Research Article

English Language Literacy Skills and Academic Achievement of Urban and Rural Secondary Schools: The Case of High and Low Achievers

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The main objective of the study was to investigate the relationship between English language literacy skills and academic achievement between urban and rural secondary schools. The study employed a descriptive design. The subjects of the study were 139 students (73 urban and 66 rural) selected from seven secondary schools in Hawassa University Technology Village local district through a stratified random sampling technique. The data were collected by administering a literacy skill test that contains reading and writing skill items. Then, a t-test was computed to compare the mean differences between rural and urban secondary school high and low achievers' English language literacy skill performances. And the *p*-value was computed to determine the level of significance of the obtained mean difference. The findings disclosed that there was a statistically significant mean difference between urban secondary school high achievers in the test scores of English language literacy (0.003, which is < 0.05) in which urban high achievers outperform. Likewise, regarding the subcomponents of English literacy skills, a statistically significant mean difference (0.006, which is < 0.05) was obtained between urban and rural high achievers, which favored the urban ones. On the other hand, the study also confirmed that there was no statistically significant difference between the urban and rural low achievers in their language literacy skill mean scores.

1. Introduction

1.1. Language, Literacy, and Academic Achievements. It is evident that language plays a vital role in various aspects of our daily lives. Its role is extended into the wider branches of learning and searching for knowledge in academic arenas [1]. Due to the extended role, [2] defines language as a vital tool for thinking and learning, which determines students' ability to access academic texts and to critically examine abstract concepts and ideas. On the other hand, literacy is the ability to read, write, view, comprehend, discuss, create, listen, and respond in the way that enables individuals to communicate successfully [3, 4]. It is also the ability to apply these skills to connect, discover, interpret, and understand both written and verbal information effectively [5]. Thus, literacy is an essential skill, which contains important language skills (reading, writing, reflecting, inquiring, etc.) for learning and searching for knowledge.

Although the broader definitions integrate social and political empowerment as well, the most common definition of literacy is typically from skill-based conceptions of functional literacy [6, 7]. Recent sources claim that literacy is generally defined as the ability to read and write [8, 9]. In addition, UNESCO [4] disclosed that literacy is the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate, and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. UNESCO's definition clearly demonstrates that literacy is plural, being practiced in particular contexts for particular purposes and in specific languages, and involves a continuum of learning measured at different proficient levels [4]. This indicates that the concept of literacy is highly associated with the macro skills of a language as it is

difficult to think about the components in the definitions without language. Thus, the need for literacy instruction becomes more vivid when we think about how much we use our reading and writing skills in our day-to-day life. That means it is important to cultivate the literacy skills of learners from early grades through language instruction as it impacts the life of the individual learners in the future.

On the other hand, academic achievement, which is one of the key variables in this study, is defined by various scholars, but the definitions have the same content. For example, Guneet Kaur Cheema [10] defined that academic achievement refers to the marks or grades of a student at school. In the same vein, Gizem Engin [11] describes it as an indicator of learners' performance, which precedes educational activities in the process of school evaluation. The performance indicator in this case can be considered as the grades of students get at the end of the assessment activities. Thus, it is possible to infer that academic achievement is the performance of learners in different disciplines or in their specific field of study. It is categorized as low, medium (average), and high achievement [12]. Low achievement refers to learners' performance, which is below the expected standard, whereas average performance indicates the medium-level performance, which is aligned with the standard. On the other hand, high achievement denotes a performance that ranges above the standard [13, 14]. Although there are learners who fall in either of the achievement categories mentioned above, the overall classroom instruction is to improve the academic achievement of students to the expected level (standard).

There are many factors that affect students' academic achievement. According to Evans Austin Brew [15], academic performance is affected by many factors including parents' education level and income, teachers' knowledge of the subject, truancy, textbook availability and accessibility, libraries, practical laboratory, meal provision, and many other factors. Bronfenbrenner [16, 17], in his theory of ecological development, grouped the factors in microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem levels. Based on this, Katherine Bertolini [18] carefully selected the factors related to the learners' academic achievement. Accordingly, the microsystem factors, which comprise literacy skills, are traits within the student as well as their direct interactions with others such as teachers and other students. The mesosystem factors are interactions that surround each learner and directly impact student achievement, whereas exo- and macro-system factors are characterized by societal factors and systemic factors that impact student learning. In addition, among the various factors, which impact academic achievement, Cornelius and Harbaugh [19] stated that literacy programs impact long-term students' academic success. Even many empirical studies [20, 21] indicate that English literacy plays a crucial role for international students in completing their studies in English-medium institutions.

1.2. The Rationale of the Study. The concept of literacy is dominantly embedded in language skills as the notion is commonly described in terms of writing and reading skill performances of individuals [22, 23]. In Ethiopian, English language is being taught as a foreign language across the three levels of education: primary, secondary, and tertiary levels. But, it is a medium of instruction in the secondary and tertiary levels. English language is being imparted as a subject in the primary level as the medium of instruction at this level is the learners' mother tongue. In secondary schools, where English language is the medium of instruction, learners' proficiency in reading and writing skills is getting the attention of scholars since the skills potentially determine students' academic success and failure. Regarding this, Karin Pethman [24] disclosed that English language literacy becomes an important tool for students to pursue their academics and get jobs easily. In addition, it plays key roles in adapting science and technology and making diplomatic and commercial ties to the global world [25]. As a remark, Reddy [26] points out that English literacy plays a significant role in academic and nonacademic settings.

In a broader perspective, the ability to read and write has long been considered by literate societies to be one of the basic building blocks affecting commercial exchange, cultural advancement, and personal independence. Estelle Bellity et al.[27] contend that a high level of literacy is even more important as we move through the 21st century since globalization demands learners to communicate with people through reading and writing dominantly. Likewise, Cale Cimmiyotti [28] explicitly states that students need to practice reading to develop their phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension as the mastery of these skills will grant them access to increasingly complex knowledge in other academic subject areas. Learners are now exposed to more information that requires reading, writing, and synthesizing. They depend on their reading and writing abilities in every area of their academic and nonacademic life [29]. The demands on students to read, comprehend, evaluate, and reflect complex information have never been greater before than present times [30, 31]. However, in Ethiopian context, various scholars [32–34] have stated that students could not follow their studies in English because their English proficiency was poor. As a result, after completing their high school education, students are unable to speak the target language and write to the expected level. In addition, learners' low proficiency of English language in classrooms is evidence for the growing concern. Nevertheless, although many scholars [35, 36] who claim that students' performance in writing and reading skills is considerably connected with their academic performance, there is no any empirical evidence which ensures to what extent the students poor academic performance is associated with their English language literacy skills.

Moreover, learners' performance in reading and writing skills might differ based on the setting in which the schools are located. Rural students had better grades than urban students in college level [37]. On the other hand, in the rural areas of Bangladesh, it has been seen that most of the students could not pass their public examination because of the failure in English subject [38]. The findings of these studies show that the school setting and learners' performance in literacy skills (reading and writing skills) might be linked to their academic performance. However, such claims

have not been supported by evidences, which have disclosed the level of influence of each literacy skill on the academic performance of the learners on the basis of the school setting.

Thus, the main objective of the study was to investigate the relationship between English language literacy skills and academic achievement between urban and rural secondary schools. Specifically, it attempted to:

(1) Compare the urban and rural secondary school high and low achievers reading skill performances.

(2) Compare the urban and rural secondary school high and low achievers writing skill performances.

(3) Test whether there is a significant difference between urban and rural secondary school students' English language literacy skills.

(4) Assess the contribution of English language literacy skills (reading and writing) to learner academic performance.

1.3. Significance of the Study. The current study has a number of significant findings mainly to secondary school students, English language teacher, textbook and curriculum designers, and teacher training institutes. First, the results of the study will help the students through providing information about their status of English language literacy to take measures to bridge their literacy skill gap. This will enhance the students' literacy skills, which has a significant role in the academic environment. Second, as there are a number of trainings being delivered these days, the study will show potential areas of training for those who design various English language literacy skill trainings. Thus, the study clearly shows areas for those who are engaged in literacy skill training. The other beneficiaries of this study are secondary school English language teachers as they are preparing students to develop their literacy skills, which help them to communicate effectively in the global level. Finally, the study will be expected to help textbook writers and curriculum designers since it provides input for designing or revising text books or teaching materials.

1.4. Scope of the Study. The study was conducted in the local district of Hawassa University Technology Village, which is located in the Sidama Regional State, Ethiopia. It consisted of a total of seven secondary schools, of which four of them were located in the urban districts and the rest three were in the rural districts. Conceptually, the study was confined not to the broader definition of literacy, which encompasses many other fields like mathematics and information technology, rather it focused on the English language literacy skills: reading and writing skills.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Research Design. The study employed a descriptive design that has made a comparison between urban and rural secondary school students' literacy skills as per their academic performance. It used a purely quantitative approach to collect the required data. The design was preferred because it displays the actual situation of a certain environments in which the subjects operate. Furthermore, it gives an opportunity to collect objective data about the scenario.

2.2. Setting, Participants, and Sampling Techniques. The present research was conducted in Hawassa University Technology Village district. The site was selected due to its proximity and familiarity with the researcher. In addition, it is the catchment area of Hawassa University to conduct studies on various social issues such as education, health, and others.

The participants of the study were selected from secondary school students from the local districts. Among the eight districts in the catchment, six districts, three rural and three urban districts, were selected through convenience sampling. Accordingly, Hawassa Zuria (R01), Wondo Genet (R02), and Dalle (R03) districts were the rural ones, whereas Hawassa city (U01), Yirgalem town (U02), and Wondo Genet town (U03) were urban districts. To manage the sample size of secondary schools, it was decided to draw one secondary school from the selected rural and urban districts through a simple random sampling technique. In addition, as the Hawassa city has the greatest number of secondary schools among all districts, two secondary schools were selected by employing the same technique. The students were from grade 10 as it was the level at which students are qualified to take the general secondary school examination, EGSSE.

Regarding the schools, all the selected schools in the rural areas were in the same status. That means they nearly have the same number of students, teachers, amount of resources, and facilities. Similarly, the selected urban schools were in the same status. Moreover, all the selected schools in the urban and rural settings have allotted equal time on literacy instruction; they have allotted 5 periods (4 hours) weekly. However, there were some differences related to school facilities and resources between the schools in the urban and rural context, which favored the urban ones.

The students were selected from each secondary school based on their academic performance. They were stratified in to three groups based on their 2019 second semester, the cumulative average point (CAP): 75%–100% "high achievers," 50%–74% "medium achievers," and 49% to 0% "low achievers" as suggested by Ganyaupfu [39]. Then, for this study, only high and low achievers were selected from each secondary school using simple random sampling, and the specific details are demonstrated in Table 1.

2.3. Data Collection Tools. The tool employed for data collection was the English language literacy skill test. It was administered to assess the actual performance of urban and rural secondary school students' literacy skills: reading and writing on the basis of their academic performance. The test was a standard test, which was adapted by considering the English language curriculum minimum learning competencies (MLCs) of Ethiopian secondary schools, particularly

TABLE 1: Distribution of the samples.

No.	Woreda/districts (In codes)	No. of secondary schools	School setting and no. of students			
			Urban		Rural	
			High achievers	Low achievers	High achievers	Low achievers
1	R02	1	—	—	11	11
2	R01	1	—	—	10	10
3	U01	2	18	18	—	—
4	U03	1	9	8	—	—
5	R03	1	—	—	12	12
6	U02	1	10	10	—	—
Total	**7**	**37**	**36**	**33**	**33**	

focusing on the reading and writing skills that are expected from the learners in the secondary level.

The test items were taken from standard tests of literacy across the world on the basis of the minimum learning competencies (MLCs) of the grade 10 English syllabus. The items were slightly adapted from High School Literacy Test (New South Wales Department of Education and Training) and TOEFL Junior Practice Test (2012). Accordingly, 30 reading and 25 writing skill items were carefully selected, adapted, and included in the test. The reading test had 0.77 reliability value, whereas the writing test had 0.79. The aggregate reliability value of the two tests was 0.78. According to Weir [40], the value from 0.1–0.4 is poor, 0.41–0.59 is average, 0.60–0.70 is good, 0.71–0.89 is very good, and 0.9–1.0 is excellent. This indicates that the items have an acceptable level of reliability. The items were also evaluated by two experts in light of the MLCs of the level to ensure their validity. The designed test contained two parts. The first part was on reading proficiency, and the next part was on assessing the writing performance of the learners. Both parts have subjective and objective items, which were designed to achieve the intended purpose.

2.4. Methods of Data Analysis. The students' test scores were sorted by school setting, academic achievements, and literacy skills (reading and writing skills). Specifically, first, the literacy skill test was marked based on the criteria set. Two instructors were selected, and informed about the purpose, and were given a brief orientation on the marking criteria. The two instructors marked each student paper, and the average score was taken as a true score. In addition, the two scores' internal consistency was checked by computing Person's correlation and the value, and the value (0.86) indicated that there was a strong correlation between the two raters' scores. Then, the test scores were entered into SPSS on the basis of their categories: urban and rural, literacy skills, and academic achievement categories. Then, an independent sample t-test was computed to compare the mean difference between rural and urban secondary school students' literacy skill tests on the basis of their academic achievement. And the p-value was computed to determine the level of significance of the mean difference based on statistical cutoff points (0.05). Furthermore, the "effect size," which is the strength of the association between two or more variables, was computed to see the magnitude of the differences. The

values of effect size were determined as "small" if it is ±0.2, "moderate" if it is ±0.5, and "large" if it is ±0.8 [41].

3. Results

3.1. Writing Skill Test Scores of Urban and Rural Secondary Schools. Table 2 demonstrates the mean, SD, and p-value of the urban and rural secondary schools of high and low achievers' writing skill test scores. It depicts that the low achievers writing skill performance of urban (mean = 6.07 and SD 2.52) and rural students (mean = 5.08 and SD = 1.79). On the other hand, the table displays that high achiever writing performance of urban (mean = 8.11 and SD = 2.94) and rural (mean = 7.04 and SD = 2.36) secondary school learners. This shows that although there was a difference in writing mean scores in both learners' categories, which favors urban high achievers, the difference was not statistically significant as the p-value is greater than 0.05 in both cases.

3.2. Reading Skill Test Scores of Urban and Rural Secondary Schools. Table 3 exhibits the mean, SD, and p-value of the urban and rural secondary schools of high and low achievers' reading skill test scores. It depicts that the low achievers' reading skill performance of urban (mean = 6.88 and SD 1.73) and rural students (mean = 7.39 and SD = 2.12). Likewise, the table portrays the high achiever reading skill scores of urban (mean = 11.36 and SD = 2.97) and rural (mean = 9.57 and SD = 2.68) secondary school learners. This shows that there was a statistically significant difference ($p = 0.006$) in the reading mean scores of high achievers' category, which favors the urban learners. The magnitude of the difference is moderate as the effect size value is 0.62.

3.3. Literacy Score of Urban and Rural Secondary Schools. Table 4 displays the mean, SD, and p-value of the urban and rural secondary schools of high and low achievers' literacy skill test scores. Accordingly, it illustrates that the low achievers' literacy skill performance of urban (mean = 12.96 and SD = 3.16) and rural students (mean = 12.47 and SD = 2.63). Similarly, the table shows the high achiever literacy skill scores of urban (mean = 16.97 and SD = 4.26) and rural (mean = 14.18 and SD = 4.48) secondary school learners. The p-value, which shows the level of significance of the difference, is 0.48 for low achievers and 0.003 for high

TABLE 2: Low and high achievers' writing skill scores.

	Achievement group	School category	N	Mean	SD	p-value	Effect size (for $p < 0.05$)
1	Low achievers	Urban secondary schools	27	6.07	2.52	0.052	Not significant
		Rural secondary schools	48	5.08	1.79		
2	High achievers	Urban secondary schools	36	8.11	2.94	0.071	Not significant
		Rural secondary schools	47	7.04	2.36		

TABLE 3: High and low achievers' reading skill test scores.

	Achievement group	School category	N	Mean	SD	p-value	Effect size (for $p < 0.05$)
1	Low achievers	Urban secondary schools	27	6.88	1.73	0.29	Not significant
		Rural secondary schools	48	7.39	2.12		
2	High achievers	Urban secondary schools	36	11.36	2.97	0.006	0.62
		Rural secondary schools	47	9.59	2.68		

achievers. This reveals that there was a statistically significant difference between the high achievers in the urban and rural schools favoring urban learners.

Figure 1 demonstrates the summary of the mean scores of rural and urban secondary school high and low achievers in reading, writing, and English language literacy (writing and reading). Accordingly, urban high achievers (16.97) have scored the greatest mean in overall language literacy, followed by rural secondary school high achievers (14.82). Similarly, both urban and rural secondary school low achievers have scored almost equal mean values (12.96 and 12.47, respectively). When we compare the components of English literacy skill scores, still both reading (11.36) and writing skills (8.11), greater mean scores are associated with urban secondary school high achievers.

4. Discussion

Many scholars [15, 21, 26] in the area of literacy explicitly underscored that individuals' academic performance is related to their literacy skills. Specifically, the current study outputs revealed that the relationship becomes stronger specifically to language literacy skills and learners' academic performance.

Writing skill is one of the literacy skills that have the potential to determine learners' academic achievement. The National Assessment of Educational Progress [42] underscores that advanced writing skill is one of the basic requirements for better academic performance as well as other activities related to the learners' academic progress. The present study revealed that there is a difference between urban and rural high and low achievers in their writing skill performances. However, the difference was insignificant. The result agrees with Javed et al., [43] which pointed out that the difference between mean scores of urban and rural students in writing skills was 0.09, which shows statistically insignificant. However, it contradicts with Mahyuddin et al.'s [44] finding that disclosed that there is a gap between the achievements of rural and urban learners. Nevertheless, this conclusion was drawn not based on measuring the learners' actual performance, rather based on the assessment of the learners' writing skill self-efficacy report. Hence, the current finding is more valid as it is based on the actual writing skill assessment.

Regarding reading skills, the results show that urban high achievers perform better than that of the rural high achievers. Complementing this, Cartwright [45] unveiled that there is a difference between rural and urban reading performance, which tends positively to the urban settings. On the other hand, the findings imply that high academic achievement is highly associated with higher reading skills performance as high achievers in both urban and rural settings scored higher results in the reading skill test. In line with this, many researchers such as Keskin [46], Yıldız [47], Kerubo [29], and Hijazi [48] disclosed that there was a statistically significant relationship between students' reading comprehension and their achievement in English since reading comprehension positively affects students' achievement. Besides, Sholihah [49] specifically highlights that urban students are interested much in reading the text related to academics like science and new technologies, for example, texts related to computers, Internet, and mobile phones, whereas the students of rural areas have tended to receive a text that is derived from the teacher only. It can be inferred that the differences in reading exposure and practice have brought a significant difference in the reading scores of the students in the two settings. This can also be considered as a factor for their achievement difference among them.

The present study also uncovered that, unlike low achievers, urban secondary school high achievers have better literacy skill performances (the sum of reading and writing scores) than rural high achievers. This finding is indirectly consistent with Graham and Teague [50], which revealed that students in rural areas have poor literacy skills due to the school environment, home, and economic status of the community. Similarly, Banda and Kirunda [51] argue that urban children are helped by the school and home communities to develop their linguistic skills in the language of education/examination by virtue of the quality of exposure resulting from superior resources, infrastructure, teaching materials, and well-trained teachers, as well as other socio-economic factors. Very specifically, Hall [52] stated that the urban learners are also exposed to print as well as audio-visual resources right from their childhood. They grow up reading words and images, in addition to watching their parents work with books [53, 54]. Hence, it is notable that exposure to such literacy-related practices will have a positive effect on their academic success.

TABLE 4: Literacy score of low and high achievers.

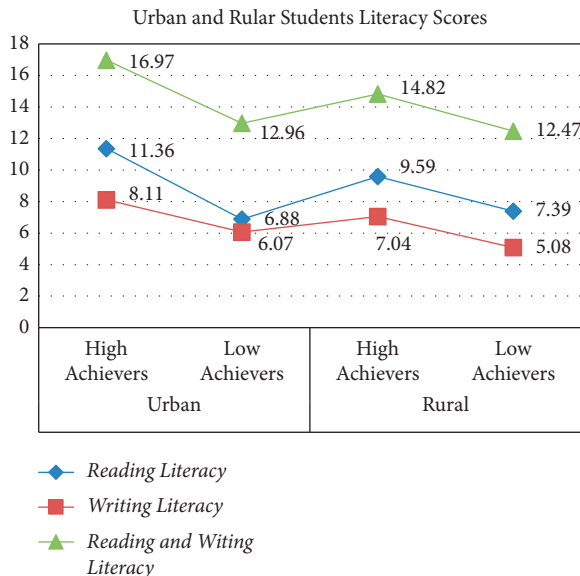|	Achievement group	School category	N	Mean	SD	p-value	Effect size (for $p < 0.05$)
1	Low achievers	Urban secondary schools	27	12.96	3.16	0.48	Not significant
		Rural secondary schools	48	12.47	2.63		
2	High achievers	Urban secondary schools	36	16.97	4.26	0.003	0.5
		Rural secondary schools	47	14.48	4.48		

FIGURE 1: Graphic representation of the mean scores.

5. Conclusions

The findings revealed that secondary students' language literacy skill performances contribute much to their academic achievement. That means students with better language literacy skills perform well in the academic subjects. Although both skills (reading and writing) contribute positively to learners' academic performance, reading skills play an indispensable role in determining learners' achievement. Thus, English language teachers need to focus more on teaching reading skills and availing reading resources to learners. This will enhance the learners' academic performance in the level.

On the other hand, there is a clear disparity between urban and rural students in their language literacy performance that favors the urban learners. Although there is variability among students in their academic performance due to their differences in literacy performance, the school settings have contributed much to the development of learners' language literacy skills. This is clearly manifested even in the main language literacy skill, reading, which is essential skill in searching for knowledge. Moreover, in spite of some differences among the secondary school students' in their writing skills, the differences are not statistically significant. This confirms that writing is a challenging skill for both rural and urban secondary school students regardless of their academic achievements. Thus, it is fair to suggest that students in rural secondary schools need more support to develop their English language literacy skills, especially reading skills, to make them academically competent enough for those in urban areas.

Data Availability

The data used to support the findings of the study are included within the article. The raw data can be obtained from the author upon request.

Disclosure

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest.

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