

CHALLENGES POSED BY THE INCONSISTENCIES IN RULE-BASED APPLICATION OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE: A STUDY OF SECOND-LANGUAGE LEARNERS AND SPEAKERS IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

English occupies a central role in Nigerian education, governance, and public life, yet its structural irregularities present persistent challenges to second-language learners and speakers. This study investigates inconsistencies in the rule-based application of English grammar and their effects on second-language learners and speakers in secondary schools and universities in Nigeria, with particular attention to phonological, morphological, and syntactic dimensions of the problem. Guided by Corder's (1967) Theory of Error Analysis and Selinker's (1972) Interlanguage Theory, the study adopts a qualitative research design, employing interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and open-ended survey questions as instruments for data collection. Data were gathered from 100 participants at Federal University Otuoke and among secondary school students in Yenagoa, Bayelsa State. Thematic analysis of the data reveals that irregular grapheme–phoneme correspondences, inconsistent tense and number marking, and the presence of grammatical exceptions create significant cognitive overload among learners, manifesting in systematic errors that reflect interlanguage development and fossilisation. The study further identifies mother-tongue interference, pedagogical inconsistency, and sociolinguistic pressures as compounding factors. Findings are interpreted through the lens of Error Analysis and Interlanguage theory, both of which illuminate the developmental, rather than merely deficient, character of learners' errors. The study recommends context-sensitive, exception-aware instructional approaches, improved teacher training, and enhanced provision of learning resources as targeted responses to the documented challenges.

Keywords: Rule-Based Application, Inconsistencies, English Language, Second-Language Acquisition, Error Analysis, Interlanguage, Nigeria

1. Introduction

The English language occupies an indispensable position in Nigeria's educational, professional, and governmental life. As the country's official language, English serves as the medium of instruction at all levels of formal education, the language of law and public administration, and the primary vehicle of inter-ethnic communication in a nation of over 500 distinct linguistic communities (Eruchalu, 2012). This institutional centrality means that competence in English is not merely academically desirable but effectively obligatory for social and economic participation. Yet despite its prominence, a significant proportion of Nigerian students at both secondary and tertiary levels continue to struggle with basic aspects of English grammar and pronunciation, a challenge reflected in consistently poor performance in external examinations such as the West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) and the National Examinations Council (NECO) examination.

A major but insufficiently investigated dimension of this challenge is the structural inconsistency inherent in the English language itself. Unlike many Nigerian languages, in which the relationship between orthographic representation and phonological realisation tends to be regular, English is characterised by irregular correspondences between spelling and pronunciation, numerous exceptions to grammatical rules, and competing standards arising from the co-existence of British and American varieties. For second-language learners whose native languages operate on more predictable phonological and morphological systems, these inconsistencies constitute a persistent source of error and frustration. As Corder (1967) established in his foundational work on learner errors, difficulties encountered by second-language learners do not arise solely from first-language interference; they frequently originate in the complexity of the target language itself. Selinker's (1972) concept of interlanguage further illuminates how learners construct intermediate grammatical systems that reflect systematic, rule-governed attempts to manage a target language they have not yet fully acquired.

Despite the relevance of these theoretical insights to the Nigerian context, empirical research examining how specific English-language inconsistencies affect Nigerian learners in both secondary and tertiary settings remains limited. Existing studies have tended to focus on broader questions of second-language acquisition or English language teaching methodology, without disaggregating the particular role of rule-based inconsistency as a discrete obstacle. This study addresses that gap by investigating the specific types of inconsistency that learners identify as most disruptive, the ways in which those inconsistencies manifest as errors in learning and communication, and the pedagogical and sociolinguistic factors that compound the problem. The findings contribute to a growing body of context-sensitive applied linguistics research on English language education in sub-Saharan Africa.

2. Statement of the Problem

Despite decades of English language instruction in Nigerian schools, deficiency in English grammatical competence remains widespread among secondary and tertiary students. A persistent and under-examined contributor to this deficiency is the structural inconsistency of English itself: the language's irregular phoneme-grapheme correspondences, its extensive system of grammatical exceptions, and the absence of uniform rule application across contexts create a learning

environment that is particularly hostile to second-language learners whose native languages operate on more regular and transparent systems. These inconsistencies are not merely theoretical concerns; they produce tangible difficulties in spelling, pronunciation, written expression, and oral communication that limit learners' academic performance and professional prospects.

Current pedagogical approaches in Nigerian schools often fail to address these inconsistencies in a systematic way. Teachers may present rules without adequate attention to exceptions, textbooks may present conflicting standards, and the linguistic distance between learners' mother tongues and the target language amplifies the effect of every irregularity encountered. The cumulative result is a pattern of fossilised errors — stable, persistent inaccuracies that learners are unable to self-correct — which Selinker (1972) identified as a defining feature of interlanguage development. Without a clearer empirical account of precisely which inconsistencies cause the greatest disruption, and why, targeted pedagogical interventions remain difficult to design. This study was conducted to provide that account.

3. Aim and Objectives of the Study

The overall aim of this study is to investigate the nature and effects of rule-based inconsistencies in the English language as they are experienced by second-language learners and speakers in Nigerian secondary schools and universities.

The specific objectives of the study are:

1. To identify and categorise the specific types of rule-based inconsistency in English that create the greatest difficulties for Nigerian second-language learners.
2. To examine how these inconsistencies affect learners' written performance, including spelling, tense marking, and number agreement.
3. To investigate how inconsistencies in English affect learners' spoken communication, including pronunciation, confidence, and fluency.
4. To identify the pedagogical and sociolinguistic factors that compound the challenges posed by structural inconsistency.

4. Literature Review

4.1 The Nature of Rule-Based Inconsistency in English

The grammar of any language constitutes the system of rules that govern its use, rules that, in the view of Ndimele (1999), are internalised by native speakers and form the basis of linguistic competence. In many languages, these rules operate with sufficient regularity that learners can generalise from observed patterns with reasonable success. English, however, is widely recognised as a language in which such generalisation frequently fails. Chomsky (1965) observed that natural languages contain substantial irregularities that resist systematic rule formulation, and Crystal (1995) attributed much of English's structural complexity to its historical evolution through Germanic, Latinate, and diverse borrowed sources — a layered etymology that produced competing orthographic and phonological conventions.

For second-language learners in Nigeria, the consequences of this complexity are acute. Njoku and Izuagba (2004) documented that Nigerian learners frequently encounter difficulty with the absence of one-to-one grapheme–phoneme correspondence in English, producing phonetically plausible but orthographically incorrect spellings such as “enof” for “enough,” “tif” for “thief,” and “abawt” for “about.” Similar difficulties are reported with irregular verb tenses and plural formations, where learners tend to over-regularise, applying the general rule (adding –ed or –s) to irregular items (producing “splited” instead of “split,” or “childs” instead of “children”). Obasi (2018) further noted that the inconsistency between English orthography and phonology complicates the learning process for Nigerian learners, particularly affecting spelling and pronunciation.

4.2 Variation Between Standard English and Nigerian English

An additional dimension of inconsistency arises from the divergence between internationally recognised standard English and the localised Nigerian English that learners encounter in everyday communication. Edhere (2023) observed that while Nigerian English is a functional variety adapted to local communicative needs, its deviations from international norms can create confusion for learners who must navigate between locally acceptable usage and the globally recognised standard required in formal and academic contexts. This dual navigational burden negatively affects learners’ confidence and competence in high-stakes settings such as examinations and formal employment.

4.3 Pedagogical Inconsistencies

The challenge of rule-based inconsistency in the target language is compounded by inconsistency at the pedagogical level. Olufemi and Ogunniyi (2023) observed that English language instruction in Nigeria is often characterised by fragmented rule presentation, insufficient attention to exceptions, and variation across teachers and textbooks in how rules are explained. Learners who encounter different explanations of the same grammatical rule from different teachers, or different conventions in different textbooks, face a meta-level inconsistency that further undermines their ability to develop stable linguistic intuitions.

4.4 First-Language (L1) Interference

Njoku and Nwokedi (2020) established that mother-tongue interference substantially exacerbates the difficulties caused by target-language inconsistency. Because the phonological and grammatical systems of many Nigerian languages differ significantly from English, learners frequently transfer features of their native languages into English production, generating errors in pronunciation, sentence structure, and tense usage. These transferred features interact with the inconsistencies already present in the target language to produce a distinctive error profile that is, as Selinker (1972) argued, systematic rather than random.

4.5 The Second-Language Learner and Speaker

Contemporary scholarship in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) has significantly reconceptualised the second-language learner. Ellis (2020) argued that second-language learners are active, agentive constructors of linguistic knowledge who build competence through exposure, interaction, and cognitive processing, rather than passive recipients of input. Lightbown and Spada (2021) emphasised the developmental and non-linear character of second-language learning, noting

that progress is shaped by the interaction of input, internal processing, and output. Ortega (2021) added that individual differences — including motivation, age, and quality of exposure — play a significant role in determining learning outcomes.

With respect to the second-language speaker, Cook (2021) introduced the concept of multicompetence, arguing that speakers of more than one language should not be evaluated against native-speaker norms but recognised as users of distinct, integrated multilingual systems. Li (2022) observed that multilingual speakers draw flexibly from multiple linguistic repertoires in communication, while Canagarajah (2023) proposed that second-language speakers' functional communicative competence — their ability to make meaning effectively across contexts — is a more appropriate evaluative standard than grammatical accuracy measured against native-speaker idealisation.

5. Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on two complementary theoretical frameworks that together provide analytical tools for understanding both the source and the developmental trajectory of learner errors arising from English rule-based inconsistency.

5.1 The Theory of Error Analysis (Corder, 1967)

Stephen Pit Corder's Theory of Error Analysis, introduced in his seminal 1967 article "The Significance of Learners' Errors," fundamentally reoriented the field of applied linguistics by reframing learner errors not as failures but as evidence of systematic language learning in progress. Corder distinguished between "mistakes," which are performance slips produced by fatigue, distraction, or memory lapse and which the speaker can self-correct, and "errors," which are systematic, competence-based deviations that the learner cannot self-correct because they reflect genuine gaps in internalized grammatical knowledge. Crucially, Corder argued that errors do not arise solely from first-language interference — the dominant explanation of the prevailing Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis — but may equally arise from the complexity and inconsistency of the target language itself. Such errors, which Corder termed "intralingual errors," are directly generated by features of the target language rather than by cross-linguistic transfer.

This framework is directly applicable to the present study. The errors documented among Nigerian second-language learners in areas such as irregular plurals, irregular verb forms, and phoneme–grapheme mismatch can be analysed, within Corder's framework, as intralingual errors: systematic, learner-generated responses to genuine inconsistency in the target language. By identifying which types of inconsistency generate which patterns of error, the study operationalises Error Analysis as a diagnostic and pedagogical tool.

5.2 Interlanguage Theory (Selinker, 1972)

Larry Selinker's Interlanguage Theory, developed in his 1972 article published in the *International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching*, introduced the concept of interlanguage — the intermediate, systematic linguistic system that second-language learners construct as they move from their native language towards the target language. The interlanguage is neither the learner's L1 nor the target L2 but a distinct, rule-governed system that evolves as the learner acquires more input

and refines their hypotheses about the target language. A central and pedagogically significant concept in Selinker's framework is "fossilisation" — the arrest of interlanguage development at a stage short of native-like competence, such that certain errors become permanent features of the learner's production regardless of continued instruction or exposure.

Nwala (2015) clarified that interlanguage represents a transitional phase in which the learner's production is characterised by errors and by reduced structural complexity compared to the target language. Far from being mere signs of failure, such errors constitute evidence of the learner's active hypothesis-testing about the target system. In the context of the present study, the over-generalisation errors documented among Nigerian learners — such as applying the regular past-tense suffix –ed to irregular verbs — are paradigmatic interlanguage phenomena: they reflect the learner's reasonable generalisation from the majority pattern into a domain where English makes an exception. Selinker's framework thus provides a theoretical basis for treating learner errors as data for understanding both the difficulty of the target language and the logic of the learner's developing system.

6. Methodology

6.1 Research Design

The study adopts a qualitative research design, which is appropriate for investigating the experiential and perceptual dimensions of language learning. Qualitative methods enable the researcher to access learners' own accounts of their difficulties, to observe patterns in their responses, and to interpret those patterns in relation to the theoretical frameworks outlined above. The study does not seek to measure the frequency of errors statistically but to understand the nature, source, and consequences of specific types of inconsistency as they are experienced by learners.

6.2 Sample and Sampling Procedure

A purposive sample of 100 participants was selected from two educational settings. Twenty participants were secondary school students between the ages of 14 and 18 residing in the Ede-Epie community of Yenagoa, Bayelsa State. The remaining 80 were undergraduate students at Federal University Otuoke, drawn from the Departments of English and Communication Studies, Linguistics, Journalism and Media Studies, Art Education (English option), Accounting, History and International Studies, and Philosophy. This multi-departmental sampling was designed to capture perspectives from learners with varying levels of formal exposure to English language instruction. The sample was restricted to these two locations given the researcher's institutional affiliation and the need for sustained access to participants across multiple data collection instruments. Findings should therefore be interpreted as pertaining to these settings rather than as generalisable to all Nigerian second-language learners.

6.3 Data Collection Instruments

6.3.1 Interviews

The researcher conducted one-to-one interviews with the 20 secondary school participants. Five open-ended interview questions explored participants' attitudes towards English, their self-assessed

proficiency, and their specific experiences of difficulty with English grammar and pronunciation. Interviews were conducted in a relaxed and informal setting to encourage candid responses.

6.3.2 Focus Group Discussions (FGD)

A series of focus group discussions was conducted with undergraduate students at Federal University Otuoke, involving 30 participants (coded P1 to P30). The FGDs were organised thematically around the inconsistencies in English rule-based application, with the researcher serving as facilitator. Participants were encouraged to discuss their shared and differing experiences. Discussions were audio-recorded with participants' consent and subsequently transcribed for analysis.

6.3.3 Open-Ended Survey Questions

Twenty open-ended survey questions were administered in written form to the remaining 50 undergraduate participants from non-English departments. The questions were designed to elicit detailed written responses on specific aspects of English inconsistency, including phonological irregularity, grammatical exceptions, variety differences, mother-tongue interference, and instructional factors. Each question was directly aligned with one of the four research objectives.

6.4 Ethical Considerations

Prior to data collection, written institutional permission was obtained from the relevant authorities at Federal University Otuoke and from the leadership of the community secondary school in Ede-Epie. All participants were fully informed of the purpose and nature of the research, their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence, and the strictly academic use to which the data would be put. Participation was voluntary, and no compensation was offered or provided. All data were anonymised; participants are identified in this report only by coded designations (e.g., P1, P2). No sensitive personal information beyond age group, gender, and educational level was collected.

6.5 Data Analysis Procedure

Data from all three instruments were subjected to thematic analysis following the six-phase procedure described by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarisation with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Initial codes were generated inductively from the interview transcripts and FGD recordings and were subsequently reviewed against the survey responses to identify convergences and divergences across instruments. Five overarching themes emerged from this process and are reported in the following section. Findings from each instrument are compared in the discussion to enable triangulation across data sources.

7. Data Analysis and Results

7.1 Participant Demographics

The demographic profile of the 100 participants is presented in Tables 1 to 3 below.

Table 1: Gender Distribution

S/N	Gender	Frequency	Percentage
1	Male	55	55%
2	Female	45	45%
3	Total	100	100%

The sample is slightly male-dominated (55%) but broadly balanced in terms of gender representation.

Table 2: Age Distribution

S/N	Age Group	Frequency	Percentage
1	14 – 17	20	20%
2	18 – 20	40	40%
3	21 – 24	30	30%
4	25 and above	10	10%
5	Total	100	100%

The majority of respondents (90%) fall within the 14–24 age range, indicating a predominantly young study population consistent with the secondary and undergraduate student focus.

Table 3: Educational Level

S/N	Educational Level	Frequency	Percentage
1	Post-primary (Secondary school)	20	20%
2	Undergraduate (University student)	80	80%
3	Total	100	100%

Undergraduate students constitute 80% of the sample, reflecting the broader focus of the study on tertiary-level learners, with secondary school students providing a comparative younger population.

7.2 Thematic Analysis: Focus Group Discussion

Five themes emerged from the thematic analysis of the FGD data. These themes are presented below with representative participant evidence and analytical interpretation grounded in the theoretical frameworks.

Theme 1: Cognitive Overload Due to Irregular Rules

Participants consistently reported difficulty in internalising grammatical exceptions, which they experienced as unpredictable deviations from patterns they had already learned. This experience of cognitive overload reflects what Error Analysis identifies as the intralingual source of difficulty: the problem lies not in transfer from the L1 but in the target language's failure to apply its own rules consistently.

Evidence: Participants 1–10 stated: “Why is it ‘ox – oxen’ and not ‘oxs’? It is confusing.” Participants 11–15 reported: “Plural forms like ‘children’ instead of ‘childs,’ and past forms like ‘split’ instead of ‘splited,’ are difficult to remember.”

Interpreted through Selinker's Interlanguage framework, these responses illustrate over-generalisation: learners apply the regular morphological rule (–s for plural, –ed for past tense) to irregular items because the majority pattern has been internalised. The resulting “errors” are logical within the learner's interlanguage system, even though they deviate from target-language norms.

Theme 2: Difficulty Applying Rules in Real-Time Communication

Learners reported a gap between declarative knowledge of grammatical rules and procedural ability to apply them fluently during communication. This gap — between knowing a rule and being able to deploy it automatically — is consistent with the distinction between competence and performance that underpins Corder's (1967) Error Analysis framework.

Evidence: Participants 16–18 stated: “We know the rule, but when speaking, we forget or mix it up.” Participants 19–20 noted: “Sometimes we apply a rule, and it turns out to be wrong because of an exception.”

The inconsistency between formally learned rules and their real-life application reduces learner confidence and accuracy in communication, a finding consistent with Edhere's (2023) observation that navigating between local and standard English norms imposes a double cognitive burden.

Theme 3: Over-Generalisation of Grammatical Rules

Participants frequently described applying a single rule across contexts in which it does not apply, a strategy that is both inevitable and, within the interlanguage framework, entirely predictable. Over-generalisation represents the learner's rational attempt to impose system on a language that resists full systematisation.

Evidence: Participants 21–24 stated: “We always add ‘–ed’ to every verb when talking about the past.” Participants 25–26 reported: “We thought all plurals end with ‘–s.’”

These patterns of over-generalisation constitute what Corder (1967) termed “systematic errors” — deviations that are consistent and predictable rather than random, and that reflect the internal logic of the learner’s developing grammatical system.

Theme 4: Frustration and Reduced Motivation

Several participants expressed emotional responses to the experience of English inconsistency, particularly frustration at the perceived arbitrariness of the language’s rules. This affective dimension has practical implications for learning outcomes, as sustained frustration can erode motivation and inhibit willingness to engage with the language.

Evidence: Participants 27–28 stated: “English has too many exceptions” and “Sometimes we feel like giving up because it does not follow logic.”

This theme resonates with the concept of fossilisation in Selinker’s (1972) framework: where learners cease to develop their interlanguage, one contributing factor is motivational disengagement from the learning process.

Theme 5: Preference for Context-Based Learning

Participants identified contextual, usage-based instruction as more effective than abstract rule presentation, a finding that aligns with contemporary approaches to language pedagogy emphasising input-rich, communicative learning environments.

Evidence: Participants 29–30 stated: “Examples help more than rules; we learn better when we see how words are used in sentences.”

This suggestion from learners themselves is consistent with Ellis’s (2020) argument that second-language acquisition proceeds most effectively through active engagement with meaningful input and interaction, rather than through explicit rule instruction alone.

7.3 Thematic Analysis: Open-Ended Survey Responses

The written survey responses from 50 undergraduate participants were analysed thematically and are summarised in Table 4. The table presents key response patterns, the type of inconsistency identified, the reported effect on learning (writing), the reported effect on speaking, and an overall interpretive comment grounded in the theoretical framework.

Table 4: Thematic Analysis of Open-Ended Survey Responses (N = 50)

Respondent	Key Response Summary	Type of Inconsistency	Effect on Learning/Writing	Effect on Speaking
R1	Spelling differs from pronunciation	Orthographic–phonological	Confusion in reading and spelling	Mispronunciation

R2	Teachers pronounce words differently from one another	Instructional inconsistency	Mixed understanding	Inconsistent speech patterns
R3	Confusion between British and American English conventions	Variety difference	Uncertainty in examination contexts	Unintended accent switching
R4	Silent letters create confusion	Phonological inconsistency	Slowed reading	Avoidance of unfamiliar words
R5	Many grammatical exceptions	Grammatical inconsistency	Errors in written composition	Fear of speaking due to anticipated error
R6	Words with multiple meanings cause misinterpretation	Semantic ambiguity	Misreading of texts	Inappropriate word choice
R7	Slang vs. formal English confusion	Register inconsistency	Poor academic writing	Informal speech in formal contexts
R8	Pronunciation does not match spelling	Phonic inconsistency	Learning delay	Incorrect articulation
R9	Influence of mother tongue on English production	L1 interference	Translation-based errors	L1 accent in English speech
R10	Limited opportunities to practise English	Exposure inconsistency	Limited mastery	Poor fluency
R11	Different textbooks present different rules	Instructional inconsistency	Confusion in independent study	Uncertainty in speech
R12	Verb tenses are confusing	Morphosyntactic inconsistency	Tense errors in writing	Incorrect tense use in speech
R13	Teachers code-switch to local language during instruction	Code-switching inconsistency	Reduced English immersion	Dependency on L1
R14	Words spelled similarly but	Orthographic inconsistency	Reading difficulty	Mispronunciation

	pronounced differently			
R15	Irregular plural formations	Morphological inconsistency	Memorisation burden	Errors in spoken number marking
R16	Peer influence reinforces incorrect usage	Sociolinguistic inconsistency	Reinforcement of errors	Spread of non-standard forms
R17	Absence of systematic phonics instruction	Instructional gap	Weak word-decoding skills	Poor pronunciation
R18	Confusion with homophones	Lexical inconsistency	Spelling errors	Miscommunication
R19	Examination English differs from everyday spoken English	Functional inconsistency	Examination-focused learning at expense of fluency	Poor real-life communicative ability
R20	Media exposure to multiple English accents	Exposure inconsistency	Mixed phonological input	Accent confusion

Five overarching themes emerge from the survey data: (1) phonological inconsistency, particularly mismatch between spelling and pronunciation and the presence of silent letters and homophones; (2) grammatical complexity and exception-richness, including irregular verbs, tense confusion, and irregular plural formation; (3) variety and standardisation issues, arising from the co-existence of British and American English and variation across teachers and textbooks; (4) mother-tongue interference, manifesting in accent, sentence structure, and tense-marking errors; and (5) instructional and environmental factors, including limited exposure, code-switching by teachers, and absence of systematic phonics instruction. These five themes correspond closely to the themes identified in the FGD analysis, confirming their robustness across data sources.

8. Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study, taken together across the three data collection instruments, present a coherent and theoretically interpretable picture of the challenges that English rule-based inconsistency poses for Nigerian second-language learners. Three analytical threads run through the data and are discussed below in relation to the study's theoretical frameworks.

8.1 Intralingual Difficulty as a Primary Source of Error

A consistent finding across the FGD and survey data is that learners identify the inconsistencies within English itself — rather than solely the distance between English and their L1 — as a major

source of difficulty. The errors documented in this study — over-regularised past tenses (e.g., “splited”), over-regularised plurals (e.g., “childs”), and phonetically plausible but orthographically incorrect spellings (e.g., “enof,” “tif,” “saikoloji” for “psychology”) — are precisely the intralingual errors that Corder (1967) described as arising from the target language rather than from L1 transfer. They reflect the learner’s rational application of the majority rule to a domain where English makes an exception. This finding is consistent with Njoku and Izuagba’s (2004) earlier documentation of grapheme–phoneme mismatch as a significant challenge for Nigerian learners, and extends it by situating this pattern within a broader theoretical account.

8.2 Over-Generalisation as Interlanguage Development

The over-generalisation errors documented in Theme 3 of the FGD analysis are, from the perspective of Selinker’s (1972) Interlanguage Theory, entirely expected features of a developing second-language system. The learner who adds –ed to all verbs in the past tense is not making a random error; they are demonstrating mastery of the majority rule for English past-tense formation. What they have not yet acquired is knowledge of the class of irregular verbs that constitute exceptions to that rule. Pedagogically, this insight is important: over-generalisation errors should not be treated as failures of attention or intelligence but as evidence of successful rule learning that requires extension to include exceptions. This reframing — from deficit to development — is one of the primary contributions of both Corder’s and Selinker’s theoretical frameworks to classroom practice.

The risk of fossilisation arises where exceptions are never systematically taught, or where learners lose the motivation to continue refining their interlanguage (Theme 4). Sustained frustration with the perceived arbitrariness of English rules, documented among several FGD participants, is a condition that facilitates fossilisation and should therefore be treated as a pedagogical risk factor.

8.3 Compound Challenges: L1 Interference, Instructional Inconsistency, and Sociolinguistic Pressure

The survey data (Table 4, Themes R9, R11, R13, R16) and the FGD findings together confirm that the difficulties caused by target-language inconsistency are substantially compounded by three interacting sets of factors. First, mother-tongue interference — identified by Njoku and Nwokedi (2020) as a major exacerbating variable — interacts with the target language’s own inconsistencies to produce a distinctive error profile in which, for example, learners whose L1 phonologies do not contain certain English phonemes are further disadvantaged by the absence of a consistent orthographic guide to pronunciation. Second, instructional inconsistency, including variation in rule presentation across teachers and textbooks (Olufemi and Ogunniyi, 2023), means that learners receive conflicting information about the target system, compounding the inconsistency already present in the language itself. Third, sociolinguistic pressures — peer influence, media exposure to multiple accent varieties, and the co-existence of Nigerian English and standard English in learners’ communicative environments — create competing norms that make it difficult for learners to develop stable target-language intuitions.

Taken together, these findings indicate that the challenge of English rule-based inconsistency for Nigerian learners is not a simple two-variable problem (learner L1 vs. target language) but a multi-

layered phenomenon in which structural, pedagogical, and sociolinguistic factors are dynamically interrelated. Effective intervention must therefore address all three dimensions simultaneously.

9. Summary and Conclusion

This study investigated the nature and effects of rule-based inconsistency in the English language as experienced by second-language learners and speakers in Nigerian secondary schools and universities, drawing on qualitative data from 100 participants across three instruments: interviews, focus group discussions, and open-ended surveys. The findings confirm that structural inconsistency in English — particularly in the areas of grapheme–phoneme correspondence, irregular verb and plural morphology, and variety differences between British and American standards — constitutes a significant and internally generated source of learner difficulty that compounds the challenges of first-language interference and instructional inconsistency.

Interpreted through Corder’s (1967) Theory of Error Analysis, the systematic errors documented in this study are best understood as intralingual phenomena: evidence of the target language’s own complexity rather than merely of learner deficiency. Interpreted through Selinker’s (1972) Interlanguage Theory, the over-generalisation patterns and affective responses of frustration and disengagement observed in the data are recognisable features of interlanguage development that, if unaddressed, carry the risk of fossilisation. The study thus argues for a shift in pedagogical orientation: from treating learner errors as signs of failure to treating them as diagnostic data that reveal which aspects of the target language require more deliberate and exception-aware instruction.

The study is limited by its restriction to two educational settings in Bayelsa State, which constrains the generalisability of its findings. Future research should replicate this investigation across a wider range of Nigerian states and institutions, and should employ a mixed-methods design capable of quantifying the frequency and distribution of specific error types alongside the qualitative accounts of learner experience reported here.

10. Recommendations

Based on the findings and the theoretical analysis presented in this study, the following recommendations are offered:

1. Exception-aware instruction: Given that the over-generalisation errors documented in this study reflect learners’ successful mastery of majority rules rather than ignorance of grammar, teachers of English at secondary and tertiary levels should adopt instructional approaches that explicitly address exceptions alongside rules. Presenting irregular verbs and irregular plurals as a coherent, learnable category — rather than as anomalies — can reduce the cognitive disorientation that drives the frustration documented in Theme 4.
2. Systematic phonics instruction: The finding that phonological inconsistency — particularly grapheme–phoneme mismatch and the presence of silent letters — is among the most frequently cited sources of difficulty (Survey Respondents R1, R4, R8, R14, R17) argues strongly for the integration of systematic phonics instruction into secondary-school English curricula. Learners who develop explicit awareness of the patterns and limitations of English phonics are better equipped to manage the irregularities they will inevitably encounter.

3. Improved teacher training: The instructional inconsistencies documented in this study — varying rule explanations across teachers, code-switching to local languages during instruction — indicate a need for more rigorous and consistent pre-service and in-service teacher education focused on English language pedagogy. Teachers should be equipped with knowledge not only of English grammar rules but also of the exceptions, the historical and etymological reasons for them, and effective strategies for teaching them.
4. Context-based and communicative learning: The learner-generated recommendation in Theme 5 — that contextual, usage-based instruction is more effective than abstract rule presentation — is consistent with the theoretical frameworks adopted in this study and with a substantial body of SLA research. Schools and universities should provide structured opportunities for extended English language use in meaningful contexts, including language laboratories, English-medium discussion groups, and supervised oral performance assessments.
5. Standardisation of instructional materials: Given the confusion caused by differing conventions across textbooks, education authorities in Bayelsa State and at the federal level should work towards greater standardisation of English language teaching materials, ensuring that exceptions are treated consistently and that the choice between British and American conventions is made explicit and stable within any given institution.

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