

From memorization to internalization of irregular verbs in the Beni EFL classroom

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Abstract

This article examines the shift from traditional memorization techniques to the internalization of irregular verbs among high school students in Beni. On the one hand, the study highlights the barriers to the internalization of irregular verbs by English learners in Beni. On the other hand, it explores effective facilitation strategies that are likely to lead students to a deeper understanding and learning of irregular verbs and promote their authentic use in real-life situations. The findings underscore the importance of contextualized and learner-centered approaches that engage students in meaningful activities rather than rote repetition. Furthermore, the study shows that the integration of communicative tasks can significantly increase learners' motivation and retention of irregular verbs.

Keywords: memorization, internalization of irregular verbs, EFL classroom

Date of Submission: 17-05-2025

Date of Acceptance: 27-05-2025

I. Introduction

Learning irregular verbs is a critical component of mastering the English language, especially for learners of English as a foreign language (EFL). These verbs, with their non-standard patterns, often present a unique challenge, requiring not only memorization, but also the ability to recognize and use them appropriately in different contexts. Despite the importance of this skill, teaching and learning methods in high schools of Beni town have largely relied on traditional memorization techniques, where English language learners (ELLs) are expected to recite lists of verbs along with their simple past and past participle forms. While such methods may help with initial recall, they often fall short of providing learners with the tools to naturally integrate these verbs into their spoken and written communication.

The limitations of memorization are evident in classroom practice, where students often demonstrate knowledge of verb forms but struggle to apply them in constructing grammatically correct sentences or engaging in authentic conversation. This gap between knowledge and practical application reflects a deeper problem: the lack of internalization. Internalization involves embedding irregular verbs in a learner's linguistic repertoire so that they can be retrieved and used effortlessly in a variety of real-life scenarios. Achieving this requires a shift from teacher-centered, mechanical approaches to more dynamic, learner-centered methods that emphasize comprehension, context, and meaningful interaction.

Therefore, this article seeks to explore alternative pedagogical strategies that go beyond memorization to facilitate the internalization of irregular verbs among English language learners in Beni town. By examining approaches such as task-based learning, communicative activities, and the use of multimedia resources, this study aims at identifying practices that foster deeper engagement with irregular verbs. Ultimately, these strategies aim at enabling learners to use irregular verbs accurately and fluently, thus bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical language use.

II. Literature Review

A Linguistic Perspective on English Irregular Verbs

Irregular verbs are a hallmark of the English language, representing exceptions to standard conjugation patterns. According to Pinker (1999), these verbs provide a window into the interplay between memory and linguistic rules. While regular verbs follow predictable patterns, irregular verbs must be memorized because of their historical development and phonological evolution. These verbs often retain forms rooted in Old and Middle English, reflecting how the language has maintained a connection to its Germanic origins (Hogg & Denison, 2006). Their persistence challenges learners and highlights the importance of frequency in language acquisition, as the most common irregular verbs are the most frequently used.

Research has also examined the cognitive mechanisms underlying the acquisition of irregular verbs. Ullman (2001) proposed the dual-system model, which posits that regular verbs are processed by a rule-based

system in the brain, whereas irregular verbs are stored in declarative memory. This distinction is supported by neuroimaging studies that show different patterns of activation when speakers process regular versus irregular forms (Pinker & Ullman, 2002). The irregular nature of these verbs can complicate second language acquisition, requiring explicit instruction and repeated exposure for non-native speakers to internalize their forms (Ellis, 2006).

Pedagogical approaches to teaching irregular verbs often emphasize contextualized learning and practice. Larsen-Freeman (2003) advocates teaching irregular verbs through meaningful communication and authentic language use rather than through rote memorization. Such methods aim to help learners integrate irregular verbs into their active vocabulary. In addition, Thornbury (1999) emphasizes the value of focusing on high-frequency irregular verbs first, since they account for the majority of occurrences in everyday communication. Thus, irregular verbs not only present linguistic and cognitive challenges, but also require innovative teaching strategies to help learners master their complexity.

Traditional versus Current Approaches to Teaching English Irregular Verbs

The traditional approach to teaching English irregular verbs has relied primarily on rote memorization and repetition. Thornbury (1999) points out that this method involves presenting lists of irregular verbs along with their base forms, past tense, and past participle equivalents, and expecting students to memorize them through repetition. While this approach emphasizes accuracy, it often neglects meaningful context, making it difficult for learners to use these forms in real-life communication. In addition, such methods can lead to boredom and disengagement, especially among younger learners or those with less intrinsic motivation.

In contrast, current approaches emphasize contextualized and communicative methods to enhance the learning of irregular verbs. Larsen-Freeman (2003) advocates teaching these verbs through activities that integrate them into meaningful language use, such as storytelling, role-playing, or problem-solving tasks. This approach is consistent with the principles of communicative language teaching, which focus on helping learners use language naturally and effectively. In addition, these methods take into account the cognitive benefits of learning irregular verbs in context, as learners are more likely to retain and recall these forms when they encounter them in authentic situations.

Both approaches have their merits, but a mixed strategy may be most effective. While memorization ensures that learners have a foundation in irregular verb forms, contextualized practice helps to solidify understanding and facilitate fluency. Larsen-Freeman (2003) suggests that high-frequency irregular verbs should be prioritized because they are more likely to occur in everyday conversation. By combining the strengths of both traditional and contemporary approaches, educators can address a variety of learning styles and needs, ultimately improving students' ability to use irregular verbs effectively.

III. Methodology

Data Collection

The data for this article were collected through classroom observation, focusing on how English irregular verbs were taught and learned in a traditional classroom setting. During the first observation, the teacher used a method in which students were asked to memorize the base, simple past, and past participle forms of irregular verbs. This approach provided limited opportunities for meaningful use of the verbs in context. To further explore the ELLs' ability to use irregular verbs communicatively, we asked them to talk about something they had done the previous day. This task was designed to assess their ability to use the learned verb forms in a practical setting. In the ten schools selected for observation, only fifteen out of 90 students in the third grade successfully completed the task, highlighting a gap between memorization and functional use.

The data were analyzed qualitatively to understand the effectiveness of the instructional method and the students' ability to use irregular verbs. Observations indicated that while most students could accurately repeat verb forms during drills, they struggled to incorporate these forms into meaningful communication. The low success rate in the contextualized speaking task suggested a disconnect between the memorization approach and the development of practical language skills. These findings highlight the need for a more communicative approach to teaching irregular verbs, as learners appeared to lack both confidence and the ability to transfer their knowledge to real-life situations. The analysis informed the discussion of how traditional and current methods could be combined to bridge this gap.

IV. Results

The observations across the ten secondary schools revealed that only 15 third-grade ELLs successfully used irregular verbs in authentic scenarios, such as discussing what they did yesterday. These results suggest the following findings:

(1) Limited use of irregular verbs. The vast majority of ELLs had difficulty using irregular verbs in authentic communication. This suggests that teachers prioritize rote memorization over practical language application techniques. As a result, ELLs are less prepared for real-world interactions using irregular verbs.

Teachers give ELLs copies of the list of irregular verbs to recite in the form of infinitive - simple past - past participle - French translation. Teachers don't give ELLs the opportunity to use these irregular verbs in their own production of English. As a result, they stagnate at the memorization level. Here below is an example of a list of irregular verbs teachers ask their ELLs to recite.

<i>Infinitive</i>	<i>Simple past</i>	<i>Past participle</i>	<i>French</i>
be	was/were	been	être
beat	beat	beaten	battre
become	became	become	devenir
begin	began	begun	commencer
bend	bent	bent	se courber, etc.
bet	bet	bet	parier
bite	bit	bitten	mordre
bleed	bled	bled	saigner
blow	blew	blown	souffler
break	broke	broken	caisser
bring	brought	brought	apporter
build	built	built	construire
burn	burnt	burnt	brûler
buy	bought	bought	acheter
catch	caught	caught	attraper
choose	chose	chosen	choisir
come	came	come	venir
dig	dug	dug	bêcher
do	did	done	faire

draw	drew	drawn	dessiner / tirer
dream	dreamt	dreamt	rêver
drink	drank	drunk	boire
drive	drove	driven	conduire
eat	ate	eaten	manger
fall	fell	fallen	tomber
feed	fed	fed	nourrir
fight	fought	fought	combattre
find	found	found	trouver
forbid	forbade	forbidden	interdire
forget	forgot	forgotten	oublier
forgive	forgave	forgiven	pardonner
give	gave	given	donner
grow	grew	grown	cultiver/pousser/grandir
go	went	gone	aller
have	had	had	avoir
hide	hid	hidden	cache
keep	kept	kept	garder
learn	learnt	learnt	apprendre
leave	left	left	quitter/laisser
lose	lost	lost	perdre
make	made	made	faire
meet	met	met	rencontrer

pay	paid	paid	payer
read	read	read	lire
say	said	said	dire
see	saw	seen	voir
sell	sold	sold	vendre
send	sent	sent	envoyer
shake	shook	shaken	secouer
show	showed	shown	montrer
sing	sang	sung	chanter
sit	sat	sat	s'asseoir
sleep	slept	slept	dormir
take	took	taken	prendre
teach	taught	taught	enseigner
write	wrote	written	écrire

(2) Inconsistent instructional practices. The variation in performance across schools reflects the variability in instructional approaches. Most schools emphasize repetitive drills without integrating communicative practice. As a result, ELLs' opportunities to internalize and apply irregular verbs through authentic scenarios are limited.

V. Discussion

The findings of this study highlight critical pedagogical challenges in the English language classroom in Beni town, particularly with regard to the internalization and use of irregular verbs.

The impact of memorization on language acquisition is revealed by the reliance on memorization, as evidenced by the widespread use of irregular verb lists with translations. This is indicative of a traditional, teacher-centered instructional approach that unfortunately does not engage students in meaningful manipulation of the verbs they need to internalize. While memorization may help ELLs recall irregular verb forms in isolation, it does not facilitate internalization, which is essential for meaningful language use. This suggests that current methods in Beni town English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms prioritize short-term knowledge retention over long-term communicative competence, leaving ELLs ill-prepared for real-world communication.

In terms of lack of communicative practice, the lack of opportunities to use irregular verbs in authentic contexts further hinders ELLs' ability to internalize these important forms. Lightbown and Spada (2013) support the idea that frequent and meaningful use of language in authentic scenarios promotes deeper acquisition. The observed stagnation at the memorization level underscores the need to integrate communicative practices that encourage ELLs to actively use irregular verbs in speaking and writing.

Furthermore, disparities in teaching quality are evident in the variability of performance across schools, suggesting inconsistency in teaching quality and methodology. This inconsistency could be attributed to factors such as teacher training, access to relevant resources, and curriculum design. Schools that emphasize repetitive drills without embedding these drills in communicative frameworks may inadvertently limit ELLs' ability to apply grammar rules in practical situations.

Concerning the implications for teacher training and curriculum design, the findings highlight the urgent need for teacher professional development programs that emphasize communicative language teaching (CLT) and learner-centered methodologies. Training should focus on providing teachers with strategies for integrating irregular verbs into relevant, contextualized activities such as storytelling, role-playing, and task-based learning.

In addition, curriculum designers should reconsider the balance between rote learning and practical application in language teaching.

In terms of cultural and linguistic context, the incorporation of French translations into irregular verb lists reflects the bilingual context of the DRC but may inadvertently reinforce reliance on the first language translation rather than direct application of English. A more immersive approach, where ELLs engage directly with English contexts, could enhance their ability to think and communicate in English without over-relying on their previously learned languages, mainly French.

VI. Possible Solutions

It is possible to help ELLs internalize irregular verbs and their simple past and other forms. This can be done through:

Storytelling. Storytelling activities are great tools that teachers can use to meaningfully engage ELLs in the process of internalizing irregular verbs. For example, the teacher can introduce the story and emphasize the use of irregular verbs. Below is an example of a story: "*Yesterday, Joseph **got up** early because he **had** an important exam. He **ate** breakfast quickly and **ran** to school. On his way, he **saw** a group of friends who **gave** him some advice about the test. When Joseph arrived at school, he **sat down** in his classroom and **took** the exam. After the test, he **went** to the library and **read** a book about his favorite subject. In the afternoon, Joseph **met** his best friend, and they **spoke** about their dreams for the future. Finally, he **came** home, **wrote** in his journal, and **fell asleep** with a smile on his face."*

After introducing this story, the teacher can ask some questions, emphasizing the verbs he wants the ELLs to internalize. For example, "What did Joseph do after he got up?" "Who did Joseph meet after the test?" "What book did Joseph read in the library?" This comprehension check will allow the ELLs to engage as much as possible with the irregular verbs that the storytelling activity focuses on.

In the next step, the teacher provides a word bank with the base forms of the verbs in the story, then removes the verbs from the story and asks the ELLs to work in pairs to fill it out using the verbs provided in the word bank in the appropriate tense.

Then comes the learner-created story step where the teacher asks each ELL to create their own short story about "*what I did yesterday*" using at least four irregular verbs. After creating their stories, each learner can turn to a neighbor to share, or they can share their stories in small groups or with the whole class, depending on what the teacher deems more productive.

For more fun, the teacher can have ELLs play a storytelling chain game. One learner starts a sentence in the past using an irregular verb, and the next learner continues the story with another sentence using another irregular verb or other verbs, and so on. For example,

Learner 1: Yesterday, I **woke up** late.

Learner 2: Then, I **took** a bath, **got** dressed and **ran** to school.

Learner 3: At school, I **met** the teacher and my classmates in the classroom.

Learner 4: The teacher asked me why I **was** late.

Learner 5: I told him I **was** late because I **overslept**.

Note that storytelling activities like the ones above make grammar learning more interactive and meaningful, while giving students a chance to practice irregular verbs in context. It also aligns with CLT principles by encouraging creativity and real-world language use.

Role-playing. Role-playing activities provide an opportunity to practice irregular verbs in different forms through fun, interactive role-playing scenarios. The teacher can divide the ELLs into pairs or small groups. Then, assign each pair or small group a scenario that involves the use of irregular verbs in the simple past tense. For example, "a student and a teacher discussing homework," "two friends talking about what they did over the weekend," "a store clerk explaining a funny situation to a customer," and so on and so forth. Here are role-playing scenario examples:

At School

Learner: I did my homework yesterday, but I forgot to bring it!

Teacher: That's too bad. Did you lose it or is it at home?

Learner: It is at home. I put it on my bedside table.

Teacher: You kept it very well. You can bring it tomorrow.

Learner: Thank you.

Teacher: You're welcome.

Weekend Fun

Friend 1: What **did** you **do** last weekend?

Friend 2: I **went** to the park and **saw** a soccer match. Later, I **ate** pizza with my family. What about you?

Friend 1: I **went** to the Okapi Palace Hotel to attend a concert. And later, my neighbor **took** me to the supermarket. I **bought** sugar, milk and a cake for my family.

Travel Story

Traveler: Last week, I flew to Kampala and met some amazing people.

Tour Guide: That's great! Did you take pictures?

Traveler: Yes, I did. I took a lot of pictures to show my friends and family.

VII. Conclusion And Recommendations

This study highlights the urgent need for a paradigm shift in the teaching of irregular verbs in Beni town EFL classrooms. While traditional memorization techniques provide a foundation for recognizing verb forms, they fail to facilitate internalization and authentic use. By using learner-centered, communicative strategies such as storytelling and role-playing, teachers can bridge the gap between memorization and practical application, helping ELLs to internalize irregular verbs for meaningful language use. Integrating these methods promotes active engagement, increases retention, and equips ELLs with the skills they need for real-world communication.

Therefore, the recommendations encourage teachers to:

1. Use contextualized learning activities. Teachers should incorporate storytelling, role-playing, and other interactive activities into their lessons to provide learners with meaningful contexts in which to practice irregular verbs. This approach not only promotes deeper engagement, but also enhances learners' ability to use these verbs naturally in communication.
2. Prioritize teacher training in CLT. Professional development programs should focus on equipping teachers with strategies to balance traditional methods with communicative practices. Training should emphasize creating immersive, learner-centered environments where students actively use irregular verbs in speaking and writing tasks.

Future research could investigate how bilingual environments, such as the DRC, affect the acquisition of irregular verbs and identify strategies to reduce reliance on translation.

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