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# The Role of Sociolinguistic Competence in Developing Second Language Learners' Proficiency

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## Authors' contributions

*This work was carried out in collaboration between both authors. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.*

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## ABSTRACT

The study investigates the role of Sociolinguistic Competence in developing second language (L2) learners' proficiency. Some linguists argue that if sociolinguistic competence is incorporated in teaching L2, it would enhance learners' spoken and written proficiency. Learners find it hard to establish fluent spoken and written communications because L2 learning is replete with teaching, learning and internalization of language rules. Learners are exposed to linguistic rules without explicit instruction on the culture of the language. The research aims at examining whether explicit knowledge of sociolinguistic competence enhances L2 learners' fluency or not. The study is supported by the sociocultural theory, while Oral Reading Methodology was used for data collection where approximately thirty Senior Secondary school students were selected from each of seven schools to read two passages of almost the same length. The first passage which reflected the Hausa culture presented a story about a poor girl. The use of language (English) in the passage is purely Nigerian. The second passage reflected the English culture and was a story about a young girl; the use of language in the passage was native-speaker version. The subjects were timed to read the two passages with a short interval between the readings. The findings showed that in the first passage, the reading was fluent and the subjects comprehended the message. In reading the second passage, the subjects were less fluent. 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 L2 learners to comprehend some ideas, thoughts, experiences or attitudes especially

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when expressed by a native speaker. In an attempt to comprehend and express certain phenomena, learners make frequent pragmatic transfers in their use of English to describe the context in question.

*Keywords: Sociolinguistics; fluency; learner; sociocultural; competence.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Sociolinguistic competence is germane to human communication. Mede and Dikilitaş [1] insist that sociolinguistic competence should be given importance in L2 teaching and learning. Sociolinguistic competence has to do with how humans interact in normal situations. It involves a sociolinguistic knowledge of appropriate use of language. Thus, this knowledge enhances L2 learners' ability to develop their fluency in spoken and written English, if it is incorporated fully in L2 curriculum and explicitly taught like the other aspects of communicative competence.

Sociologically, culture refers to a people's shared beliefs, attitudes, values, ideas and knowledge that construct their social actions. Sociolinguistic competence, according to Brown [2], is the learner's "knowledge of the sociocultural rules of language and discourse". Lyster [3], on his part views it as the "capacity to recognise and produce socially appropriate speech in context". Kramsch [4] attributes deficiency in language use skills to the failure by teachers to inculcate proficiency in learners.

### 1.1 Problem Statement

L2 learning is dominated by teaching, learning and internalization of language rules. Learners at all levels are exposed to linguistic rules without explicit instruction on the cultural background of the use of the language. The ethnographic and cultural aspects of the L2 are not explicitly introduced and taught. The poor knowledge of these aspects limits the learners' language proficiency. Learners find difficulties establishing 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 L2, which sometimes causes misperception and misinterpretation. L2 curricula do not explore culture and social norms of these target languages. Learners need to be introduced to cross-cultural 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 [1] argue that sociolinguistic competence should be incorporated in the teaching and learning of the L2, the same way other aspects of communicative competence are taught. The scholars insist that the knowledge of this competence would develop the L2 learners' language fluency. However, Ya [5] 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 learners often cannot differentiate between the rules of speaking in their native context and those of the target language context.

The aim of this study was to examine whether explicit knowledge of sociolinguistic competence enhances spoken and written proficiency or not. It examined whether or not explicit knowledge of sociolinguistic competences helps learners with poor communication abilities in a target language to overcome the problems. Omaggio [6] presents some points on why sociolinguistic competence may not be taught or treated as a topic in a language classroom:

1. Teachers of language feel they cannot address sociocultural issues in classroom due to insufficient time to cover the curriculum content.
2. Language teachers do not have the confidence to teach sociocultural aspects of foreign languages.
3. Teachers find it very challenging to impart sociocultural competence especially as it involves handling learners' behavior.

The teaching of grammatical rules, pronunciation and vocabulary appear easier, by which time sociocultural aspects of language use are assumed to be naturally learnt. This assumption may not be dependable as learning the pronunciation of words and their meanings does not automatically expose learners to the

sociolinguistic contexts in which such words can be used. It is real communication that naturally exposes learners to the knowledge of the sociolinguistic implications of words and expressions. From a pedagogical standpoint, communicative competence is developed through learners' interaction with native speakers in real life situations and not from classroom [Brown, 1987].

## 1.2 Conceptual Framework

### 1.2.1 Competence

Competence literally means the ability to perform tasks successfully. White [7] sees competence as an organism's ability to interact with its environment. Mitchelmore and Rowley [8] refer to it as the behaviour an individual is capable of demonstrating. Hager and Gonczi [9] note that competence is the possession of desirable attributes such as understanding of necessary skills and competences for solving problems, analyzing, communicating, recognition of patterns and behaviors.

Colman [10] explains that competence is the capacity, skill, or the capability to do things correctly. In the same breath, Beams [2008] posits that competence is the ability or the qualification for carrying out a task. Richards and Rodgers [11], on their part, aver that competence is the possession of vital skills and attitudes needed for performance of actual tasks or activities. Eraut [12] is of the view that competence is the ability to execute tasks and perform roles in accordance with acceptable standards. There are therefore, as many different abilities as there are tasks. To Mulder [13], competence is "capability to perform effectively". The authors equate the concept of capability with ability: "The meaning of the concept is mostly seen as being able to perform effectively". Tarone and Swain [14] opine that when members of a speech community successfully adapt their speech to the context they find themselves, it is a demonstration linguistic competence.

Chomsky [15] differentiates between linguistic competence (the speaker-hearer's knowledge of the language) and performance (the actual use of language in concrete situations). He posits that language theory focuses on an ideal speaker/listener in a homogeneous speech community who understands his language very well and as such is not affected by circumstances like, distractions, attention and

interest shifts, memory limitation and slips in the application of his linguistic know-how in actual communication. He explains that the native speakers' knowledge of the grammar of the language is competence [16] while the actual language use is performance [Chomsky 2006]. He however affirms that some factors must be considered in studying language performance. One such factor is the native speakers' proficiency [15]. He therefore argues that the primary aim of a linguistic theory is to describe the mental processes involved in language use. By this he implies that linguistics study should focus on competence, not on performance [17].

Fromkin and Rodman [18] aver that the difference between competence and performance is analogous to the difference between what one knows (linguistic competence) and how one uses that knowledge in actual communication (linguistic performance). Linguistic competence then refers to unconscious knowledge of the principles of a language while linguistic performance is the actual production of utterances [Chomsky, 2006]. Denham & Lobeck, [19] view Linguistic competence as individual's knowledge and ability for appropriate use of language in communication in any speech community they find themselves. Hamerka [20], on the other hand, uses the term competence to mean learners' ability for language production.

#### 1.2.1.1 Communicative competence

Hymes [21]'s coinage of the term 'communicative competence' is a reaction to the limitation of Chomsky's linguistic competence theory. Hymes was one of the first linguists to criticize the theory. He reasoned that the theory was inadequate to explicate an individual's holistic linguistic behavior as an individual's competence reflects, not only their knowledge of language forms and structures, but also their use language in real life situations. Communicative competence is a more comprehensive term since it includes the knowledge of a language as well as the knowledge of the sociolinguistic codes and rules for using it. Hymes claims that communicative competence is the most general expression that aptly captures a person's speaking and hearing capabilities and that competence is dependent on implicit knowledge and the ability for language use. Canale and Swain [16] suggest that communicative competence should comprise

grammatical, sociolinguistic and strategic communication components. They improved on Hymes' model by stating that some dimensions of communication could occur in uninterrupted sociocultural contexts. They incorporated the term 'skill' into their model of competence and drew other scientists' attention to the combination of contextual-possible experiences, personal talents and abilities. These efforts at analyzing the dynamics of communicative language by Canale and Swain were commended by many other scientists.

#### 1.2.1.2 Grammatical competence

Grammatical Competence is the expression of the theoretical characteristics of language. It is the understanding of language created by Noam Chomsky in 1965. The term came with the 'Language Acquisition Device' (L.A.D.), which Chomsky described as a black box, an inherent mental ability of a child to acquire and use language in a rule-governed way. In a more general sense, Chomsky explained grammatical competence as hypothetical and applied knowledge of grammatical rules that make for the generation of countless number of accurate sentences. In the context of a foreign language learning, grammatical competence can be regarded a set of linguistic rules and skills necessary and sufficient for learners to create correct sentences, understand them, monitor grammatical errors, pass judgments about right and wrong forms and to perform testing tasks.

In Canale and Swain [16]'s view, grammatical competence is the form of competence whose focus is on the use of vocabulary, rules of morphology, grammar, meanings and aspects of pronunciation. It also includes basic communication elements like sentence patterns/types, the constituent structure, morphological inflections and lexical resources. Grammatical competence deals with learners' ability to create sentences and utterances in accordance with suitable rules.

#### 1.2.1.3 Discourse competence

Discourse competence relates to the learners' understanding and construction of texts in the form of listening, speaking, reading and writing. It is concerned with learners' capability for language production at sentence and text levels based on cohesion and coherence standards. Cohesion and coherence which are the guides in discourse analysis are also very important for

receptive and productive skills [16]. The concept of discourse competence developed from communicative competence theory and appears in all communicative competence models. It is the understanding and abilities needed for texts production and interpretation according to the structures and standards of the discourse genres in use. Discourse competence helps in the effective and appropriate handling of pragmatic, sociocultural and textual knowledge.

#### 1.2.1.4 Strategic competence

This embodies the strategies of verbal and non-verbal communication aimed at avoiding communication breakdown. It supports communication by the use of strategies that ensure fluency, efficiency and effectiveness. It is a very important element in communication. Strategic competence is defined by Canale and Swain [16] as verbal and nonverbal communication strategies employed to make up for communication breakdown arising from performance or competence inadequacy. It is the coping strategy employed by communicators for the initiation, termination, maintenance, reparation, and redirection of communication [22]. In essence, communicative competence is the underlying ability to repair, cope with limited knowledge and to support the communication process by approximating, paraphrasing, repeating, hesitating, avoiding and requesting for help, including shifting in registers and styles.

#### 1.2.1.5 Sociolinguistic competence

Sociolinguistic competence is very important as it is central to actual communication. Culture is a capital as well as a means for developing cultures and understanding so as to to end human sharing problems, help stabilize economy and ensure political security. Human interaction in natural contexts is the concern of sociolinguistic competence. In sociology, culture is viewed as innate ideas, knowledge, attitudes, values and beliefs, forming the common foundations of social actions. Also, from the anthropological and ethnological perspectives, culture comprises the activities and ideas of a particular group of people with shared traditions conveyed, distributed, and highlighted by members of that group [23].

Language is a system of arbitrary signs accepted by a group of people and society of speakers. It is a delivery of a specific purpose in relation to the communal world of clients [24]. Chase [25]

states that the purpose of language is to communicate with others, think and shape one's viewpoint and perception of life. Language reveals human thoughts. As Crystal [26] puts it, language is the systematic and conventional use of sounds, signs and symbols in human communication. Words are very significant tools of cultural symbols, therefore, stories, fictions, poems and myths are the major components of cultures in societies. In a language, myth communicates universal truths in symbols. Generally, the components of culture are the entire socially transmitted common behavioral patterns, beliefs, prototypes, samples, institutions, arts, and other products of human works and thoughts [26].

### 1.3 Theoretical Framework

The study employed Wang, Bruce and Hughes [2001] sociocultural theory which argues that learners are driven by their motivation to relate with other people to produce discourse beyond accuracy in language and grammar. The theory defines human cognition as a product of individual's engagement in social and cultural activities with other people, events and objects. Ellis [27] posits that sociocultural theory is based on the assumption that learning takes place in interaction, not through interaction. As learners do certain tasks with one another or with their teachers, they learn to do the same task by themselves. Therefore, it is believed that social interaction facilitates or mediates the learning process. Accordingly, the interactions that help the learners' learning process are those that the learners scaffold the new tasks. Vygotsky [28] states that the social aspect of consciousness is primary in time and in fact while the individual dimension is derivative and secondary. As a result, mental function of individuals are not just derived from social interaction; instead, the specific structures and processes revealed by individuals are traceable to their interactions with others. Thus, the theory deals with how individuals' mental functioning is related to cultural, institutional and historical contexts and the focus is on the roles that involvement in social contacts and cultural activities play in affecting psychological growth.

Lantolf [29] notes that sociocultural theories in L2 acquisition study provide a framework through which human cognition can be systematically examined without isolating it from social context. Frawley and Lantolf [30] explain sociocultural theory as one of mental development and

functioning. Ratner [31] describes the theory as one that examines the content, mode of operation and interrelationships of psychological phenomena that are socially constructed, shared and rooted in other social relics. Thus, human psychological processes are organized by fundamental cultural factors, such as: education, activities play, work, medical and legal systems, creation, esthetic artifacts, books, use of physical tools, weapons, eating utensils, clocks, computers and related technology in addition to symbolic tools like language, numeric systems, charts, diagrams, music, art and concepts. For the purpose of analysis, three factors could be examined independently; but, in normal human behavior, they generally work as a combined organic system.

According to sociocultural perspective, language learning occurs through negotiation, interaction and collaboration. Language is best learnt when attention is given to the discourse, practices and norms associated with certain communities. The scope of the theory is broad. It is concerned with the ways in which learning is an act of acculturation. Learning situations tend to accommodate. As a theory of language learning, sociocultural theory integrates the social context with individual achievement. To become a competent speaker of a language, the individual's sheer personal efforts will not guarantee mastery of the said language; he must benefit from other people's language usage.

### 1.4 Method of Data Collection and Analysis

#### 1.4.1 Data collection instrument

Classroom observation was the data collection instrument used. The study employed Amer's [32] Oral Reading Method where senior secondary school students were randomly selected to read two passages of almost the same length. The first passage presented a story about a poor girl (Farida), an extract from chapter twelve of *Mysterious Vanishing* by Hshim [33], which reflected the Hausa culture. The language in the passage was Standard Nigerian English. The second passage presented a story of a young girl (Ms. Mack) in *Houghton Mifflin English* by Rueda et al. [34], which reflected 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 subject was given five minutes during the first reading and the same length of time was given during the reading of the second passage with researchers observing and scoring the students' readings.

In the assessment of the fluency, the students' reading rate/speed and accuracy in the reading were assessed by comparing the time taken by the subjects to the timed sample of reading the same passage. The assessment of the reading comprehension was done after the students' reading. The researchers asked them questions on the passage; they asked them to retell/summarize the story in a few sentences. Recognition of politeness was assessed by observing the change in their tones in the expression of emotions. The students' familiarity of the context during the two readings was assessed based on their performance in the other aspects, such as, reading fluency, reading comprehension and politeness recognition. In other words, the students' performance in the above-mentioned variables determined their scores in the context familiarity. The new words and new expressions, which were expected to be strange were written in bold and after the reading the students were asked their meanings. Each variable was assessed over hundred.

### 1.5 Sample and Sampling Technique

203 students were selected out of 409 from seven Government Senior Secondary schools in Kano Municipal using Krejcie and Morgan [35] Model. According to this Model, in a population of 420 subjects, 201 subjects would be selected as

sample. Random sampling technique was employed where 31 out of 62 students were selected in the first school. 28 out of 57 students were selected in the second school. In the third school, 27 out of 54 students; in the fourth school 30 out of 61 students were selected. 27 out 55 of students were selected in the fifth school; 30 out of 60 in the sixth school and 30 out of 61 students in the seventh school. Every odd number was selected in the class registers in the first, third and sixth schools and every even number was selected in the class registers in the second, fourth, fifth and seventh schools.

The seven schools were selected from Kano Municipal because of the diverse nature of the students' background. The first factor considered for the selection was cultural diversity. In the Municipal Zone, students in secondary schools were from different cultural backgrounds. The second factor considered for this selection was linguistic background. Students in the secondary schools in that zone shared different linguistic backgrounds, which enhanced the process of conducting this study. The students had different L1s and for this reason, English as L2 became the medium of communication. The third factor, gender, was also important, as Wray and Bloomer [36] observed that gender is one out of the many variables linguists consider when examining the conscious and unconscious choices people make in relation to linguistic behaviour. Research has consistently shown that females perform better than their male counterparts in language learning (see Schmitt, 2010). For this reason, both boys' and girls' schools were selected. The subjects selected for the study were the final year students.

**Table 1. The population and sampling (schools and the subjects selected for the study)**

S/n	Schools	Gender	Samples
1	Rumfa College, Kano	Boys	31
2	Ado Gwaram Senior Secondary School, Zoo Road	Boys	28
3	Government Senior Secondary School, Sabuwar Kofa	Boys	27
4	Government Senior Secondary School, Sharada	Boys	30
5	Government Girls Secondary School, Salanta	Girls	27
6	Government Girls Secondary School, Hasana Suffi	Girls	30
7	Government Girls Secondary School, Gandu	Girls	30
			203

1.6 Data Presentation and Analysis

Table 2. Results of reading the translated Hausa passage for the Seven Schools

	Reading Fluency	Reading Comprehension	Recognition of Politeness	Context Familiarity	New Words	New Expressions
(%)						
1	55.00	70.9	59.59	69.63	6.1	5.6
2	54.00	68.2	58.90	70.4	4.30	10.62
3	56.50	68.40	63.63	65.30	5.20	8.70
4	58.19	74.63	67.95	67.50	5.23	9.40
5	55.66	73.63	57.40	71.36	5.06	11.40
6	55.66	78.1	59.60	59.40	5.1	9.10
7	57.1	66.96	60.90	70.20	5.3	7.8
Average	55.66	73.63	67.95	67.50	5.23	9.40

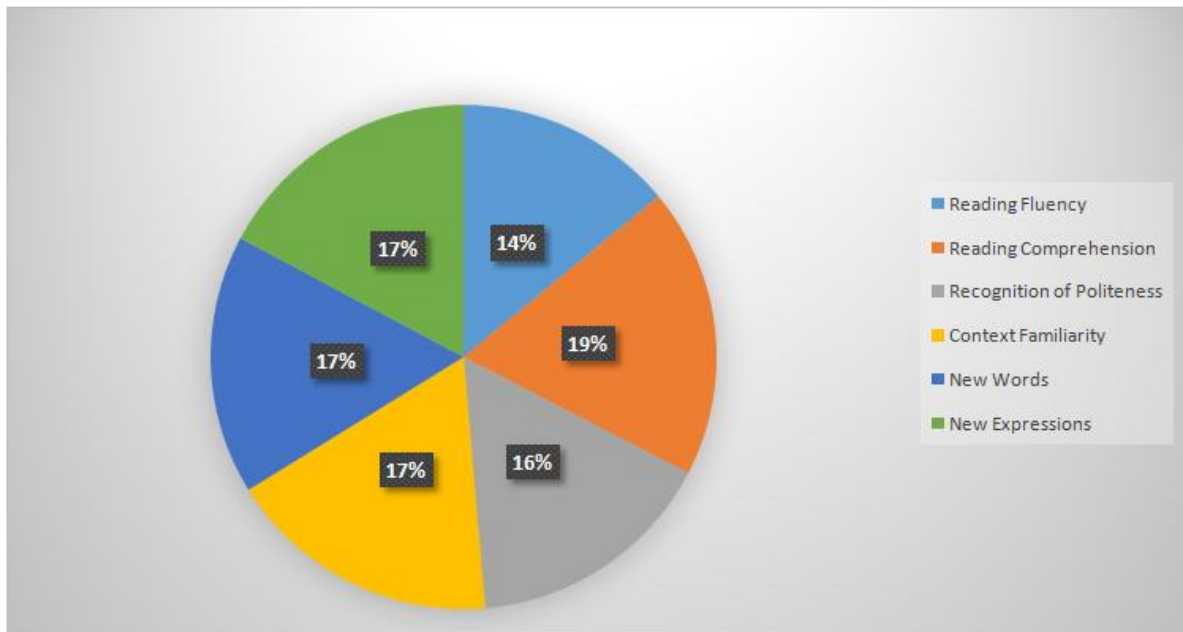


Fig. 1. Result of reading the Hausa-culture-based passage

Table 3. Results of Reading the Native Speaker Version Passage for the Seven Schools

Variables Assessed	Reading Fluency	Reading Comprehension	Recognition of Politeness	Context Familiarity	New Words	New Expressions
(%)						
1	24.10	20.7	20.39	10	70.38	68.3
2	25.60	19.40	23.6	9	65.8	67.50
3	27.1	27.50	22.6	8.17	67.30	71.37
4	30.98	23.7	25.10	7.90	72.50	70.37
5	26.13	21.9	30.00	11.10	59.95	60.6
6	26.3	29.51	20.1	8.40	66.40	62.60
7	25.10	20.1	20.70	9.21	70.00	68.40
Average	26.13	23.7	22.6	9	65.8	68.3

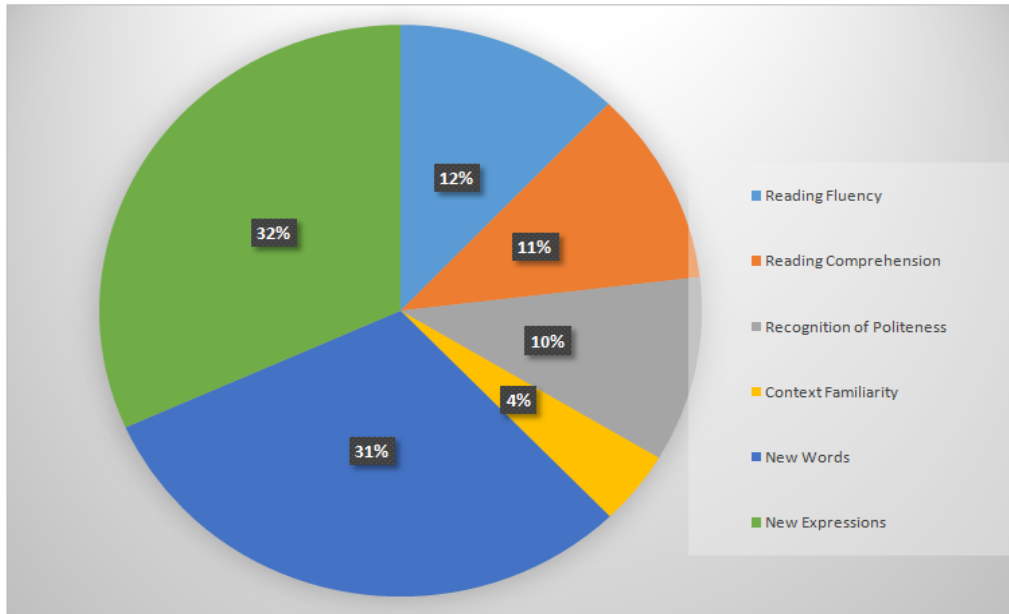


Fig. 2. Result of reading the English-culture-based passage

## 2. RESULTS

JMP Pro 15.0.0 software was used as the instrument for the statistical analysis in the study where parameter of frequency counts and percentages were determined. 203 subjects' scores on the six variables were analysed using this parameter. The total scores of the students on each of the six variables in each school were summed up as shown in Tables 2 & 3. However, the scores of each variable from the seven schools were put together. Also, the percentages of the students'/subjects' scores were calculated. Table 2 shows the result of reading the translated Hausa passage for the seven schools and Table 3 presents the results of reading the native speaker version passage for the seven schools. After adding the students' scores in each school on each variable, the percentages were summed up and divided by the number of schools where the average of each variable was found. The averages of the six variables were presented on Figs. 1 & 2 in percentage.

### 2.1 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. As can be seen from Fig. 1, reading fluency in the Hausa-culture-based passage has 17% of the total score during the assessment of

the students' reading. Reading comprehension carries 19%, recognition of politeness takes 16%, context familiarity 17%, new words in the passage carries 14% and new expressions occupies 17%. This indicates that the first passage reading was fluent; it flowed smoothly as students did not have difficulty pronouncing words and their reading speed was high. The subjects understood the message of the passage and correctly answered most of the questions asked on the passage. They understood the politeness as well as the mood of the writer very well. The subjects' familiarity with the context enhanced their comprehension of the passage. They came across only a few new words and expressions during the reading.

As can be seen from Fig. 2, reading fluency in the English-culture-based passage carries only 12% of the total score during the assessment of the students' reading. Reading comprehension has 11% of the total score, recognition of politeness gets 10%, context familiarity has the least score of 4%, new words takes 31% and new expressions occupies the largest share of 32%. This indicates that during the reading of the second passage, the subjects were less fluent. The flow of the reading was rough and they got difficulty pronouncing some words in the passage. Their comprehension of the message was poor. After the reading, they were unable to answer most of the comprehension questions. 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 in the passage also contributed to their poor understanding.

### 3. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

As the finding of the study shows, L2 teaching is dominated by language rules and comprehension texts on local socio-cultural issues. This is supported by the students' poor performance due to the unfamiliarity the students showed with the context in reading the second passage. The inability of the students to read the second passage fluently and the way they struggled with new words and new expressions (that hampered the comprehension) prove that they have not been interacting with the English culture. It is however a clear indication that L2 learners lack exposure to the culture of the target language.

The learners poor performance in reading of the passage on English culture and the excellent performance during reading the Hausa culture based passage, also indicate that the National curricula and schemes have enough provisions on the rules governing the structure of English language but do not have provision for the English culture and tradition which form the background to the usage of the language. The finding however indicates that little attention is given to the sociocultural aspect of English as L2, rather, it is dominated by the L2 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 L2 learners to comprehend some ideas, thoughts, experiences or attitudes especially when expressed by a native speaker. L2 learners find it easy to comprehend the same phenomena expressed in their own version of the use of the language. This therefore supports the relativist argument that people's world view is totally or partly determined by their native language structure.

### COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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