

## **Performance of Freshman and Preparatory Origin Students on a Reading Comprehension Test: A Comparative Study**

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**Abstract:** Following the country's higher education reform, institutions of higher learning in the country, during the 2003/2004 academic year, had to admit two groups of students – the freshman origin and the preparatory origin – to departments in their faculties. This study which was carried out during the said academic year involved two freshman and two preparatory sections/classes, one each from the Departments of Foreign Languages and Literature and, Ethiopian Languages and Literature, Institute of Language Studies, Addis Ababa University. The purpose was to investigate if there exist differences in the reading comprehension performance of the groups. Participants were selected on availability basis as these were the only groups newly admitted to the Departments during that academic year. All sat for a reading comprehension test and an independent samples t-test was applied on the scores. Results showed that freshman origin students performed significantly higher than their preparatory counter parts. This might imply that despite the heavy responsibility laid on the shoulders of preparatory schools in the various regions in preparing their students for the demands that higher education would put to them, it seems there is still a lot expected of them to bridge existing gaps. Therefore, that the schools and other relevant bodies work harder to alleviate the problem seems to be in order.

### **Introduction**

Very few aspects of social services we know of are as important as education to mankind. It is through education that man influences the environment he lives in. Education is a means of material as well as spiritual development. That is why nations, whether poor or rich, dearly invest into the sector.

Education, however, is not static. Systems, policies, structures and other matters related to it are not designed once and for all. They keep changing so as to keep up with the dynamic nature of society and the ever-growing knowledge. This, however, does not mean that

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educational policies should haphazardly change every now and then just for the sake of change. If changes are to take place, they should be the result of careful assessment and thorough study. Today, in many parts of the world and particularly in developed countries, quality assurance assessments are continuously undertaken so as to ensure that the system is achieving perceived goals and that quality is not compromised (Taye 2004). With particular reference to higher education in Ethiopia, Ashcroft (2004:36), emphasising the need for such measures, argues that institutes “should look at their systems for assuring quality, standards and relevance ....”

Whether or not based on objective and adequate quality assessment, changes in educational policies have at times taken place in Ethiopia. The Education Sector Review (ESR) of 1972 and the Evaluative Research of the General Education System in Ethiopia (ERGESE) of 1986 are cases in point. These reforms, although positively viewed by the agents that engineered the changes, were not embraced by the forces at the executing end and hence could not bring about the progress desired. Evidences are that the ESR suffered strong resistance from the public and that ERGESE was in limbo when the 1991 change of government took place. Inevitably, in 1994, it had to give way to the new *Education and Training Policy*.

One of the areas the *new policy* targets is reform in higher education of the country. It “stresses issues of quality and relevance in educational programs; quality of teaching staff and facilities; improvement of learning process towards a focus on students ...” (Teshome 2004:8). To address such matters and ensure that the policy is materialised, evaluations of the programs and redesigning of courses took effect in institutions of higher education. This was in the main to make education product-oriented and at the same time meet the prescribed reduction by one year of duration of higher education training in the various fields of study.

The introduction of this change, in the 2003/04 academic year, created an overlap whereby entrants who were in the freshman

programme (the outgoing four-year system) and those from the preparatory programme (the incoming three-year system) join the various departments to take up specific fields of study. Although both groups, owing to the fact that preparatory students came much later in the semester, did not take lectures together, they took the same courses offered by the same instructors in most of the cases. In other words, although the freshman origin group had already stayed in the university for one year and had some exposure to the skills needed to cope with the academic demands of their respective departments, the preparatory origin group was coming directly from schools where learners had been through a two-year preparatory training assumed, at least at a policy level, to have equipped them with the necessary academic skills. As a result of such an assumption, both groups were taken to be on equal footing “in all regards” and were admitted directly to the same department of their choice to take the same courses with no differential treatments. But the question is, are they really *equal* as assumed by the policy? What did things look like under such situations?

### **The Study**

As the conventional four year-programme (in very few faculties this was more than four years) phased out and the new three-year programme came into the scene, Addis Ababa University, like any other institution of higher learning in the country, had to admit two groups of incoming students in each department – one, the freshman origin and the other, the preparatory origin. However, despite the assumption by the policy that the groups are comparable, there were widespread comments and informal complaints by instructors that the preparatory origin students were not up to expectations. Remarks were being made that they did not have adequate preparations that would enable them cope with the challenges that the course work put to them. Communication was, in general, said to be easier with the freshman origin ones and that tasks were handled better by the group.

One of the specific areas in which inadequacies and weaknesses were claimed to have been observed was in the learners' ability to use the English language for various purposes. But as English is the medium of instruction, deficiency in the language would mean a serious stumbling block in the academic success of the learners. This is because almost all academic activities like reading printed materials, listening to lectures, taking notes, making oral presentations and participating in them, writing assignments and tests all require reasonably adequate knowledge of and skills in using English.

The above situation reflecting how important a tool English is in general in academic career, the focus of this study is specifically on the reading competence of the groups under discussion. This is because in a situation like ours where English is a non-native language, many believe that reading is perhaps the most important skill that students need to succeed in their university/college studies. Gbenedio (1986:47) in this regard says:

In all countries where English is taught as a second or a foreign language, the teaching of reading in English is of particular importance, because, whether or not the pupils will be required to speak or write it, there is no doubt that they will want to read it for a variety of purposes, which include the passing of examinations, since textbooks are written in English.

Yorkey (1970) also says that reading is the most important skill for students in colleges or institutes of higher learning for the reason that they are expected to read lengthy assignments and notes with varying degrees of detail and accuracy. Emphasising the role reading plays in academic success, Burns et al. (1999) also say that it becomes increasingly difficult for learners to be weak in reading and strong in handling the content of the subjects they learn. Others like Main (1980) and Harri-Augstein et al. (1982) further argue that reading

performances required by higher education demand being equipped with new skills, new strategies, and a new approach altogether.

If the incoming preparatory groups, as claimed by many of the instructors, really have more serious problems than the freshman origins in using the English language, which may of course imply the existence of a similar problem in the former's reading performance, then the effect could be far reaching. But is the claim substantial? Or do these students perform equally as assumed by the policy?

### Objectives

The study sets out to investigate if freshman origin and preparatory origin students in both the Departments of Foreign Languages and Literature and Ethiopian Languages and Literature show any difference in their English language ability. Specifically, it examines if both groups perform differently on a reading comprehension test.

### Methodology

#### *Subjects*

Participants in the study were four groups of students - one group of freshman and another of preparatory origin students taking the course *Reading Skills (FLEn 108)* in each of the Departments of Foreign Languages and Literature, and Ethiopian Languages and Literature during the 2003/04 academic year. These were chosen on the basis of availability sampling. The breakdown of the groups was:

One group of freshman origin (N=44)	}	from the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature
One group of preparatory origin (N=26)		
	and	
One group of freshman origin (N=29)	}	from the Department of Ethiopian Languages and Literature
One group of preparatory origin (N=28)		

That the groups were drawn from those taking *Reading Skills* course was simply because of easy access to the groups as the researcher was among the instructors offering the course to two of the groups. The subjects are believed to be adequate samples as the turnout for the freshman origin and preparatory origin students from the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature was 100% (44/44) and 86.7% (26/30) respectively. For respective groups from the Department of Ethiopian Languages and Literature attendance was 100% (29/29) and 93.3% (28/30).

### *Instruments*

Two research instruments were employed to gather data for the study: test and focus group discussion. As regards the test, a reading comprehension test component of the first semester College English (FLEN101) Mid-Examination (2001/2002) was used. It is assumed that students did not get copies of the examination as it was not allowed to give out test papers. Marked papers are always kept with the course co-ordinator or instructors.

This particular test was chosen for three main reasons. First, it was then produced by a Testing Committee which, I believe, had a reasonably good expertise in designing tests. Second, it would be logical to use the same test that students of similar level took before. If a new test were used, one may question the quality of the items, the level of difficulty of the examination, and whether or not the test is parallel with previous freshman tests. Finally, the text "*THE EUCALYPTUS*" which was used as a reading comprehension passage was somehow neutral in content to the participants in the study that it would not favour or disfavour any particular group.

The test included 30 items comprising multiple choice, short answer, true/false and matching test formats. The micro skills tested were understanding the main idea (gist), identifying specific information, information transfer, referencing, inferencing and understanding meaning from context.

The second instrument, focus group discussion, was used to draw ideas in relation to how the schools prepared the students during the two preparatory years, and the adequacy of the preparations in terms of equipping them with the skills they need for university/college education. Participants were ten randomly selected students from the preparatory origin groups. Those from the freshman origin were not included as their one-year stay in the university was principally devoted to preparing them for the academic challenges beyond the first year.

#### *Procedure*

The test was administered to the groups with the assistance of two other instructors who were also offering the course *Reading Skills* to two of the groups studied. Then the test papers were collected and later marked by the researcher using an answer key. The scores for each group were then statistically analysed using independent samples t-test.

Following the administration of the test, a focus group discussion, as a supplementary instrument, was used with ten randomly selected students in order to get an idea on the kind of preparations given at the preparatory schools to help students cope with tertiary education. While participants aired their feelings and views, the researcher took notes of the main points.

### **Data Analysis and Discussion**

#### *The Focus Group Discussion*

Before we go to the analysis of the test scores, which comprises the bulk of this section, it may be useful to briefly report on the students' reactions to the following two basic questions raised at the focus group discussion.

1. When you were in the preparatory programme, what kind of materials did your instructors/you use in order to help you improve your reading skills and particularly your reading comprehension?
2. What kind of reading strategies/skills were you exposed to in order to be able to cope with demands of tertiary education?

A summary of the students' responses indicate that no material other than the English textbooks were used and that the students had not been exposed to any strategies of reading like use of collocations, guessing meanings from context, using synonyms or antonyms, etc. Altogether, they said that whatever they did at the preparatory level was not any different in nature from what they did in the preceding years. It was only a linear kind of change where the tasks were probably more difficult than what they were engaged in while in Grade Nine or Ten.

### *The Test Scores*

That the text used for the reading comprehension test came from the test that was once used with students at the freshman level would most likely create the impression that it is of the appropriate level of difficulty for the groups under study. Even then, presenting the readability index would give the reader a better picture of how simple or difficult the text was to be understood by the target group.

Readability statistics carried out on the text indicated that it had 747 words built into 42 sentences. Each of the sentences, on average, consisted of about 18 words. Further to this, it was found out that the Flesch reading ease was 50.8. This means that the text was rather simple for students at the first year university/college level. This is supported by the Flesch Kincaid grade level which came to be 10.5. This means that the text is readable to secondary school students of roughly grade 10 or 11. In general, the text was not difficult and thus would not cause a problem of understanding to the participants in the study.



However, it may be necessary to mention that readability statistics are to be taken with a pinch of salt. First, there are criticisms that readability formulae do not take into account the structural and rhetorical aspects of the text and also the skills, interests, and background knowledge of the reader (Clapham 1996). More important, readability statistics seem to be based on the context of the US where readers are native speakers of English. But it should be noted that grade levels in different countries and school systems may not be equally comparable. For example, a grade 5 pupil in one of the African or Asian countries should not be expected to read and understand a given text written in English comparably with a British or an American pupil in the same grade. This is because, among other things, the language in which the text is written exerts an impact on the reader's comprehension. It would, therefore, not be logical to expect the formulae to apply across the board. Nevertheless, as Ridgway (1997) writes, they give a "pseudo-objective" basis against which subjective judgements could be interpreted. Thus, though not accurately, readability indices give ideas with regard to how easy or difficult a text is.

The next important issue to be explored was if there existed any difference in the distribution of scores between the freshman origin group, on the one hand, and the preparatory one, on the other. The following table shows this.

**Table 1: Distribution Statistics of Test Scores for the Freshman and Preparatory Groups (in %)**

Group	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mode	Median	Mean	SD
FrEng	44	50	90	80	75	72.73	11.18
PrEng	29	10	70	50	50	43.45	17.17
FrAmh	26	25	85	50	65	61.54	17.25
PrAmh	28	5	85	35	40	48.04	25.40
FrTotal	70	25	90	75	70	68.57	14.57
PrTotal	57	5	85	25	40	45.70	21.54

In the table above, the acronyms under the *Group* column represent the following and will also be used to mean the same in future discussions.

**FrEng** – Freshman Origin English Group    **PrAmh** - Preparatory Origin Amharic Group  
**PrEng** – Preparatory Origin English Group    **FrTotal** - Freshman Origin Total  
**FrAmh** – Freshman Origin Amharic Group    **PrTotal** - Preparatory Origin Total

Seen from various perspectives, the table above indicates that there is a good spread of scores, which possibly means that the test is discriminating between weak and strong students. However, these differences have some implications when seen from the point of view of competence of the two groups. To start with, the range of the scores that varies from 5%, which was rather too low, to a high score of 90% indicates that there are very weak students as much as there are strong ones in the groups studied. Specifically, that the lowest score was achieved by a member of the preparatory group and that the highest was by a student from the freshman group seem to suggest that the latter group is better in its academic standing. This is further supported by the fact that the lowest score in the freshman group was 25%, which is higher by 20% than its counterpart in the preparatory group. Another striking point is that differences in the measures of central tendency between the groups are also vivid from the table. In general, one can observe that the freshman origin group had a higher mean, mode, and median than the preparatory one.

What remains to be seen, however, is whether or not such differences, and particularly the differences in the mean scores are statistically significant. To find this out, mean scores achieved by each group were compared using independent samples t-test. The table below presents the results.

**Table 2: Comparison of Mean Scores Achieved by Each Group**

Group	N	Reading Comprehension Test Scores			
		Mean	SD	T-value	P-value
FrEng	44	72.73	11.18	8.84	<.001
PrEng	29	43.45	17.17		
FrAmh	26	61.54	17.25	2.27	<.05
PrAmh	28	48.04	25.40		
FrTotal	70	68.57	14.57	7.09	<.001
PrTotal	57	45.70	21.54		

From Table 2 above, one can see that the freshman groups in both departments significantly outperformed their counter parts ( $p < .001$  and  $p < .05$  for the Departments of Foreign Languages and Literature, and Ethiopian Languages and Literature, respectively). When the scores of the Freshman groups were put together and compared with those of the preparatory, the difference was again statistically significant. The former performed significantly higher than the latter ( $p < .001$ ).

One conceivable explanation for this is that the preparatory origin students, contrary to the nomenclature *preparatory*, were not given any special training at schools so that they can be academically prepared for the challenges awaiting them at institutions of higher learning. Focus group discussions made with ten of the sample students indicated that the content and nature of instruction they received during the preparatory years were in general only linearly different from what they had while they were in grade 9 or 10. This, when related to reading, means that they were not introduced to word attack-skills, text-attack skills, skills of reading charts and graphs of various kinds, and other necessary skills involving reading. In fact, the same, they said, was true about the other language skills. However, the freshman origin group had some degree of exposure to such skills during their first year stay in the university and this might have helped them.

Another explanation could be that the freshman origin students had already been to the University for one academic year and, therefore, had a better exposure to the academic system including that of examinations. This might have helped them to gain better familiarity with the university life and also how to cope with the academic demands.

Further data analysis with regard to inter-departmental difference in performance between each of the groups yielded mixed results. The comparison is shown in Table 3 below.

**Table 3: Inter-departmental Comparison of Group's Performance on the Reading Comprehension Test**

Group	N	Reading Comprehension Test Scores			
		Mean	SD	T-value	P-value
FrEng	44	72.73	11.18	3.29	<.005
FrAmh	26	61.54	17.25		
PrEng	29	43.45	17.17	-.801	>.05
PrAmh	28	48.04	25.40		
FrTotal	70	68.57	14.57	7.09	<.001
PrTotal	57	45.70	21.54		

As can be observed from Table 3, the findings are inconclusive. On the one hand, comparison of the freshman origin group in the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature with a similar group in the Department of Ethiopian Languages and Literature showed that the former significantly outscored the latter ( $p < .005$ ). Whether or not this consolidates the intuitive assumption that students in the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature are more proficient in the English language, and therefore in reading in the language as well, than those in the Department of Ethiopian Languages and Literature is not clear. However, as the text used in the study was written in English, and processing the same requires some degree of reading proficiency in the language, the argument seems a possibility.

Previous studies (for example, Clarke, 1980; Devine, 1987; Devine, 1988; Taye, 2000) have shown that language proficiency significantly affects reading comprehension.

However, on the other hand, we observe that the preparatory origin groups in both departments did not perform significantly differently from one another ( $p > .05$ ). Whether or not this lends itself to a question of proficiency is difficult to say. In other words, if this happened because the groups were equally proficient in English in general and in their reading ability in particular is not known.

### **Implications and Recommendations**

In institutions of higher learning where print media take the lion's share to access information, it is unquestionable that reading is, if not the most important, one of the key language skills students would require to succeed in their academic career. As Burns, et al. (1999) put it, a learner weak at reading cannot be strong in content areas.

However, the relatively lower scores achieved by the preparatory groups (their difference with the freshman groups being statistically significant) suggest that the former group of students may encounter some difficulty in satisfactorily processing academic materials to be read for purposes like taking notes, producing papers (assignments), presenting seminars, writing examinations and other related tasks. If that happens, then academic success will be called into question.

The implication of such a situation and alleviation of the problem might point fingers at different institutions, namely: preparatory schools, institutions of higher learning, and the Ministry of Education.

Preparatory schools in the various regions have the primary duty of equipping their students with the readiness required at institutions of higher learning. Any deficiency exhibited by such students as they start college/university education reflects back on them. Therefore,

they should seriously devote themselves to equipping the learners with strategies of coping with education at universities/colleges.

Institution of higher learning may also play their own role by providing pre-sessional study skills course for a few weeks before the main courses begin. Such undertakings are common, for example in the UK, when the entrants are believed to have language inadequacy to pursue their college/university education. For this to be practical, however, the National Organization for Examinations (NOE) should release **The Ethiopian Higher Education Entrance Qualification Examination** results well in time so that a few weeks could be devoted to this before the academic year commences. Otherwise, it is obvious that this cannot be accommodated within the academic semesters as the students, following the new policy, now stay a year less than they used to do.

Finally, the Ministry of Education should also reconsider the policy that removed the Freshman Programme if further studies yield similar results. In It should be borne in mind that findings in this study are based on data generated from very limited samples, i.e., students from two departments in one faculty only, and also one aspect of reading, reading comprehension. This means that there is a need to conduct such an investigation on a wider scale both in the University and in other institutions of higher learning in the country. Furthermore, an attempt should also be made to cover other aspects of reading skill. If findings from such studies consolidate those in this study, then it would be sensible for the Ministry to objectively re-examine the effectiveness of the policy. It is very healthy for one to admit that new policies are not necessarily perfect panacea to a problem and that they could sometimes fail to hit the intended target.

In general, that the preparatory origin students seem to have more serious problem in their academic career than the freshman origin ones should be the worry of all concerned. Therefore, through synchronised efforts, means should be sought to bring the competence of the group up to expectations.

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