

## **The Relationship between Reading Strategy use and Reading Comprehension among Ethiopian EFL Learners**

**Dr. Belilew Molla**

Department of English, Dilla University  
Dilla, Ethiopia  
[belilewmolla@yahoo.com](mailto:belilewmolla@yahoo.com)

---

**Abstract:** *The study was an attempt to find out the rate of recurrence of reading strategy use among Ethiopian EFL learners. It also tried to figure out the possible relationship between reading strategy use and reading comprehension. Forty EFL learners participated in the study. A reading strategy inventory and a reading comprehension test were used to collect the required data. The data were analyzed through descriptive statistics to determine the frequency of strategies employed by the learners. Moreover, Pearson coefficient correlation was used to discover the association between reading strategy use and reading comprehension achievement. According to the findings Ethiopian EFL learners can be categorized as medium strategy users. It was also revealed that Ethiopian students reading comprehension is below what is expected of them. Furthermore, the use of reading strategies had neither positively nor negatively correlation with reading comprehension achievement.*

**Keywords:** *TEFL, Reading Strategy Use, Reading Comprehension.*

---

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

In the Ethiopian educational institutions, English is taught as a foreign language at all grade levels. It is taught as a subject in the primary, junior, secondary and tertiary levels, and it is a medium of instruction starting from grade nine up to tertiary level. Moreover, English is a subject for specialization at tertiary level. To this effect, it is inevitable that the learners at the tertiary level encounter so many academic materials written in English. With regard to this, Solomon (1999) notes that the bulk of the teaching and the learning materials used in classes is written in English.

For this reason, the practice of the English language skills is indispensable in the language education. Students are expected to read at a reasonable level of proficiency and comprehension to perform well in the area of their specialization at the level expected of them. Reading in English in the Ethiopian educational system is important. As to Solomon (1999), particular importance is attached to reading at the tertiary level where the ability to read for academic purposes in the content areas is considered crucial. Learners' ability of English can greatly be determined by their ability to read. With regard to this, Atkins, J., Hailom, B. And Nuru, M. (1996:39) note that students' eventual academic success or failure depends to a large degree on their ability to read and comprehend the text books and notes they receive in the different subjects they study as all these study materials are written in English. Most of the knowledge and abilities students get are based on their reading and comprehending abilities in English. Hence, it can be said that reading is an important skill for second or foreign language learning in academic contexts. It is one of the most important skills of language. Students' success in academic performance at the tertiary level can be due to their ability to read and understand English written materials.

Research studies on reading comprehension have revealed that reading is a complex cognitive activity that is crucial for adequate functioning and for obtaining information in current society and requires an integration of memory and meaning construction (Alfassi, 2004). Students need to know how to learn from reading in order to be able to enter the present literate society and have a successful communication. Reading has been defined as an active process in which readers shift between sources of information, elaborate meaning and strategies, monitor their comprehension, and use the social context to reflect their response (Walker, 2000). Research studies on second/foreign language reading have consistently confirmed the importance of reading strategies on developing language learners' reading comprehension skills (Zare & Nooreen, 2011; Brantmeier, 2002; Slataci & Akyel, 2002;

Song, 1998; Carrell, 1989). They argue that strategy use is different in more and less proficient readers, who use the strategies in different ways. Moreover, it has been acknowledged that reading strategies can be taught to learners and that reading strategy instruction can benefit all students (Carrell, 1989; Carol, 2002; Janzen, 1996).

My experience as a secondary school teacher and university English language instructor, secondary school and university students have problems in reading in English and using reading strategies for better comprehension. Most students experience difficulties in reading texts in their studies. The students I taught used to score low marks on reading tests most frequently. Besides, students frequently ask for what types of reading strategy would help them to better understand reading texts. Other colleagues who teach English and other subject areas also complain that their students at tertiary level too are not good at using the right types of reading strategies to understand reading texts. They have difficulties in reading books for understanding the content areas of these books.

Thus this study tries to answer the following basic research questions:

- i. What reading strategies are most often used by Dilla University second year English majoring students?
- ii. What is the reading comprehension level of the respondents?
- iii. Is there relationship between reading strategy use and reading comprehension?

## **2. METHODS**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between the reading strategies university students use and their reading comprehension. The design of this study was a descriptive one. Data were gathered from the subjects and they were described quantitatively. Numerical data was collected through questionnaire and reading comprehension test.

The target sources of data for the study were the 2014/15 academic year Dilla university second year English majoring students. The total number of students in the year mentioned about was 40. Of these 30 were male students and the 10 were female ones. All second year English majoring students were purposely selected for the study. The reason why **second** year students are purposely selected as subjects of the study is because the course reading skills is given for this particular class year and the researcher believes senior class students have more experience in reading than the lower ones.

### **INSTRUMENTATION**

Questionnaire was used to collect data on the students' reading strategies use. For this purpose, strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) that was developed by Oxford (1990) was used. The SILL instrument is a self – report written questionnaire which measures frequencies of learning strategies use (ranging between “never” to “always”). As to Oxford and Burry, (1995:1), SILL is the most widely used instrument around the world to assess the use of reading strategies. The scholars further say that the SILL measures reading strategies use that are driven by mental processes which are not often directly observable.

### **3. READING COMPREHENSION TEST**

Reading comprehension test was also the other instrument used in this study. The purpose of this instrument was to determine the students' reading comprehension ability. Two reading comprehension passages that are part of TOEFL were used for the study. The reason why the researcher intended to use reading comprehension passages from TOEFL was because as to Pierce (1994), TOEFL tests match with experiences and cultures of the majority of the students as they are standardized tests. He further noted that TOEFL tests show high reliability and validity. Besides, “the TOEFL test is a highly secure, internationally administered” test for assessing the language proficiency level of foreign language speakers. It has substantial reliability estimates between 0.87 and 0.90 (Stevenson, 1987) cited in Solomon (1999).

An attempt was also made to measure whether or not the reading passages matched the students' grade level using “Gunning Fog Index Formula” which measures the difficulty level of reading texts. The difficulty levels of the passages were 10 and 11 respectively and Gunning (1968) recommends that difficulty levels of reading passages between 8 and 13 are appropriate for undergraduate students. The reason why the researcher also wanted to collect two reading comprehension passages was to

## The Relationship between Reading Strategy use and Reading Comprehension among Ethiopian EFL Learners

attract students' interests at least in either of the passages and to avoid any bias that could affect the results of the study when using one comprehension passage.

The data collected through Reading Strategy Inventory and tests were analyzed using descriptive statistics such as mean and standard deviation. Moreover, Pearson's correlation coefficient was applied to determine the relationship between reading Strategy use and reading comprehension.

### 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The purpose of this study is to investigate Dilla University English majoring students reading strategies use and their reading comprehension ability. In this section, the data gathered through questionnaire, and reading comprehension test are presented and discussed based on the basic research questions developed at the beginning of the study.

The first research question of the study was an attempt to find out the overall frequency of reading strategy use of Ethiopian EFL learners. Descriptive statistics were measured to answer the first research question. In Table 1 below the overall mean score, minimum, maximum, and the standard deviation of the participants' responses to the whole instrument have been reported. As seen below in Table 1, the overall mean score demonstrates that the participants of the study were medium strategy users ( $M=2.49$ ) as long as reading strategy use is concerned. It is worth mentioning that based on Oxford's (Oxford, 1990) classification, the student whose mean score is above 3.5 ( $M \geq 3.5$ ) is considered to be a high strategy user, the one whose mean score is between 2.5 and 3.4 ( $2.5 \leq M < 3.4$ ) is a medium strategy user, and the one below 2.4 ( $M \leq 2.4$ ) is considered a low strategy user.

**Table1.** Questionnaire results

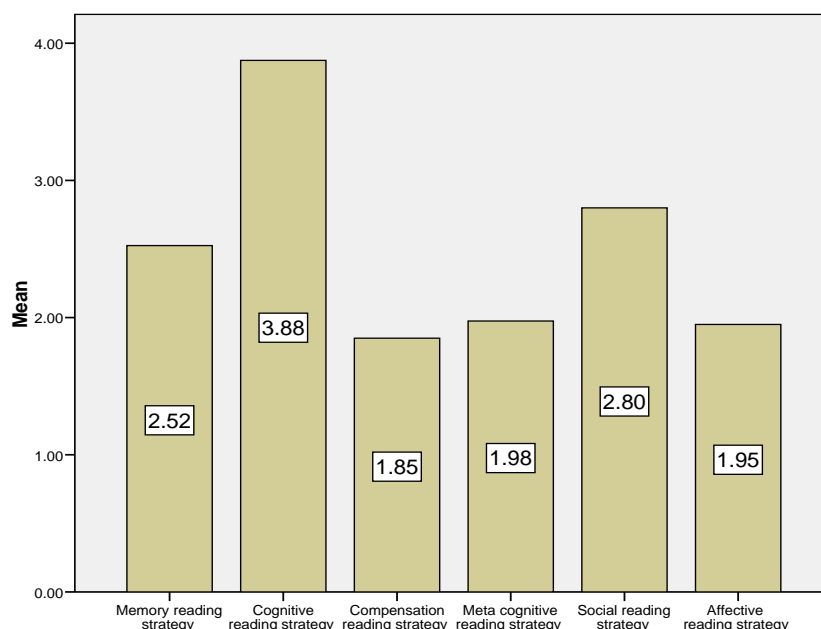
	Types of reading strategy	Number	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
1	Memory Reading strategy	40	1.00	4.00	2.5250	.59861
2	Cognitive Reading Strategy	40	3.00	5.00	3.8750	.51578
3	Compensation reading strategy	40	1.00	3.00	1.8500	.48305
4	Metacognitive reading strategy	40	1.00	3.00	1.9750	.42290
5	Social reading strategy	40	1.00	5.00	2.8000	.91147
6	Affective reading strategy	40	1.00	2.00	1.9500	.22072
	Overall mean				2.495	

As can be seen in Table 1, the learners use the various kinds of reading strategies when they read but with different degrees of frequency. As it is shown in the table, the mean calculated for the students' use of the memory reading strategy is (2.53) which is medium strategy use while the standard deviation is (0.599). This result indicates that most of the memory reading strategies is not used by the majority of the learners. The students seemed they lacked the opportunities they could get from using the memory reading strategies when reading. Very little attempt is made by the students to make arrangements and associations when they want to remember ideas they get from texts. With regards to the cognitive reading strategy, the calculated mean of the respondents' use of it is (3.88) which is high strategy use. The standard deviation for the cognitive reading strategy is (0.516). Hence, it can be said that the students use this strategy widely as the mean calculated shows that their use is above average. The majority of the students use the cognitive reading strategies to facilitate their understanding of reading materials.

It is also indicated in table 1 that the compensation reading strategy is underused by the students as the mean calculated for their use of it is (1.85). This number is considered to be an indication of the students' low use of the strategy. The data on metacognitive reading strategy also show (with its mean 1.98) that the respondents use this strategy rarely. Almost all these strategies are not frequently used by the students. In response to the social reading strategies, a significant number of the learners employ this strategy to understand written texts. The calculated mean for this strategy is (2.80) which implies that the majority of the students do not frequently make interactions with their peers and other people who could have assisted them in explaining and clarifying academic readings. As scholars like Oxford (1990) claim, students' understanding of reading texts can be maximized when they make active interactions with others who have similar information on the texts they read. However, the students in this study were found with having a limited use of this strategy. As can also be seen in Table 1, the result of the data from the questionnaire indicates that the overall mean score for affective reading strategy use of the students is (1.95) which is considered to be low. Almost all the students do

not relax and reward themselves; do not and do not control their emotions to solve the problems they face while reading.

To conclude, the mean scores for the students' use of the cognitive, social, memory, metacognitive, affective and compensation reading strategies in their rank order are (3.88), (2.80), (2.53), (1.98), (1.95) and (1.85) respectively. The means calculated for the various kinds of reading strategies are also graphically represented. Hence, as can be seen from the data through the questionnaire, cognitive reading strategy seemed to be used more widely than the other strategy types. Besides social and memory reading strategies seemed to be the next frequently used to that of cognitive strategy. However, the mean scores for metacognitive, affective and compensation reading strategies were nearly similar and are observed to be the least utilized reading strategies by the students. The majority of the students did not frequently plan before they read, did not try to relax and reduce their problems, and did not make intelligent guesses from contextual clues whenever they read which, in turn, seriously damages the students' academic success.



*Types of Reading Strategies*

The second research question of this study was posed to learn more about the students' reading comprehension level. This research question is mainly investigated quantitatively using statistical data gathered through the reading comprehension test. Slightly modified from TOEFL reading section was used for this purpose. The numbers of questions from the two sections of reading passages were (14). The maximum score expected was (14) and the lowest one was (0). As to Alsamadani (2009), students who scored 6 and below out of 14 are considered low, between 7 and 10 are considered medium level, and between 11 and 14 are considered high level of comprehension.

The subjects' level of comprehension, frequency, percentage and means for scores is presented in Table 2 below.

**Table2.** Descriptive statistics for reading comprehension test scores

Level of comprehension	frequency	Percentage	Mean
Low ( $\leq 6$ )	17	42.5	32.77
Medium (7-10)	21	52.5	56.39
High ( $\geq 11$ )	2	5	78.57
			6.644(47.46%)

As shown in Table 2, 17 students scored 6 and below in the reading comprehension test. If this 17 is calculated in percentage, it becomes (42.5%) of the total population who took the test. The grand mean calculated for those who scored 6 and below is (32.77). It is also observed in the same table that 21 (52.5%) of the students scored between 7 and 10 and are classified as having a medium level of comprehension. The mean score for the students who have a medium level of comprehension is (56.39).

## The Relationship between Reading Strategy use and Reading Comprehension among Ethiopian EFL Learners

As could be observed in the table, 2(5%) of the subjects got between 11 and 14 and are found to have a high level of comprehension. The mean score for those who have a high level of comprehension is (78.46). However, the number of students whose result is between 11 and 14 is insignificant. The average calculated mean of all the subjects who took the reading comprehension test was 6.644 (47.46%) which indicates that the comprehension level of almost all the students is considered to be low. Hence, the students' low level of reading comprehension might have resulted from their inadequate knowledge to appropriately and effectively use the different types of reading strategies when reading written materials. The third question in this study was "Is there relationship between reading strategies use and reading comprehension?" To test the relationship among these two variables, correlation coefficient was calculated using **Pearson's**–which measures pairs of variables by means of scales using numbers (in SPSS, version 16) method.

**Table3.** Correlation among reading strategies use and reading comprehension

Reading strategy variables	r	P
Memory reading strategy	0.681(**)	0.000
Cognitive reading strategy	-0.365(*)	0.020
Compensation reading strategy	-0.225	0.163
Meta cognition reading strategy	0.189	0.244
Social reading strategy	0.011	0.946
Affective reading strategy	-0.034	0.835

\*\* Correlation is significant at 0.01 levels

\* Correlation is significant at 0.05 levels

Where  $r$  = correlation coefficient

$P$  = Significance value

As indicated in Table 3, the correlation coefficient for memory reading strategy and reading comprehension is (0.681) with significance value of (0.00) which is less than (0.01). The result indicates that there is a significant positive relationship between the students' use of the memory reading strategies and their comprehension level. That is, the more the students use the memory reading strategies, the better their comprehension ability becomes. The finding for this particular aspect of reading strategy goes along with that of Rafael's (2007). In his study, Rafael found that there is a moderate positive relationship between reading strategy use and reading comprehension. However, as it can be seen in the table, there is moderate negative relationship between the subjects' use of cognitive reading strategy and comprehension with a correlation coefficient of -0.37 ( $P = <0.05$ ). In a normal condition, reading strategy use and reading comprehension have direct relationship. But the result here contradicts the fact that they have a direct relationship. This result shows that there is a negative (an inverse) relationship between the students' use of cognitive reading strategies and their comprehension level. The more the cognitive reading strategies the students use, their reading comprehension level decreases or vice versa. It is also shown in the table that reading comprehension ability of the subjects was neither positively nor negatively correlated with compensation, metacognitive, social and affective reading strategies.

The reading comprehension level of the students positively and negatively correlated with memory and cognitive reading strategies respectively, it neither positively nor negatively correlated with the remaining reading strategy types in the table. The analysis of the correlation showed that nearly all of the reading strategy types had not been correlated with the students' reading comprehension level. This might have been caused from the students' insufficient knowledge of what reading strategies to use, how and when to use them.

## 5. DISCUSSION

The analysis of the information obtained from the questionnaire indicated that nearly all the subjects were not aware of the different types of reading strategies used in this study. This finding agrees with that of Girma's (1994) in that he found that the majority of the students were not aware of using, nor do they seem to employ a number of reading strategies. The majority of the participants were low users, which means that English language learners of Dilla University almost rarely use the reading strategies while reading English texts.

Authorities in the area of reading as cited in Alsamadani (2009) such as (Oxford, 1990) claim that low reported strategy use is not always a sign of ineffective learning. Also high frequency use of strategies does not guarantee that the learning is successful. In a casual class observation, one might see some learners working eagerly and using many strategies, but do not employ those strategies effectively. This is because frequency results alone do not explain everything about strategy use, it is necessary to include other factors that affect learners' comprehension. As to Alsamadani, "the more the better" is not always the case in strategy use.

The second research question of this study was to learn more about the subjects' reading comprehension ability. Slightly modified TOEFL reading section was used for this purpose. It was adapted from Alsamadani's (2009) work on reading comprehension. As to the researcher, students who scored between 2 and 6 were considered low, between 7 and 10 were Considered medium level, and between 11 and 14 were considered high level of comprehension.

The results of the study showed that (42.5%) of them were low comprehenders, (52.5%) were found to be medium comprehenders, and the rest (5%) of the subjects were found to have a high level of comprehension. However, the overall calculated mean of all the subjects who took the reading comprehension test was 6.6 (47.46%) which is below 7 (50%). Hence, the reading comprehension level of almost all subjects of this study was found to be low and below what is expected of them.

The third question in this study was to see if there is relationship between the subjects reading strategies use and their reading comprehension. To test the relationship among the two variables, correlation coefficient was calculated using Pearson's (See Table 9). The result of the study showed that there was moderate positive relationship between the students' use of memory reading strategies and their reading comprehension level with a correlation coefficient of 0.68 ( $p < 0.01$ ). It was also found that the students' use of the cognitive reading strategies use and their reading comprehension negatively correlated with a correlation coefficient of -0.37 ( $p < 0.05$ ). This finding contradicted with what O'Malley and Chamot (1990) claimed. These scholars noted that the use of appropriate reading strategies lead to improve students' reading comprehension. At a normal condition, reading strategy use and reading comprehension have direct relationship. This finding, on the other hand, goes along with what Oxford and her colleagues (1990) claimed as cited in Alsamadani (2009). They said that low strategy use is not always a sign of ineffective learning; also high frequency use of strategies does not guarantee that the learning is successful unless they are effectively used. Frequency alone does not explain everything about strategy use. It is necessary to include other factors that affect learners' comprehension. "The more the better" does not always work in strategies use due to other factors. The data questionnaire showed that cognitive reading strategies were more widely used than the other strategies; however, these strategies did not help the subjects for better comprehension. In this study, the subjects' reading comprehension scores and their use of the cognitive reading strategies negatively correlated. Thus, this finding indicated that the students were not consciously and effectively using these strategies. The reason might have been because they were unaware of how and when to use these strategies

Further, the students' reading comprehension level neither positively nor negatively correlated with compensation, metacognitive, social and affective reading strategies. This might have resulted from, as Oxford (2003) notes, the random, unconnected and uncontrolled use of the strategies by the students due to their insufficient knowledge of how and when to use these strategies. As to the scholar, in strategy use, it is not the quantity, but the quality of the strategies that is more important. It is not how much reading strategies that the students use matters, but how effectively they use them to effective reading comprehension. Therefore, the overall finding on the relation between reading strategies and reading comprehension, except for the memory reading strategy, even for which the researcher still doubts if the students had really consciously applied them during the test, implied that there is no simple or linear relationship among them. This finding agrees with that of Solomon's (1999), Brantmeier's (2000), Alsamadani's (2009) and Alderson's (1991).

## **6. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The first research question in this study tried to find out the kinds of reading strategy types that were mostly used by the subjects when reading written materials. The result of the questionnaire indicated that the subjects, irrespective of their reading abilities, use various reading strategies but with different degrees of frequency. The majority of the participants were low users, which means that English

## **The Relationship between Reading Strategy use and Reading Comprehension among Ethiopian EFL Learners**

---

language learners of Dilla University almost rarely use the reading strategies while reading English texts.

The second research question of this study was to learn more about the subjects' reading comprehension ability. Slightly modified TOEFL reading section was used for this purpose. It was adapted from Alsamadani's (2009) work on reading comprehension. As to the researcher, students who scored between 2 and 6 were considered low, between 7 and 10 were Considered medium level, and between 11 and 14 were considered high level of comprehension.

The results of the study showed that (42.5%) of them were low comprehenders, (52.5%) were found to be medium comprehenders, and the rest (5%) of the subjects were found to have a high level of comprehension. However, the overall calculated mean of all the subjects who took the reading comprehension test was 6.6 (47.46%) which is below 7 (50%). Hence, the reading comprehension level of almost all subjects of this study was found to be low and below what is expected of them.

The third question in this study was to see if there is relationship between the subjects reading strategies use and their reading comprehension. To test the relationship among the two variables, correlation coefficient was calculated using Pearson's. The result of the study showed that there was moderate positive relationship between the students' use of memory reading strategies and their reading comprehension level with a correlation coefficient of 0.68 ( $p < 0.01$ ). It was also found that the students' use of the cognitive reading strategies use and their reading comprehension negatively correlated with a correlation coefficient of -0.37 ( $p < 0.05$ ).

Therefore, the overall finding on the relation between reading strategies and reading comprehension, except for the memory reading strategy, even for which the researcher still doubts if the students had really consciously applied them during the test, implied that there is no simple or linear relationship among them.

### **Recommendations**

On the basis of the findings and implications of the study, the following suggestions are made: Classroom teachers can still help students to improve their effectiveness of reading strategies use. They can make this practical by developing interesting classroom reading tasks that require extract information from the reading texts using some targeted strategies. Making purposes of reading clear can motivate the learners to use certain strategies to achieve their purposes.

- Students should be made to practice the different types of reading strategies in and out of classroom. They should be made conscious of the strategies they could use to read the texts and teachers can play an important role in this case. This can be made practical by modeling the different types of reading strategies in classroom for further use outside classroom and by explaining to the students what, how and when particular or group of strategies are useful.
- Language textbooks at various grade levels should be prepared in a way that make learners, in their respective grade level, practice the different types of reading strategies for effective reading comprehension.
- The language students should get plenty of opportunities for strategy training during language classes by providing various reading tasks that demand the learners apply memory, cognitive, compensation, met cognitive, social and affective reading strategies
- Teachers' awareness on what, how, why, when and where to use the various kinds of reading strategies should also be raised through various workshops and seminars so that this, in turn, will enable the teachers to practice these strategies together with their students in the classroom.

### **REFERENCES**

- Anderson, N.J. (1991). "Individual Difference in strategy use in second language Reading and Testing." *The Modern Language Journal*. Vol.75No.4 available at <http://www.jstor.org/view/00267902/ap020541/02a00080/0>
- Atkins, et al(1996). *Skills Development Methodology Part 2*. Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University.
- Brantmeier, C. (2002). Second language reading strategy research at the secondary and university levels: variations, disparities, and generalizability. *The Reading Matrix*, 2(3), 1–14.

- Carrell, P.L. (1989). Metacognitive awareness and second language reading. *Modern Language Journal*, 73, 120–133.
- Carol, R. (2002). Mindful reading: strategy training that facilitates transfer. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, Vol. 45(6), 498–513.
- Girma G. (1994). "A preliminary Investigation in to the Reading strategies of Addis Ababa University First year students." Unpublished M.A Thesis, Addis Ababa University.
- Gunning, R. (1968). *The Gunning's Fog Index (or FOG) Readability Formula: The Techniques of Clear Writing*. USA: McGraw-Hall Book Co.
- Janzen, J. (1996). Teaching strategic reading. *TESOL Journal*, 6(1), 6–9.
- O'Mally, J.M., and Chamot A.U (1990). *Learning strategies in second language acquisition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University press.
- Oxford, R.L, and Burry, J.A. (1995). Assessing the Use of Language Learning strategies Word wide with the ESL/EFL version of the Strategy Inventory for language (SILL). *System*. vol.23, No.1 p 1-23, 1995.
- Oxford, R.L, (1990). *Language Learning strategies: what every teacher should know*. New York: Newbury House/Harper & Row.
- Pierce, B. (1994). The test of English as a foreign language: Developing items for reading Comprehension. In C. Hill, & K. Parry (Eds.), *From testing to assessment: English as an international language* (pp.39-60). New York: London.
- Solomon H. (1999). *A study of Reading Strategies of First Year Students at Addis a University College in Ethiopia*. Unpublished PhD thesis, AAU
- Song, M. J. (1998). Teaching reading strategies in an ongoing EFL university reading classroom. *Asian Journal of English Language Teaching*, 8, 41–54.
- Walker, J. B. (2000). *Diagnostic teaching of reading: Techniques for instruction and assessment* (4th ed.). OH: Merrill.
- Zare, P. & Nooreen, N. ( 2011). The Relationship Between Language Learning Strategy Use and Reading Comprehension Achievement Among Iranian Undergraduate EFL Learners. *World Applied Sciences Journal*. 13(8): 1870-1877.

#### **AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY**



**Dr. Belilew Molla**, Assistant professor in Teaching English as a Foreign Language, received Ph.D. from Addis Ababa University, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. He is a good teacher and an astute researcher in the fields of Language Learning Strategy, Strategy Instruction on Different Language Skills and Mother Tongue Education.