

Towards ESP's Specific Purposes: An Investigation of Language Learning Needs

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Abstract

English for Specific Purposes (ESP), as a form of language teaching, can be distinguished by its adherence to facilitating acquisition of the language skills based on the relevant needs of a group of learners. Thus, the rationale of the study is to investigate the Arab learners' language learning needs in a General Foundation Program (GFP) of a technical higher education institution. The study was guided by a developed ESP Course Design Framework that has four major trends with various rungs to complete the ESP cycle. The research surveyed 77 Level 4 GFP learners using a needs analysis questionnaire about their background, their goal for learning the language, the importance of the macro skills and related language areas, what they want to study, what they want to be trained, and what they want to improve. The responses of the learners could result in useful materials, such as an ESP Course Outline that assures the incorporation of the learning needs of the ESL/EFL learners. Furthermore, proposed Learning Plans, which is a departure from the traditional Lesson Plan, could be written and put together to comprise an ESP Module.

Keywords: language teaching, needs analysis, English for specific purposes, language acquisition, language learning

1. Introduction

Hutchinson and Waters (1987) defined English for Specific Purposes (ESP) as an approach to language teaching whose decisions as regards content as well as method stem from the learners' intentions for learning. It's a specific case of a broad special-purpose category of language teaching. Regardless of which language is taught and learned, similar concepts apply.

While Hutchinson and Waters regarded ESP as an approach, Robinson (1991) viewed it as an enterprise that involves education, training, and drawing upon the three major realms of knowledge: language, pedagogy, and student participants' area of interest. To Richards and Rodgers (2001), ESP is a movement seeking to serve the learners' language needs so as to carry out specific roles (e.g. doctor, engineer, lawyer) and to acquire content as well as skills via the medium of English instead of mastering it per se.

ESP has had a significant part in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL), thanks to the contemporary, international lingua franca status of English. There's then this consistent demand for English as a medium of communication. Moreover, there's this governmental mass educational programs wherein English is the first, or the sole language contributing to the rapid expansion of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) under which ESP operates.

The teaching and learning of English in a communicative manner has resulted in English language acquisition that is dictated by various reasons. Daily conversations, academic or technical purposes, and English for Specific Purposes were created with all this in view. ESP's definitions then diversified: It refers, according to Harmer (1983), to "situations where the student has some specific reasons to learn a language".

The teaching of English at Ibra College of Technology should therefore be designed to meet the demands for personality development, as well as knowledge and skills improvement. In an attempt to meet these demands, a learning plan may be devised to comprise the ESP module. And it must jibe with the popular principle of English for Specific Purposes. The students tell what they need English for, and they will learn the English that they need since ESP is meant to fulfil learners' needs.

Hawkey (1980) claimed that needs analysis is a tool for a course designer. This presupposes a "language training situation with reasonably specific occupational or educational objectives involving a reasonably homogeneous group of learners". Given the information about learner needs, a course designer will be able to produce a specification of language skills, functions, and forms as required in the learner needs profile. McDonough (1984) states that the language needs of the learner should be the bases for course development. He explained that "information on his or her language needs will help in drawing up a profile to establish coherent objectives, and take subsequent decisions on course content".

This paper then conducted a needs analysis to determine the specific needs of the college students from Ibra College of Technology that could lead to a rightful learning plan.

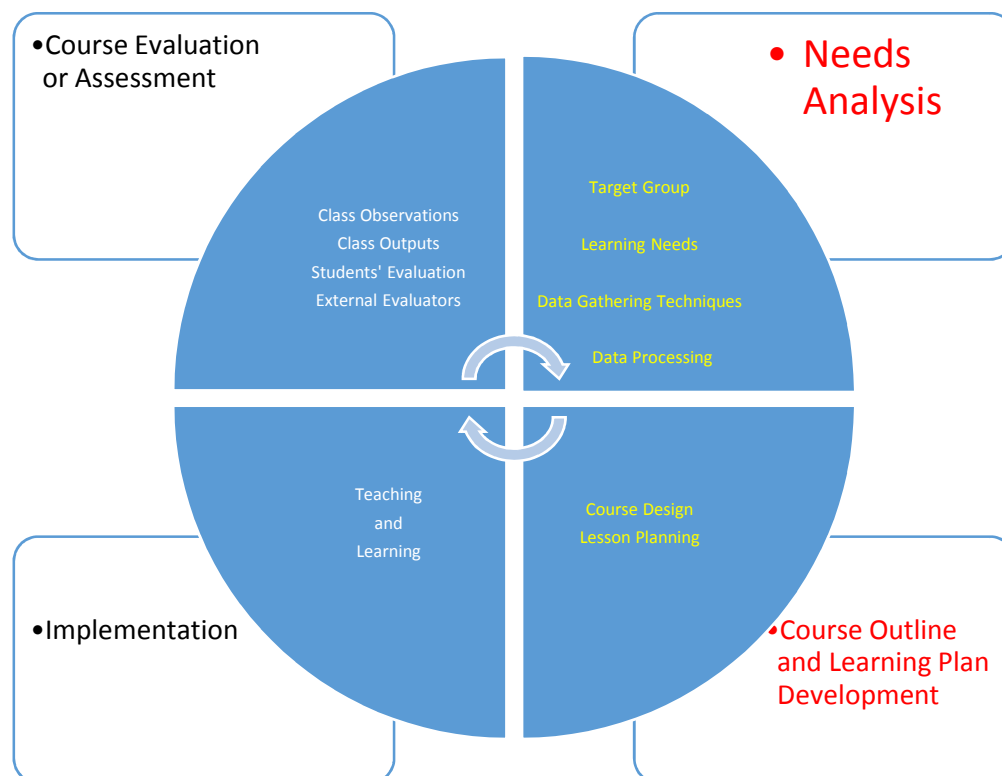


Figure 1. ESP Course Design Framework

2. Method

The study comprised of 77 Level 4 GFP Arab learners from a General Foundation Program (GFP) of a technical higher education institution. It aimed to determine the language learning needs of the students using a developed ESP Course Design Framework. Furthermore, Munby's needs analysis was utilized in analysing the needs of the students. In his work, Munby introduced a very well detailed set of procedures for discovering target situation needs. He called this set of procedures the Communication Needs Processor (CNP). The CNP is formed by a group of questions related to key communication variables (topic, participants, medium etc.) which can be used to spot the target language needs of any group of learners. Hutchinson (1991:54) states that there are two kinds of needs: target needs and learning needs. The former implies what the learner needs to do in the target situation, and the latter, what he needs to do in order to learn.

2.1 ESP Needs Analysis Questionnaire

The needs analysis questionnaire, which required the student-respondents to check appropriate answers, consists of the following: Part I – Background Information, Part II – Target Needs (in reading, writing, speaking, listening, grammar, project and presentation).

2.2 Coding of Responses

This consists of Part I – Background Information, with qualitative and quantitative descriptions, Part II – Target Needs, where the codes under the different language components are given qualitative descriptions.

3. Results and Discussion

This comprises raw data tables, summary tables, and graphic data representation.

3.1 Part I - Background Information

Under gender, the female ranked 1 with a percentage of 54.55 while the males, ranked 2, got the percentage of 45.45.

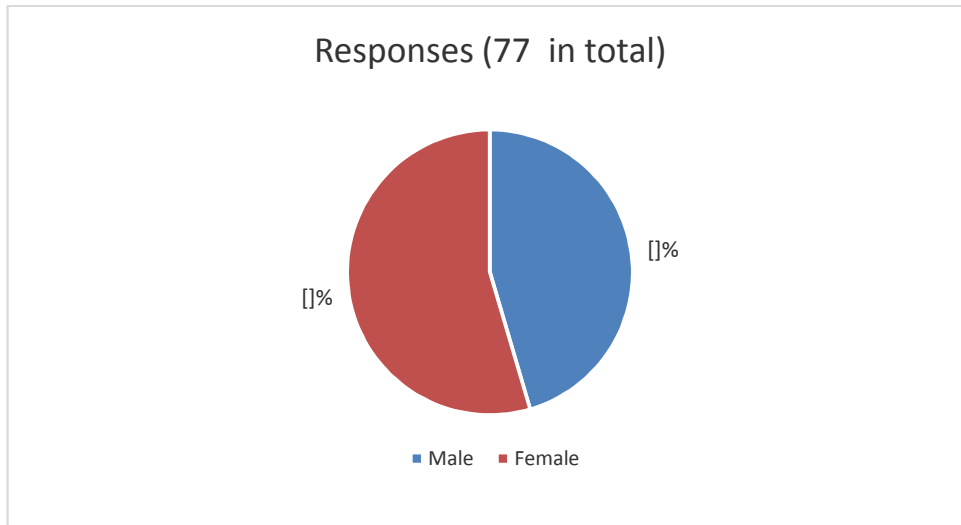


Figure 2. Summary of Responses

Under age, 19 had the highest percentage for both sexes—73.81% for female, and 65.71 for male.

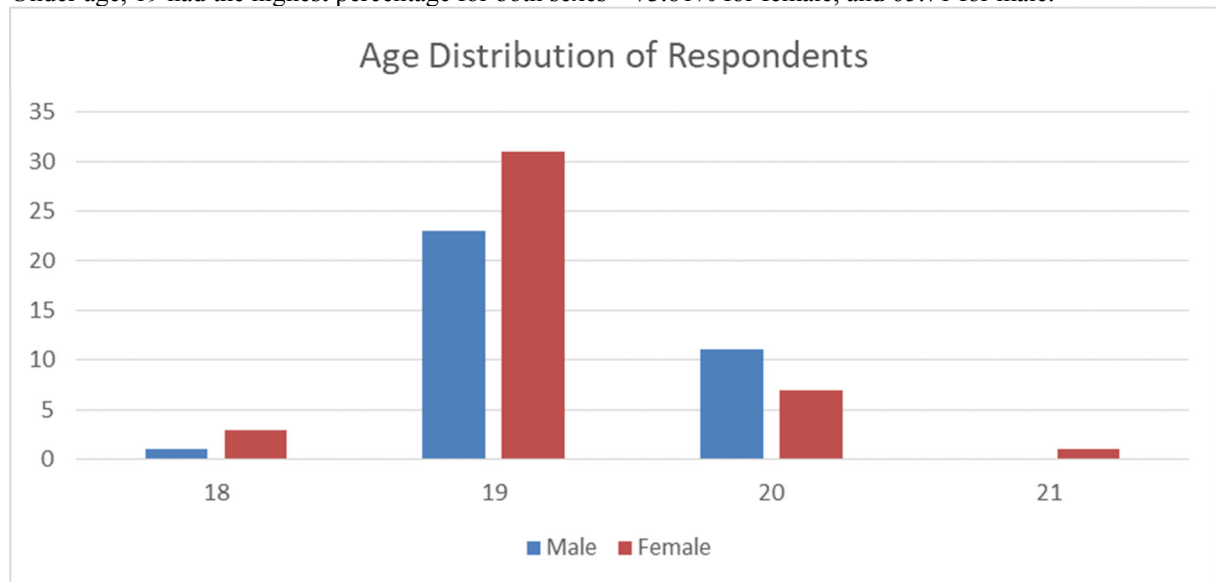


Figure 3. Age Distribution of Respondents

Under proficiency grade in level 3, grades B+ and B were the highest for both male and female, while D+ was the lowest for both.

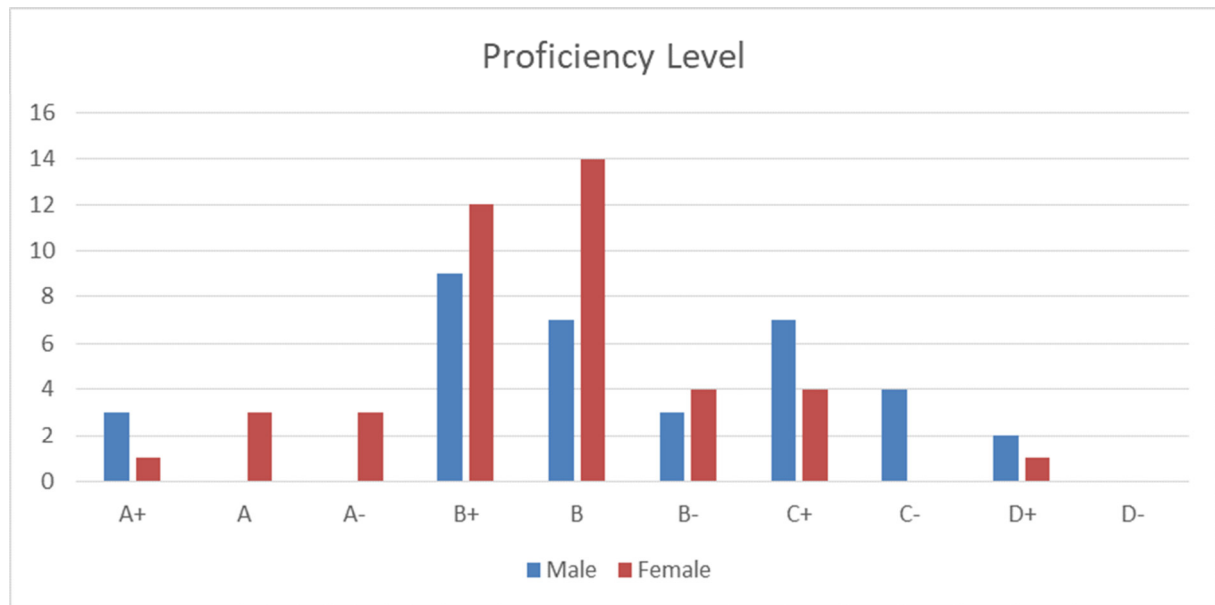


Figure 4. Proficiency Level of Respondents

On the question if it is necessary to learn English, yes got the biggest percentage—97.40% for female, and 94.29% for male.

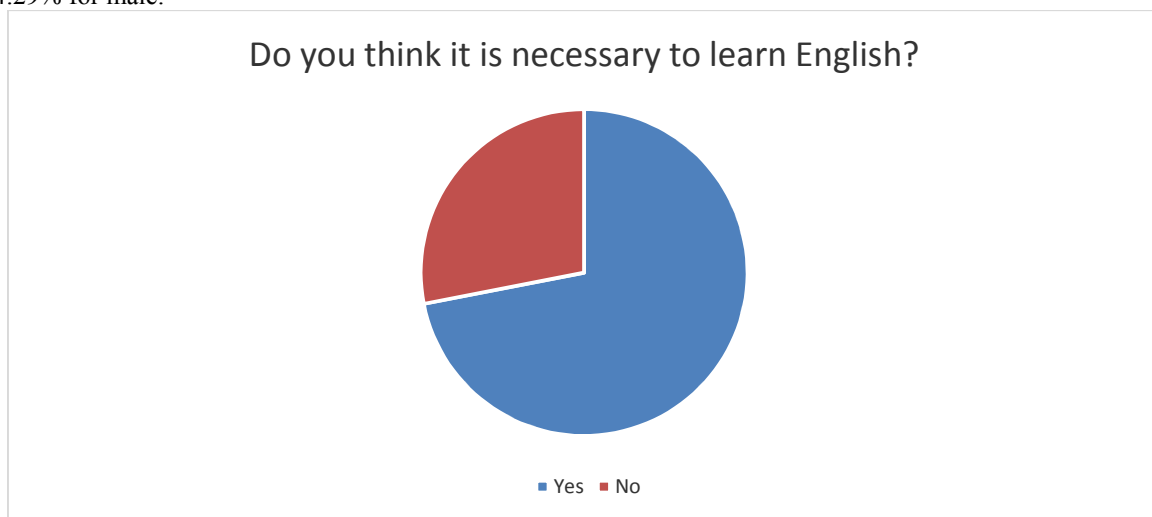


Figure 5. Distribution of Responses on Learning English

For the question why it is necessary to learn English, To get a job was the reason that got the highest ranking for both genders—90.91% for males, and 88.10% for female. The reason with the lowest rank for both sexes was: To comprehend materials in English.

The ranking sequence of other reasons after the first one is as follows: To read and write any form of communication material in English, To communicate using the international language, To understand lessons in class, To be able to use technology, To travel to other countries, and To comprehend written or printed materials in English. The graph below details these results.

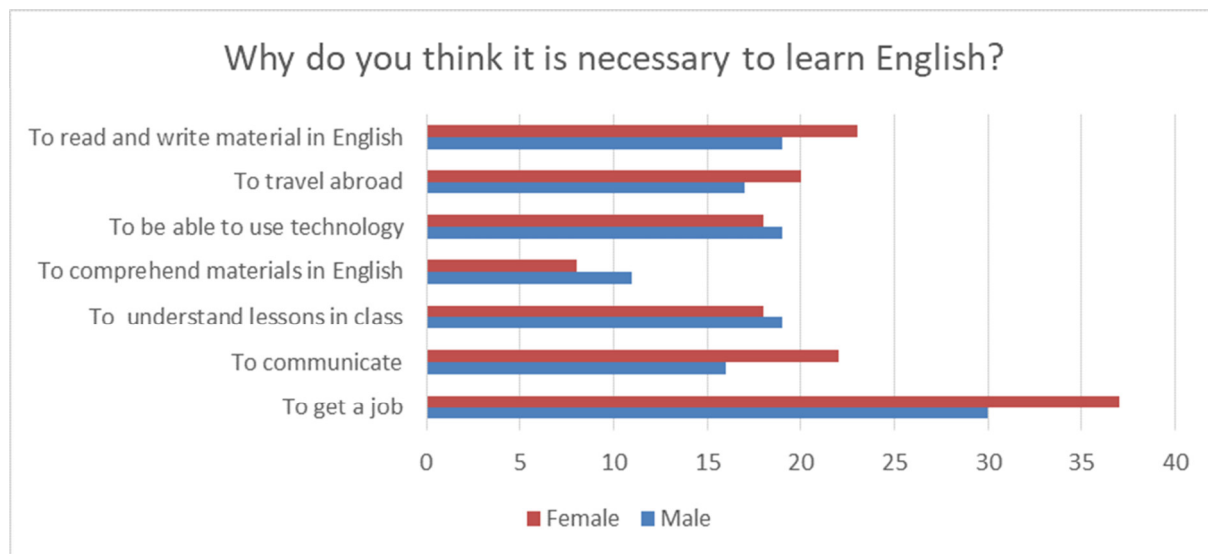


Figure 6. Distribution of Responses on Reasons to Learn English

As for the ranking of the following: reading, writing, listening, speaking, grammar, and project and presentation, reading got the highest percentage as the most important, with an overall percentage of 24%.

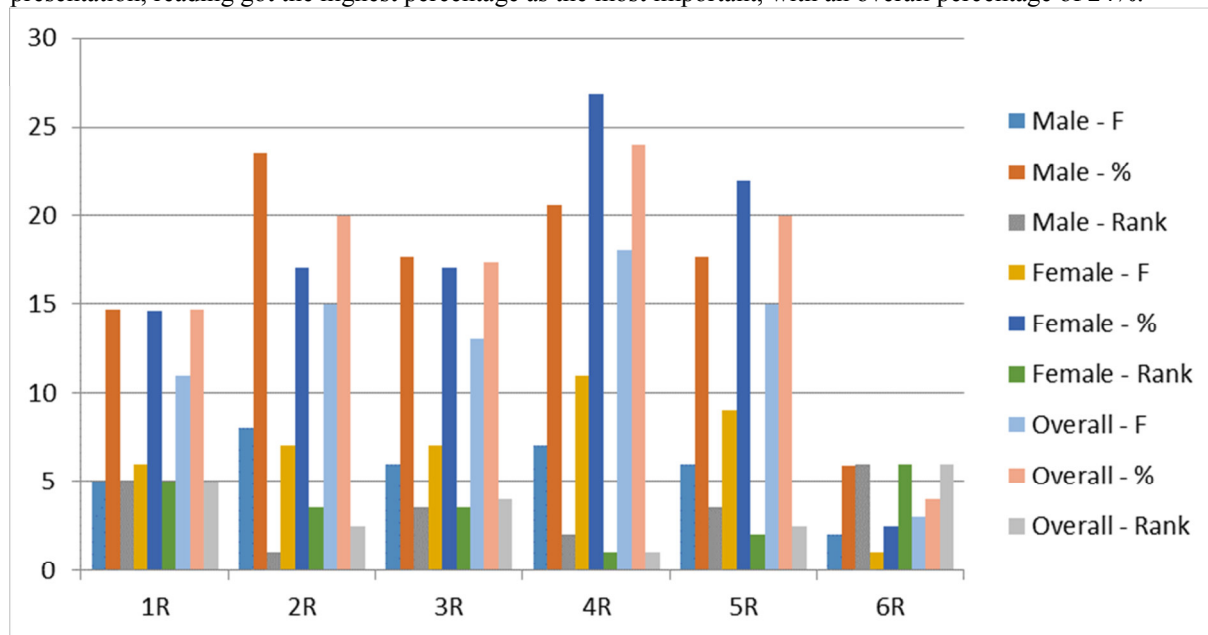


Figure 7. Overall Importance of Reading

Speaking and grammar got the same overall percentage of 25.33%, and got second in the ranking.

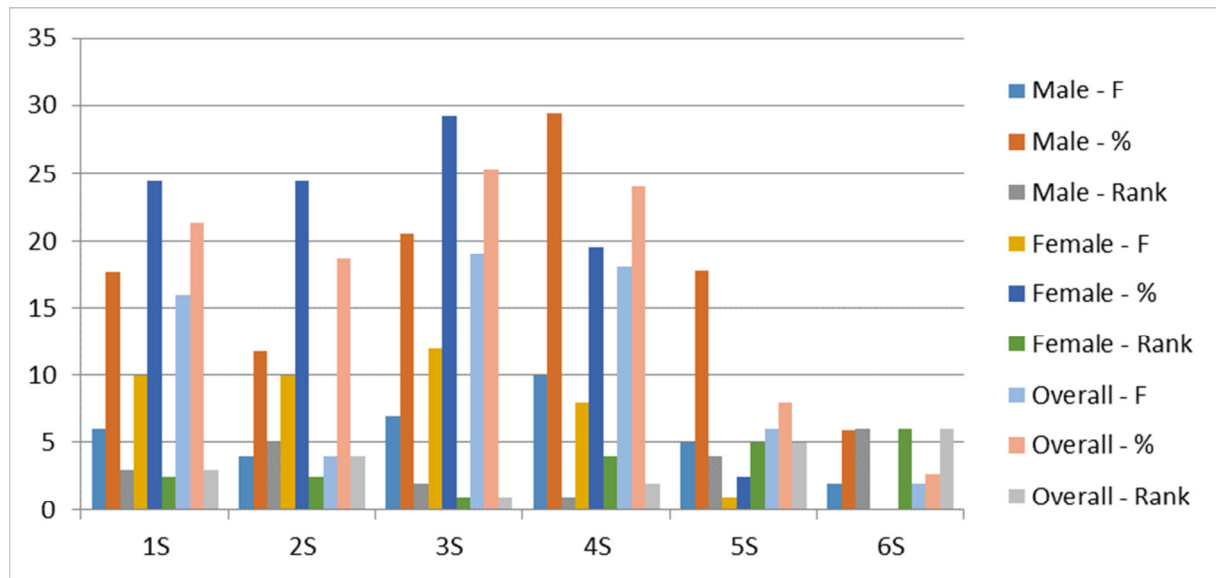


Figure 8. Overall Importance of Speaking

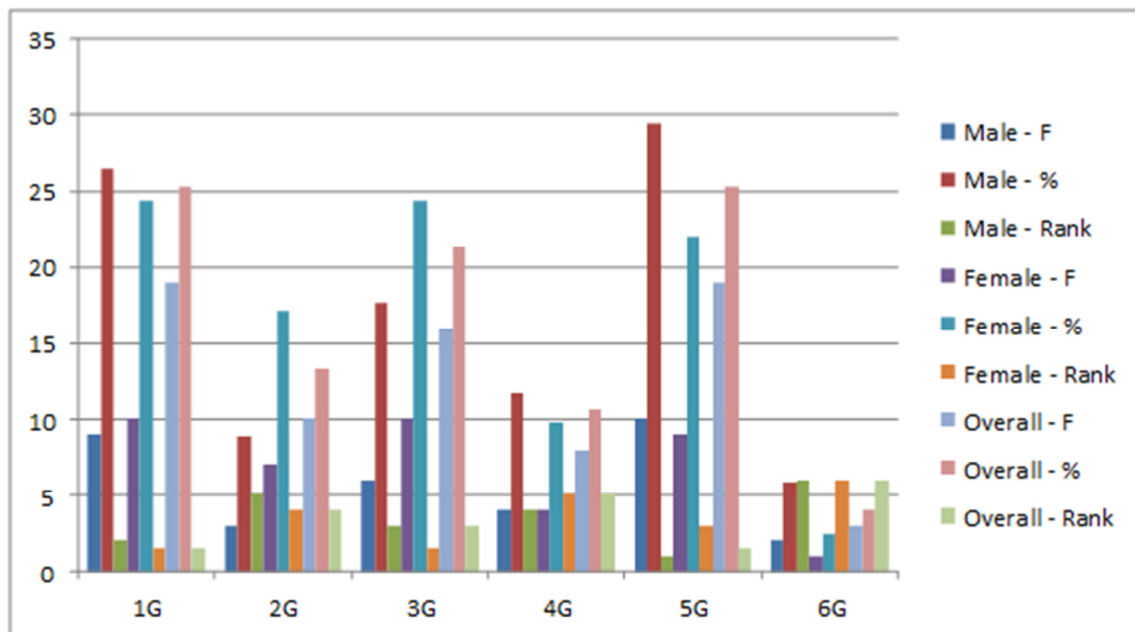


Figure 9. Overall Importance of Grammar

Writing was ranked third, with 33.3%.

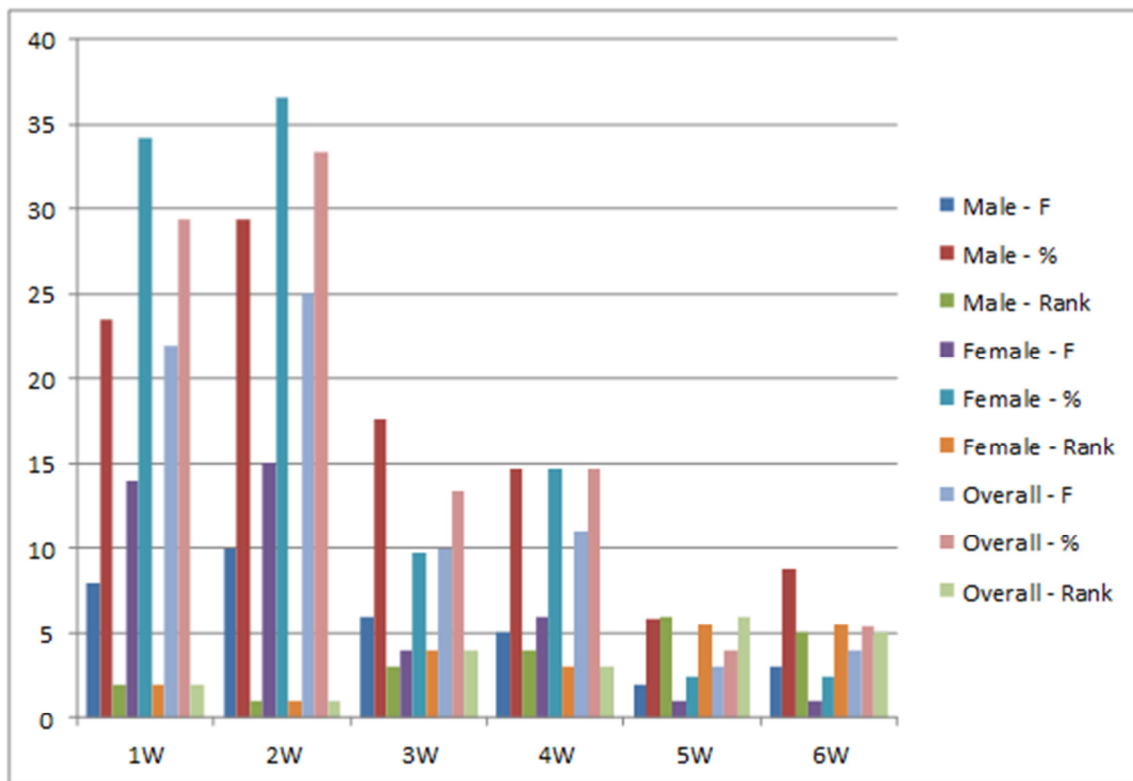


Figure 10. Overall Importance of Writing

Listening got fourth place, with 34.67%.

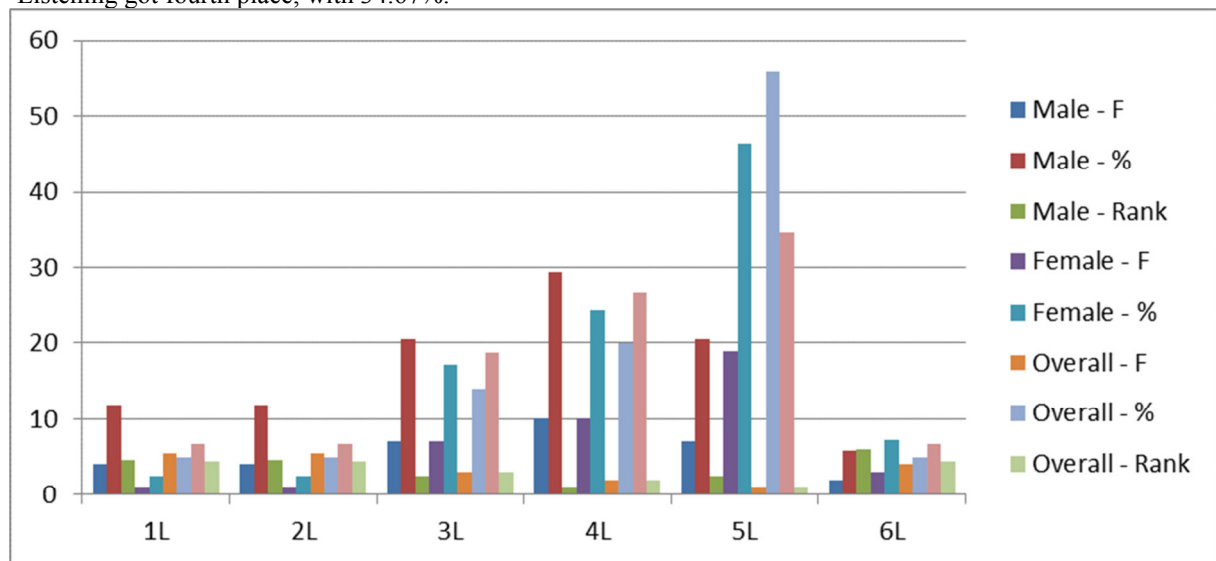


Figure 11. Overall Importance of Listening

Ranked fifth, the least important of all, is project and presentation, with 77.33%.

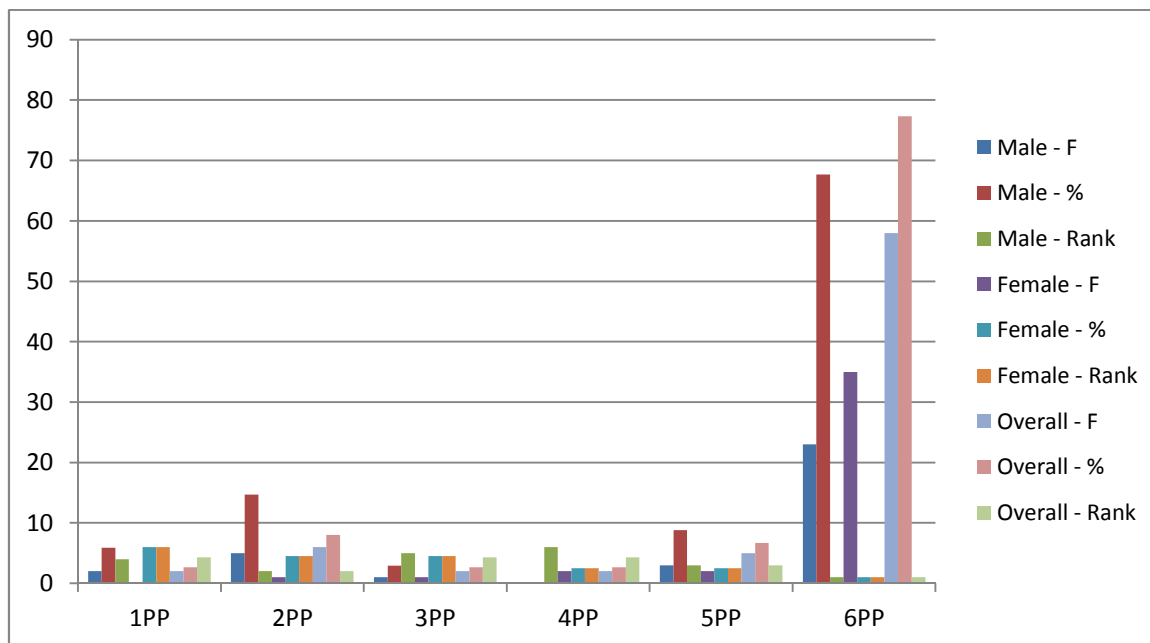


Figure 12. Overall Importance of Project and Presentation

3.2 Part II – Target Needs

As for the subjects/topics for study, Advertising ranked first among the males, and Public Speaking for the females. But for the overall average result, the following topics ranked first: Telephone/mobile phone conversation, Public speaking, and Technical writing. Next to these, the following ranking sequence came out: Technology in language learning, Advertising, Research writing, Writing a speech, Journal writing, Scientific writing, interviewing, Using the library resources, Conducting a meeting, Doing oral presentations, journalism, Business correspondence, Resume/curriculum vitae, and Dynamics of a small group discussion.

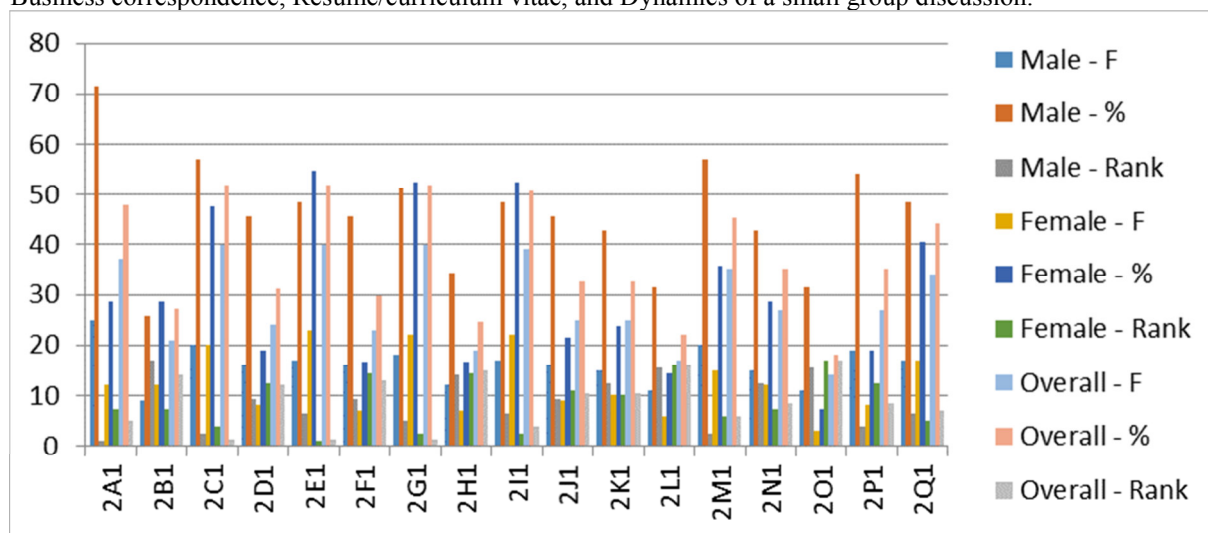


Figure 13. Overall Average Result of Subjects/Topics for Study

As regards language functions that students would like to be trained, Greeting a colleague, Giving information, Asking for information, and Giving advice ranked first on the average, followed by the following sequence: Introducing yourself, Giving orders, Making suggestion, Making an offer, Asking for help and advice, Asking for clarification, Explaining rules, Introducing a colleague, Dealing with a complaint, Describing a piece of equipment or machinery, Giving instructions, Interrupting, Apologizing, Congratulating, Explaining where something is, Explaining process or procedure, Inviting someone to do something, Putting forward a formal proposal.

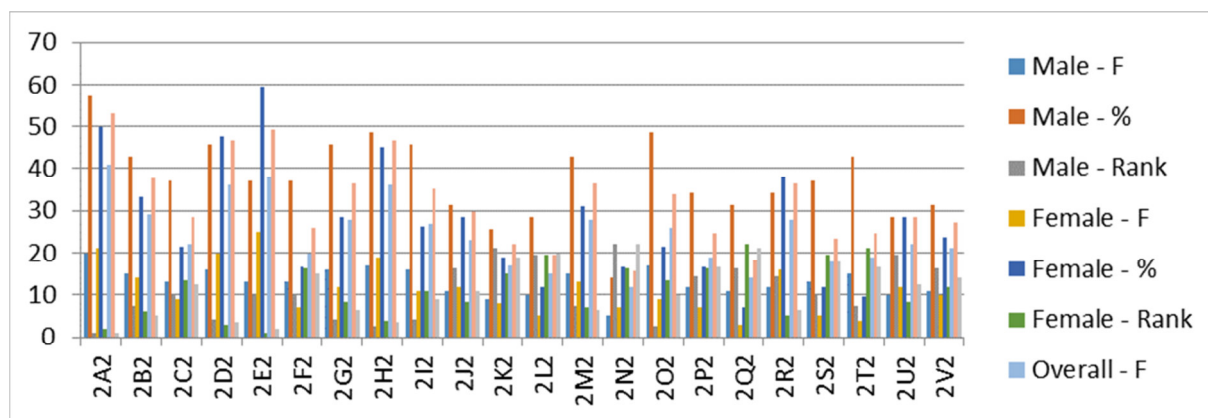


Figure 14. Overall Average Result of Language Functions for Training

As regards what they would like to improve under the language components, the ranking results are as follows: under reading--Reading quickly for general understanding topped the list for reading, Summarizing a passage or selection, Reading in detail and understanding the whole text, Reading facts and explaining it to others, Using graphic organizers, Finding out supporting details, Unlocking the meaning of unfamiliar words, Getting meaning through headings or titles, Translating ideas using other words, Comprehending a wide variety of conceptual and symbolic language, Understanding function and content words, Identifying the main idea of a paragraph, Distinguishing a fact from opinion, Paraphrasing relevant or specific ideas, Inferring unstated ideas of the author, Understanding references to longer subjects, Interpreting instructions and rubrics, Identifying the author's purpose and tone, Identifying and understanding literary devices, Comprehending high frequency idiomatic expressions.

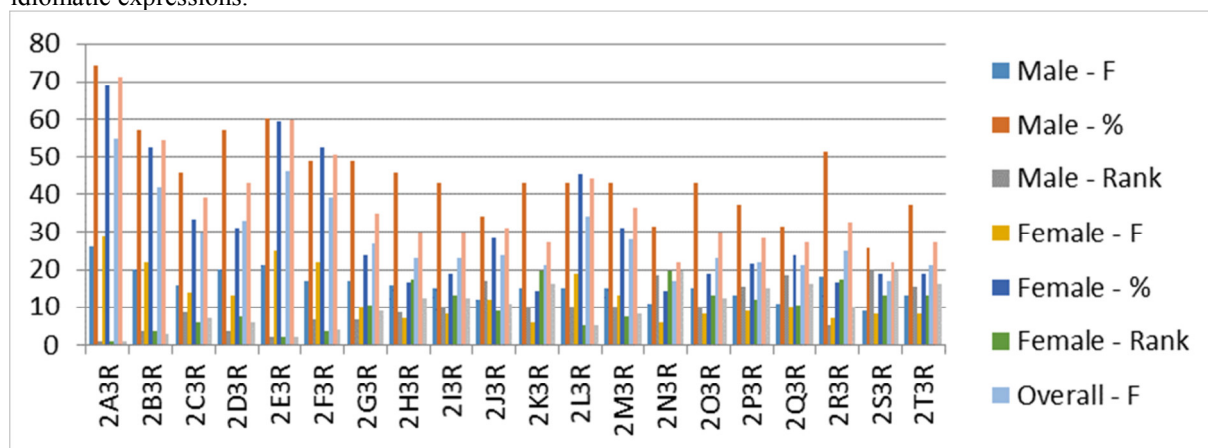


Figure 15. Overall Ranking of Reading Learning Outcomes for Improvement

Under writing, the following ranking of what they would like to improve came out: Writing grammatically correct sentences for writing, Writing a summary, Writing a topic sentence, Writing a thesis statement, Writing a problem and solution essay, Writing following the process approach, Writing a causes and effects essay, Writing essays using the correct conventions, Writing a divide and classify essay, Writing a job application letter, Writing a process essay, Writing a paraphrase, Writing supporting details, Writing an argumentative essay, Writing using techniques for a concluding paragraph, Writing a narrative essay, Writing paragraphs with unity, coherence, and emphasis, Writing a divide and classify essay, Writing a job application letter, Writing using techniques for an introductory paragraph, Writing a comparison and contrast essay, Writing a descriptive essay.

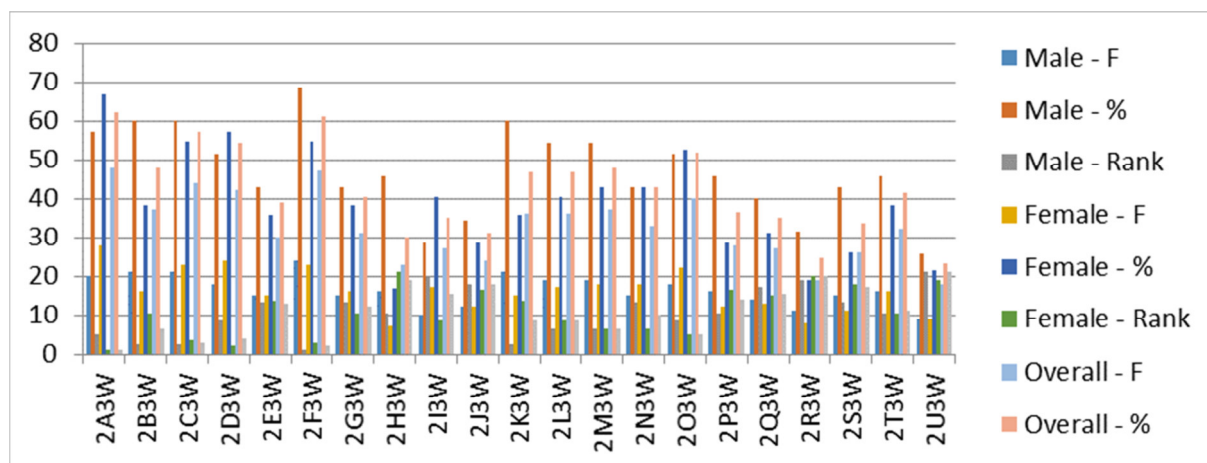


Figure 16. Overall Ranking of Writing Learning Outcomes for Improvement

Under speaking, the following ranking resulted: Speaking using basic stress, Asking questions, Speaking with correct intonation, Organizing a speech, Speaking using appropriate signal/transition words, Expressing ideas, opinions and plans, Speaking for accuracy and intelligibility, Using high frequency words about common and familiar topics, Describing and interpreting graphs and charts, Responding appropriately to questions, Doing oral description.

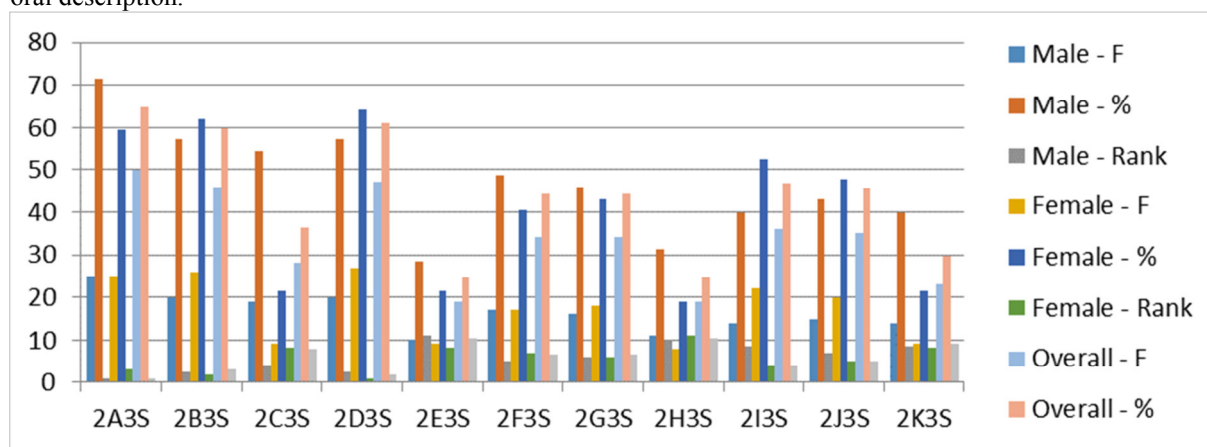


Figure 17. Overall Ranking of Speaking Learning Outcomes for Improvement

For Listening, Taking notes for ideas ranked first, followed by the following: Understanding technical terminologies, Predicting speaker's message and meaning, Understanding idioms, Summarizing a portion or the whole of a talk, lecture or conversation, Paraphrasing a portion or the whole of a talk, lecture or conversation, Understanding colloquial expressions, Evaluating information to identify the purpose/s of the speaker, Discriminating between facts and opinions, Determining literal and implied meaning of messages and draw logical conclusions, Extracting details, opinions or arguments, Discriminating between emotional and logical ideas, Evaluating information to identify assumptions and motives of the speaker, Evaluating information to identify a bias or biases of the speaker, Identifying the meaning of unfamiliar words, Identifying transition words that assist in comprehension of ideas.

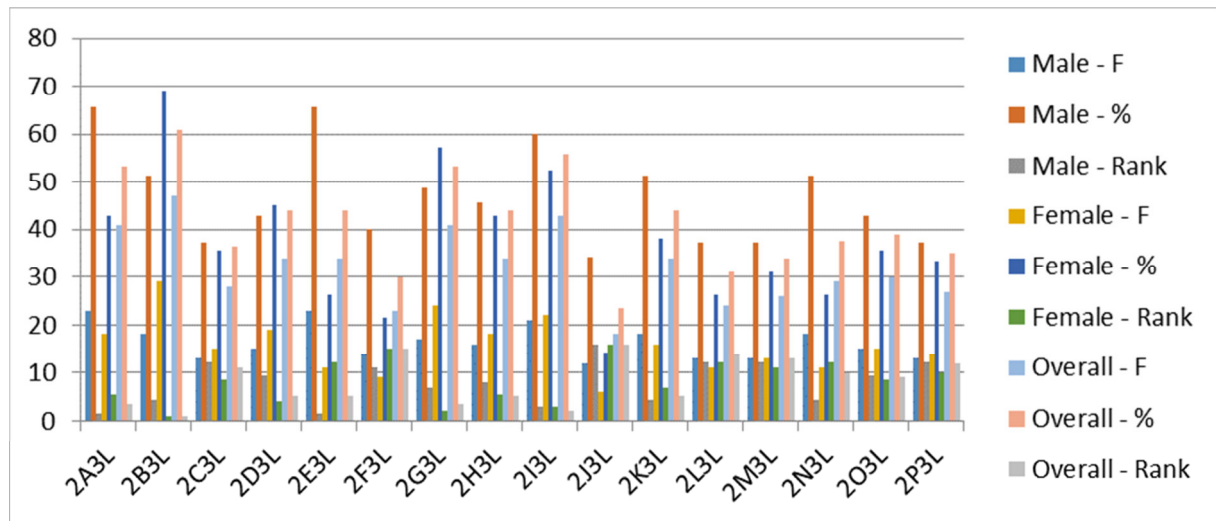


Figure 18. Overall Ranking of Listening Learning Outcomes for Improvement

For grammar, the results are as follows: Language of prepositions for time phrases, Language using the differences between adjectives, Language using more complex verbs, Language using second conditional, Language using direct/reported speech, and Language using third conditional.

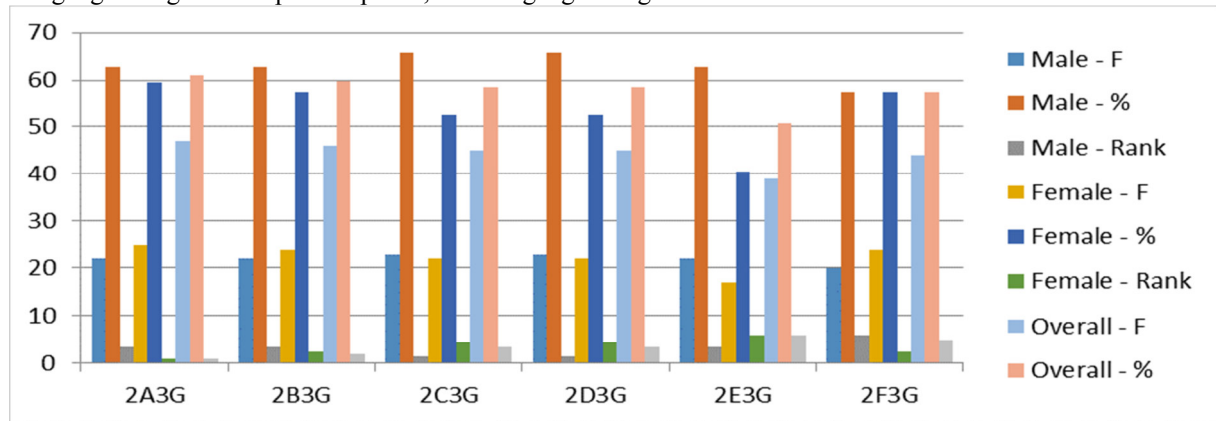


Figure 19. Overall Ranking of Grammar Learning Outcomes for Improvement

And for project and presentation, the following ranking emerged: Locating source materials using a variety of technological and information sources, Using reading strategies to extract relevant information, Writing the chapters of the written report, Summarizing relevant information, Writing an interview guide/schedule, Using citations, Carrying out a survey/interview, Paraphrasing relevant information, Preparing a questionnaire, and Quoting relevant information.

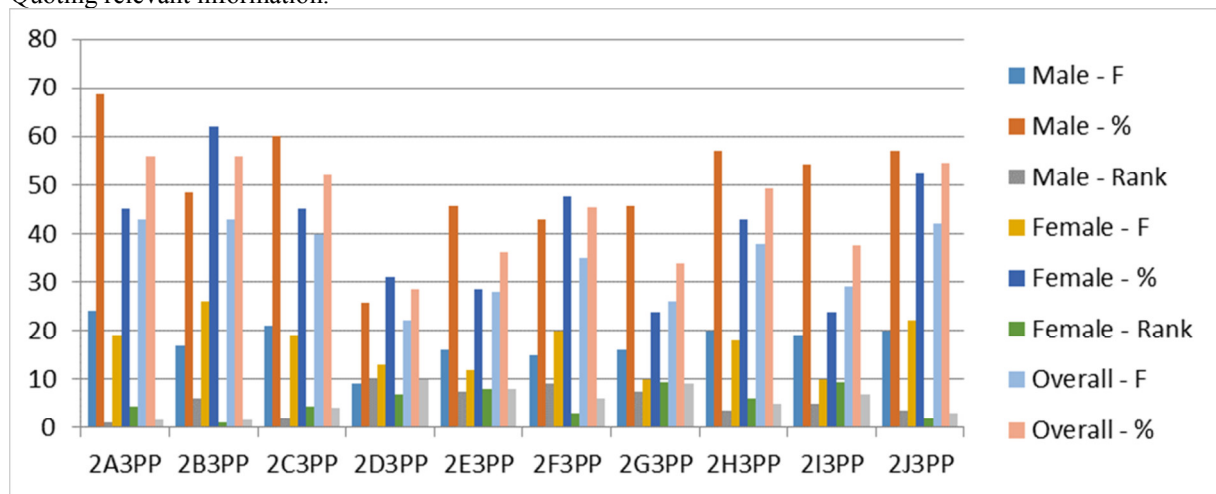


Figure 20. Overall Ranking of Project and Presentation Learning Outcomes for Improvement

4. Conclusion

Based on the results of this study, we then conclude that the inclusion of ESP courses to any curriculum should first take into account a needs analysis survey conducted prior to such action. And said survey should be localized, and not just patterned after results from similar surveys done in other places, the reason being that needs vary from place to place, hence determining the kind of solutions to introduce. Only after those needs have been fully determined can an institution include ESP courses in a curriculum. Surely, needs may have commonalities across countries, but it cannot be denied that unique language needs always emerge in every learning institution, and these can only be addressed effectively based on survey results.

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