain errors like: errors of omission, errors of overgeneralization, interference errors, among others. Besides, it shows the intermediate aspect of the learner’s language towards learning a second or foreign language. Selinker (1972) defines interlanguage as “a linguistic system that draws, in part, on the learner’s L1 but is also different from it and from the target language”. A learner’s interlanguage is, therefore, a unique linguistic system.

3. Methods and Techniques

Using the Survey Research Design, this study collected samples from Forms One, Three, Five, Sixième, Quatrième and Seconde students from selected secondary schools in Cameroon. The schools represent the government, lay private and mission, located both in the urban and rural centers. From the South West region, research was carried out on learners of GHS Limbe, (a government institution), Vocast Muyuka, (lay private institution) and PSS Besongabang, (Christian mission institution). From the Littoral region, *Lycee Makepe*, (a government institution), *Foundation pippart Souza*, (lay private institution) and *College Episcopal Ste Jeanne d’Arc / Ste Monique Nkongsamba*, (Christian mission institution). Research for this study, was not limited only on the above-mentioned schools. The following schools were also used; BHS Mankon, Ceget Bonaberi, Lycée Odza, college du Levant and Lycée Bilingue Bonaberi.

The population yielded nine hundred (900) students both male and female. For the students studying in the Anglophone subsystem French is a foreign language to them, while to those studying in the French subsystem, English is a foreign language them. Key peculiarities with the informants were that, the Francophone learners spoke English with their teachers and French with friends while the English-speaking students, spoke in English and Pidgin. Again, those from the French speaking background studied entirely in French with English taught to them as a foreign language. Most spoke or understood the mother tongues or native languages. Informants from the English - speaking background on the other hand, spoke in English and studied in the English subsystem of education. Alongside their mother tongues, they have pidgin as a lingua – franca for communication and also French as their second official language after English.

Data for this study was collected by way of a completion task assigned to the target population. This task was aimed at evaluating students’ acquisition and use of morphological forms of irregular verbs of groups 4 and 5. The choice of this design was inspired by the need to evaluate their level of acquisition and difficulties.

The completion task was aimed at analysing morphological features in learners’ acquisition of irregular verbs in the

present continuous, simple past and past participle. The reason for giving this exercise was to evaluate students' acquisition of the verb forms independently. With verbs of the fourth group, the following verb forms were expected to be provided by learners; present continuous tense m + -ing "swimming", past tense + -a- "swam" and past perfect tense + -u- "had swum". Finally, with verbs of the fifth group, the following verb forms were expected to be provided by learners: present continuous tense, + -ing "blowing", past tense + -e- "blew" and past perfect tense + -o- "had blown".

4. Results

The results from the written task are presented on tables and further illustrated on charts for better clarity.

4.1 The Morphology of Verb Forms of the Fourth Group

In this group, the vowel "i" in the present changes to "a" in the past tense and "u" in the past participle. The verbs proposed were; swim, ring, and begin. The verb "to swim" was analysed.

48% of learners were able to present the verb form in the present continuous tense m + -ing "swimming". 50% and 2% presented + -ing "swiming" and -s "swims" respectively. In the past tense, 34% presented the form +a "swam". 20% and 46% presented -ed "swimed" and m + -ed "swimmed". With regard to the past perfect tense, it would be seen that learners faced difficulties using the form as 14% were able to present + -u- "had swum". 46% and 40% presented + -ed "had swimed" and + -a- "had swam" respectively.

Table 6. Frequency in the Use of Morphological Forms in the Present Continuous, Past and Past Perfect Tenses with Verbs of the Fourth Group (ESL Learners)

Morphological Form	Present Continuous Tense			Past Tense			Past Perfect Tense		
	+ -ing	m + -ing	+ -s	+ -ed	m + -ed	+ -a-	+ -ed	+ -a-	+ -u-
Verb	swiming	swimming	swims	swimed	swimmed	swam	Had swimed	Had swam	Had swum
Form 1 (%)	50	46	4	27.3	42	30.7	47.3	44.7	8
Form 3 (%)	40.7	56	3.3	24	38	38	33.3	43.3	21.3
Form 5 (%)	20	78	2	17.3	40.7	48.7	19.3	48.7	32

Table 7. Frequency in the Use of Morphological Forms in the Present Continuous, Past and Past Perfect Tenses with Verbs of the Fourth Group (EFL Learners)

Morphological Form	Present Continuous Tense			Past Tense			Past Perfect Tense		
	+ -ing	m + -ing	+ -s	+ -ed	m + -ed	+ -a-	+ -ed	+ -a-	+ -u-
Verb	swiming	swimming	swims	swimed	swimmed	swam	Had swimed	Had swam	had swum
6 ^{eme} (%)	69.3	20	10.7	65.3	24.7	10	81.3	14.7	4
4 ^{eme} (%)	58	28.7	13	48	34	18	63.3	26.7	10
2 nd (%)	56	34	10	38.7	36	26.7	42.7	34.7	21.3

Table 8. Frequency in the Use of Morphological Forms in the Present Continuous, Past and Past Perfect Tenses with Verbs of the Fourth Group (ESL and EFL Learners)

Morphological Form	Present Continuous Tense			Past Tense			Past Perfect Tense		
	+ -ing	m + -ing	+ -s	+ -ed	m + -ed	+ -a-	+ -ed	+ -a-	+ -u-
Verb	swiming	swimming	swims	swimed	swimmed	swam	Had swimed	Had swam	Had swum
ESL (%)	36.8	60	3.1	22.8	40.2	39.1	33.3	45.8	20.4
EFL (%)	61.1	27.5	11.3	50.6	31.1	18.2	62.4	25.3	11.7

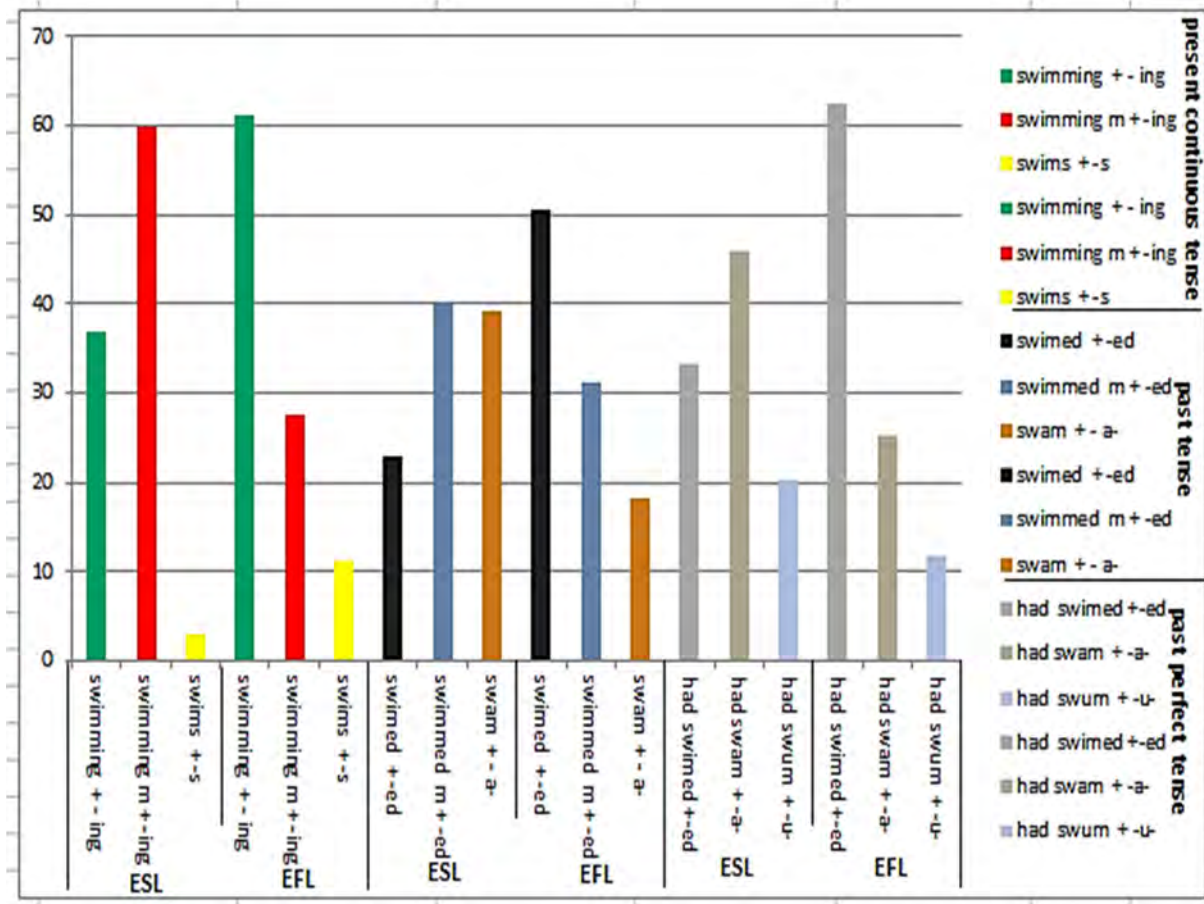


Figure 1. Morphological Forms of verbs in the Present Continuous, Past and Past Perfect Tenses (Group Four ESL and EFL Learners)

Table 9. Frequency in the Use of Morphological Forms in the Present Continuous, Past and Past Perfect Tenses with Verbs of the Fifth Group (ESL Learners)

Morphological Form	Present Continuous Tense			Past Tense			Past Perfect Tense		
	+ -ing	+ -s	+ -en	+ -ed	+ -s	+ -e-	+ -ing	+ -e-	+ -o-
Verb	blowing	blows	blowen	blowed	blows	blew	had blowing	had blew	had blown
Form 1 (%)	93.3	2	4.7	48.7	10.7	40.7	31.3	34.7	34
Form 3 (%)	93.3	2.7	4	45.3	6.7	48	24	41.3	34.7
Form 5 (%)	96.7	11.3	2	27.3	4.7	66	14	47.3	38.7

Table 10. Frequency in the Use of Morphological Forms in the Present Continuous, Past and Past Perfect Tenses with Verbs of the Fifth Group (EFL Learners)

Morphological Form	Present Continuous Tense			Past Tense			Past Perfect Tense		
	+ -ing	+ -s	+ -en	+ -ed	+ -s	+ -e-	+ -ing	+ -e-	+ -o-
Verb	blowing	blows	blowen	blowed	blows	blew	Had blowing	Had blew	Had blown
6 ^{eme} (%)	80.7	10.7	8.7	69.3	15.3	15.3	69.3	20	10.7
4 ^{eme} (%)	80.7	8	11.3	64	12	24	61.3	26	30.3
2 nd (%)	87.3	4.7	8	60	10	23.3	49.3	27.3	24.7

Table 11. Frequency in the Use of Morphological Forms in the Present Continuous, Past and Past Perfect Tenses with Verbs of the Fifth Group (ESL and EFL Learners)

Morphological Form	Present Continuous Tense			Past Tense			Past Perfect Tense		
	+ -ing	+ -s	+ -en	+ -ed	+ -s	+ -e-	+ -ing	+ -e-	+ -o-
Verb	blowing	blows	blowen	blowed	blows	blew	Had blowing	Had blew	Had blown
ESL (%)	76.4	10	3.5	40.4	11.5	48	23.1	41.1	35.7
EFL (%)	82.8	7.7	9.3	64.4	12.4	20.8	60	24.4	16.2

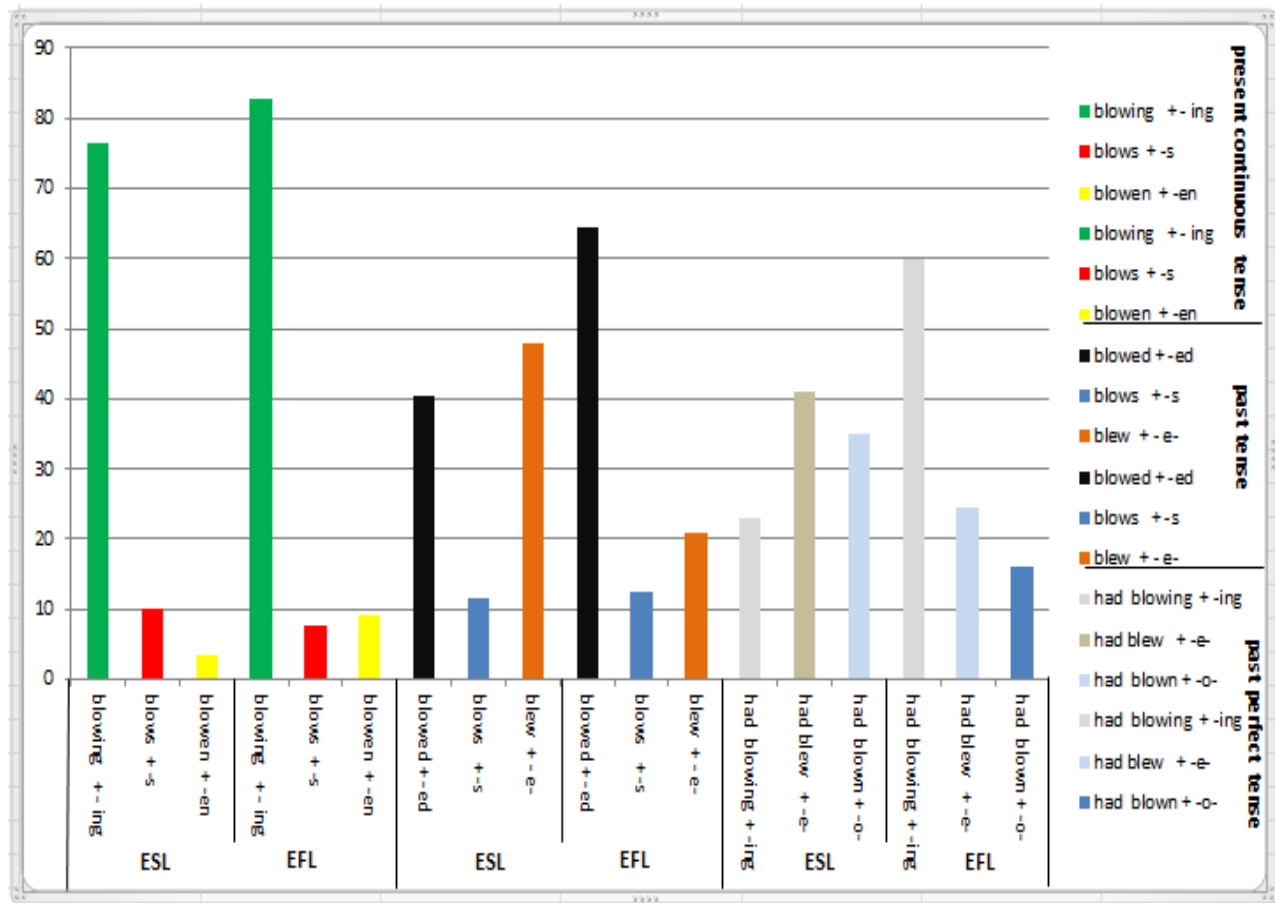


Figure 2. Morphological Forms of verbs in the Present Continuous, Past and Past Perfect Tenses (Group Five ESL and EFL Learners)

5. Discussion

This study investigated the ways that EFL and ESL learners in Cameroon schools processed English irregular verbs that belong to Groups 4 and groups 5. Through this the study sought to analyzing morphological features in ESL and EFL learners' acquisition of irregular verbs and identifying difficulties faced. Focus was on morphological features at different proficiency levels and schools, against a backdrop of Cameroon's multiple languages to which these learners are exposed to on a daily basis. Drawing analyses from Selinker's (1972) theory of Interlanguage, which states that learners' grammar is permeable, learners change their grammar from one time to another by adding rules, deleting rules and restructuring the whole system. The result is an inter language continuum. This influence determines the nature of learners' language as they move from one level of proficiency to the other.

With regard to the completion task, our findings revealed that ESL learners produced more frequencies with the form

“+ing” as in swimming. They also faced difficulties using the “a” and “u” morpheme in the past and past perfect tense as in “swam” and “swum” respectively. They also over generalized the “-ed” morpheme and used one form in place of the other. Finally, with verbs of the fifth group, they produced more frequencies in the past perfect form with the form “+o-” as in blown as opposed to the form “+e-” “blew” in the past. Similarly, EFL learners produced more frequencies with verbs of the fourth group in the past and past perfect forms. They also over generalized the “-ed” morpheme to the verb “swimed” as opposed to “swam” and “swum”. In the present continuous, the form “+ing” as in “swimming” produced more frequencies as compared to “m+ing”, ‘swimming’. Finally, with verbs of the fifth group, learners produced more frequencies with the use of the “-ed” morpheme for the past and past perfect forms as in “falled” as opposed to ‘fell’ and “fallen” respectively. Less frequencies in use with forms “e” and “en” as in ‘fell’ and “fallen” were produced.

The findings revealed that learners produced more frequencies in form in the completion task. EFL learners produced more frequencies than ESL learners, owing to the fact that ESL learners are more exposed to the target language than their EFL counterparts. They also over generalized the “-ed” morpheme as a past tense marker to irregular verbs than ESL learners

both ESL and EFL learners faced similar difficulties using the appropriate morphological forms in the process of acquiring irregular verbs. The findings also reveal that, there was an upward trend in the acquisition of morphological forms by ESL and EFL learners, as they climbed the academic ladder. This accounts for why learners of Form Five and Seconde produced lower frequencies than their counterparts of forms one, three and sixième and seconde. Finally, we found out that over generalization of the “-ed” morpheme registered the highest frequencies by both ESL and EFL learners.

Proficiency level was identified as a variable in the acquisition of irregular verbs by EFL and ESL learners, and so, it was of prime importance in the course of presenting data for this study. Informants for this research are ESL and EFL learners of forms one, three, five, sixième, quatrieme and seconde from selected schools and regions in Cameroon. Learners of form one and sixième are considered beginners of secondary education. Form three or quatrieme is an intermediate class where learners are introduced to the GCE ordinary levels syllabus for the learners of the Anglophone subsystem of education and BEPC for the learners of the francophone subsystem of education. Form five or seconde marks the end of the secondary education. Learners at this stage are expected to be at an advanced level of proficiency. The tasks designed were the same for all levels, since it is a developmental study in the acquisition of irregular verbs. The developmental features have a significant manifestation of each proficiency level. Frequencies of features are considered since learners’ grammar is open to influence depending on the input. Such influences impart learner’s language as they move from one proficiency level to another towards the target language.

However, it is worth nothing that despite the differences between learners of form one and sixième who are beginners, there was a close frequency in the use of morphological forms with intermediate learners of form three and quatrieme. This is contrary to learners of form five and seconde whose frequencies in morphological forms dropped. It could however be deduced that elementary and intermediate learners are still struggling to cope with the complexity of the English morphology, with respect to irregular verbs. Learner’s language is transitional. Learners change their grammar from one time to another by adding rules, deleting rules, and restructuring the whole system. The result is an interlanguage continuum. It is also assumed that as they move from one level of acquisition to another, the level of acquisition of internalized rules in the target language would have increased as seen in the case of form five and seconde. The presence of these features in the learner’s language and proficiency level was an indication of interlanguage development. However, according to Ellis (2003) all learners, no matter whether they are learning naturalistically or in a classroom and irrespective of the LI, make omission, overgeneralization and transfer errors.

6. Conclusion

Conclusively, we found out that the more learners advanced up the academic ladder; there was a decrease in the frequency rate at which features occurred in the production of morphological forms of irregular verbs. However, no matter the proficiency level, both ESL and EFL learners faced similar difficulties in the use of morphological forms in the process of acquiring irregular verbs of the fourth and fifth groups.

A pedagogic relevance can be ascribed to this work. The findings as earlier discussed reveal that both ESL and EFL learners of English faced difficulties when inflecting irregular verbs to indicate various verb tenses. These results have pedagogic implications. We found out that, the level of acquisition differed from one learner to the other, level, school and locality. This, however, accounted why learners produced different frequencies with morphological features.

Since all learners do not acquire and evolve at the same time, teachers should bear in mind that, the rate of intake is determined by the learner and environment. Pedagogically, it is the responsibility of the teachers to determine what an L2 class room learner would learn about a language item and the order in which it would be taught. With regards to the fact that learners learning context, environment and other factors affect L2 acquisition, it is important for the teacher to use a methodology that seeks to better manage the process of language learning. In continuation, we also found out that different morphological features were consistent and traceable in different levels, schools and locality. We share with Ellis (2003), view on the nature of the language learner and the developmental patterns of L2 acquisition, which states that, all learners, no matter whether they are learning naturalistically or in a class room and irrespective of their L1, make omission, over generalization and transfer errors. The errors that L2 learners make are universal and systematic. The occurrence of these features is as a result of the learning process and inter language. In continuation, these features should not be considered errors per say but rather be seen as learners actively involved in shaping their grammar and creating their own rules. The errors are therefore conditioned by the contextual realities in which learners are found.

In relation to the discussion above teachers should avail themselves of opportunities to regularly update their professional knowledge and acquaint themselves with theoretical developments in language teaching circles which are relevant to what they do. In continuation, they should bring in interactive model of language teaching and learning in order to illuminate grammatical knowledge in a low anxiety environment. This will help learners acquire English language without inhibition. Furthermore, they should also subscribe to professional journals where relevant developments in their fields are disseminated. This will help them have a wealth of knowledge on teaching techniques and approaches to class room organization, which can foster optional interactions. In continuation, the presence of morphological features in the production of final year learners of secondary education, that is form five and seconde reveal the weaknesses of methods. In teaching ESL and EFL learners of English in Anglophone subsystem of education, the communicative approach overshadows the structural approach. This is however opposed to the francophone subsystem, where the structural approach over shadows the communicative approach. It could be seen that there is a disparity of approaches used in two subsystems. It would be of prime importance for the government to merge the methods so as to facilitate learners' acquisition. In addition to the above, the curriculum for English language should be reviewed periodically, in order for it to reflect the new concerns in the language teaching field. Course books in use should also be reviewed in order to ensure that they are consistent with developments in the language teaching field.

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