

## On Context and Second Language Acquisition: The Rural Urban Dichotomy in Cameroon

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### ABSTRACT

The complexity of the linguistic environment in Cameroon raises the question of context and its role in the acquisition of another language. This paper draws a dichotomy between learners in such contexts considered rural<sup>1</sup> and those regarded as urban or cosmopolitan<sup>2</sup>. Using the irregular verb as a yardstick, an evaluation of the acquisition of irregular verb patterns by 80 final year primary school learners from 2 contexts in the Northwest Region of Cameroon was done. Oral and written tests were administered to check learners' acquisition of verb inflectional categories, verb tenses and general written and oral productions. The findings reveal similar trends in the acquisition of inflectional categories and verb tenses by learners in both contexts and divergent trends in general oral and written productions. For instance, learners in both contexts had similar challenges using the Vs, Ved and Ven inflections with a very low average frequency of 26% and with a high frequency of 67.2 % for the Ving and Vo inflections. Though learners in the urban centres had higher degrees of efficiency in oral productions, their counterparts in the rural areas had more challenges in verbal as against written productions. The paper concludes that second language acquisition is not a consequence of a unilateral context but a result of a plethora of other factors both within and without the learning environment with evident pedagogic implications for stakeholders in the second language acquisition industry.

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## INTRODUCTION

Second language acquisition has gradually drifted from being a pleasing pastime, to an obligatory endeavour especially for citizens of the global village. It is no news again that the World Wide Web has bridged the gap between continents, countries, cities and villages hitherto separated by archetypal frontiers that inhibited interaction between peoples believed to be eternally separated by varied topographical barriers. This has had a boomerang effect on the second language acquisition industry that has witnessed a blossom in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is more so the case of the English language given its significance as a vehicle for the transmission of knowledge that is greatly cherished in the global village. To bridge the linguistic chasm between the islands in the globe, a plethora of intricacies need to be grappled with amongst which is the question of context. If we adhere to the Whorfian Hypothesis,<sup>3</sup> it is evident that culture influences language and vice versa.

Learners in the rural areas of Cameroon acquire English in a context that is conspicuously dissimilar from their counterparts in the urban centres with regard to both linguistic and extra-linguistic exigencies. The rural areas are dominated almost exclusively by local languages of Bantu origin

and Mbibeh (2010) highlights this complexity by stating that at times there are 2 to 3 different local languages spoken in the same locality. Children who go to primary school at 3 to 5 years can already speak and sustain a conversation in any or two or more of these languages. In the urban centres, children on the contrary are exposed to some English at home and more to Pidgin English among peers with whom they have very regular interactions (Fonka 2011). At school age, these children come to the acquisition of English with knowledge of either a home language (which can be a local language spoken by the parents at home) Pidgin English and English language. Such complexity raises a fundamental question of context in second language acquisition with focus on the Cameroonian rural and urban contexts. Given that all these learners are expected to acquire English within the same school program, this raises another problem of consistency in the teaching learning process for such glaringly diverse contexts. In an effort to bridge the linguistic ravine, this paper isolates the two contradictory islands in an endeavour to specify such challenges and strengths that are peculiar to each milieu, examines what characterises such contexts and identifies inherent trends related to the acquisition of English language before drawing implications to the second language acquisition industry. In cognisance of the

fact that learners are acquiring the same language (English) in varying contexts, the pivotal preoccupation of the paper is to examine whether there is a difference and/or similarity in the acquisition trend as well as in the final outcome of the acquisition process in the two contexts. That is why the study uses the theory of interlanguage to trace development in the acquisition of irregular verbs by learners both in the rural and urban centres of Cameroon. For a better comprehension of the contexts under study, it is imperative to present a linguistic map of Cameroon.

### **THE LANGUAGE CARTOGRAPHY OF CAMEROON**

One of the most intriguing marvels about Cameroon is the complexity of its linguistic geography. If the country has over the years been referred to as Africa in miniature, the linguistic density of the territory (with a multiplicity of many languages) stands out as one of the prominent reasons for this appellation. In fact, it has been arduous and challenging to make precise statements on the number of languages that exist in Cameroon. The 15<sup>th</sup> edition of the Ethnologue on languages of the world estimates that Cameroon has over 276 languages distributed amongst three of the four major language families in Africa including Nilo-Saharan, Congo-Kordofanian and the Afro-Asiatic. Chia (1983:32) had earlier proposed that there are 123 unintelligible indigenous languages in Cameroon. Considering this number as inferior, the linguistic atlas of Cameroon talks of 239 languages in the country. It is obvious from these rather conflicting statements that over time, the confusion on the exact number of languages in Cameroon is quite rife. This is not however the foremost issue in this section. What can be conjectured from these diverging reports is that the linguistic topography of Cameroon is a byzantine one. Besides, it is evident from these reports that Cameroon is a hodgepodge of all African language. Wolf (2001) notes that the divergence exhibited by researchers about the exact number of languages in Cameroon, shows that this number is yet to be known even though this is a herculean task given that some of the languages are dying out while others are evolving and adopting fairly new ramifications and identities. After an in depth inspect of results from various researchers on the question, Atechi (2006) purports that a good number of them consider 248 as a plausible number of languages spoken in Cameroon. It is worth noting that present day Cameroon has witnessed some evolution in its linguistic panorama with the development of Pidgin English as a national lingua franca (Fonka 2011, Kouega 2015, Ngefac 2016,) with its various corollaries as well as camfranglais (a mixture of English French and some local languages) that is also attracting attention (Kouega 2003)

In the rural areas where part of this study is carried out, various languages are used with the following estimated frequencies; local languages 60%, pidgin English 20%, English 15% and French 5%. The reverse of this frequency is true for urban centres where Pidgin English is domineering with an estimated frequency of 50% (see Fonka 2011) English 30%, French 15% and local languages 5%. A discussion of the

linguistic background of Cameroon is primordial in a study like the present one that traces the relationship between contexts and second language acquisition. The context of course is primarily the sociolinguistic context. From the discussion above, it is possible to insinuate a discrepancy in the acquisition trends between learners in rural areas and their counterparts in the urban centres.

### **THE ROLE OF CONTEXT IN SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION**

In fact, one of the easiest and aboriginal explanations of second language acquisition is the role of context. This paradigm that dominated justifications for language acquisition in the yesteryears was championed by linguists pruned to the behaviourist school of thought. It is common place in daily conversation to hear learners scoff at their peers asking them where they come from in instances of what they consider to be ‘wrong grammar’ (most glaring in pronunciation). The earliest explanations of language acquisition held the role of the context in which the child grew up in high esteem. According to the behaviourists championed by Bloomfield, language acquisition involves habits which are formed when “learners respond to various stimuli in the environment and subsequently have their responses reinforced so that they are remembered” (Ellis 1997:31). In effect, the baseline of this theory that knew its heydays in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was the imperative necessity for stimulus from the environment (context). In which perspective, the child in behaviourist jargon, was considered to be born tabula raza and could only acquire what it was exposed to. That is why when Genie<sup>4</sup> was deprived from social and linguistic interaction by a callous father, she could only start acquiring language at the age of 13 when she was exposed to it.

A number of critics of this realm of thought on language acquisition have drawn a discrepancy between the input learners receive from the environment and the output they produce with the conclusion that the finality of language acquisition is not just the result of the stimulus they receive but also of innate capabilities (Chomsky 1965, 2002, Ellis 1997). What then does the child add to this input? Is it that learners come into the acquisition process with some endowments that permit them to acquire and process language the way they do? These are some of the interrogations that pushed structural linguists to dig deep into the process of language acquisition concluding that since it is now glaring that the output learners produce is far from being a facsimile of the input they received, it is but evident that there is some interplay of biological abilities. This is because the learners do not just regurgitate the input received but are seen to be creative (see Chomsky 1965, Ellis 1997). Of course as Chomsky (1965) explains, the rule of input is evident, but to claim that the language a child produces is essentially a re-enactment of motherese<sup>5</sup> input is far from satisfactory. This argument gives enough impetus for language acquisition to drift from an absolute focus on input to the output learners produce (Larson Freeman 1983).

Away from the input/output disparity, you will bear with me that some contexts could be more suitable for second

language acquisition than others and reference can be made to the precarious situation that Genie went through. Though the issue of suitability of context is seemingly glaring, it is still replete with uncertainties and debates are still on the rise. I will therefore like to delimit the acquisition of English in this paper to acquisition within the Cameroonian context. The context here will drift away from the macrocosm of contexts that could exist to specifically examine the rural and urban classroom contexts and their incidence on English second language acquisition in Cameroon.

### **THEORETICAL PREMISES**

The later part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century witnessed bounteous interest in second language research that was hitherto the reserve of first language. Questions on how an infant acquired language drifted to how an adult could or did acquire yet another language after acquiring the first. The major preoccupation was to draw interrelationships between theoretical explanations of first language acquisition and possible analogies with the situation in second language acquisition (later SLA). That is why a number of theories in SLA often have a bearing on first language acquisition (later FLA). After all, a number of linguists have fervently contended that the two processes present a similar experience. If SLA is a field of study on its own, there is need for theoretical explanations on how the procedure takes place. This section discusses a number of theories in SLA especially focusing on those that are considered to have a bearing on issues discussed in this paper.

#### **Interlanguage**

In order to describe L2 learner language, Selinker (1972) drawing inspirations from linguistics and psychology believed that when learners start acquiring a second language, they reach a stage in which their language could be referred to as an interlanguage. Apart from being just a terminology, interlanguage has become a theory that explains the evolutionary process in which first language (later L1) speakers progressively become users on a second language (later L2). In discussing interlanguage, credit is given to founding fathers including; Corder (1967) Selinker (1972), Adjeman (1976), who all underscore that interlanguage "... is systematic and the errors produced by learners do not consist of random mistakes but rather suggest rule governed behaviour" (White 2003). As learners move towards the target language, they pass through intermediate states, developing what these linguists call interim grammars or interlanguage which according to Saville-Troike (2006) is a creative process "...driven by inner forces in interaction with environmental factors and influenced by both L1 and input from the target language".

Littlewood (1984) defines interlanguage as "a learner's system which is neither that of the mother tongue nor that of the second language but contains elements from both". This according to Crystal (1997) is a fundamental stage in second language development especially as it reflects the learner's evolving system of rules. Ellis (1997:33) gives a rather

comprehensive definition of interlanguage emphasising that it has a number of premises about second language acquisition including the fact that;

1. A learner constructs a system of abstract linguistic rules which underlies comprehension and production.
2. The learner's grammar is permeable
3. The grammar is transitional and learners employ varied learning strategies
4. Fossilisation could set in if learners fail to put in necessary efforts or are deprived of sufficient input.

The significance of interlanguage to second language acquisition lies in the fact that it offers a general account on how the process takes place incorporating elements from the two extremist behaviourist and mentalist theories. Apart from the psycholinguistic perspective of interlanguage presented above, the theory equally recognises the significance of social factors discussed within other offshoots of the theory below.

#### **The Accommodation Theory**

Developed by Howard Gills (1982) the accommodation theory is used to explain how the learner's social group influences the course of SLA. The theory holds that when people interact with each other, they either make their speech to sound the same like that of their interlocutors in a bid to emphasise social cohesiveness (convergence) or make their speech to sound different as an expression of social distinctiveness (divergence). Of course, high efficiency ensures when learners employ a convergent rather than a divergent technique. The target language community in the context of this study constitutes educators and all other speakers of English who are definitely not native speakers per say. The relationship between learners in the rural and urban centres in Cameroon and their English language environment (school, other speakers, English programs etc) could be quite determinant in the acquisition of English within the confines of this theory.

#### **Acculturation**

Just like accommodation, the acculturation theory developed by John Schumann (1978) generally assumes that language learning is culture learning. In the case of SLA, restructuring the culture of a learner often results in culture shock which is quite determinant in L2 acquisition. The culture distance perceived in terms of both "the cognitive and affective proximity of two cultures which come into contact within an individual" and distance conceived from an abstract perspective to denote dissimilarity between cultures (Brown 1987:132), have an enormous incidence on SLA. The greater the social distance between two cultures, the greater the difficulty the learner will have in acquiring the second language. Conversely, the smaller the social distance, the greater the social solidarity between the two cultures. Despite the fact that intergroup relationships are not really a problem in the context of the present study, it is worth noting that such distance is still perceptible especially within rural/urban discrepancy. Equally, the teacher here remains the beholder of the required etiquette and if a

distance is created between such a teacher and the learners, there is bound to be retardation in SLA. Generally, learners in urban centres are observed to maintain more closeness to the learning environment than their counterparts in the rural areas who exhibit a great deal of distance with the learning environment and consequently with the L2 culture. The task of this paper is to isolate the incidence of such behavioural pattern within the given context in the acquisition of English and to underscore the dichotomy between the learners. While examining the two principal contexts in which L2 learners of English acquire the language in Cameroon, the major focus drawn from the theories discussed above will be to evaluate how learner language in one context develops and how it is influenced by the socio-cultural tenets of the environment in which the language is acquired. In which case, the theory of interlanguage and its various facets (both psycholinguistic and social) will serve as an essential foundation to the study.

This paper does not discuss English language as a whole but uses an aspect of grammar (the lexical categories-the case of the irregular verb) as a springboard to extrapolate evidence of divergence or convergence between the two contexts. It is therefore incumbent to discuss the grammar of the irregular verb before plunging into the analysis of specific data.

## THE MORPHOLOGY OF THE IRREGULAR VERB

Generally speaking, the verb is at the centre of the description of action in the sentence. Traditionally referred to as “doing words”, verbs prototypically express actions, activities and events. Besides, Parrot (2000) goes further to indicate that verbs equally express other meanings such as existence (be, become, exist), mental conditions (believe), perceptions (see) relationships etc. Verbs are generally classified into main verbs and auxiliary verbs which syntactically have the distinctive property of functioning as heads of the verbs phrase or the predicator within the phrase.

One of the most distinctive characteristic of verbs is their inflectional morphology (Collins and Hollo 2000). Verbs essentially have six inflectional forms including tensed and non-tensed forms.

- |                  |   |
|------------------|---|
| Tensed forms     | 1) X + s → (Vs) 3 <sup>rd</sup> person e.g. <i>dances, eats, cuts</i>     |
|                  | 2) X + O <sub>1</sub> → (Vo) other persons e.g. <i>dance, eat, cut</i>    |
|                  | 3) X + ed → (Ved) past tense e.g. <i>danced, cut, ate</i>                 |
| Non tensed Forms | 4) X + O <sub>2</sub> → (Vi) based/infinitive e.g. <i>dance, cut, eat</i> |
|                  | 5) X + ing → (Ving) present participle e.g. <i>dancing</i>                |
|                  | 6) X + en → (Ven) past participle e.g. <i>danced, eaten</i>               |

Read.

**X** represents any verb

+ represents the plus sign

**O<sub>1</sub>** represents zero one = for persons

**O<sub>2</sub>** represents zero two = based or infinitive form

→ gives

When verbs are considered irregular, the irregularity stems from their failure to follow the normal verb inflectional categories as presented above in a number of levels

### i) Irregularity in past tense formation

As seen above, the past tense form of the verb is represented by the ED morpheme at the end of the verb. Any other verb that does not respect this irregular within such lines; for example

Drive \_\_\_\_\_ drove

Give \_\_\_\_\_ gave

### ii) Irregularity in participial forms

The participial form of verbs is indicated by the EN morpheme placed at the end of the verb. For example

Break \_\_\_\_\_ broken

Be \_\_\_\_\_ been.

It should be recalled that a verb could be regular form our discussion here just in terms of the participial form but irregular in the past simple form

### iii) Verbs could equally be irregular in the sense that both the past participle and the past tense are the same as in this example.<sup>5</sup>

Spend \_\_\_\_\_ spent

Stand \_\_\_\_\_ stood

Here is a list of irregular verbs that were generally used by learners within the context of the study.

## METHODOLOGY

Using the survey research design, written and oral tests were administered to a sample of 80 primary school learners drawn from the Northwest region of Cameroon. The learners selected through a simple random sample were subdivided as follows; 40 from the rural areas and 40 from the urban centres. These constituted final year pupils who are considered to have acquired a certain level of English that permits them to sustain a fluent conversation in the language. The teaching/learning process at this level is more serious as learners are being prepared for final year certificate examinations.

The questionnaire administered to them comprised three main tasks aimed at testing a number of tenses including the present tenses, the past tenses and the future tenses. In item 1 for instance, learners were expected to say why they chose the school in which they are. At one moment they were expected to respond orally, yet in another they were asked to write down their response. The *raison d'être* was to strike a balance between those who are good in writing and the others who do better in speech. Item 2 required the learners to say how they spent their holiday while in item 3 respondents were expected to say what they will like to be in future.

The analysis of data from these exercises does not follow this distinction. The data is sorted and analysed as a whole with particular attention to the frequency of irregular verbs used, the inflectional categories as well as the tenses. In which case, specific attention is paid to the level of error and correctness in line with the paradigms of the theory of interlanguage used in the study. At the macro level, a comparison between learners in the urban and rural areas is done with the

intension of determining the impact of their sociolinguistic settings to the acquisition process.

## DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

While analysing data collected for this study in order to evaluate the interrelationship between context and second language acquisition with focus on the rural and urban settings in Cameroon, a tri-dimensional measure is preferred. Firstly, an evaluation of the use of the six verb inflectional forms in terms of error and occurrence is done followed by verb tenses before moving to an analysis of learners' fluency in both the written and oral productions. In each case, a comparison of the rural and urban contexts is done.

### The Use of the Six Verb Inflectional Forms

Within the grammar of the verb, the most glaring characteristic as mentioned earlier is the inflectional categories which are six in number. In the corpus analysed, inflectional forms were used at varying degrees in the different contexts as the table below indicates.

From this table, it is evident that learners in the final stage of primary education in both the rural and urban centres all used the six inflectional forms with a close similarity in the frequency of occurrence. The inflections with the highest frequency of error as well as highest occurrence of positive renditions include the Vo with 100% for both the rural and urban areas, the Vi with 100% for urban and 63% for rural areas, the Ving with 68% for urban and 65.2% for rural areas. What is curious here is that the trend is just the same for both contexts but for the slight difference in percentage of occurrence as seen above. Learners are definitely comfortable with the Vi and Vo inflections because they represent verbs in the base form devoid of any morphological alteration. Equally, the Ving form that represents mostly the progressive in learners' write up was seemingly easier for learners to manipulate. However, note should be taken that such gross use of the Ving form did not go without difficulty. This is because at one moment it was used more as a gerund in instances where it was supposed to represent either the progressive in the past or in the present as in the instance below;

I \*going to see my aunt\_\_\_\_ I was going

The dropping of the auxiliary particle was frequent so much such that in the total number of 17 erroneous instances noted with both rural and urban learners, 10 of them, that is, 58% represented this kind of error. Even though the Vs, Ved and Ven inflections were supposed to be used with higher frequencies given that the exercise was tailored to engender the use of these inflections, they recorded very low frequencies for learners in both contexts as follows;

- 26 and 19.2 % for the Ved inflection for the urban and rural contexts respectively.
- 27 and 25% for the Vs inflection for the urban and rural contexts respectively.
- 25% for the Ven in both contexts.

This is glaring indication that these inflections constitute impediments to the acquisition of English by learners in both areas.

Looking at the data from both areas, one interesting finding is that despite the difference in context of study, learners acquire and use the six inflectional forms with a lot of similitude in the process of acquisition. The difference may be that the corpus for learners in the rural areas is slightly smaller than that of their counterparts in the urban centres. But from a general perspective, the trends are similar. This is because learners in the urban centres recorded 50% of positive inflections while those in the rural areas recorded 51.1%. This trend goes to reinforce Larson's (1983) postulate that the focus of language acquisition should be drifted from input to output. This is important here because it is generally considered that learners in the rural areas have lesser input due to the unfavourable learning context as English is spoken here essentially in the classroom (Mbibeh 2010). The findings here reveal that if we were to stop analysis at the level of inflectional categories, then we would postulate that learners in both contexts acquire language with the same

**Table 1.** List of irregular verbs

Base form	Past tense	Past participle
Be	Was/were	Been
Beat	Beat	Beaten
Bite	Bit	Bitten
Blow	Blew	Blown
Catch	Caught	Caught
Come	Came	Come
Cut	Cut	Cut
Do	Did	Done
Draw	Drew	Drawn
Drink	Drank	Drunk
Eat	Ate	Eaten
Fall	Fell	Fallen
Fight	Fought	Fought
Give	Gave	Given
Go	Went	Gone
Hold	Held	Held
Hide	Hid	Hidden
Keep	Kept	Kept
Know	Knew	Known
Leave	Left	Left
Lie	Lay	Lain
Make	Made	Made
Put	Put	Put
Rise	Rose	Risen
See	Saw	Seen
Shine	Shone	Shone
Sing	Sang	Sung
Tear	Tore	Torn
Understand	Understood	Understood
Wake	Woke	Woken
Win	Won	Won

trends and patterns confirming the postulates of Universal Grammar.

### Verb Tenses

From the inflectional categories, it can be deduced that a number of tenses were used including the simple present, progressive tenses, perfect tenses etc. The table below presents the relative frequency of tenses used as well as the level of error involved for both learners in the urban and rural areas.

An observation of table 3 above reveals that learners in both areas are quite comfortable with inflections for the progressive tenses and the future simple tense. That is why they recorded high frequencies of positive usage with 82.2% and 100% for the urban centres and 73.7% and 100% for the rural areas for the progressive and future simple tenses respectively. This trend could be attributed first of all to the simplicity in the morphological structure of the future simple tense with will/shall as the case may be plus the base form of the verb. It was noticed that the basic definition of a verb as an indicator of action was reminiscent in the learners' mental grammar is quite concomitant with the ING forms that represent the progressive tenses with an addition of the auxiliary particle. The recurrent error noticed at this level was the elision of the auxiliary particle or the interchange of such auxiliary. In which case, the auxiliary was used in the present to represent a past continuous action. The simple present equally posed difficulties to learners at both levels with as much as 69.3% error for the rural areas and 68% error for the urban centres.

The error noticed here was with the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular where the S morpheme was elided. The simple past, as well as the perfect tenses were quite problematic to learners. For the simple past, the error could be related to overgeneralization of rules to include irregular cases. The ED morpheme that represents the past simple for regular verbs was extended to irregular cases yielding such erroneous forms as;

- i. Eat \_\_\_\_\_ \*eated \_\_\_\_\_ instead of ate
- ii. Run \_\_\_\_\_ \*runed \_\_\_\_\_ instead of ran etc

This situation was equally extended to include the participial forms used to obtain the perfect tenses with an addition of the verb *to have*. That is why cases such as the ones below could find expression in the corpus analysed.

- iii. It have \*flyed (flown), \*costed (cost),
- iv. Has \*chosed (chosen), has \*ran (run) etc

Equally, one of the glaring errors was with the past perfect where the auxiliary *to have* was still maintained in the present simple instead of the past.

Examining the divergence between learners in the rural areas as well as those in the urban centres with regard to verb tenses for irregular verbs, it is evident just like with inflectional categories discussed earlier that the difference is not an astounding one. On the whole, the acquisition trend is virtually the same with similar difficulties at all stages. Even if the corpus for learners in the rural areas is slightly shorter, the inherent grammar is identical with analogous difficulties at all stages. That is why the general percentage for positive occurrences for learners, that is, 63.2 and 57% respectively for both the urban and rural areas had a very slim gap of 6.2%. This finding goes in line with the mentalists' paradigms of language acquisition that privileges the role of underlying systems as against the stimulus from the

**Table 2.** Verb inflectional categories

Inflection	Urban data			Rural data		
	Positive	Negative	Positive %	Positive	Negative	Positive %
Vs	10	27	27	7	21	25
Vo	41	00	100	31	00	100
Ved	11	31	26	5	21	19.2
Vi	10	00	100	12	7	63
Ving	20	9	68	15	8	65.2
Ven	5	20	25	5	15	25
Total	27	87	50	75	72	51.1

**Table 3.** Dichotomy in the use of verb tenses

Tense	Urban data			Rural data		
	Positive	Negative	Positive %	Positive	Negative	Positive %
Simple present	15	31	32	113	28	31.7
Progressive tenses	51	11	82.2	42	15	73.5
Future simple	53	00	100	39	00	100
Simple past	49	21	70	33	29	53.2
Perfect tenses	15	32	31.9	09	21	30
Total	193	95	63.2	136	93	57

environment earlier projected by the behaviourists. This is evidence that the learner does not come to the acquisition terrain tabula raza but possesses innate endowments that permit them to acquire language in general with similar trends as can be noticed here with learners in two quite distinct contexts. Therefore, the conclusion one may be making here is that in terms of the acquisition of the internal grammatical system, the procedure is similar even in varying contexts. Maybe it is time to examine the learners' general written as well as oral productions.

### Trends in Written and Oral Productions

Given that data for this study was collected in both rural and urban contexts, it became necessary to evaluate the general performance of respondents in written and oral productions owing to the specificity of each context. In terms of written English, it was discovered that learners in the rural areas performed better than their counterparts in the urban centres. This was evaluated from the frequency of error found in their write up in general. As such, in a volume of written work of about 120 words for example, the average frequency of error related to verbs stood at 50 for learners in the urban areas and at 35 for their counterparts in the rural areas with similar volume of corpus.

In terms of oral productions, learners in the urban centres were more fluent in speech than their peers in the rural areas. The subjects from the rural areas were primarily very timid and spoke with a lot of hesitations and error as regards spontaneous speech. In a corpus of 5 sentences of about 16 to 20 words as many as 7 hesitations and the same number of errors related especially to verb usage could be recorded. On the contrary, their peers in the urban centres spoke with few hesitations recording only 3 of such within the same length of corpus and even if they had the same number of errors, they ironically spoke with a lot of confidence as could be read on their faces. This is indicative of the fact that they are not aware of the erroneous renditions in their speech. It is evident within interlanguage paradigms that such errors are developmental hence we consider them as such in this study.

The justification for this difference between learners in the same level of education with teachers from similar training schools can only be related to the context in which they learn. Learners in the rural areas acquire English essentially in the classroom given that the out-of-class environment is dominated by the local languages. Their English is mostly rule oriented following the teaching technique used. This explains why their speech is replete with hesitations which of course are geared toward reassuring themselves of the rule being used. In fact, their communication moves from rule to expression. This means that rules are at a primordial position to production. The contrary is true of respondents in the urban centres who start acquiring English language at home before moving to the classroom. The rule-based grammar introduced in school is more of an impediment to the acquisition trend at home that is devoid of rigid corrections and respect for rules. It is evident that there is reinforcement at home and any language produced by the child is received with appreciation from the surrounding no matter how

erroneous school grammarians may consider it to be. This gives the child the liberty to communicate without fear of error hence few hesitations. This is unlike the case in school where the teacher is poised to obtain efficiency in grammar and is therefore constantly correcting the child to achieve this objective. Such corrections create a distance between the interlocutors thereby reducing efficiency in communication. Though methodologists are relegating focus on rules in teaching, it is necessary to mention here that personal observation shows that teachers rather prefer old habits especially given other mechanical difficulties<sup>7</sup> for instance that impede the use of communicative techniques.

It is only within the domain of oral and written productions that the dichotomy between learners in the rural and urban areas is conspicuous. Given that communication which is the finality of language acquisition is both oral and written, it is essential to strike a balance. Even though one may not want neither learners in the urban centres to be prolific writers nor those in the rural areas to be vibrant communicators, it is incumbent on them to acquire a plausible degree of competence in these domains. For the rural areas, it is important to accompany teaching with a lot of role-play so as to give the learners a semblance of the communicative context they would find out of the classroom. Those in the urban centres will need to focus more on reading and writing activities given that within the setting, the external environment already has a favourable communicative context for learners to develop verbal competence and skills.

### SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

This paper set out to investigate the acquisition of English in two different learning contexts (the rural and urban settings in Cameroon). After observation and analysis of data focusing specifically on the acquisition of irregular verbs in these contexts, the following findings were arrived at.

As regards the use of the six verb inflectional forms, it was observed that learners in both rural and urban centres had difficulties with the Vs, Ved and Ven inflectional categories for irregular verbs. That is why the relative average of difficulty for the three inflections stood at 70.7 and 77.3 for the urban and rural contexts respectively. The general comment one can make here is that the gap is not as wide as expected. This means that the learners are acquiring the inflectional categories in both contexts with similar trends. Therefore the environment is not exclusively primordial as is often projected to be<sup>8</sup> in SLA.

Secondly, an evaluation of the use of verb tenses by learners in both areas revealed that the simple present and perfect tenses were problematic to learners in both environments. The ED morpheme which is a marker of the past simple tense was over-generalized to include irregular verbs. It was equally observed that the progressive and the future simple tenses were grasped with a lot of ease recording an overwhelming average success rate of 91.1% and 86.6% for the two tenses in the urban and rural settings respectively. We still maintain that though there is a slight difference of 4.5% between the contexts, the acquisition trends remain the same. This goes to confirm the mentalists' philosophies that

there is more to acquisition than just the visible environment. This means that learners come to the acquisition terrain with a natural capacity that permits them acquire language with similar patterns notwithstanding the individual learner differences that could exist in line with the general dynamism of the human race.

The last finding that seems to have turned the tides of the line of thought being developed above was related to the learners' general performance in both the written and oral productions. It was realised that learners in the urban centres were very good in oral productions and could involve in verbal exchange with a high degree of efficiency and ease. Unlike their counterparts in the rural areas whose verbal productions were replete with a lot of hesitations and 'strange' paralinguistic undertones.<sup>9</sup> However, unlike their peers in the urban centres, learners in the rural areas were quite good in written productions. Though their corpus was comparatively shorter, good sentences/expressions had relatively higher frequency rates in the scripts of these learners. The seemingly 'strange' gestural language is a consequence of transfer from learners' first language or socio cultural context. This is indicative of the level to which the environment could have an impact on second language acquisition. That learners spend more time in rural classroom contexts writing than speaking reflects the trends of the environment in which they study. As earlier mentioned, the rural environment is devoid of communicative contexts out of the classroom where learners could freely use acquired forms in more natural contexts. This is of course detrimental to fluency in the language. They have no other option than to become good writers since they practice it more.

## CONCLUSION

The discussion in this paper centred on an evaluation of the dichotomy between two learning contexts in Cameroon; that is, the rural and urban contexts. Data was collected from a sample of 80 learners' written and oral productions. These learners were drawn from rural and urban contexts in the Northwest Region of Cameroon. Using the irregular verb as a yardstick for measurement, the paper concludes that the influence of the environment in second language acquisition is rather complementary to learners' innate predispositions than to an absolute bearing on one. The consequent outcome of SLA would not be strictly based on the environment as behaviourist would claim but equally on a plethora of other factors. This paper thus observes that in terms of the internal system of language, structures are acquired with similar trends with very slight differences that could be attributed to individual learner differences rather than to the influence of the environment in general. That is why verb inflectional categories were acquired with a slim difference of 6.6% and verb tenses with a 4.5% difference for rural and urban centres. The implication here is that the child comes into the world of language acquisition with in-built mechanisms that permit them to acquire language with similar trends as previous analysis by the Chomsky and structural linguists have exemplified. However, the difference noted by this paper is in the communicative domain, be it written or oral. Learners in the

urban centres were noted to have exhibited more fluency in spoken English with little hesitations than their counterparts in the rural areas who excelled in written language with fewer errors in their write-ups. The role of practice here needs to be emphasised as learners in the rural areas do more of writing while those in the urban centres do have a lot of opportunities to speak and listen to English and lesser opportunities to write. Given that learner internal mechanisms are the same and that externalization is more of an individual learner parameter, this paper concludes that the impact of the environment on second language acquisition is more visible in verbal productions that are spontaneous than in written productions where the learner has time to use the in-built grammar. This surely has implications for those in the second language acquisition industry in Cameroon both the linguists and the educationists. Linguists describing Cameroon English will need to pay attention to the corpus emanating from the varying linguistic contexts understanding that those in the rural contexts will produce more in written than oral productions. For the rural areas, it is important to accompany teaching with a lot of role-play so as to give the learners a semblance of the communicative context they would find out of the classroom. Those in the urban centres will need to focus more on reading and writing activities given that within the setting, the external environment already has a favourable communicative context for learners to develop verbal competence and skills.

## END NOTES

1. Less developed, fewer schools and learning material, etc
2. Developed, many schools and a plethora of learning material etc
3. See Whorf (1956:212)
4. See Krahsen (1975) An update on the linguistic development of Genie
5. A pattern of language used by mothers to their children
6. Confer Quirk and Greenbaum (1973) for details on the grammar of irregular verbs
7. Large enrollments, poor accommodations etc
8. See behaviourists positions in language acquisition
9. Refusing by simple sideward to and fro shake of the head, head down while speaking especially to the elderly or superior etc

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