

ORIGINAL ARTICLE**The Influence of Socio-Demographic Characteristics on EFL¹¹ Reading Comprehension Achievement: The Case of Jimma University Undergraduates, Ethiopia****Tesfaye Gebeyehu², Andualem Mossie³, Tekle Ferede⁴**

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Abstract

This study investigated the socio-demographic variables that influence EFL reading comprehension achievement among undergraduate students at Jimma University. To achieve this, data were collected from a sample of second and third year students (N= 802) randomly selected from four colleges. The data collection instruments used in the study were pretested structured questionnaire and standardized reading comprehension test. Descriptive statistics, the Mann Whitney U Test and Kruskal-Wallis H test were used to analyze the data (at $P < 0.05$). The findings revealed that students' socio-demographic characteristics have a significant influence on their EFL reading comprehension achievement. Being Oromo by ethnicity, coming from Oromia Region, being Protestant Christianity follower, being from College of Social Sciences and Law and being from better educated parents had a significant influence on reading comprehension achievement. The findings of the study imply the importance of (1) taking appropriate instructional measures by EFL teachers to deal with the consequences of socio-demographic factors on students' reading comprehension achievement, (2) enhancing students' reading comprehension of standardized tests like TOFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language), and (3) taking into account demographic characteristics of undergraduates when preparing instructional materials or reading activities. Furthermore, studies are necessary to establish a clear understanding of the relationship between demographic variables and achievement in EFL reading comprehension.

Keywords: EFL/Ethiopia/Reading Comprehension Achievement/Socio-demographic Characteristics/ Undergraduates/

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background of the Study

English is used as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Ethiopia. It serves as a medium of instruction in the majority of academic disciplines in Ethiopian universities. In addition, English courses such as *Communicative English Skills* and *Basic Writing Skills* are offered as common courses to university undergraduates. Thus, students engage in tremendous EFL reading beginning from their entry into universities until their graduation. Learning English as a foreign language makes reading texts written in this language difficult. Reading a multitude of texts and comprehending massive information can thus result in cognitive overload and frustration, leading to what is known as foreign language reading anxiety (Hui-Ju, 2011). Additionally, since the huge reading tasks take a long time, they require students to develop persistence and stamina to adjust to the university context. In this case, socio-demographic background becomes important since it can determine the extent to which the students adjust to the contexts of their universities and meet the reading requirements of university courses.

Findings show that demographic characteristics like caregiver's education, urban or rural setting, region, type of school and wealth influence early grade reading (Tassew & Aregaw, 2016), and early grade reading has impacts on academic reading performance in university (Gayden-Hence, 2016). However, whether the influence of background characteristics on EFL reading achievement continues or disappears when students join university remains under investigated in the Ethiopian context. Therefore, examining the influence socio-demographic characteristics of undergraduates (e.g. gender, education level, income level, marital status, religion, geographical location) have on EFL reading achievement is a sound undertaking.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

English is used as a means of communication among people in most parts of the world. It is used in different domains of life such as education, business, health, etc. In the domain of education, in contexts where the medium of instruction is English, students need to be sufficiently equipped with the four major English language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Since much of school learning involves reading comprehension, which facilitates for analysis and synthesis of information from various sources, it is obviously an important academic skill. University undergraduates are particularly expected to comprehend what they read so that they can analyze, criticize, synthesize and evaluate information from a wide range of print and electronic texts (Bharuthram, 2012). In this era of information exploration, in which the value of reading is gaining increasing currency, university students are required to develop the ability and the love for life-long reading.

On the one hand, exploration of textual information requires independent reading, autonomous thinking and individual analysis. On the other hand, according to Noble, Norman and Farah (2005), reading requires social efforts. Thus, the development of reading skills among a certain group of students can be influenced by socio-demographic factors. As Helen and Terfa (2014) explicate, these factors are important causes of variations in students' reading habits and reading comprehension abilities. Accordingly, studies conducted by Luster and McAdoo (1991), Moats and Lyon (1996), Snow, Burns and Griffin (1998), Fouts (2003), Ghaemi and Yazdanpanah (2014), established relationships between socio-demographic characteristics and reading comprehension achievement. A study conducted on Greek elementary schools (Vlachos and Papadimtriou, 2015) assessed the effects age and gender have on second-grade children's reading performance. The finding shows that while older children have better reading scores than younger children, gender does not have an effect on second-grade children's reading performance. Sturm's (2003) finding indicates that age and gender affect reading preferences. A study by Helen and Terfa (2014) revealed that gender, age, marital status, level of study and occupation predicted reading habit of students.

Many published local studies (e.g. Belilew, 2015; Habtamu, 2016) investigated factors related to reading comprehension. A study by Belilew (2015) examined the possible relationship between reading strategy use and reading comprehension of English major students at Dilla University, and he found no correlation between the reading strategy and reading comprehension achievement. Habtamu (2016) assessed student, teacher, and school related factors that influence reading comprehension without regard to the influence demographic characteristics have on reading comprehension. The common factors reported in a study by Habtamu and other similar studies as determinants of reading comprehension are large number of students in a class, inappropriateness of seating arrangements to pair and group works and lack of access to teaching aids. Nonetheless, the statistics these studies used to analyze survey data are frequency and percentage which are inappropriate to measure factors that determine reading comprehension.

Yet, a few local studies investigated the association between demographic characteristics and reading comprehension achievement using appropriate statistics. A local study was conducted in Walayta and Hadiya to determine whether early grade learners' (grades 2 and 3) demographic characteristics had a significant effect on reading achievement in Wolayttatto and Hadiyyisa languages. The study found a statistically significant association between oral reading fluency and male gender, grade level and learners' age (USAID, 2014). A USAID/Ethiopia (2012) early grade reading assessment revealed that male gender, urban school, and parent-teacher association influenced early grade reading. Tassew and Aregawi (2016) found that the male gender than the female, the region Oromia than the SNNPR, the urban setting than the rural, and non-government schools than government schools significantly influenced the reading performance of students of age 12. However, to the knowledge of the researchers very little is known about whether the influence demographic characteristics exert on reading comprehension continues or disappears when students join university. Hence, this study

has been initiated to fill this research gap by examining socio-demographic variables that influence undergraduates' reading comprehension.

1.3. General Objective of the Study

The general objective of this study is to investigate socio-demographic characteristics that influence EFL reading comprehension achievement.

1.4. Research Questions

The study aimed to answer the following specific research questions:

- 1) Do students significantly differ on their mean/median score of standardized reading test due to differences in their parents' educational level?
- 2) Do students significantly differ on their mean/median score of standardized reading test because of department/college differences?
- 3) Are there statistically significant differences between mean/median score of standardized reading test across respondents' demographic characteristics (e.g. ethnicity, region, religion)?

1.5. Significance of the Study

The purpose of this study was to identify socio-demographic characteristics that influence EFL reading comprehension achievement of undergraduates at Jimma University. Therefore, the findings of the study can help EFL teachers to take appropriate instructional measures to deal with the consequences of socio-demographic factors on their students' reading comprehension achievement. It also helps instructional material designers to take into account these variables when designing reading passages and tasks. Since the median on teaching English as a foreign language (TOFL) or EFL reading comprehension achievement of undergraduates is only satisfactory (57.50 out of 100), the finding helps undergraduates especially those who want to continue further education (M.A./MSC/PhD) in the country or abroad to enhance their reading comprehension abilities. It is also hoped that the study will initiate further research to solidify our empirical knowledge regarding the relationship (causal or other otherwise) between socio-demographic variables and EFL reading comprehension achievement.

1.6. Scope of the Study

This study was conducted in four colleges of Jimma University from January 01 - March 30, 2014. The study used quantitative data collected through structured questionnaire and standard reading comprehension test. It was confined to measuring only whether students significantly differ on their achievement in EFL reading comprehension (outcome) because of their socio-demographic differences (predictor). The outcome-predictor relationship is not in the sense of experimental study where confounding factors are controlled and the effect size is measured.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Overview

One way of acquiring information in real life and in educational circles is reading. In other words, the ability to read is a vital skill for information exploration. The process of education and the development of literacy skills depend mainly on printed words, and reading is the crucial means through which one develops these literacy skills and knowledge about his/her environment. Innovative and realistic education should thus involve personal exploration of information through reading. Personal exploration of information obviously requires self-initiated reading, independent thinking and individual analysis. On the other hand, the development of independent reading, reading at one's own accord, requires social efforts (Noble, Norman & Farah, 2005). Therefore, nurturing reading skills among a particular group of students can be influenced by factors pertinent to the social group to which they belong. That is why socio-demographic factors can be important determinants of students' reading habits and reading comprehension abilities (Helen & Terfa, 2014). The following sections discuss the effect of socio-demographic factors on students' academic performance in general and their reading comprehension achievement in particular.

2.2. Socio-demographic Characteristics and Academic Achievement

Socio-demographic factors have important implications for students' academic achievement. For example, the home environment has been proved to be an important contributor to a child's cognitive development and educational attainment. Authors like Gyles (1990) point out that the home environment exerts substantial impacts on children's learning achievement. Similarly, Iverson and Walberg (1982) found that the socio-psychological environment and intellectual inspiration in the home prominently influence students' academic ability and achievement. The home environment and family support provide a network of physical, social, and intellectual factors that affect students' academic attainment. The amount of parental encouragement, their expectations and educational activities in the home are among the socio-demographic characteristics which have bearings to children's education (Song & Hattie, 1984).

Therefore, demo-graphic variables, including the home environment, might be important determinants of academic achievement. For example, the socio-economic status of families has been found to be important predictor of students' academic performance (Bloom, 1986). According to Schneider and Coleman (1993), low socio-economic background hinders children's performance unless parental involvement counteracts this impact. It has been empirically established that high family wealth leads to higher levels of student teachability since students from wealthy families do not encounter formidable material challenges which hamper their learning process and achievement. Other socio-demographic variables which exert significant effects on students' academic achievement can include age, gender, ethnicity, religion and parental educational status.

2.3. Socio-demographics viz-a-viz Reading Comprehension

Certain socio-economic factors can be important determinants of reading achievement. It has been established that children who have poor families, limited proficiency in English and parents of low literacy levels are susceptible to failure in reading (Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998). This is because learning to read is significantly based on language and literacy skills (Moats & Lyon, 1996). Studies have verified that, in the US, failure in literacy is much more common among economically poor children, children of color, children whose primary language is not English, children with preschool language impairments, and students whose parents faced trouble in learning to read (Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998). A negative relationship has also been found between socio-economic status and academic achievement, which requires reading comprehension ability, among university students in the Iranian EFL context (Ghaemi & Yazdanpanah, 2014).

Ethnicity can also be a factor which has considerable effects on school achievement including reading comprehensions achievement. A study conducted on German-origin and Turkey- origin students (Yee et al, 2016) showed that the mean reading performance significantly differed between German and Turkish-origin students; the students with the origin of German outperformed students with Turkish-origin. A study conducted in the United States of America (Johnson-Selfridge et al., 1998) revealed that students' word fluency performance appeared to be influenced by ethnic group membership. According to the finding, the highest word fluency mean score was obtained by the White veterans, followed by Black, and Hispanic veterans. A local study (USAID/Ethiopia, 2014) on Grade 2 and Grade 3 students found that male pupils were found to read more fluently than female pupils in Hadiyyisa, and no such gender differences were found for Wolayttatto with regard to oral reading fluency. This may imply presence of positive correlation between better reading fluency for male gender and Hadiyya ethnicity. However, results of other studies show that economic status exerts a stronger influence than ethnic background on success in school such as reading comprehension work. On this basis, it is believed that educators and policy makers should give more attention to economic status than ethnicity in intervention and remedial schemes (Fouts, 2003). However, it is also important to remember that there are ethnic groups who are economically privileged.

Likewise, students' age, their sex and parents' education level have been identified to have relationships with reading predispositions and habits which impact on reading comprehension achievement. In connection with this, Sturm (2003) suggests that these variables influence the reading preferences of school children. Sturm found that girls enjoy reading more than boys do and that boys appear to have more negative attitudes towards reading than girls do. Likewise, parents' level of education is an important socio-demographic variable which bears relationships with reading comprehension achievement. For instance, according to Helen and Terfa (2014), it has been established that the book reading rate of individuals whose mothers had university degrees was 1.2 times the rate of individuals whose mothers did not obtain high school

diplomas. Generally, parental level of education is among the socio-demographic characteristics which can have relationships with reading comprehension achievement.

Geographic region can also influence students' reading performance. A local study which assessed early grade reading revealed that learners' reading performance increased for three regions: Tigray, Amhara and Addis Ababa, while it decreased for Oromia and SNNPR. "The steepest decline in reading outcomes is observed in SNNPR, where the percentage of children who could not read anything almost doubled, and this difference was also statistically significant at the 1 per cent level of significance" (Tassew & Aregawi, 2016, p. 13).

However, whether the influence of background characteristics on EFL reading achievement continues or disappears when students join University has rarely been investigated by international and local studies. Therefore, examining the influence socio-demographic characteristics of undergraduates (e.g. gender, education level, income level, marital status, religion, geographical location) have on EFL reading achievement is important, and this study addressed this issue.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Study Area and Study Period

The study was conducted at Jimma University in the main campus from April 2014 – May 30, 2014. Jimma University is located at 352 kms from Addis Ababa, the capital city of Ethiopia.

2.2. Research Design

A descriptive survey study design was employed to determine the association between demographic characteristics and students' performance in EFL reading comprehension. No attempt was made to control variables. In other words, the researchers tried to see only the relationship between demographic characteristics and students' reading comprehension achievement without focus on causation.

2.3. Source population and study population

Regular undergraduate students of Jimma University who were learning in the main campus were considered as the source of population for this study. Samples of second and third year regular undergraduates were selected from four colleges: Public Health & Medical Sciences (CPHMS), Social Sciences & Law (CSSL), Natural Sciences (CNS), and Business & Economics (CBE).

2.4. Inclusion-exclusion Criteria

Sampled students who were willing to participate were included in the study. On the other hand, students who were not willing to participate in the study were excluded. Further, first year, fourth year, fifth year, sixth year, and medicine students were excluded from the study for they were found to be reluctant to participate in the study, may be because of their academic burden. Students from the Department of English Language and Literature were also excluded for they had participated in the pilot study. On top of that, students from College of Agriculture and Veterinary Medicine as well as those from Institute of Technology, who were relatively far away from the main campus, were excluded due to the tight schedule the researchers had.

3.5. Sample Size Determination

The sample size in this publication is the same as the sample size in the previous publication that examined the association between substance use and students' performance in EFL reading comprehension, because both are prepared from the same source: Staff research sponsored by Jimma University. In previously published study, the sample size was determined using single population proportion formula with the assumption of confidence level of 95%, a design effect of 2, and 10% allowance for non-response. Some basic assumptions of sample size determination are:

- P = Proportion of substance use among Jimma University students is not known; thus, 50% is taken to maximize the sample size.
- d^2 = an absolute precision (marginal error) 0.05 (5%)
- Non-response rate = 10%

The formula used to determine the sample size is: $n = \frac{(Z\alpha/2)^2 \cdot P(1-p)}{d^2}$

$$d^2$$

$$Z\alpha/2 = 0.5 - \alpha/2 = 0.5 - 0.05/2 = 0.475$$

Then, using normal table area of 0.475 is covered by Z value of 1.96.

$$\frac{(Z\alpha/2)^2}{d^2} = (1.96/0.05)^2 = 1536.64$$

$$n = 1536.64 \times 0.5(1-0.5) = 384.16$$

By adding 10% for non response rate and multiplying by design effect of 2, the required total sample size for the study will be: $n = 384.16 + 38.416 = 423$; $423 \times 2 = 846$. Hence, the total sample size = 846 students.

3.6. Sampling Technique

Multi-stage sampling technique was employed for this study. Samples of students in different departments of the four colleges of Jimma University were included in the study. There were 30 departments in four colleges that admitted undergraduate students. Fifteen departments were selected by the lottery method, and individual respondents were

recruited from second year and third year students in different departments using stratified random sampling; the strata were determined based on the number of students in the colleges. That is to say, large sample of participants were taken from colleges with large number of students. The sampling procedure is summarized in the following flow chart:

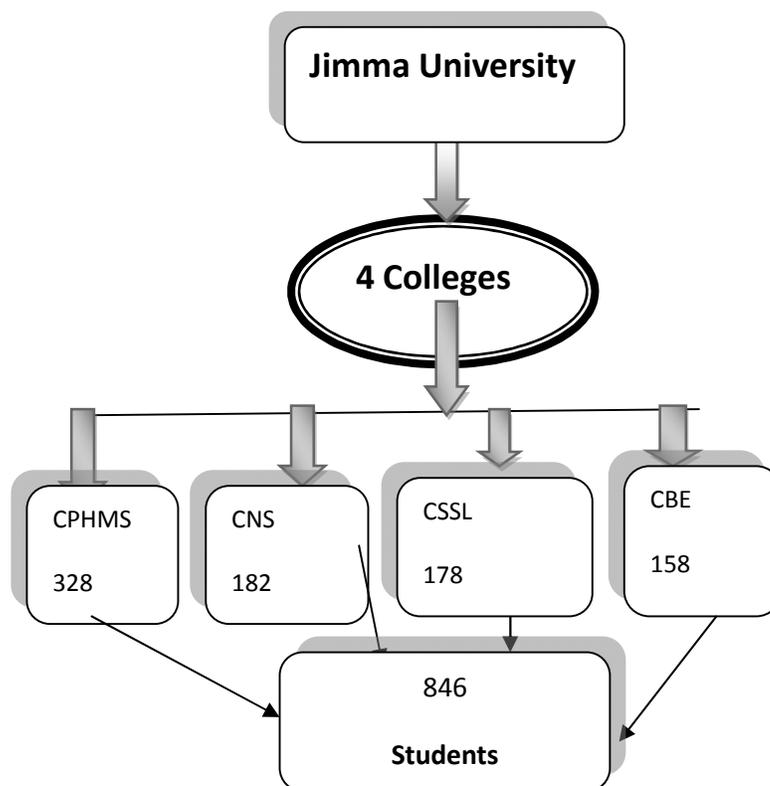


Figure 1: Proportional allocation of student samples in different colleges

3.7. Study Variables

In this study, the outcome variable was reading comprehension achievement. On the other hand, the predictor variables were demographic characteristics such as study year, marital status, college of affiliated, parents' educational status, ethnicity, religion, and region. The outcome-predictor relationship is not in the sense of experimental study where confounding factors are controlled and the effect size is measured. The study was intended to measure only whether students significantly differ in their reading comprehension achievement scores because of their socio-demographic differences.

3.7. Data Collection Instruments

Two instruments of data collection were used in the study. Firstly, self-administered questionnaire was used to collect demographic characteristics related data.

The questionnaire consisted of 12 socio–demographic questions. The participants were asked to circle the responses they believed were right. Out of 846 copies of the questionnaire distributed, 802(94.8 %) were properly filled and returned. Additionally, standardized EFL reading comprehension test, which was adopted from TOFL test format, was administered.

3.6. Procedure of Data Collection

First, the instruments were piloted on third year English major students. Next, during the main study, the participants were informed about the purpose of the study. The investigators informed them that taking the standardized TOFL test would enable them to check their reading comprehension level. Following this, data were collected using the questionnaire and the test (both in one booklet).

3.7. Data Quality Assurance

Data was collected by the principal investigator, one of the co-investigators and one English language instructor. Before administering the test, the data collectors discussed in detail the contents of the questionnaire and the test, the general objective of the study and issues related to confidentiality. The reading test was marked by two high school English language instructors. Pilot study was carried out on 50 third year English major students at Jimma University who were excluded from the main study; these students were chosen to see if the questionnaire had any English language related problems. Comments and corrections given on the questionnaire were addressed properly. Data were carefully edited, coded and entered into a computer using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20.

3.8. Data analysis

The Mann Whitney U Test and A Kruskal-Wallis H Test were used to examine whether participants differed on their EFL reading comprehension median score (at $P < 0.05$) because of their differences in socio-demographic characteristics. These tests were used since the data distribution was not normal. Median was used instead of mean since A Mann Whitney Test compares the former. Mean was used to give only extra information as some literatures suggest.

3.9. Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the Ethical Review Board of the College of Social Sciences and Law, Jimma University. Oral consent was also obtained from the survey participants, and confidentiality was maintained.

4. Results

As indicated earlier, this study aimed to investigate the influence socio-demographic characteristics exert on Jimma University undergraduates' reading comprehension achievement. Accordingly, to measure whether participants differed on the median score of standardized reading comprehension test, the Mann-Whitney U Test was applied (Tables 1-4). Socio-demographic variables (e.g. economic status, urban/rural background, gender, age) that could not significantly influence EFL reading comprehension have been excluded from this report.

Table 1: The Influence of Marital Status on Reading Comprehension Score

Variables	Categories	N	Mean	SD	Median	U	Z	p
Marital Status	Single	767	55.65	16.69	57.50	4858.00	-3.678	.000
	Married	23	41.30	17.37	40.00			

As can be seen in Table 1, Mann Whitney U test was applied to compare the reading comprehension median scores of students who were single and those who were married. The test indicated that participants who were single scored better ($n=767$, $Med = 57.50$) than their counterparts who were married ($n=23$, $Med = 40.00$), and the difference is statistically significant, $U=4858.00$; $Z=-3.678$; $p=.000$. From the finding, regardless of the small sample size of married respondents, it is possible to conclude that being single positively influenced the reading performance of the study participants. Put it differently, higher reading median score is significantly correlated to being single.

Table 2: The Influence of Religion on Reading Comprehension Score

Variables	Categories	N	Mean	SD	Median	χ^2	df	p
Religion	Islam	174	54.67	18.42	60.00	12.208	3	0.007
	Protestant	178	58.29	15.31	60.00			
	Orthodox	413	53.75	16.92	55.00			
	Others (e.g. Wakefeta)	34	61.18	13.17	62.50			

A Kruskal-Wallis H test (Table 2) was conducted to determine if students' median reading scores differed because of the study participants' religious differences: (a) Islam ($n = 174$, $Med = 60.00$), (b) Protestant ($n = 178$, $Med = 60.00$), (c) Orthodox ($n = 413$, $Med = 55.00$), and (d) Others ($n = 34$, $Med = 62.50$). The test showed that there was a statistically significant difference in reading score among the four groups, $\chi^2(3) = 12.208$, $p = 0.007$. Since the median ranks of Islam and Protestant Christianity followers are equal (each 60), to see the performance difference on the outcome variable, the mean is compared. Accordingly, the mean values showed that Protestant Christianity followers ($\bar{x} = 58.29$) and Others⁵ ($\bar{x} = 61.18$) performed best and better respectively on the reading comprehension test. It is likely that the protestant religion and 'Others' had significant influences on the median score on a standardized reading comprehension test. This indicates that higher reading performance is associated with 'Others' (excluding Orthodox and Islam religions) and Protestant religions.

⁵ Refers to Wakefeta believers, Jehovah's Witnesses and Catholics

Table 3: The Influence of Region on Reading Comprehension Score

Variable	Categories	N	Mean	SD	Median	χ^2	df	p
Region	Oromia	395	57.37	16.00	60.00	33.97	5	.000 000
	Amhara	209	50.95	16.63	52.50			
	Tigray	21	53.57	14.93	55.00			
	Addis Ababa	32	65.31	19.19	72.50			
	SNNP	124	54.59	17.62	57.50			
	Others	11	50.23	18.89	55.00			

A Kruskal-Wallis H test (Table 3) was also conducted to determine if students' median reading scores differed because of their regional differences: Oromia ($n = 395$, $Med = 60.00$), Amhara ($n = 209$, $Med = 52.50$), Tigray ($n = 21$, $Med = 55.00$), Addis Ababa ($n = 32$, $Med = 72.50$), SNNP ($n = 124$, $Med = 57.50$), and Others ($n = 11$, $Med = 55.00$). The test showed that there was a statistically significant difference in reading score among the six groups, $\chi^2(5) = 33.97$, $p = 0.000$. As the mean values also indicate, students from Addis Ababa ($\bar{x} = 65.31$) and those from Oromia ($\bar{x} = 57.37$) outperformed students from Amhara ($\bar{x} = 50.95$) and Tigray ($\bar{x} = 53.57$) regardless of the small participants from Addis Ababa and Tigray. From the data, it appears that the Addis Ababa and Oromia regions had significant effects on the median reading score. This indicates that higher reading median score is related to Addis Ababa and Oromia regions.

Table 4: The Influence of Ethnicity on Reading Comprehension Score

Variables	Categories	N	Mean	SD	Median	χ^2	df	<i>p</i>
Ethnicity	Tigre	25	55.40	19.00	57.50	17.609	3	.001
	Oromo	364	57.50	15.87	60.00			
	Amhara	246	51.62	16.80	52.50			
	Others	155	55.87	18.26	57.50			

A Kruskal-Wallis H test (Table 4) was conducted to determine if students' median reading scores differed because of their ethnicity differences: Tigre ($n = 25$, $Med = 57.50$), Oromo ($n = 364$, $Med = 60.00$), Amhara ($n = 246$, $Med = 52.50$), and Others ($n = 155$, $Med = 57.50$). The test showed that there was a statistically significant difference in reading score among the four groups, $\chi^2(3) = 17.609$, $p = 0.001$. From the finding, one can conclude that respondents who self-reported being Oromo by ethnicity significantly outperformed respondents who self-reported being Amhara, 'Others', and Tigre ethnic groups on the standardized reading median score. From this, one can conclude that higher reading performance is correlated to the Oromo ethnicity.

Table 5: The Influence of Father's Educational Status on Reading Comprehension Score

Variables	Categories	N	Mean	SD	55.00	χ^2	df	p
Father's Educational Status	No Formal Education	357	53.82	16.62	57.50	16.16	3	.001
	Some Primary Education (Grades 1-8)	233	54.55	17.10	57.50			
	Secondary Education (Grades 9-12)	77	55.36	17.03	62.50			
	Post Secondary Education	128	60.49	16.32	55.00			

Kruskal-Wallis H test (Table 5) was conducted to determine if students' median reading scores differed because of their fathers' educational status differences: No Formal Education ($n = 357$, $Med = 57.50$), Some Primary Education ($n = 233$, $Med = 57.50$), Secondary Education ($n = 77$, $Med = 62.50$), and Post Secondary Education ($n = 128$, $Med = 55.00$). The test showed that there was a statistically significant difference in standardized reading score among the four groups, $\chi^2(3) = 16.158$, $p = 0.001$. The mean score also ascends as the educational status of the father increases. Interestingly, change in fathers' educational level is associated with greater reading median score.

Table 6: The Influence of Mother's Educational Status on Reading Comprehension Score

Variables	Categories	N	Mean	SD	Median	χ^2	df	p
Mother's Educational Status	No Formal Education	476	54.41	16.31	57.50	17.75	3	.000
	Some Primary Education (Grades 1-8)	192	53.88	17.37	55.000			
	Secondary Education (Grades 9-12)	64	59.96	16.84	65.00			
	Post Secondary Education	64	61.02	18.16	65.00			

A Kruskal-Wallis H test (Table 6) was conducted to determine if students' median reading scores differed because of their mothers' educational status differences : No Formal Education ($n = 476$, $Med = 57.50$), Some Primary Education ($n = 192$, $Med = 55.000$), Secondary Education ($n = 64$, $Med = 65.00$), and Post Secondary Education ($n = 64$, $Med = 65.00$). The test showed that there was a statistically significant difference in standardized reading score among the four groups, $\chi^2(3) = 17.753$, $p = 0.000$. Overall, the mean value also shows that students' reading scores rises as mothers' educational level increases. Therefore, it can be concluded that mothers' educational status influenced the sample students' reading scores.

Table 7: The Influence of Students' College on Reading Comprehension Score

Variables	Categories	N	Mean	SD	Median	χ^2	df	p
Variable College	Public Health & Medicine	325	57.50	16.00	60.00	58.37	3	.000
	Social Sciences & Law	170	59.76	17.87	62.50			
	Natural Sciences	175	47.46	15.48	47.50			
	Business & Economics	130	54.20	16.34	55.00			

A Kruskal-Wallis H test (Table 7) was conducted to determine if students' median reading scores differed because of their college differences: Public Health & Medicine ($n = 325$, $Med = 60.00$), Social Sciences & Law ($n = 170$, $Med = 62.50$), Natural Sciences ($n = 175$, $Med = 47.50$), and Business & Economics ($n = 130$, $Med = 55.00$). The test showed that there was a statistically significant difference in standardized reading score among the four groups, $\chi^2(3) = 58.37$, $p = 0.000$. From both the median and the mean values, it is likely that the College of Social Sciences & Law significantly affected the standardized reading median score. This indicates that higher reading median performance is correlated with affiliation to the College of Social Sciences & Law.

5. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between demographic characteristics of undergraduates and their reading comprehension performance. The study revealed that demographic characteristics have associations with reading comprehension scores. For example, students who were Protestant Christianity believers outperformed students who were believers of Orthodox Christianity, Islam and others religions (e.g. Wakefeta). One of the possible explanations for this issue could be more reading experience of religious literatures including the Holy Bible which can positively contribute to academic reading (Evola, 2005) among Protestants.

Marital status: The finding also revealed that single students performed on the standardized reading test better than students who were married. One of the possible explanations for the difference is that single students have more time to read as compared to married students who may be busy with various duties which take much of their time. Besides, the family responsibility can create more stress which in turn decreases academic performance. However, this finding does not support the finding of Helen and Terfa's (2014) study which reported insignificant relationship between marital status and reading comprehension achievement. The reason for the difference in the findings could be the sampling procedure. While this study used stratified random sampling, Helen and Terfa's used purposive sampling.

Religion: According to the finding, believers of Protestant Christianity and 'Others' performed better on the standardized reading test than those who were believers of Islam and Orthodox. One possible explanation could be that students who are believers of Protestant religion have more exposure to the Bible and related religious literatures which require critical reading, discussions and arguments and in effect can have positive contributions to academic outcomes (Jeynes, 2010). However, to reach a sound conclusion, this issue warrants further study.

Region and ethnicity: Students from Addis Ababa performed best on the standardized reading test as compared to students from Oromia, Amhara, Tigray, and SNNP. Support to this finding comes from (Tassew & Aregawi, 2016) who found that early grade learners' reading performance increased for Addis Ababa and decreased for SNNPR. The possible explanation for the difference can be that students from Addis Ababa come from better schools and educated parents. Further, these students are likely to have better exposure to different reading materials. Next to Addis Ababa, students from Oromia performed better on the reading comprehension test as compared to students from Amhara, Tigray, and SNNP. The finding supports the finding of Tassew and Aregawi (2016) who found that 12 years old students from Oromia significantly performed better than students from the SNNPR. A possible explanation could be that the orthographic similarity between the English alphabets and the Qube, the writing system

used in Oromia for academic and office work purposes. From KG up to grade 8, students in Oromia Region read and write in Qube, except for two subjects: English and Amharic.

Contrary to this finding, students from Amhara Region and Amhara ethnic group performed the least on the standardized reading test as compared to students who come from Oromia and SNNP implying learning inequality among the regions. These differences may have happened because of discrepancies in quality of teachers, availability of reading materials and government budget allocation to regions. The study is in agreement, to some extent, with the finding of Fouts (2003) who found ethnicity as a determinant of academic achievement. The finding is also in line with that of Yee *et al.* (2016) who found strong association between German-origin students and higher reading performance. This finding also points out to the need for carrying out further investigations to reach a logical conclusion.

College: The study revealed that students from the Colleges of Social Sciences & Law and Public Health & Medicine performed better on the standardized reading test as compared to students from the Colleges of Business & Economics and Natural Sciences, who registered the least scores on the test. One explanation for such a difference could be the nature of courses given to Social Science & Law students as well as Health students that could require critical reading as compared to the tasks given to Natural Science students which involve mathematical operations. Yet, further study is important to firmly establish the relationship between field of study and reading comprehension achievement.

Parents' educational background: Finally, the study revealed that students from fathers and mothers with better educational backgrounds (e.g. beyond Grade 12) outperformed students from fathers and mothers with lower educational backgrounds or "No formal education" implying that better educational background of parents influences students' reading performance. The possible explanation for this could be that educated parents send their children to better school, follow them up, and help them to read well. Conversely, less educated parents may not support their children to develop their reading comprehension abilities. Such parents may be less likely to provide their children with necessary resources that enhance reading comprehension strategies and skills. This explanation is also related to Reese's (2006) and Gilleece's (2015) view that parental involvement in children's schooling is positively associated with a range of student outcomes. The finding also accords with Ursache and Noble (2015) whose review shows a significant association between home literacy environment and reading achievement. Another support comes from Helen and Terfa (2014) who found that the book reading rate of individuals whose mothers had university degrees was 1.2 times the rate of individuals whose mothers did not obtain high school diplomas. The finding also corresponds with that of Luster and McAdoo (1991) who found that high achievers generally came from mothers who reared their children in a more supportive home environment.

Overall Implications: As discussed above, some demographic characteristics have clear relationships with reading comprehension achievement. For example, demographic factors such as being from Addis Ababa and Oromia, being Oromo, being single, being Protestant Christianity believer, being from the colleges of Social Sciences & Law and Public Health & Medicine, and being from parents with higher educational backgrounds influenced standardized reading test performance of students. This has important implications for classroom practice and applied research. On the one hand, teachers have to take appropriate instructional measures to minimize undesirable consequences of socio-demographic factors on their students' performance in reading comprehension and to maximize the positive effect of these variables on reading comprehension achievement. The relationship between socio-demographic characteristics and reading achievement can be context-based. It then follows that studies conducted in certain contexts may not fully reflect the realities of other contexts and may not support instructional practices in the latter to the fullest. Therefore, further local studies are required to fully understand the relationship between socio-demographic variables and reading comprehension achievement in various instructional contexts with the view to making interventions which help maximize learning and achievement. The finding also implies the importance of involving parents in their children's academic reading.

6. Conclusions

The findings of this study revealed that some demographic characteristics influence students' EFL reading comprehension achievement. Being from Addis Ababa and Oromia, being Oromo, being single, being Protestant Christianity follower, being from the colleges of Social Sciences & Law and Public Health & Medicine, and being from parents with higher educational backgrounds influenced reading comprehension performance of students. Furthermore, the study filled the gap that was described in the statement of the problem; earlier no local and published study investigated the influence socio-demographic characteristics have on the reading performance of university undergraduates in the Ethiopian context. Therefore, it can be concluded that socio-demographic characteristics such as marital status, religion, region, ethnicity, college students attended, and their parents' educational levels can influence their achievement in reading comprehension tests.

Limitations of the Study: Like any other study, this study has some limitations. Firstly, it focused on one out of the 31 public universities which were operating in Ethiopia in 2014. Moreover, it focused only on second and third year students. These make the scope of the study limited and can affect the generalizability of the findings to other university which can have some context-specific characteristics. Similarly, since the study excluded students from the Institute of Technology and the College of Agriculture & Veterinary Medicine, the findings cannot be generalized to these branches of Jimma University. Secondly, the fact that the study did not investigate causal relationships that could exist between socio-demographic characteristics and EFL reading comprehension can be one limitation of this study. The small number of participants for the variables of marital status and region (Addis Ababa, Tigray, and Others) may also have contributed to

the limitation of the study. However, despite these limitations, the study has made a new contribution regarding the influence socio-demographic variables exert on EFL reading comprehension achievement among Jimma University undergraduates.

7 Recommendations

In line with the findings presented and the conclusions made accordingly, the following recommendations have been forwarded:

- It is necessary that religious organizations and regional administrators encourage students to develop the habits of reading comprehension.
- It is recommended that researchers investigate seriously the quality of education in Amhara National Regional State in general and the reading habits students in particular.
- Instructional material designers need to take into account students' socio-demographic characteristics when designing reading activities
- Parents are advised to actively contribute their shares in endeavors to enhance their children's reading comprehension abilities.
- The students' median score of the standardized test (TOFL) out of 100% was 57.50 implying hard working. Hence, undergraduate students need to work hard to improve their reading comprehension abilities.
- Finally, further studies are necessary to establish a clearer understanding of the association between demographic characteristics and EFL reading comprehension achievement.

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