

**An Investigation on Secondary School Students' Literacy Skills and  
Their Academic Performance:  
*Identifying Critical Areas for Intervention***

**Mebratu Mulatu, Ph.D. and Eshetu Mandefro, M.A.  
Hawassa University**

=====

**Abstract**

The main objective of the study was to evaluate the students' perception and performance in the basic literacy skills (Reading and Writing Skills). The design was basically a descriptive survey. The study encompassed 4 Woredas (local districts) of Hawassa University Technology village. The samples were 226 Grade 10 students of which 76 were High, 75 were Medium and 75 were Low achievers in the overall academic subjects. The sampling technique employed was purposive. The instruments were Standard Literacy Test and questionnaire. The data from the test was analyzed using SPSS, specifically independent sample t-test, to make comparisons among the scores of the students. On the other hand, the data collected through questionnaire was analyzed using simple statistics like frequency count and percentile. The main findings of the study revealed that high achievers managed to score high marks in Standard Literacy Test (SLT) when they are compared with low achievers. When the reading and the writing items scores were compared, reading skills test scores have high potential to predict the academic performance of the learners. On the other hand, most high and low achievers couldn't score the average point in the literacy skills test which implies that pool literacy performance of students is one of the main challenges in ensuring quality education. The other important finding of this study is that high and low achievers have differences in interest, reading and writing experience and classroom practice towards literacy skills. However, both groups experience similar challenges such as scarcity of materials, poor back ground experience, and inconvenient environment to develop their literacy

level. It is recommended that EFL teachers, school administrators, governmental and non-governmental organization should take part in the intervention components mentioned in the study.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Background of the study

The most common understanding of literacy is that it is a set of tangible skills – particularly the cognitive skills of reading and writing – that are independent of the context in which they are acquired and the background of the person who acquires them. Scholars continue to disagree on the best way to acquire literacy, with some advocating the ‘phonetic’ approach and others ‘reading for meaning’, resulting in what has sometimes been called the ‘reading wars’ (Street, 2004). The emphasis on meaning has recently given way to a ‘scientific’ attention to phonetics, word recognition, spelling and vocabulary. This approach has lately turned to research in the cognitive sciences on important features of human memory (e.g. how the brain processes reading patterns) and to techniques such as phonological awareness training and giving increasingly faster reading tasks (Kourea, et al., 2007).

English language literacy, which is the focus of the present study, is very vital for students in different levels in our country as English language plays a significant role in linking the national community to the international one. And, it is being given as a subject of from grade one. Moreover, today, having appropriate literacy skills in English language has become an advantage not only for individuals to manage academic areas and get jobs easily but also for the country to adapt science and technology and make diplomatic and commercial ties to the global world.

Currently, English is also used as a means of communication in international and local NGO’s, federal as well as regional legislative documents, import and export oriented business organizations, government and non-government media of printed and electronic types, entertainments (e.g., music and movies), and business promotion and advertisement activities. Thus, English has become a key to unlock business of government and nongovernment organizations in the country. Generally, as the country is on the way to integrate itself into the

global world, English language plays an immense role in facilitating the country's success in diplomacy, commerce and modernization.

English literacy, especially in reading and writing, becomes very vital for secondary school students these days. The ability to read has long been considered by literate societies to be one of the basic building blocks affecting commercial exchange, cultural advancement, and personal independence. High levels of literacy are even more important as we move through the 21st century as globalization demands students to communicate people in distance through reading and writing dominantly. In fact, we are now exposed to more information that requires reading and synthesizing. Now, we depend on our reading abilities in every area of our life: our careers, following directions in brochures for household equipment as well as being informed citizens. The demands on students to read, comprehend and evaluate complex information have never been greater before than present times. However, in Ethiopian context, various scholars (Tekeste, 2006; Hailom, 1993; Haregewoine, 2007) stated that students could not follow their studies in English because their knowledge of English was poor and the teachers could not help their students since they themselves were not good at it. As a result, after completing high school students are unable to speak the target language and write independently.

When we come to the secondary level, the students' proficiency in reading and writing is connected with the learners' proficiency in English. We do not have to look much to realize the apparent lack of interest and problems in reading and writing. The low proficiency of English language learners in Ethiopia's classrooms is proof of this growing concern. The problem is so common that we have grown accustomed to seeing them struggle to comprehend written texts and to produce texts. Above all, teachers and other professionals blame secondary school students for their poor reading and writing ability, however, there are only limited empirical evidences on the areas. In addition, as of the researchers' knowledge, the limited number of studies conducted in the area haven't specifically put the sub skills and contents of reading and writing skills in which the learners are proficient or poor. This leads to vague interventions which don't bring any desired change in the students' English proficiency in general and on the target literacy skill specifically.

## 1.2 Research Objectives

### 1.3.1 General Objective

The main objective of the study was to evaluate the students' perception and performance in the basic literacy skills (Reading and Writing Skills) in the language of instruction.

### 1.3.2 Specific Objectives

The study attempted to:

1. Assess the perception of students towards the role of the basic literacy skills (Reading and Writing skills) to improve their academic performance;
2. Evaluate the status of students' performance of the basic literacy skills which are expected in the level;
3. Indicate the correlation between the perception of the students and their actual performances on the literacy skills based on their achievement level, and

## 1.3 Significance of the study

The current study has a number of significances mainly to the secondary school students and to various stakeholders working in the area. First, the results of the study will help the students though providing their exact status so as to take measures to bridge their literacy skill gap in English language. This will enhance the students' literacy skills which has a significant role in the academic environment. Secondly, as there are a number of trainings being delivered these days, the study will show potential areas of training for those who design different to foster the students' literacy skills in English language. Thus, the study clearly shows areas for those who are engaged on literacy skill training. The other beneficiaries of this study are secondary school EFL teachers as they are preparing students to develop their literacy skill which help them to communicate effectively in global level. Finally, the study will be expected to help text book writers and curriculum designers since it will provide inputs for designing or revising text book or teaching materials.

### Scope of the Study

=====

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 18:2 February 2018

Mebratu Mulatu, Ph.D. and Eshetu Mandefro, M.A.

An Investigation on Secondary School Students' Literacy Skills and Their Academic Performance: Identifying Critical Areas for Intervention

The study was conducted in Hawassa university Technology village. From six Technology Village Woredas (local districts), 6 secondary schools in four districts were selected on the basis of the proximity to the researchers and their location.

## **2. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE**

### **2.1 The Concept of Literacy**

In the academic community, theories of literacy have evolved from those focused solely on changes in individuals to more complex views encompassing the broader social contexts (the ‘literate environment’ and the ‘literate society’) that encourage and enable literacy activities and practices to occur. As a result of these and other developments, understandings in the global community have expanded too: from viewing literacy as a simple process of acquiring basic cognitive skills, to use these skills in ways that contribute to socio-economic development, to develop the capacity for social awareness and critical reflection as a basis for personal and social change.

Currently, various disciplines underline the importance of literacy. Even, most of them termed the process of reading and writing as a critical concept to their field. However, they often interpret it based on their content wise understanding. Linguists emphasize the language or textual dimensions of reading and writing. Cognitive psychologists explore the mental processes that are used to generate meaning through and from print. Socioculturalists view acts of literacy as expressions of group identity that signal power relationships. Developmentalists focus on the strategies employed and the patterns displayed in the learning of reading and writing ( Kucer, 2005).

These views have a significant impact on the definition and the teaching of literacy in classroom context. The ways in which literacy is defined and used as a social practice by various communities (e.g., cultural, occupational, gender) are being documented. The nature of knowledge, its production, and its use as linked to literacy, ideology, and power are being uncovered (Kucer, 2005). The educational impact of these explorations has been an increased sensitivity to the range of socially based experiences and meanings that students bring to the

classroom. Additionally, educators have worked to ensure a more diverse representation of knowledge in the curriculum and more equitable access to this knowledge. These experiences offer the opportunity for additional literacy learning that result in developmental advancements. Therefore, as Leu (2000) states becoming literate rather than being literate more accurately describes our ongoing relationship with written language. In other words, when reading and writing are conceived as multidimensional in nature, the tendency to reduce literacy to, or understand literacy from, a single disciplinary perspective is avoided.

## **2.2 The Relationship between Literacy and English Language**

It continues to be the case that practitioners in pre-school establishments, primary schools and staff in the English department in secondary schools will deliver the framework for literacy and English. However, the framework recognizes that all staff in schools have important responsibilities for and contributions to make towards the development of literacy. Almost all of the literacy and English experiences and outcomes relate to either literacy or both literacy and English. As a result, much of what children and young people learn as part of English includes developing their literacy skills.

In English, learners will also develop skills in word patterns, text structures and studying literature, including Scottish literature and a wide range of texts. This will involve some experiences and outcomes identified as English. These include aspects of: tools for listening, talking and reading; understanding, analysing and evaluating as part of reading; and creating texts as part of writing. In relation to this children and young people will learn about characters, setting, plot and the techniques authors have used to make these effective. They will also be encouraged to talk and write imaginatively and listen to the ideas and thoughts of others.

Literacy skills will be developed in all subjects and across curriculum. The experiences and outcomes promote the development of critical thinking, creative thinking, competence in listening and talking, reading and writing, personal, interpersonal and team-working skills and skills in using language. In secondary schools and other settings where a young person might be

learning, young people study a variety of curriculum areas with literacy across learning. At various times all their teachers will be supporting them in activities which involve listening and talking, reading or writing and so their literacy skills will continue to develop.

In listening and talking, learners will demonstrate their progress through their interactions in social and learning contexts and through using individual talks, presentations and group discussions. This range of sources will provide evidence about their confidence, their increasing awareness of others in sustaining interactions, the clarity of their ideas and expression and their skills in listening to others and taking turns.

In reading, learners will demonstrate their progress through their growing fluency and understanding, and their increasing confidence in reading to learn as well as learning to read. Progress in critical literacy will be demonstrated as learners move from dealing with straightforward information towards analyzing, evaluating and being aware of the trust that they should place on evidence.

In writing, learners will demonstrate their progress through the degree of independence they show, the organization and quality of their ideas, their skills in spelling, punctuation and grammar, the match of their writing to audience and the effectiveness of their use of language.

### **2.3 Elementary Versus High School Literacy Instruction**

In the elementary years, reading instruction focuses on basic reading: phonics/decoding, fluency, and comprehension of narrative and simple informational text. The type of instruction needed for most students to be successful with content area reading and writing changes drastically in middle and high school. Students in middle and high schools are bombarded with a wide variety of complex expository and descriptive text, technical content vocabulary, and writing requirements of content classes.

Most students know how to read on at least a literal level when they enter high school. In other words, they can decode and comprehend basic information when reading straightforward

text. However, many do not know how to “read to learn” more complex texts on their own; they do not know how to independently use reading, writing, and critical thinking strategies to comprehend information, construct meaning, question the author’s thinking against other text or their own experiences, or synthesize new information and ideas to new situations. Literacy instruction at the high school level should support students to continue developing reading fluency; improving vocabulary knowledge; developing higher-level reasoning and thinking skills; improving reading comprehension strategies, and increasing student motivation and engagement with reading and writing (Torgeson et al., 2007).

### **3. MATERIALS AND METHODS**

#### **3.1 Research Design**

The study was basically a correlational design that encompasses both qualitative and quantitative data. The design was preferred because it clearly displays the actual situation of certain environment in which the subjects operate. Furthermore, it gives opportunity to collect objective data about the scenario.

#### **3.2 Setting of the Study**

Setting refers the area which the study is to be conducted. Accordingly, the present research was conducted in Hawassa University Technology Village districts (Woredas). The site was selected due to its proximity and familiarity to the researcher. In addition, it is the catchment area of Hawassa University to deliver the community service.

#### **3.3 Subjects and Sampling Techniques**

The subjects of the study were secondary school students in Hawassa University Technology Village Woredas. Among Eight Woredas, five were selected through simple random technique. Accordingly, Hawassa Zuriya, Wondogenet, Hawassa City and Dalle were selected. Each Woredas (local districts) had two and more secondary schools and one school was included in the sample from each Woredas. Thus, 6 secondary first cycle schools (Hawassa City and Hawassa Zuriya , Dalle and Wondogenet) were selected.

The students were selected from each secondary school based on their academic performances. That means the students were selected through purposive sampling. The students were selected based on their 2009 second semester classroom rank and average point they scored.

**Table 1: Distribution of the Samples**

No.	Woreda/ districts	School	Number of Students in achievement		
			High	Medium	Low
1	Wondogenet	1 Secondary	20	20	20
2	Hawassa Zuriya	1 Secondary	15	15	15
3	Hawassa City	3 Secondary	26	25	25
4	Dalle	1 Secondary	15	15	15
		<i>Total</i>	<i>76</i>	<i>75</i>	<i>75</i>

### 3.4 Instruments of Data Collection

There are two instruments which were used in the study. These tools were selected based on their effectiveness to attain the objectives stated in the proposal.

#### 3.4.1 Literacy Test

The main objective of administering the test was to assess the actual performance of the students so as to determine their proficiency in the literacy skills: reading and writing. The test was a standard test which was modified by considering the English language curriculum competencies that are expected in the secondary level. The minimum learning competencies of English language reading and writing skills of general secondary level were taken from the curriculum of the level. The items were taken from standard tests of literacy across the world on the basis of the minimum learning competencies. The items were slightly adapted from High School Literacy Test (New South Wales Department of Education and Training) and TOFEL Junior, Practice Test (2012) considering the minimum learning competencies of General Secondary School students in Ethiopia. The standard tests of which the items were taken from has 0.73 average reliability value. This indicates that the items are consistent. The test contained two parts. The first part was on reading proficiency and the next part was on assessing the writing performance of the learners.

### 3.4.2 Questionnaire

The questionnaire was administered to assess the perception of the learners about their performance on the literacy skills. Thus, items which can assess the learners' perception of literacy skills will carefully be selected and included in the questionnaire. There are standard items which were designed by various scholars to assess the students' perception on literacy skills. However, the items were adapted to the level in such a way that students can comprehend and respond to them easily.

The questionnaire contained two parts. The first part was intended to assess the learners' general perception on literacy skills. Then, the next part was assumed evaluate the students' perception particularly to their performances in the literacy skills. This part included specific items which are related to the specific skills in the two broader ones: reading and writing.

### 3.5 Data Gathering Procedures

The data was gathered through the test and questionnaire. The procedure which was preferred to gather the data was that the researcher administered the questionnaire first and the test later. This was to avoid a possible reflection of artificial behavior on the questionnaire due to the effect of the literacy test. In addition, the test was administered after two weeks of administering the questionnaire. This helped the researcher to minimize the possibility of the two tools affecting each other.

### 3.6 Methods of Data Analysis

The researcher used different methods to analyze data. Both tools were given a code when they are being administered. This was done to compare individual's perception with the actual performance in the test. First, the literacy skill test was marked based on the criteria set. Two different instructors marked each student paper and the average score was taken as a true score that indicates the individual's performance. Then, the items in the questionnaire were tallied and counted based on the rating scale scores. Then, using SPSS version 21, an independent sample t-test was computed to compare the mean difference and its significance based on statistical cut points.

The other statistical concept which was applied in the study was the “Effect Size”. It refers to an estimate of the strength of the association between two or more variables (Osteen and Bright, 2010). In other words, it is a statistical tool that measures the magnitude of statistically significant mean differences. There are different ways of calculating effect size: Cohen’s d, Pearson’s r, Cramer’s V, odd Ratio and Cohen’s  $f^2$ . The effect size of the variables in the literacy skills tests were computed by a formula called Cohen’s d as it is the most appropriate method for two independent groups (Osteen and Bright, 2010). In addition, the statistical values which are the components of the formula: mean, standard deviation and standard error, were calculated.

#### 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In this section, the data collected through literacy skills tests and questionnaire is analyzed on the basis of the objectives stated in the first chapter. In addition, the main findings and results are discussed in line with the findings of recent related studies. Though the data from each tool is discussed separately, it is categorized in themes considering the objectives.

**Table 2: Reading Literacy vs Students’ Achievement**

Category	N	Mean	Standard Deviation (SD)	Mean Difference	P- Value (Sign 2-tailed)	Cohen’s d/ Effect Size
High Achievers	76	10.05	2.8	2.8	0.00	1.23/ 0.54
Low Achievers	75	7.21	1.9			

The above table indicates the two categories of students and their reading skills literacy test performance. Accordingly, high and low achievers managed to score 10.05 and 7.21 mean with 2.8 and 1.9 SD respectively. The mean scores of the two groups were also exposed to the independent sample t-test to see if the mean difference, 2.8, is significant. The P-value, the value for significant difference, is 0.00. It is less than 0.05 which is the cutoff for decision. This means that the reading achievement differences between the two groups is statistically significant. On the other hand, the magnitude of the significant mean difference, effect size, was tabulated using the

Cohen's d and the value is 0.54 which large. In general, the statistical values indicate that high achievers in all subjects scores significantly high marks in reading skills test than the low achievers. Thus, it is possible to say that high school students reading experience and performance determine their academic success and failure highly.

The result is in line with Acheaw's and Larson's (2014) findings of the study conducted in Ghana. In addition, the same study was conducted in USA by Ukiah in 2013. The studies confirmed that learners reading habit skills have positive influence on their academic performance and there is relationship between reading skills and academic performance. Ukia (2013) revealed that the relationship between reading and academic performance becomes stronger as we proceeded to the upper level (grades). But, the studies lack standard empirical data which is provided by the current study. Thus, the present study confirms that the positive relationship between reading skills and academic performance is very strong.

**Table 3: Writing Literacy Vs Students' Achievement**

Category	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean Difference	P- Value	Cohen's d/ Effect size
High Achievers	76	7.72	2.7	2.1	0.00	0.9/ 0.4
Low Achievers	75	5.53	2.0			

The other sub category of the literacy test which is indicated in the above table is the writing skills literacy. The table demonstrates both the mean scores and the independent t-test values. In the writing literacy test, high achievers scored 7.72 and low achievers scored 5.53 mean value. This results in 2.1 mean difference value. The p value which indicates the level of significant difference is 0.00 which means that the difference between the two categories is statistically significant. The magnitude of the mean difference which was termed as statistically significant is 0.4. This means that the magnitude is 'moderate' as the values of effect size were determined as 'Small' if it is  $\pm 0.2$ , 'Moderate' if it is  $\pm 0.5$  and 'Large' if it is  $\pm 0.8$  (Osteen and Bright, 2010). Thus, the results from the table imply that there is statistically significant difference between the

writing skills of high achievers and low achievers. However, the magnitude of the difference is moderate.

**Table 4: General Literacy Mean and Independent Sample t test outputs**

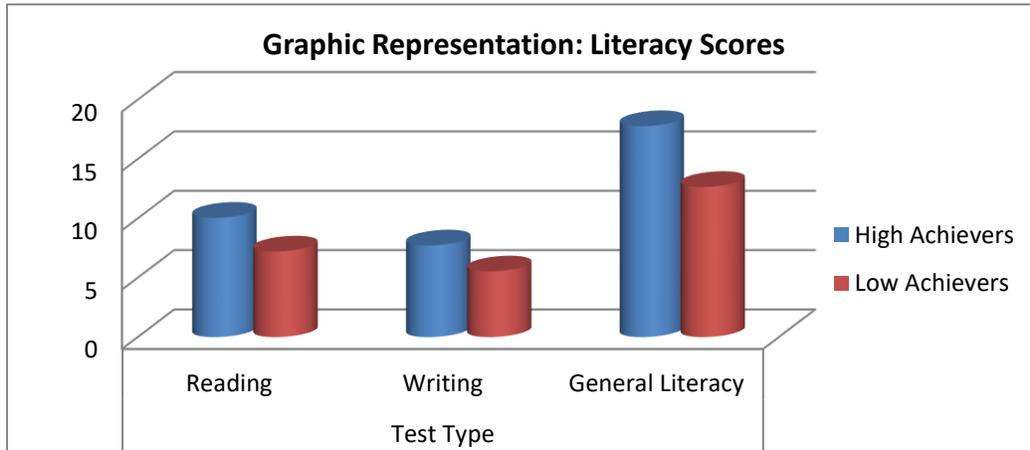
Category	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean Difference	P-Value	Cohen's d/ Effect size
High Achievers	76	17.77	4.6	5.12	0.00	1.3/ 0.56
Low Achievers	75	12.65	2.8			

The above table depicts the statistical analysis of the scores of the comprehensive literacy test which constitutes of reading and writing skills tests. Accordingly, the mean scores of high achievers and low achievers are 17.77 and 12.56 with 4.6 and 2.8 SD respectively. The two categories mean difference is 5.12. The p value, 0.00, indicates that the mean difference is statistically significant as it is less than 0.05. The magnitude of the mean difference was tabulated and it is 0.56 which means the mean difference is 'large'. This implies that high achievers score significantly high marks in the literacy exam compared with low achievers.

The above finding matches with Antilla's (2013) study outputs. She Claimed that roughly 80% of high school dropouts are students with poor literacy skills and these students have trouble in all of their subjects in school and constitute a large proportion of students who coast, become disciplinary problems, and -- in too many cases--go on to populate the nation's prisons. Thus, poor literacy skill doesn't only result in poor academic performance but also makes citizens not productive enough in various sectors.

In addition, the above table shows that the expected average mean score cutoff to the standard literacy test was 20. However, the table indicates that the two categories of students couldn't achieve it since their means are 17.77 and 12.65. This indicates that both group students are far away from the standard average mean scores. This implies most of the students in both group have poor literacy skills.

**Fig 1: Graphic Representations of the Literacy Test Scores**



*Fig. 2: Graphic Representation of Literacy Scores*

The above graph indicates the pictorial representations of the literacy skill test scores of the students. There are three groups in the horizontal line: reading tests, writing test and general literacy test. Each of them has two cylindrical bars that represent the two categories of learners: high and low achievers. And, the vertical line indicates the scores. Therefore, the two category students' writing achievement is low when we compare with reading. Nevertheless, reading determines students' achievement more than writing as the mean differences between the groups is greater in reading skill test (2.8) than in writing (2.1).

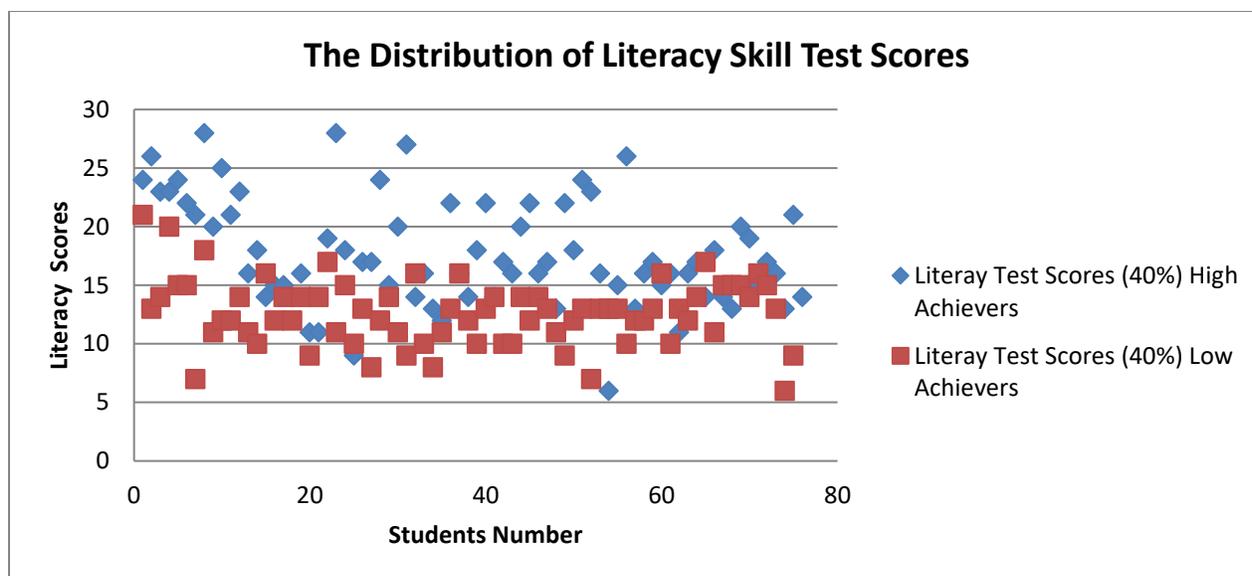


Fig 2: The Distribution of Literacy Skills Test Scores

The above figure demonstrates the distribution of high and low achievers' literacy scores. The blue (diamond shape) dots indicate the distribution of high achievers scores, whereas, the red (square shape) dots represent low achievers' scores distribution. From the figure, it is possible to notice that most high achievers' literacy scores are located at the top position. In contrast, almost all low achievers scores are below the high achievers' scores. In general, the literacy skills test scores made distinction between high and low achievers, which in turn means that secondary school students' academic achievement is highly determined their literacy skills performance.

## Analysis of the Questionnaire

Table 5: Learners' Reading Experience

No.	Item	Options	High		Low		Remark
			F	%	F	%	
1	Number of books read	One to two	18	23.6	31	41.3	
		Three to five	34	44.7	7	9.3	
		More than five	26	34.2	3	4	
		None	7	9.2	34	45.3	
2	Frequency of going library	Always	31	40.7	12	16	

		Frequently	20	26.3	13	17.3	
		Sometimes	15	19.7	26	34.2	
		Rarely	4	5.2	16	21.3	
		Never	5	6.5	8	10.6	
3	Types of materials students read	Lecture notes	24	31.5	34	45.3	
		Text books	22	28.9	31	41.3	
		Novels newspapers/ magazines	14	18.4	2	2.6	
		Guides and references	15	19.7	8	10.6	

Table 5 reveals the analysis of the two categories learners' reaction towards their reading experiences. Regarding the first item, the number of books they have read so far, most high achievers, which means 52 (68%), read three to five and more books. However, most low achievers read one to two books and many students, 34 (45.3%), even no book at all. About their frequency going to the library, 51(67%) high achievers go always and frequently, whereas only 26 (33.3%) low achievers do so. In addition, high achievers read varieties of materials like newspapers, novel, etc as the frequency is fairly distributed among the varieties. But, low achievers focus only on lecture notes and texts books since these cover 65 (86%) of students. In general, the table implies that there is a clear experience differences between high and low achievers in reading.

**Table 6: Perception towards Interest and Reasons for Reading and Writing**

No.	Item	Options	High Achiev.		Low Achievers		Remark
			F	%	F	%	
1	Interested to read in English	Yes	67	88.8	39	52	
		No	9	11.8	36	48	
2	Reasons for not reading in English	I feel that the materials are not important.	1	11.1	5	13.8	
		Have no any experience of doing so.	3	33.3	18	50	
		I'm not good at English.	4	44.4	12	33.3	
		Takes too much time to comprehend.	1	11.1	1	2.7	
3	The importance of reading Novel or Fiction	Better self-expression	22	28.9	18	24	
		Learn new things	36	47.3	27	36	
		Imagine things	1	1.3	6	8	
		Complement studies	14	18.4	23	30.6	
		To refresh	2	2.6	1	1.3	
4		Pass exam	32	42.1	48	64	

Reasons to read most of the time contents in English	Gain knowledge	26	34.2	11	14.6	
	Improve spoken/ written language	12	15.5	6	8	
	To have fun/ pleasure	5	6.5	11	14.6	

The above table displays the perceptions of high and low achievers their interest and reasons for reading and writing. Accordingly, 67 (88%) high achievers and 39 (52%) low achievers responded that they are interested to read in English. On the contrary, 36 (48%) low achievers revealed that they are not interested to read in English. Concerning their reasons for not reading in English, 18(50%) low achievers indicated that they have no experience and 12 (33.3%) reacted they don't read because they are not good at English. The students were asked the importance of reading fiction, dominant figure of high achievers, 58(76%) stated to have better self-expression and to learn new things. Likewise, most of the low achievers, 45(60%) agreed with their counterparts. Regarding reasons for reading contents in English, most of high and low achievers have the same justifications: to pass exam and to gain knowledge. The data in the table basically implies that high and low achievers are not equally interested to read in English. But, their reasons for reading in English are almost similar.

**Table 7: Writing Experience and Challenges to Literacy Practice**

No.	Item	Options	High		Low		Remark
			F	%	F	%	
1	Common writing practice in English	Copying notes from the blackboard	17	22.3	41	54.6	
		Developing short notes from a book.	38	50.6	10	13.3	
		Writing letter/ email to a friend.	15	19.7	6	7.8	
		I don't have any practice of writing	4	5.2	18	23.6	
2	Reasons to write in English	To communicate with people.	17	22.3	24	32	
		To copy certain documents/ notes.	24	31.5	37	49.3	
		To develop my thinking ability.	30	39.4	2	2.6	
		I don't write	5	6.5	12	16	
3	The challenges that affect students reading/ writing practice in English	Resource scarcity	16	21	20	26.6	
		Inconvenient environment	36	47.3	29	38.6	
		Poor interest	11	14.4	12	16	

	Poor background/ experience	13	17.1	21	28	
--	-----------------------------	----	------	----	----	--

Table 7 depicts the learners’ writing experience and the challenges in developing their literacy skills. The first item is about their common writing practice. The most common writing practice to high achievers is developing short notes, whereas copying notes from blackboard is the most common one to low achievers. In addition, 23.6% low achievers reacted that they don’t have any practice of writing. When the students were asked about their reasons of writing in English, 39.4% and 31.5% high achievers reacted to develop their thinking ability and to copy certain documents/ notes. On the other hand, 50% of low achievers reacted to copy certain notes/ documents. Regarding the challenges to develop literacy skills, the two categories of students stated similar challenges like inconvenient environment, resource limitations and poor background experience. From the analysis, it is possible to infer that there is a writing practice difference among the two categories of students. Also, high achievers write in English having different purposes, but low achievers focus mainly on one or two purposes.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

### Conclusions

The main objective of the present study was to evaluate the students’ perception and performance in the basic literacy skills (Reading and Writing Skills). Specifically, it attempted to assess the perception of students towards the role of the basic literacy skills (Reading and Writing skills) to improve their academic performance, evaluate the status of students’ performance of the basic literacy skills which are expected in the level, indicate the relationship between the perception of the students and their actual performances on the literacy skills based on their achievement level.

Regarding the perception of students to the basic literacy skills, high and low achievers have differences on their interest to read and write in English. The positive interest is associated with high achievers and the negative is to their counterpart. In addition, high achievers read varieties of materials like newspapers, fiction, references, etc apart from text books and guides,

but low achievers focus is mainly limited to text books and lecture notes. Similarly, most low achievers have read only no, one, two books, but most high achievers have read three and more books. From this, it is possible to conclude that the performance difference in the academics is the result of developing interest and carrying out activities related to literacy skills.

Both high and low achievers experience similar challenges which hamper their attempt to develop literacy skills. The most common ones are scarcity of varieties of reading and writing resources, inconvenient environment, poor interest and background experience. This indicates that the challenges limited students' practice on enhancing their literacy skills.

The status of students' performance of the basic literacy skills which are expected in the level is low as almost all students (high and low achievers) couldn't manage to score the average performance value. Thus, it is possible to conclude that high schools students need urgent literacy intervention so as to bring them at least to the average performance level.

The other important part of the study is identifying the relationship between students' academic achievement and literacy performance. Here, literacy has two basic components; reading and writing. Accordingly, high achievers in all subjects scored significantly high marks with large magnitude (effect size) in reading skills test than the low achievers. This shows that high school students reading experience and performance determine their academic success and failure highly. In writing, the two groups of students had significant mean difference which favours the high achievers; however, the magnitude is moderate. This means that when we compare reading and writing skills, reading skills contribute much to the academic performance. In general, the aggregate literacy performance test results show that literacy skills contribute highly to secondary school students' academic performance.

---

### References

Acheaw, O and Micheal, (2014). "Reading Habits Among Students and its Effect on Academic Performance: A Study of Students of Koforidua Polytechnic". **Library**

---

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 18:2 February 2018

Mebratu Mulatu, Ph.D. and Eshetu Mandefro, M.A.

An Investigation on Secondary School Students' Literacy Skills and Their Academic Performance: Identifying Critical Areas for Intervention

**Philosophy and Practice (e-journal).**

1130.<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/libphilprac/1130>

Antilla, J. (2013). **The Effects of Early Literacy Development On Academic Success In The Educational Setting And Implications For Educational Leaders And Teachers.** Michigan: Michigan University Press

Baron, P. (1997). **Deep and Surface Learning: Can Teachers Really Control Student approaches to Learning in Law?** (Internet source).

Biancarosa, G., & Snow, C. E. (2004). **Reading next: A vision for action and research in middle and high school literacy.** Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education (AEE).

Hailom Banteyirga (1993). **Explorations in the Preparation of pre-service EFL Teachers: A Learning Centred Approach.** PhD Thesis: Addis Ababa University.

Haregewoine Abate (2007). **The Effect of Communicative grammar on the Grammatical Accuracy of Students' Academic Writing: An Integrated Approach to TEFL.** A PhD Dissertation Submitted to Addis Ababa University.

Kourea, L., Cartledge, G., & Musti-Rao, S. (2007). Improving the reading skills of urban elementary students through total class peer tutoring. **Remedial and Special Education**, 28, 2, 95–107.

Kucer, S. (2005). **Dimensions of Literacy.** New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.

Leu, D. (2000). Literacy and technology: Deictic consequences for literacy education in an information age. In M. Kamil, P. Mosenthal, D. Pearson, & R. Barr (Eds.), **Reading research** (Vol. 3, pp. 743-770). Mahwah, NY: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Osteen, p. and Bright, Ch. (2010). **Effect Size and Intervention Research.** University of Maryland: MLU Press

Street, B. (2004). **Literacy in theory and practice.** New York: Cambridge University Press.

=====  
**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 18:2 February 2018

Mebratu Mulatu, Ph.D. and Eshetu Mandefro, M.A.

An Investigation on Secondary School Students' Literacy Skills and Their Academic Performance: Identifying Critical Areas for Intervention

Tekeste, N. (2006). Education in Ethiopia: From Crisis to the Brink of Collapse. **Discussion Paper** 33 (pp. 1-56). Stockholm: Elanders Gotab AB.

Torgesen, J., et al. (2007). **Academic literacy instruction for adolescents: A guidance document from the Center on Instruction**. Portsmouth, NH: RMC Research Corporation, Center on Instruction.

---

*Acknowledgments*

*The authors would like to acknowledge Hawassa University NMBU Project for the support in conducting this research.*

Mebratu Mulatu, Ph.D.  
College of Social Sciences and Humanities  
Hawassa University  
Hawassa  
Ethiopia  
[mebratumulatu@gmail.com](mailto:mebratumulatu@gmail.com)

Eshetu Mandefro, M.A.  
College of Education  
Hawassa University  
Hawassa  
Ethiopia  
[eshe1972@gmail.com](mailto:eshe1972@gmail.com)