

THE ROLE OF SOCIOLINGUISTIC COMPETENCE IN DEVELOPING SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNERS' PROFICIENCY

Abstract

The study investigates the role of sociolinguistic competence in developing the second language learners' proficiency. The research aims at examining whether sociolinguistic competence enhances second language learners' fluency or not. Sociolinguistic competence is concerned with human interaction in natural contexts; the utterances, as they are produced and meant in various sociocultural contexts. The sociolinguistic competence is quite important since it is genuine for real communication. Culture is a capital and means for developing all cultures and knowledge in order to terminate all human sharing problems, for helping economic stabilization and political security. According to sociological perspective, culture is the total of the inherited and innate ideas, attitudes, beliefs, values, and knowledge, comprising or forming the shared foundations of social action. Sociocultural theory was employed as the theoretical framework. Oral reading methodology was used for data collection. The findings show that in the first passage, the reading was fluent and the subjects comprehended the message in the text. Reading the second passage, the subjects were less fluent and their comprehension of the message contained in the passage was poor. The implication is that lack of exposure to the English culture makes it difficult for second language learners to comprehend some ideas, thoughts, experiences or attitudes especially when expressed by a native speaker. In an attempt to comprehend and express certain phenomena, learners make frequent pragmatic transfer in their use of English to describe the context in question.

KEYWORDS: Sociolinguistics, fluency, learner, sociocultural, competence

Introduction

Communicative competence comprises grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and strategic competence. Much emphasis is given to the grammatical and discourse competences in the curriculum in second language teaching. Mede and Dikilitaş (2015) insist that sociolinguistic competences should be given equal importance in second language teaching and learning. Sociolinguistic competence includes learning pragmatic and sociolinguistic knowledge about how to use language linguistically and socially appropriately. Thus, the knowledge of this competence enhances language learning and may allow L2 learners develop their fluency in spoken and written English, if it incorporated fully in second language curriculum and explicitly taught to the L2 learners like the other types of communicative competence.

Second language learning is dominated by teaching, learning and internalization of language rules. Learners at all levels are exposed to linguistic rules without explicit instruction of the cultures that background the use of the languages. The ethnographic and cultural aspects of the second languages are not explicitly introduced and taught to second language learners. The poor knowledge of these aspects limits the learners' language proficiency. Learners find difficult to establish fluent spoken and written communications because of the poor awareness of sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic strategies. They are forced to transfer their native pragmatic knowledge to communicate in second language, which sometimes causes misperception and misinterpretation. Second language curriculums do not explore culture and social norms of these target languages. Learners need to be introduced to cross-culturally perceptions of what constitute linguistic behaviour and how things in the world — ideas, thoughts, philosophies, phenomena, sensations, beliefs, perceptions — are referred to and how native speakers express them. This is why Mede and Dikilitaş (2015) argue that sociolinguistic competences should be incorporated in the teaching and learning of the second language the same way other types of competence are taught. The scholars insist that the knowledge of this competence would develop the L2 learners language fluency. However, Ya (2008) notes that sociolinguistic competence is so hard to acquire due to the variance in cultural rules of speaking as well as the social, cultural and pragmatic elements that inherently exist in that competence. To put it differently, what is appropriate in one cultural situation might be entirely inappropriate in another one. The language learner often cannot differentiate between the rules of speaking of his or her native context and those of the target context.

The aim of this study is to examine whether explicit knowledge of sociolinguistic competences enhances or does not enhance spoken and written competence. It examines whether or not explicit knowledge of sociolinguistic competences helps learners with poor communication abilities in a target language to overcome the problems.

Omaggio (2001) puts forward three reasons why sociolinguistic competence is not often regarded as a topic in its own right and as an indispensable aspect of language teaching:

1. Language teachers often think that they do not have time for sociocultural teaching due to time constraints in their curriculum.
2. Teachers may not have enough confidence in believing that they can teach sociocultural aspect of foreign language learning well.
3. The teaching of sociocultural competence often involves dealing with student attitudes which teachers usually find very challenging when trying to guide their students to understand and appreciate the logic and meaning of the target culture.

Explicit teaching of discrete grammatical rules, segmental level of pronunciation, and lexical items seem easier, during which sociocultural aspects of communicative competence are thought to be incidentally acquired. However, this is a problematic claim because knowing rules of language along with how to pronounce individual words and what they mean may not necessarily ensure knowing the sociolinguistics contexts in which they might be used. The knowledge of sociolinguistic values of linguistic forms is constructed on the basis of the social context and cultural environments where language is naturally used. The functions and socio-pragmatic values of forms are attached to them in actual communication. From a pedagogical perspective, the situation seems complex for the teachers who are expected to help students promote communicative competence in the classroom setting, which can be developed by close interaction with native speakers (Brown, 1987).

Conceptual Framework

Competence

Competence is literally defined as the ability to carry out a task successfully. White (1959) defines competence as an organism's capacity to interact effectively with its environment. According to Mitchelmore and Rowley (2010) it refers to behaviour a person should be able to demonstrate. Hager and Gonczi (1991) note that competence is seen as possession of a series of desirable attributes including knowledge of appropriate sorts, skills and abilities, such as problem solving, analysis, communication, pattern recognition, and attitudes of appropriate kinds.

Colman (2009) defined the competence as the capacity, skills, or the ability in doing something correctly and effectively. In line with Colman, Beams (2008) defined the competences as the quality of ability caused by the qualification and the ability in doing a task. Richards & Rodgers (2003) defined the competences as the description of essential skills, knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors required for effective performance of a real-world task or activity. So, the competence is the useful ability includes skills, knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors acquired by the students in doing the real-world task or activity in the real life in form of social networking.

Eraut (1998) understands by competence ability to perform tasks and roles according to expected standards. Eraut (1998) specifies ability with the activities to perform tasks and roles. There are thus as many different abilities as there are tasks. Mulder (2011) defines competence as "capability to perform effectively". The author equates the concept of capability with that of ability: "The meaning of the concept is mostly defined as being able to perform effectively" Tarone and Swain (1995) define this competence as the ability of the members of a speech community to adapt their speech to the context in which they find themselves.

Chomsky (1965) emphasized the difference between linguistic competence, the speaker-hearer's knowledge of his language and performance, the actual use of language in concrete situations, he points out that "linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker-listener, in a completely homogeneous speech-community, who knows its language perfectly and is unaffected by such grammatically irrelevant conditions as memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention and interests, and errors (random or characteristic) in applying his knowledge of the language in actual performance.

Chomsky makes a clear distinction between the notions of competence and performance. Competence refers to the native speakers' (ideal speaker-listeners') knowledge of the linguistic system (grammar) of their language (Canale & Swain 1980), while performance is seen as the actual language use (Chomsky 2006). However, he asserts that a number of different factors need to be taken into account in order to study the real language performance. One of these factors is the native speakers' competence (Chomsky 1965). Therefore, Chomsky argues that the purpose of the linguistic theory is to explain the mental processes underlying the language use, and by this he means that the study of linguistics should be concerned with competence, not performance (Barman 2014).

Similarly, Fromkin and Rodman (1993) differentiate competence and performance as a difference between what you *know*, which is your linguistic competence and how you *use* this knowledge in actual speech production and comprehension, which is your linguistic performance. Based on Chomsky's theory, our linguistic competence is our unconscious knowledge of languages and the organizing principles of a language. Then, what we actually produce as utterances is called linguistic performance (Denham & Lobeck, 2013).

linguistic competence refers to the knowledge and ability of individuals for appropriate language use in the communicative events in which they find themselves in any particular speech community. Hamerka (2009, p. 14), the term competence is used to describe the learner's capacity to produce a language.

This limitation of Chomsky's linguistic competence led Hymes (1972) to coin the term "communicative competence." He was among the first linguists who criticized Chomsky's theory of competence. He argued that Chomsky's perception of competence was inadequate to explain an individual's language behavior as a whole. He noticed that an individual's competence not only reflects their knowledge of language forms and structures, but also refers to the way they use language in real social situations. Communicative competence is a wide term including not only linguistic knowledge but also knowledge of a set of sociolinguistic codes and rules for using them. Communicative competence, he claims is "the most general term for the speaking and hearing capabilities of a person - competence is understood to be dependent on two things: (tacit) knowledge and (ability for) use."

Communicative competence

A number of linguists define communicative competence looking at different linguistic perspectives. Canale and Swain (1980) defined communicative competence as a synthesis of knowledge of basic grammatical principles, knowledge of how language is used in social contexts to perform communicative functions, and knowledge of how utterances and communicative functions can be combined according to the principle of discourse. Their model consists of three fundamental components of communicative competence: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence and strategic competence. The fourth competency was added later by Canale (1989): discourse competence, which is the ability to construct longer sentences in discourse to form a meaningful whole. Discourse competence asks: how are words, phrases and sentences put together to create conversations, speeches, email messages or newspaper articles? Discourse competence also includes understanding how texts relate to the context or situation in which they are used.

According to Shobikah (2020) communicative competence is the competence in using language correctly based on the rules of language use in society. The use of language contextually based on the mean of language use in the society and theoretically based on the rules of language pattern, so that the students must acquire the use of language contextually and theoretically. To reach those competences, the students must be taught and trained English language in written and oral language skill. Oral language skill is the skill in using the English language as the verbal or direct communication tool. This oral language skill is developed through listening and speaking skills. In this skill, the students are involved in the direct communication in the use of language as lingua franca so that there is an interaction between the teacher and the students. Meanwhile, the written language skill is to use English as a nonverbal or written communication tool. The written communication is built from reading and writing skills such as reading and writing a sentence, paragraph, and text to deliver a message from the sentence, paragraph, and text.

Bachman and Palmer (1996) in their communicative ability model distinguish three components: organisational knowledge, pragmatic knowledge, and strategic competence. Organisational knowledge includes both grammatical knowledge and textual knowledge (covering cohesion). Pragmatic knowledge includes both knowledge of sociolinguistic rules and functional knowledge

(illocutionary competence). Strategic competence involves the ability to make the most effective use of available abilities to carry out a given task.

Communicative competence is widely accepted as a basis for testing oral and written language proficiency. It is not only an inherent grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, or discourse competence: the ability to use different aspects of language, such as syntax, phonology and lexicography; the ability to construct longer sentences in discourse to form a meaningful whole or the ability to understand the social context in which a communication takes place, rather, communicative competence includes the ability to use all these types of competence in a variety of communicative situations. Thus, relying too heavily on the achievement of rules of grammar can lead to dissociation from any consideration of appropriateness which is the concern of strategic competence. This study focuses on sociolinguistic competence which is one of the four types of Communicative Competence.

Types of Communicative Competence

Developing competence in second language learning involves working on grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic competence in the development of the four skills – listening, speaking, reading and writing. Canale and Swain (1980) propose that communicative competence will be at least consisting of three components such as grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, and strategic competence (communication strategies). They have improved Hymes' model of communicative competence by referring to dimensions of communication which could take place in endless sociocultural contexts. By incorporating the term 'skill' into their model of competence, they drew the attention of other scientists to the combination of contextual-probable realities and personal skills & capabilities. The efforts of Canale and Swain were highly appreciated by most scientists since they moved towards analysing the dynamics of communicative language.

Grammatical Competence

Grammatical Competence embodies the theoretical aspects of language, in other words, the knowledge of language coined by Chomsky in 1965. The term grammatical competence was also premeditated with the 'Language Acquisition Device' (L.A.D.), a black box, an instinctive mental capacity which enables the infant to acquire and produce language in a rule governed fashion, the grammatical competence. In the most general form, grammatical competence was defined by N. Chomsky, as theoretical and practical knowledge of a limited number of grammatical rules, which allow generating an unlimited number of correct sentences. It can be assumed that the grammatical competence in the context of learning a foreign language is a set of theoretical knowledge (rules) and language skills that are necessary and sufficient for students to construct correct sentences, to understand them, to monitor grammatical errors, to pass judgments about right and wrong linguistic forms, and to perform language testing tasks.

Canale and Swain (1980) defines grammatical competence as the type of competence in which it focuses on the use of lexical items, morphology rules, syntax, semantics, and along with the aspect of phonology (pronunciation). Moreover, it includes the basic element of communication such as the sentence patterns and types, the constituent structure, the morphological inflections, as well as the lexical resources.

Grammatical competence deals with the ability of the learners to form sentences or utterances based on appropriate rules. This particular competence is mostly related to the accuracy.

Discourse Competence

Discourse competence embodies the skills and capabilities to produce language at sentence and text level by meeting the standards of cohesion and coherence. This competence is related to the learners' mastery of understanding and producing texts in the mode of listening, speaking, reading and writing. It is concerned with cohesion and coherence in different types of texts. Cohesion and coherence, as index in discourse analysis, are important for both receptive skills and productive skills Canale and Swain (1980).

The notion of discourse competence derives from the theory of communicative competence; it occurs in all of the models of communicative competence in a language. It is the knowledge and skills required to produce and interpret texts considering their structural scheme and the linguistic standards of the different discourse genres that we use. It is what enables one to handle sociocultural, pragmatic, and textual pieces of knowledge such as, concepts and skills, effectively and appropriately.

Strategic Competence

Strategic competence incorporates the strategies of non-verbal and verbal communication in order to avoid communication breakdowns. In other words, the strategic competence sustains communication through strategies to provide efficiency, effectiveness and fluency.

Strategic competence is regarded as an important part of all communicative language use. Canale and Swain (1980) describe strategic competence as the verbal and nonverbal communication strategies that may be called into action to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to performance variables or due to insufficient competence. Strategic competence refers to the coping strategies that communicators employ to initiate, terminate, maintain, repair, and redirect communication (Richards, 2001). It is used to know how to sufficiently recognise and to fix communication breakdowns, how to sufficiently learn more about the language in context. In essence, it is the competence underlying our ability to make repairs, to cope with imperfect knowledge and to sustain communication through approximation, paraphrase/ circumlocution, repetition, hesitation, avoidance and asking for help, as well as shifts in register and style.

This competence can be used to enhance the effectiveness of communication. In a qualitative sense, it is different from the other three components of communicative competence in that it is not a type of stored knowledge. It interacts with other components to enable learners to deal successfully with a lack of competence in one of the fields of competence. Strategic competence consists of minor decision making processes that occur during the course of conversation like assessing the resources available and compensating for lack of linguistic resources through the use of strategies to convey a message. Thus, strategic competence should not be considered as type of non-stored knowledge, it is part of the speakers' mental capacity for managing linguistic resources to achieve communicative intent.

Sociolinguistic Competence

Sociolinguistic competence is concerned with human interaction in natural contexts; the utterances, as they are produced and meant in various sociocultural contexts. The sociolinguistic competence is quite important since it is genuine for real communication. Culture is a capital and means for developing all cultures and knowledge in order to terminate all human sharing problems, for helping economic stabilization and political security. According to sociological perspective, culture is the total of the inherited and innate ideas, attitudes, beliefs, values, and knowledge, comprising or forming the shared foundations of social action. Likewise, from the anthropological and ethnological senses, culture encompasses the total range of activities and

ideas of a specific group of people with common and shared traditions, which are conveyed, distributed, and highlighted by members of the group (Collins English Dictionary 1991).

Emmitt and Pollock (1997) believe that language is a system of arbitrary signs which is accepted by a group and society of users. It is taken delivery of a specific purpose in relation to the communal world of clients. Chase (1969) declares that the purpose of language use is to communicate with others, to think, and to shape one's standpoint and outlook on life. Indeed, language figures human thoughts. According Crystal (1971) language is the systematic, conventional use of sounds, signs or written symbols in a human society for communication and self-expression.

Words are the most significant tools of cultural symbols. That is to say, poems, stories, fictions, epics and myths are the main ingredients and components of a culture in a society. Myth, in a language expresses universal realities in symbols. On the whole, the elements of culture are the entirety of socially transmitted and common behavior patterns, prototypes, samples, arts, beliefs, institutions, and all other products of human work and thought (Crystal, 1971).

Sociolinguistic competence refers to the learner's "knowledge of the sociocultural rules of language and discourse" (Brown, 2000). Brown includes learners' sensitivity to dialect or variety, choice of register, naturalness, and knowledge of cultural references and figures of speech in his definition. Lyster (1994) defines the concept of sociolinguistic competence as the "capacity to recognise and produce socially appropriate speech in context". Kramsch (2014) attributes the lack of skills to use language in the real worlds to the expectations from the teachers, who are supposed to teach and carry students to a particular level of proficiency.

Sociolinguistic competence refers to the ability to use the language based on socio cultural context in relation to the contextual factors such as topics, role of participants, settings and norms of interaction. It involves social and cultural aspect that are essential in relation to the ability to understand and deliver linguistic forms (see Canale & Swain, 1980). Sociolinguistic competence deals with how to initiate interaction in certain society. When someone does not have sufficient knowledge about this competence or he does not have enough skill in sociolinguistic competence, it will be very difficult to him to interact with other people. Considering the scope of this study, the first four types of competence mentioned above were reviewed for this research. However, the study focuses on examining the impact of sociolinguistic competence especially with regard to the development of second language learners' oral fluency.

Theoretical Framework

The study employed Wang, Bruce and Hughes (2001) Sociocultural theory which argues that learners are pushed by their motivation to socialize with others to produce coherent discourse that goes beyond linguistic and grammatical accuracy. This theory describes human cognition as developed by an individual through engagement in social and cultural activities with other people, objects, and events. Ellis (2000) argues that sociocultural theory is based on the assumption that learning emerges not through interaction but in interaction. When learners get involved in doing certain tasks with the help of another learner or the teacher, they internalize the way to carry out the same task by themselves. Hence, social interaction is believed to facilitate or mediate the learning process. According to this perspective, the interactions that help the learners with their learning process are those in which the learners scaffold the new tasks. Vygotsky

(1979), as regarded the founder of this theory argues that the social dimension of consciousness is primary in time and in fact. The individual dimension of consciousness is derivative and secondary. From this perspective, mental functioning of the individual is not simply derived from social interaction; rather, the specific structures and processes revealed by individuals can be traced to their interactions with others. Thus, this theory is concerned with how individual mental functioning is related to cultural, institutional, and historical context and the focus of the perspective is on the roles that participation in social interactions and culturally organized activities play in influencing psychological development.

Lantolf (2011) notes that sociocultural theories in second language acquisition research offer a framework through which human cognition can be systematically investigated without isolating it from social context. Frawley and Lantolf, (1985) define sociocultural theory as the theory of mental development and functioning. Ratner (2002) defines sociocultural theory as the field that studies the content, mode of operation, and interrelationships of psychological phenomena that are socially constructed and shared, and are rooted in other social artifacts. Accordingly, human psychological processes are organized by three fundamental cultural factors: activities play, education, work, legal and medical systems, esthetic creation, artifacts, use of physical tools, books, weapons, eating utensils, clocks, computers, and related technology as well as symbolic tools, including language, numeric systems, diagrams, charts, music, and art, and concepts (the understandings that communities construct of the personal, the physical, the social and mental worlds, religion, etc.) For analytical reasons, it might be desirable to examine the three factors independently; however, in normal human behavior, it is clear that they generally function as an integrated organic system.

Language is best learnt when attention is paid to the discourse, norms, and practices associated with particular communities. According to sociocultural perspective, language learning is thought to occur through interaction, negotiation, and collaboration. The scope of this theory is considerably wide it is more concerned with the ways in which learning is an act of enculturation. Many learning situations attempt to accommodate. As the theory of language learning, sociocultural theory combines the social context with individual acquisition. In order for an individual to become a competent speaker of a language, the mere personal effort would not result in the mastery of the language unless he benefits from other people's use of language.

Method of Data Collection and Analysis

The study employed Amer's (1997) Oral Reading Method for data collection where thirty Senior Secondary School students were randomly selected to read two passages of almost the same length. The first passage presents a story about a poor girl (Farida), an extract from chapter twelve of *Mysterious Vanishing* by Hshim (2017: 50), which reflects the Hausa culture. The language in the passage was Standard Nigerian English. The second passage presents a story of a young girl (Mrs. Mack) in *Houghton Mifflin English* by Rueda et al (2004: 259), which reflects the English culture, and the language of the passage was British Standard English. The subjects were timed to read the two passages. Equal length of time was given for the reading which took place within a short interval. The subjects' reading was assessed based on reading fluency, reading comprehension, recognition of politeness and mood, context familiarity, new words and new expressions. Each variable was assessed over hundred.

Presentation of Result

figure 1 :Result of Reading the Hausa-culture-based Passage

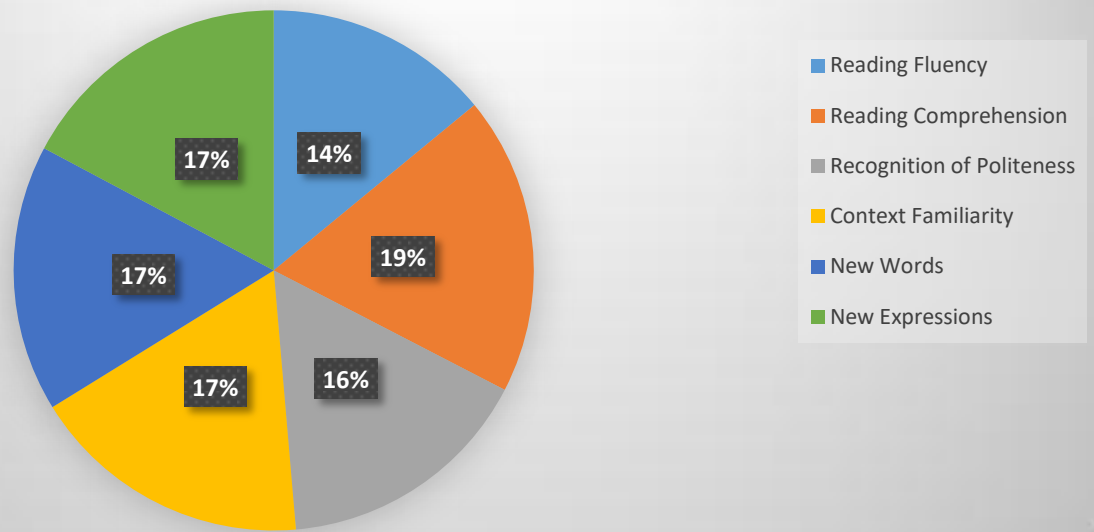
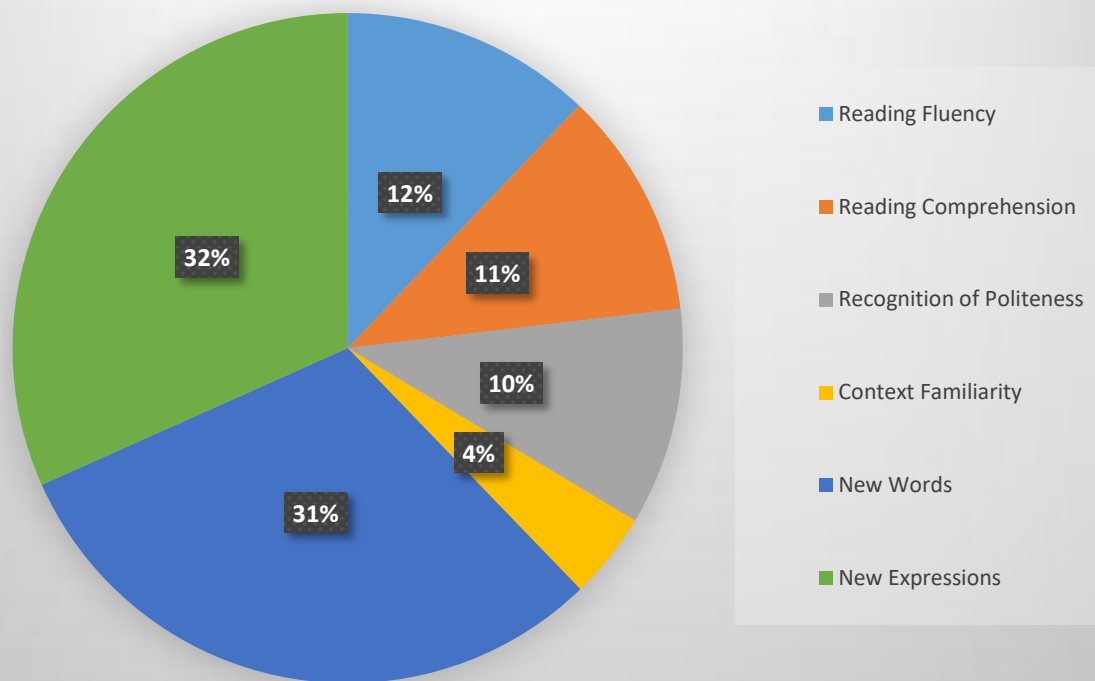


figure 2 : Result of Reading the English-culture-based Passage



Findings

The subjects' reading of the two passages was assessed based on reading fluency, reading comprehension, recognition of politeness and mood, context familiarity, new words and expressions. During the first passage reading, the reading was fluent and the subjects comprehended the message in the passage. They understood the polite and impolite expressions as well as the mood of the writer very well. The subjects' familiarity of the context enhanced their comprehension of the passage. They came across only a few new words and expressions during the reading. In reading the second passage, the subjects were less fluent. Their comprehension of the message contained in the passage was poor. They hardly understood the difference between polite and impolite expressions in the passage. Their unfamiliarity with the context hampered their understanding. The pervasiveness of unknown words and expressions also contributed to the subjects' poor understanding of the passage.

Discussion/Conclusion

As the finding of the study shows, teaching English as second language is dominated by the introduction of language rules and comprehension texts on local sociocultural issues. For this reason, second language learners lack exposure to the target culture. The poor performance of the learners in reading the passage on English culture and the excellent performance during reading the Hausa culture based passage indicates that the National Curriculum and Schemes have enough provisions on the rules governing the structure of English language and have no enough provisions on the English cultures and traditions that background the usage of the language. The finding however indicates that the little attention given to the sociocultural aspect of teaching English as second language is dominated by the second language learners' native culture and traditions. This limits the L2 learners' proficiency in the language usage. Lack of exposure to the English culture thus makes it difficult for second language learners to comprehend some ideas, thoughts, experiences or attitudes especially when expressed by a native speaker. Second language learners find it easy to comprehend the same phenomena expressed in the L2 version of the use of the language. This therefore supports the relativist argument that the way people view the world is determined wholly or partly by the structure of their native language.

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