STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT IN ENGLISH AT GRADE 10: A STUDY OF SELECTED SCHOOLS IN SRI LANKA

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Abstract

The present study was conducted with the aims of assessing achievement levels of Grade 10 students in English Language and analyzing the differences in their performance in relation to medium of study, gender of students and types of schools. The final sample consisted of 3928 students in Grade 10 classes of the three main types of schools in Sri Lanka. Data were collected using an English Language test which was conducted in all the selected schools on the same date. Student and teacher questionnaires and a questionnaire to collect data on school -related factors were used for data collection in this study.

This study has revealed a low performance in English Language of Grade 10 students and the mean value obtained for the total sample is 39.24. A significant difference could be observed in student achievement levels according to medium of study, gender and the school types. The highest achievement level is shown by the English medium students where as the lowest achievement level was shown by the Tamil medium students. Male students performed better than the female students and students in 1AB schools outperformed the students in 1C and Type 2 schools. These findings stress the need to re-examine the procedures adopted for improving equity and equality in the education system which have been the main focus for the last twenty years.

1.0 Introduction

Competency in English language opens job prospects for people in the national labor market. In addition, the increasing use of English as an international language and the introduction of Information and Communication Technology have also necessitated a high command of English from all the categories of people in the country. The option given to students to study in the English medium in selected subjects from Grade 6 and Science subjects in GCE A/L had also escalated this demand. Teachers who had studied in the mother tongue need to be trained and re-trained to teach English as a subject and teach in English as a medium of instruction. Therefore, developing English language skills has been a central element of the education policy framework in Sri Lanka, especially with a view to link school education with the job market.

AIDE MEMOIRE of the World Bank (2009) reports that the main policy objectives for promoting the learning of English is to: (a) improve the employment prospects of school completers as there is a strong demand for individuals who are fluent in English (b) enhance the performance of students who pursue higher education , as the information explosion makes the acquisition of knowledge in an international language, especially English, necessary and (c) promote social cohesion through English which acts as a link language between the different ethnic communities in the country.

In order to achieve the above mentioned objectives, a number of strategies have been adopted by the Ministry of Education, Sri Lanka. However, with regard to English Language, in particular, the outcomes of new education reforms are not very encouraging. NEC report (2003) revealed that many students educated in Sinhala and Tamil medium are unable to communicate in English and as being disadvantaged in access to highly competitive employment. At the GCE O/L examination, a substantial majority of students appear to struggle with subjects such as English Language, Mathematics and Science (World Bank 2005).

Therefore, it is timely that the effectiveness of the procedure implemented by the Ministry of Education to improve the English Language competence of students should be examined. Therefore, this study will explore student achievement in English Language in Grade 10 as well as the teacher- related factors such as teacher qualifications, experience, training, methods of teaching and resources available for teachers that may have an important bearing on the achievement of students.

2.0. Specific Objectives:

This study was conducted with the purpose of achieving nine objectives. However, the present paper will focus on the following four objectives only.

- Construction and validation of an " Achievement Test" which will be used to assess student achievement in English Language in Grade 10
- To investigate nationally the achievement levels of students in English Language in Grade 10 using the test
- To analyze the differences in the achievement levels in relation to medium of study, gender of students and school type
- To suggest ways and means of improving student achievement levels in English language at Grade 10

3.0 Methodology

The survey design was used for this study.

Pilot and main samples of the study

As illustrated in Table 1 and 2, the pilot sample of the study comprised 54 schools in which 22 1AB schools, 13 1C schools and 19 Type 2 Schools were included from three districts namely Colombo, Kalutara and Hambantota . The total number of grade 11 students involved in the pilot study was 1822.

Table 1- Pilot Sample according to District

District	**No.-of schools**		**No. of Students**	
	Proposed	Actual	Proposed	Actual
Colombo	40	29	1200	1139
Badulla	25	15	500	385
Hambantota	20	10	400	298
Total	85	54	2100	1822

Table 2 – Pilot School Sample according to School Types

District	**Type 1AB**	**Type 1C**	**Type 2**	**Total**
Colombo	14	7	8	29
Badulla	6	5	4	15
Hambantota	2	1	7	10
Total	22	13	19	54

The purpose of the pilot study was to try out the four achievement tests developed for the purpose of the study and develop one test calculating the Discriminant Index and Facility Index by analyzing student responses.

The main sample of the study consisted of 147 schools distributed in all nine provinces and out of those schools a total of 3930 of Grade 10 students had sat for the final test. The distribution of schools according to province and school type is given in Table 3.

Table 3 - School sample used for the main study according to province and school type

Province	1AB	1C	Type 2	Total
Western Province	11	8	20	39
Central Province	7	8	10	25
Southern Province	4	5	7	16
Northern Province	1	1	5	07
Eastern Province	2	7	2	11
North Western Province	2	7	8	17
North Central Province	2	5	9	16
Uva Province	-	2	5	07
Sabaragamuwa Province	2	3	4	09

Instruments used for data collection

Achievement Tests

The main method used for data collection was an achievement test. With the purpose of developing one test for the final study, **four parallel tests** (NELA A, NELA B, NELA C and NELA D) had been used to assess the student performance in English Language in Grade 10. These tests are based on the framework developed by considering the International Benchmarks identified by the research team, criteria used by the Department of Examinations and the competencies developed and implemented by the National Institute of Education for Grade 10.

The main competencies that were assessed were related to **reading** and **writing** and the following competencies were identified as important across grades 6-10.

1. Builds up vocabulary using words appropriately and accurately to convey precise meaning (Competency 4) - uses proper nouns, common nouns, link verbs etc accurately and infers meaning of unfamiliar words
2. Extracts necessary information from various types of texts (Competency 5)
3. Uses English grammar for the purpose of accurate and effective communication (Competency 6) - identifies the agreement between the subject and verb/determiner and noun, grammar of a sentence etc
4. Uses English effectively and innovatively in written communication (Competency 7) -composes short connected narratives; writes descriptions of things, places and people; uses paragraphs appropriately and effectively and pays attention to spelling

The selection of the items for the final test was done on the basis of the discrimination and facility indexes obtained for the items of the pilot tests.

Questionnaires and checklist

In addition to achievement tests, a questionnaire for students, a questionnaire for teachers and a checklist to get the information about the school were used in this study. These instruments were pre-tested with the pilot test to identify the weaknesses and necessary revisions were made before using with the final test.

Administration of Tests, questionnaires and check list

Two training workshops were conducted at two different stages of the study by the research team for the teachers who were responsible for collecting data for the pilot study and the final study. Further, written guidelines related to the conduct of the tests were also distributed among them and detailed explanations were given about these at the workshops. In addition, a workshop was conducted for the Zonal Directors who would be involved in monitoring of the conduct of the final National English Language Achievement test (NELA test). All categories were specifically informed about the importance of maintaining the confidentiality of the test. At the end of the workshops, the date for the administration of the tests was finalized and all the question papers, questionnaires and check lists were distributed among the participants along with the other documents developed to facilitate the process. Postage for returning the packet also was paid to the teachers on the basis of the number of scripts that would be enclosed in each packet.

The participants of the training workshop were instructed to administer the student questionnaire soon after the administration of the test and teachers' questionnaire on the same day to the relevant English teachers. The check list was filled by the same person with the support of the Principal of the school or Sectional Head. At the training workshops, they were instructed to submit correct information about the school as the findings of this study would be used to take important decisions regarding teaching and learning of English Language.

Data analysis

Having completed conference marking of the answer scripts of the pilot study, the marks were transferred to a special form and they were handed over to the Department of Examinations to do the analysis using Classical Test Theory (CTT). It was decided that Facility Index ranging from .3 to .8 and Discrimination values ranging from .2 to .7 would be selected for the final test.

Data analysis in the main study was conducted using the SPSS package. After entering data into the computer, double entry was done for cleaning of data.

Then the analysis of data to identify the overall performance/ achievement level of students and the differences in line with the selected sub skills/ competencies, medium of instruction and type of school were conducted.

The findings of the study will be aligned to each objective of the study and recommendations will be made to improve the existing standards of achievement of students in English Language. Further, it is expected that this study will shed light on developing a feedback mechanism for Grade 10 students who will be sitting for the GCE O/L examination in 2010.

4.0 Findings and discussion

The findings of the study and discussion are presented under four main heading:

(a) Achievement of Grade 10 Students in English Language- Total sample

Distribution of English Language Scores in the Total Sample

According to Figure 1, the frequency polygon of the English Language scores is positively skewed showing somewhat a poor achievement level with regard to the total sample under study. In other words, a large number of students in the total sample had demonstrated a poor performance with regard to English Language.

It was further observed in this study that the distribution curve is not similar to a normal distribution curve. The curve is somewhat bimodal in which achievement levels of students are centered around two points.

Figure 1- Frequency polygon of the total sample

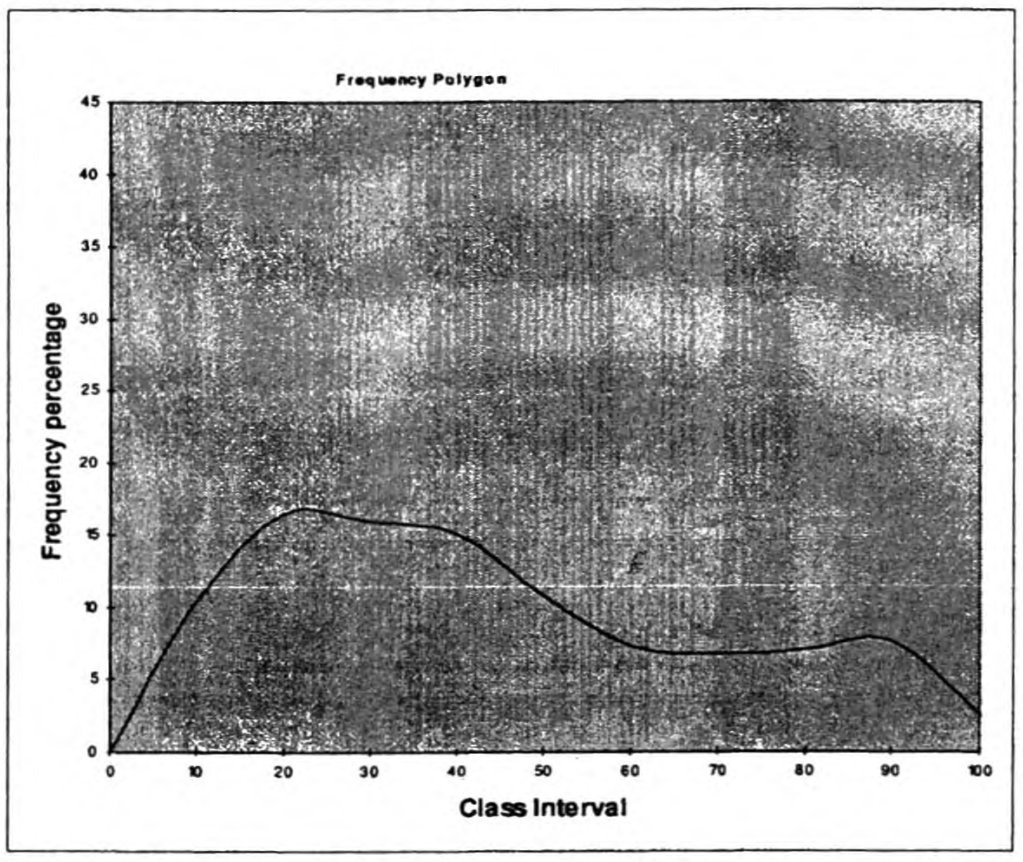


Table 4 illustrates the skewness (.521) and Standard Error of Skewness (.039) of the scores obtained by the total student sample under study. According to the Table 4.1, the distribution of scores is positively skewed which means the scores in English Language trail off towards the lower end. Therefore, this supports the perception that the achievement levels of Grade 10 students in English Language in the selected sample are relatively poor. It can be argued that the new changes introduced to the school system have a limited impact on improving the English Language ability of students.

Table 4 – Skewness value of the Frequency Polygon - total sample

Total Sample	Skewness	Std. Error of Skewness	Study
3928	.521	.039	2010 (OUSL)

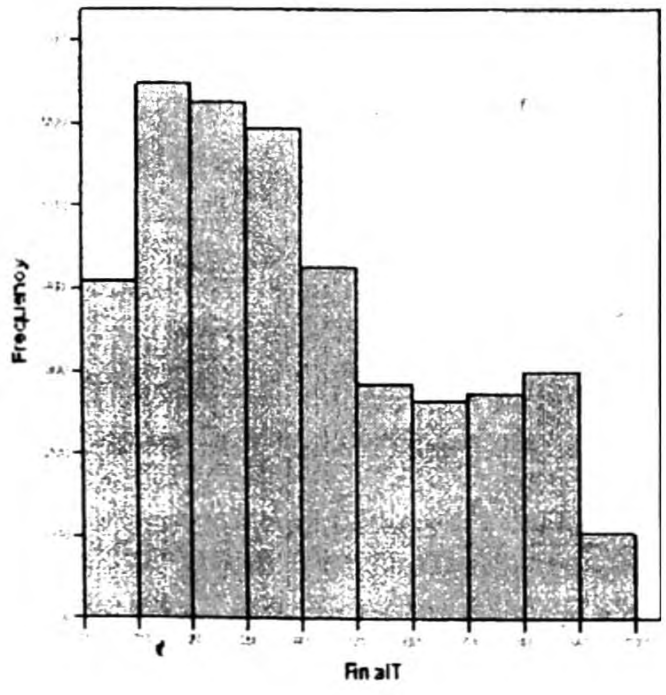
Percentages of students acquiring higher, middle and lower levels of achievements

Table 5 and Figure 2 (Histogram) illustrate the distribution of scores of the total sample in English Language.

Table 5 - Frequency Distribution of Scores- Total sample

Class Interval	Frequency	Percentage
90-100	104	2.1
80-89	300	7.6
70-79	274	7.0
60-69	264	6.7
50-59	284	7.2
40-49	425	10.8
30-39	593	15.1
20-29	626	15.9
10-19	648	16.3
0-9	410	10.4

Figure 2 - Histogram of the total sample



The highest percentage (16.3%) can be seen within the class interval of 10-19. The lowest percentage (2.1%) could be observed in the class interval 90-100. A considerable number of students in the total sample (47%) have scored between 10-39. Further, the percentage (42.6%) of students scoring lower level achievement (0-29) is higher than the percentage of students scoring middle level of achievement (30- 59).

It was surprising to find that a considerable percentage of students in the total sample have scored between 10-29 (32%) and 0-9 (10.4%), showing a very poor achievement level. Only 2.1 % students were in the highest achievement level (90- 100) and 7.6 % were in the second highest achievement level (80-89). These differences may have occurred due to the heterogeneous nature of the student sample.

Mean Value and percentages of students above and below mean values

As illustrated in Table 6, the mean value obtained for the total sample is 39.24 and Std. Deviation is 25.396. Further, the Standard Error of the calculation was low (.405). Therefore, it can be concluded that the achievement level of English Language of the selected students is very low and there is a high variation among the marks of the total student sample.

Table 6 - Mean Value, Std. Deviation and Std. Error of English Language Scores - Total Sample

Year Subject and Grade	Mean Value	Std Deviation	Std. Error
2010 English Grade 10 (OUSL)	39.24	25.396	.405

According to the Figure 2, the percentage of students (53%) scoring below the mean value is higher than the percentage of students scoring above the mean value (47%).

(b) Differences in achievement levels according to Medium of study

Differences in the distribution of English Language Scores according to Medium of Study

The frequency polygon in Figure 3 is negatively skewed showing a high achievement level by Grade 10 students whose medium of study is English. The frequency polygons of students whose medium was the Mother Tongue (Sinhala and Tamil) are positively skewed indicating lower performance levels. It is not a surprise to find that the achievement levels of grade 10 students studying in the English medium are higher than those who are studying in Sinhala and Tamil

media. However, it is surprising to find that there is a substantial difference between the Sinhala medium and Tamil medium students in the achievement levels of English Language.

Figure 3 - Frequency Polygons of English Language scores- according to medium of study

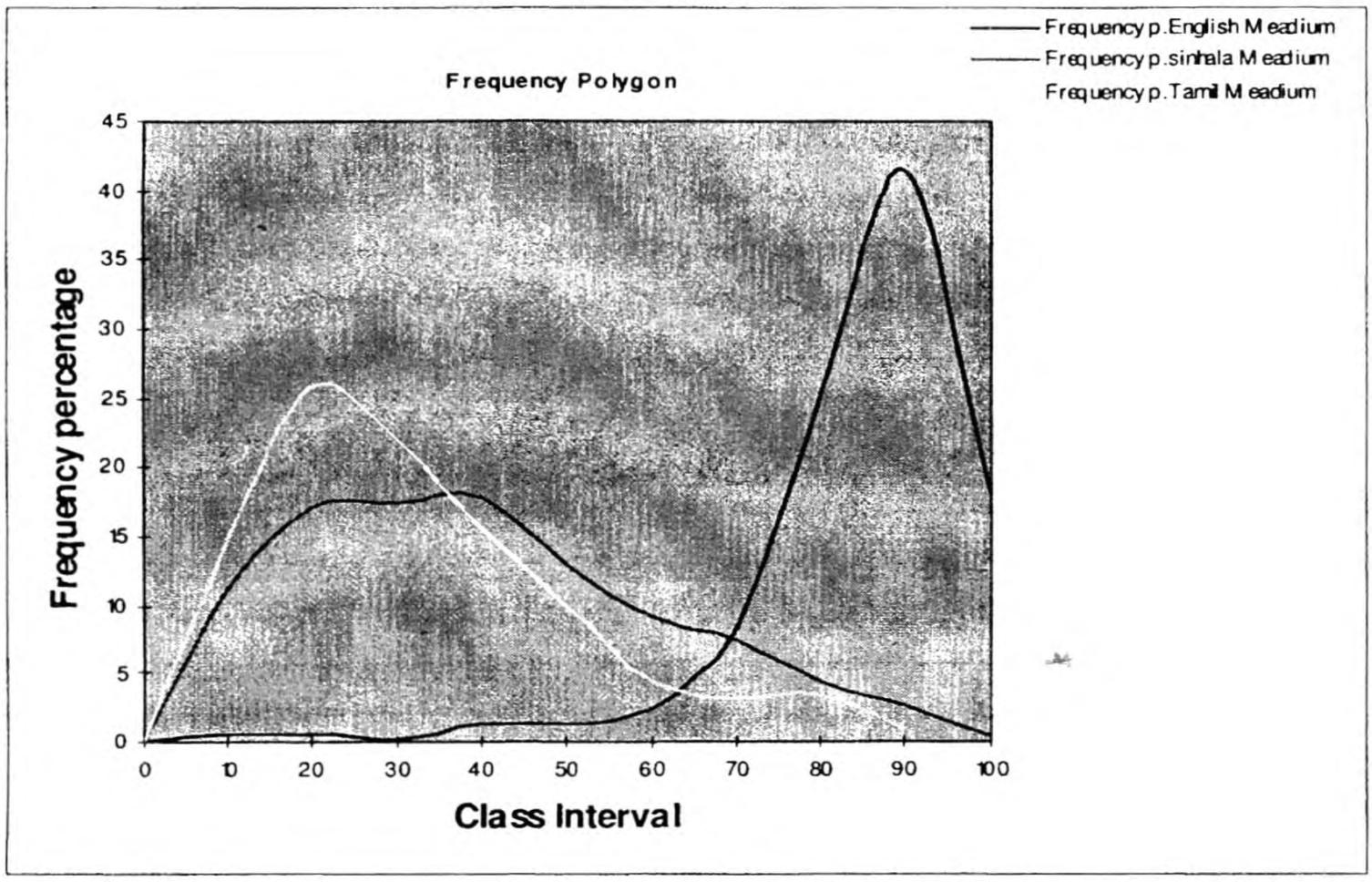


Table 7 illustrates the skewness values and Standard Error of Skewness of the scores of Grade 10 students in English Language according to medium of study. According to the table, the distribution of scores of English medium students is negatively skewed which means their scores are trailing off towards the higher end. However, the skewness values and Std. Error of Skewness of the scores of Sinhala and Tamil medium students are in the opposite direction. Their scores are trailing off towards the lower end.

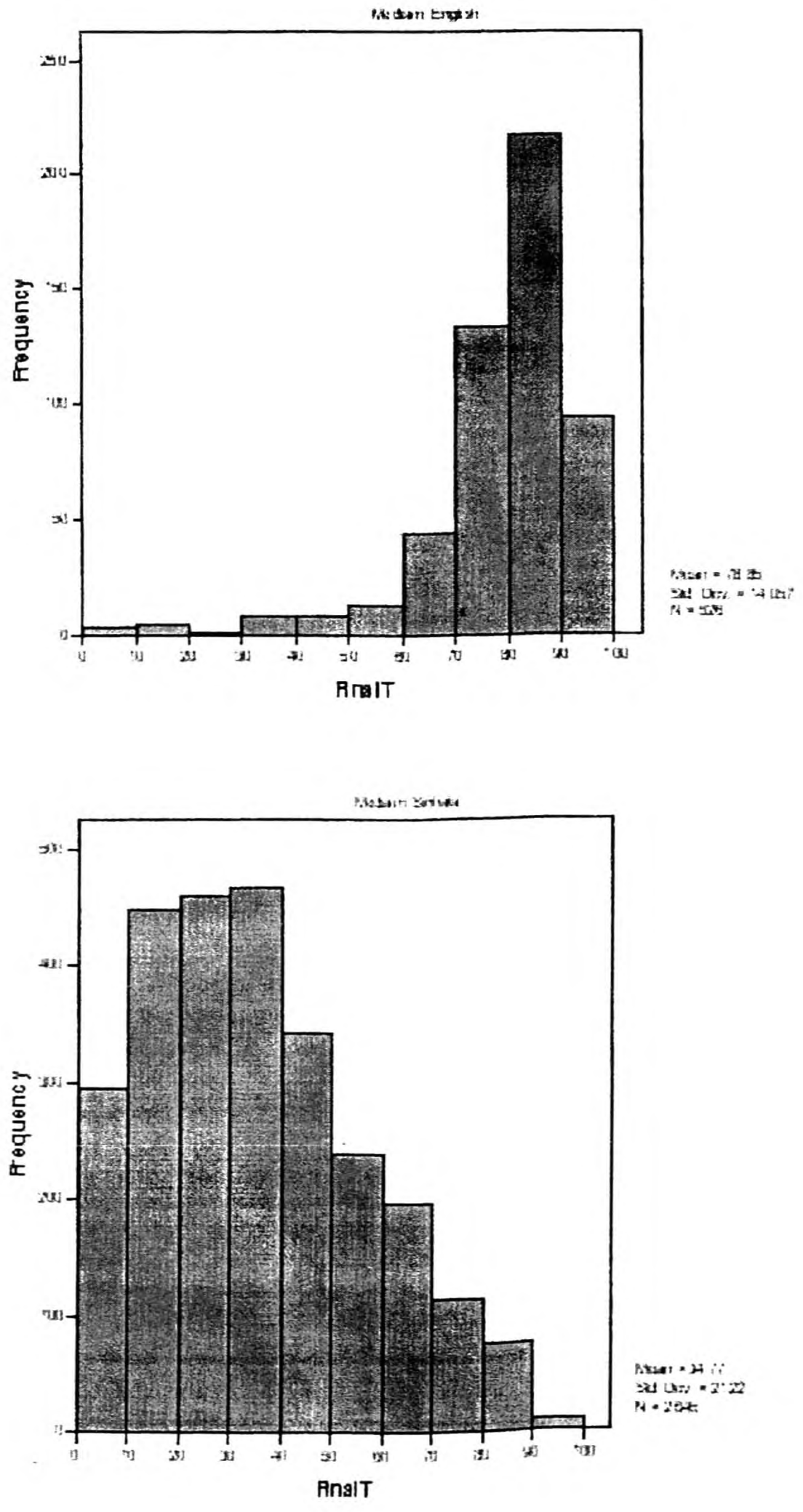
Table 7– Skewness values and Std. Errors of Skewness of English Language According to Medium of study

Medium of study	Skewness	Std. Error of Skewness
English	-2.297	.613
Sinhala	.542	.413
Tamil	1.011	.665

It could be further observed that the shapes of the distribution curves are not similar to a normal distribution curve in all three media. However, the three curves are showing uni-modal forms in which achievement levels of students are centering around one main point. It could be further observed that the distribution of marks of the Sinhala medium is the closest to, though not exactly, a normal distribution. The reason might be that the Sinhala medium students are strongly represented in the sample of study.

Differences in students acquiring higher, middle and lower levels of achievements

Figure 4 Histograms



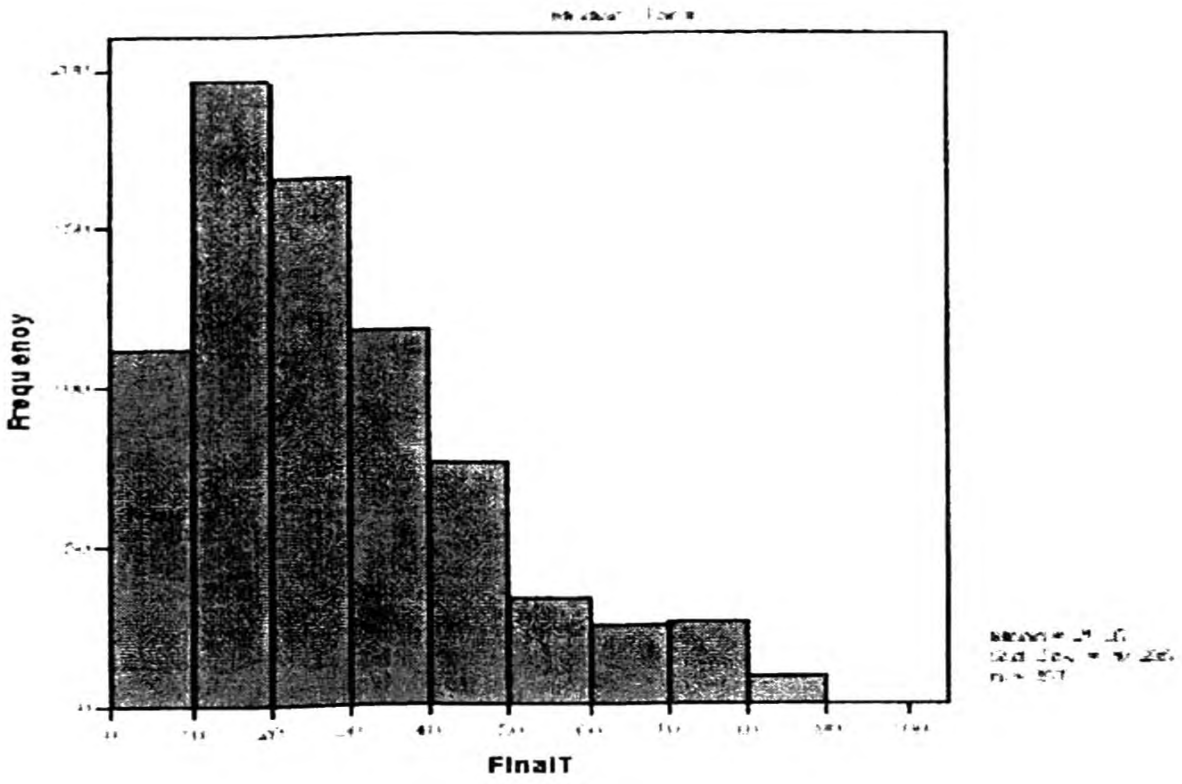


Table 8 Frequency Distribution of scores according to medium of study

Class intervals	English	Sinhala	Tamil
90-100	94(17.9)	10 (.4)	--
80-89	217(41.3)	75(2.8)	8(1.1)
70-79	134(25.5)	114(4.3)	24(3.4)
60-69	44(8.4)	196(7.4)	26(3.2)
50-59	13(2.5)	238(9.0)	33(4.4)
40-49	8(1.5)	341(12.9)	76(10.0)
30-39	8(1.5)	468(17.7)	117(15.5)
20-29	1(.2)	460(17.4)	165(21.8)
10-19	4(.8)	448(16.9)	196(25.9)
0-9	3(.6)	295(11.2)	112(14.8)

The Histograms (4) and frequency distribution (Table 8) illustrate the distribution of scores in English Language of the Grade 10 students according to their medium of study. In the English medium sample, the highest level (90-100) of achievement is shown by 17.9% of students where as in the Sinhala medium sample, the equivalent percentage is only .4%. None of the students in the Tamil medium sample have reached the highest level. On the contrary, it is surprising to find that there are nearly 3% of students in the English medium sample who have scored between 0-39 and 0.6 % scoring between 0-9. This percentage is nearly 63% in the Sinhala medium sample and 77% in the Tamil medium sample. In the present study, 13% of English medium sample, 29% of the Sinhala medium sample and 17% of the Tamil medium sample have shown a middle level achievement (40- 69) . It is noteworthy that in the score levels above the mean,

the percentages increase progressively from English to Sinhala and then to Tamil while below the mean the converse happens except in the 10-19 range.

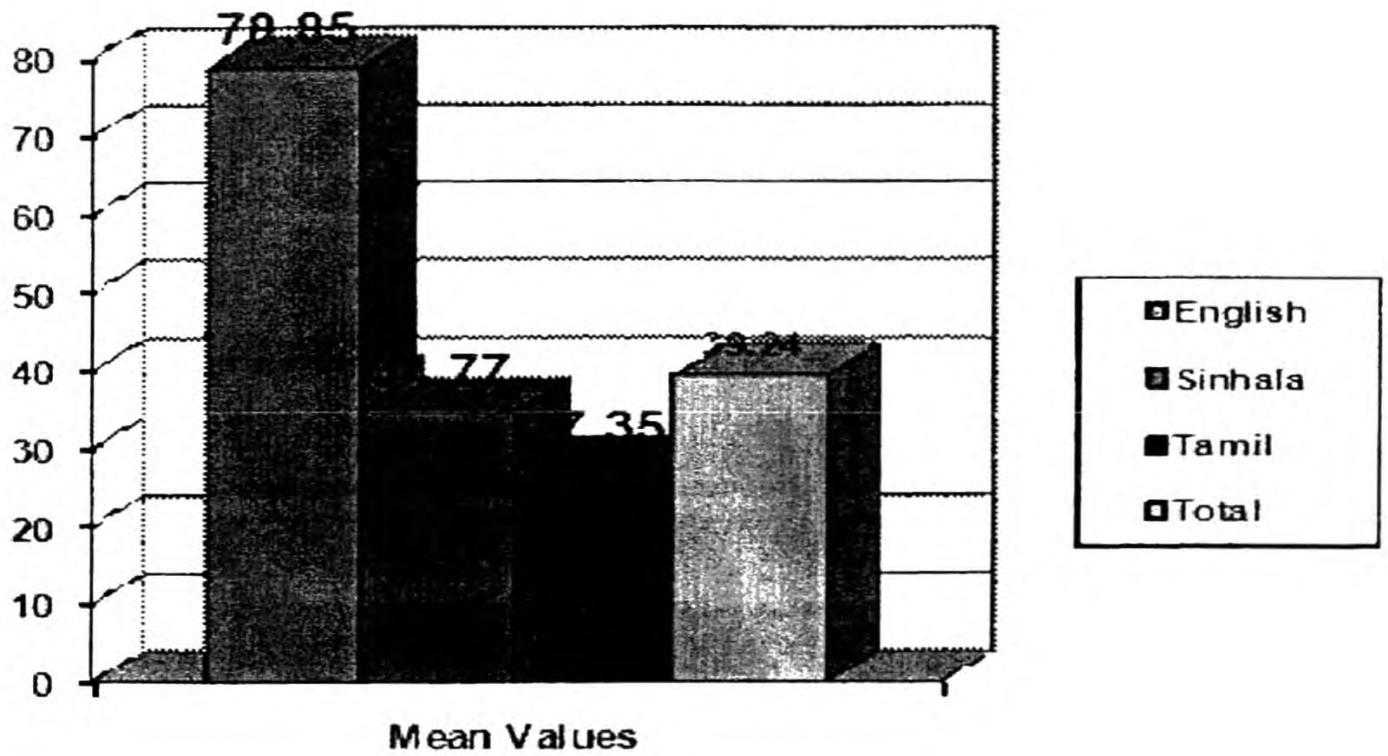
Differences in the mean values of scores according to the medium of study

Table 9 and Figure 5 show the mean values of scores according to the medium of study and in comparison with the total sample. The mean value obtained for the English medium (78.85) sample is higher than the other two samples (Sinhala 34.77, Tamil 27.35) and it is even two times higher than the mean value obtained for the total sample (39.24). On the contrary, the mean value of the Sinhala medium student sample is close to the mean value of the total sample whereas the mean value of the Tamil medium sample is lower than the mean value of the Sinhala medium sample. This might be due to the large number of Sinhala medium students represented in the total student sample.

Table 9 – Mean values, Std. Deviations and Std. Errors according to medium of study

Medium of Study	N	Mean Value	SD	Std. Error
English	526	78.85	14.057	.613
Sinhala	2645	34.77	21.22	.413
Tamil	757	27.35	18.295	.665
Total sample	3928	39.24	25.396	.405

Figure 5. - Mean values of the total sample compared with mean values according to medium



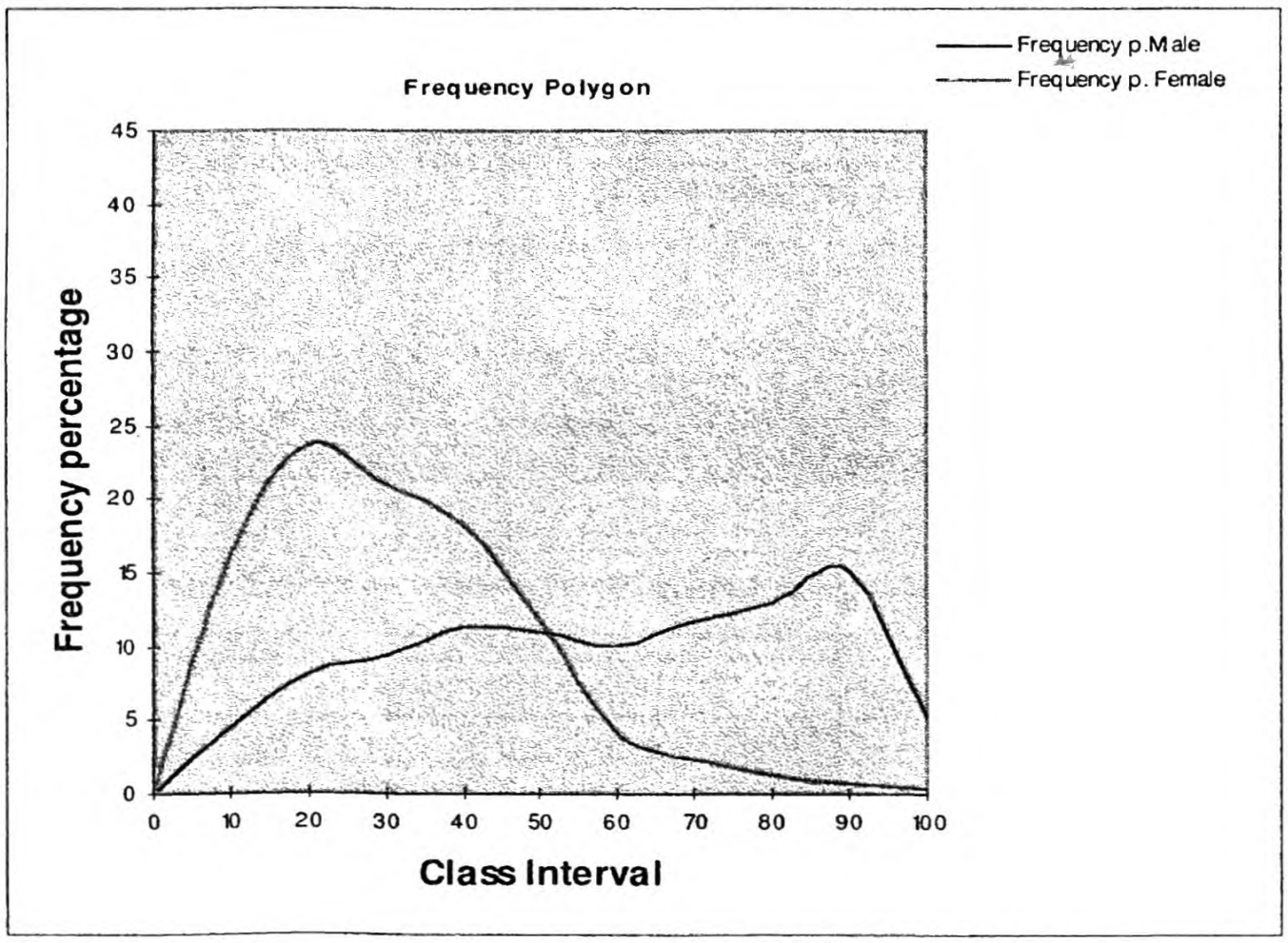
Standard deviations of the three samples and the total sample illustrate the deviation of marks from the mean values. As shown in the Table 9, the lowest standard deviation is found in the English Medium sample and the highest is in the total sample. This supports the idea that there is a high variation among the students in the total sample with regard to their achievement in English and the variation is less within each medium.

The analysis of the mean differences (ANOVA) also shows that there is a significant difference between the mean values obtained for the English, Sinhala and Tamil medium samples (p value .000 in Table 9).

(c) Differences in the achievement levels of students according to gender

Differences in the distribution of English Language Scores according to gender

Figure 6. Frequency polygons of male and female students



According to Figure 6 , the frequency polygon is negatively skewed showing a high achievement level in male students. On the contrary, the frequency polygon of female students is positively skewed showing a low performance level. This is somewhat different from the norm where girls outperformed boys in a large number of the Sri Lankan studies which looked at the performance of some other subjects.

Table 10 illustrates the skewness and Std. Error of Skewness of the scores of Grade 10 students in English Language according to gender. According to the Table, the distributions of scores of both male and female students are positively skewed which means their scores are trailing off towards the higher end. However, the skewness values and STd. Error of Skewness of the scores of Sinhala and Tamil medium students are in the opposite direction (Table 4.8).

Table 10 – Skewness values and Std. Errors of Skewness of English Language according to Gender

Gender	Skewness	Std. Error of Skewness
Male	.427	.059
Female	.583	.052

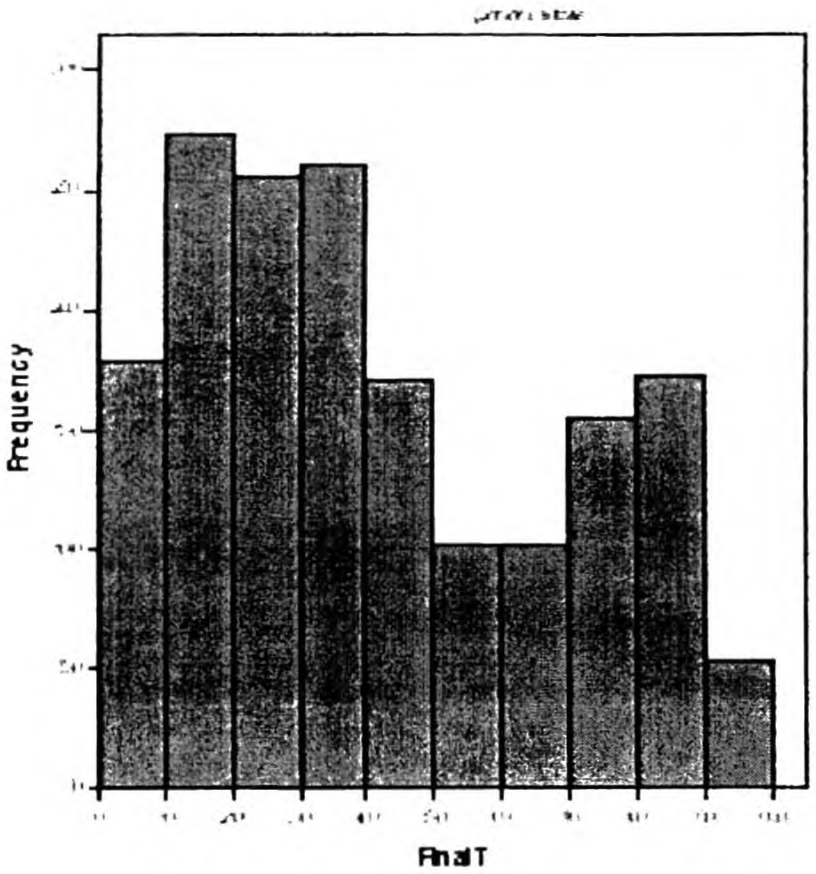
It could be further observed that the shapes of the distribution curves are not similar to a normal distribution curve in the scores obtained by both categories. However, the two curves are somewhat uni-modal in which achievement levels of students center around one main point.

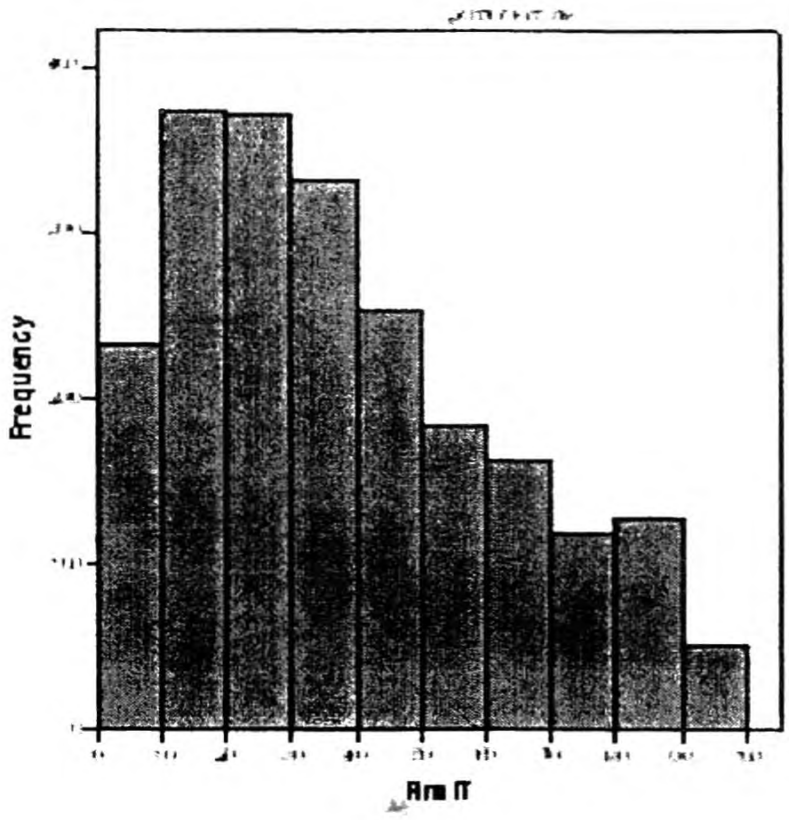
Differences in percentages of students acquiring higher, middle and lower levels of achievement levels

Table 11 Frequency Distribution of Scores in English Language according to gender

Class intervals	Male	Female
90-100	53(3.1)	51(2.3)
80-89	172(10.0)	128(5.8)
70-79	155(9.0)	119(5.4)
60-69	101(5.9)	163(7.4)
50-59	101(5.9)	183(8.3)
40-49	171(9.9)	254(11.5)
30-39	261(15.2)	332(15.0)
20-29	255(14.8)	371(16.8)
10-19	274(15.9)	374(16.9)
0-9	178(10.3)	232(10.5)

Figures 7 and 8- Histograms of marks of male and female students





The Histograms (7 & 8) and frequency distributions (Table 11) illustrate the distribution of scores in English Language of the Grade 10 students according to their gender. In the male sample, the highest level (90-100) of achievement is shown by 3.1% whereas in the female sample, it is 2.3%. However, it could be observed that there are nearly 56% of students in the male sample and 59% of the female sample who have scored less than the mean value of the total sample (39.24). Further, in the present study, 40% of male sample and 37% of the female sample have shown a middle level achievement. These findings support the perception that there is a difference between achievement levels of male and female students of Grade 10 English Language.

Differences in the mean values of scores according to gender

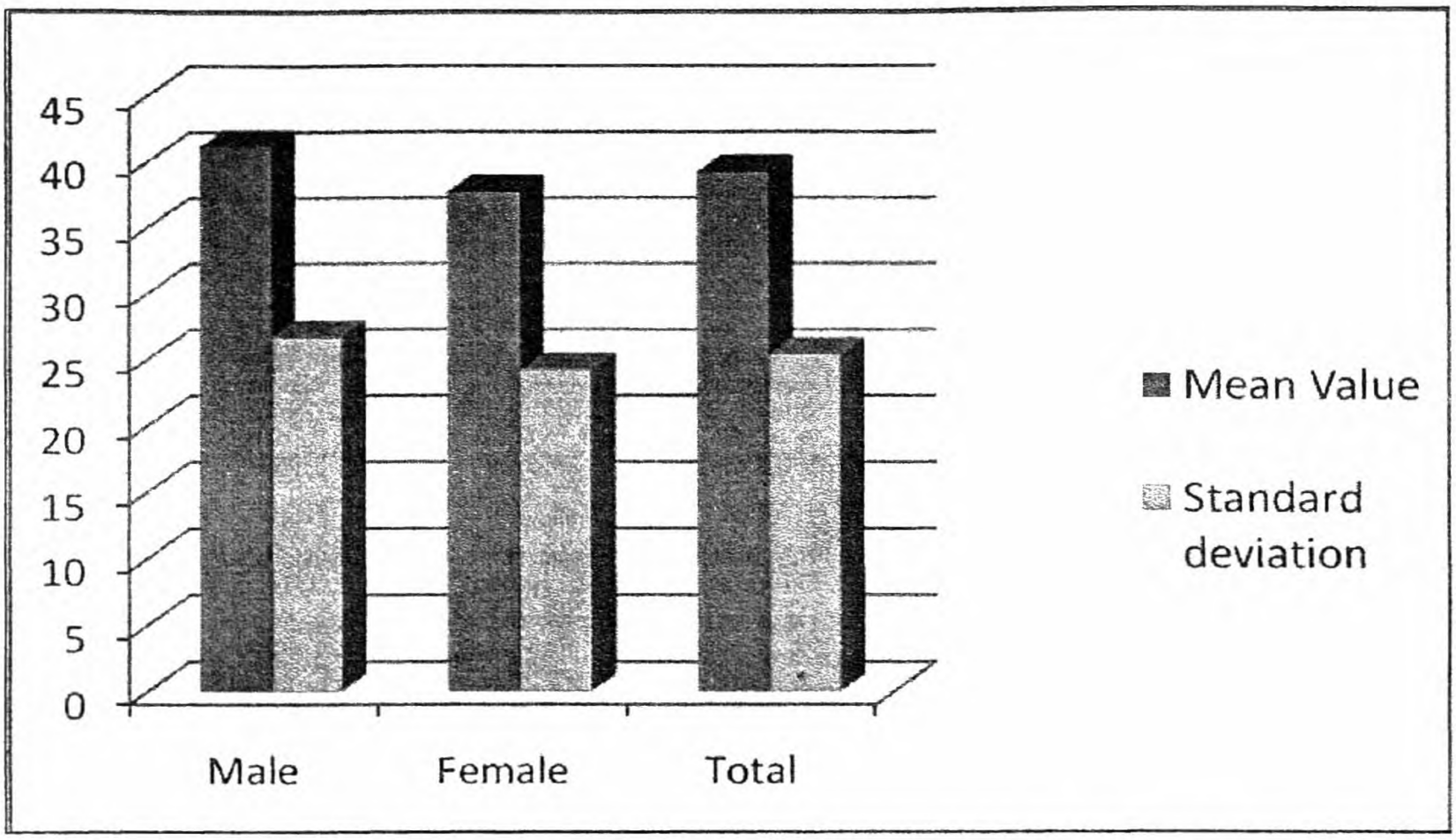
Table 12 and Figure 9 show the mean values of scores according to male and female samples and in comparison with the total sample. Standard deviations of the two samples and the total sample illustrate the deviation of marks from the mean values.

The mean value obtained for the male sample (41.17) is higher than the female samples (37.74) and it is even higher than the mean value obtained for the total sample (39.24). As shown in the Table, the lowest standard deviation is found in the female sample and the highest is in the male sample. It means that the variation of marks among male students is higher than the variation of marks among the female students. Further, the Std Deviation of the female student sample is lower than the Std. Deviation of the total sample (39.24).

Table 12 – Mean values and standard deviations according to gender

Gender	N	Mean Value	Standard deviation
Male	1721	41.17	26.72
Female	2207	37.74	24.214
Total	3928	39.24	25.396

Figure 9 - Mean values of the total sample compared with mean values of male and female samples



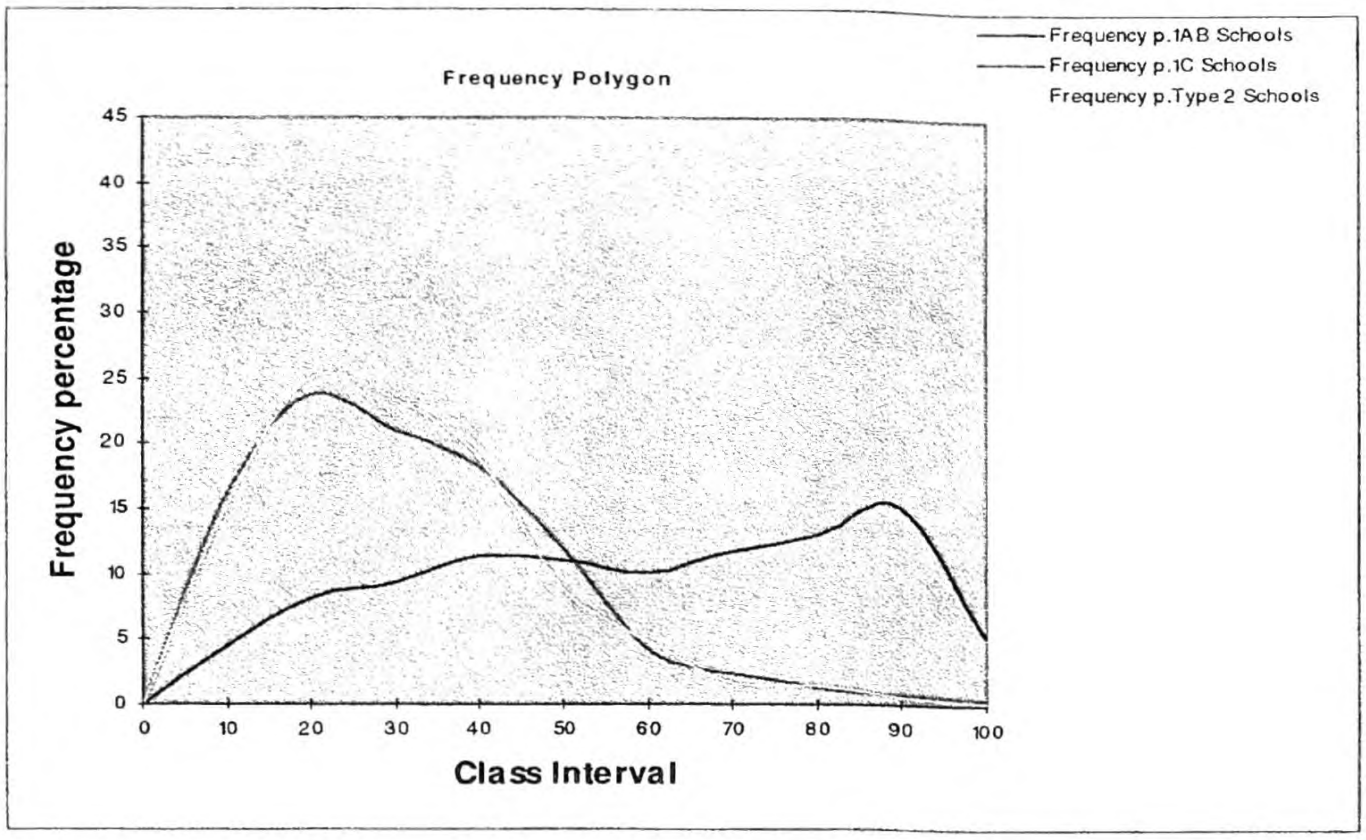
The analysis of the mean differences (ANOVA) confirms that there is a significant difference between the mean values obtained for the male and female samples. Therefore, in this study, male students in Grade 10 performed better with regard to achievement of English Language.

(d) Differences in the achievement levels of students according to school types

The difference in the achievement levels of students according to their school types are analyzed under three sub headings.

Differences in the distribution of English Language scores according to school types

Figure 10. Frequency polygons according to school type



According to Figure 10, the frequency distribution is negatively skewed showing a high achievement level in Grade 10 students studying in 1AB schools. On the contrary, the frequency distributions of students studying in type 1C and type 2 were positively skewed showing a lower performance in English Language. These findings confirm that the achievement levels of students studying in 1AB schools are better than the achievement levels of students studying in type 1C and type 2 schools. However, the frequency distributions of the type 1C and type 2 schools are falling on the same line showing a similar distribution. These results are connected with the medium of study because it is mostly the 1AB schools that conduct classes in the English medium.

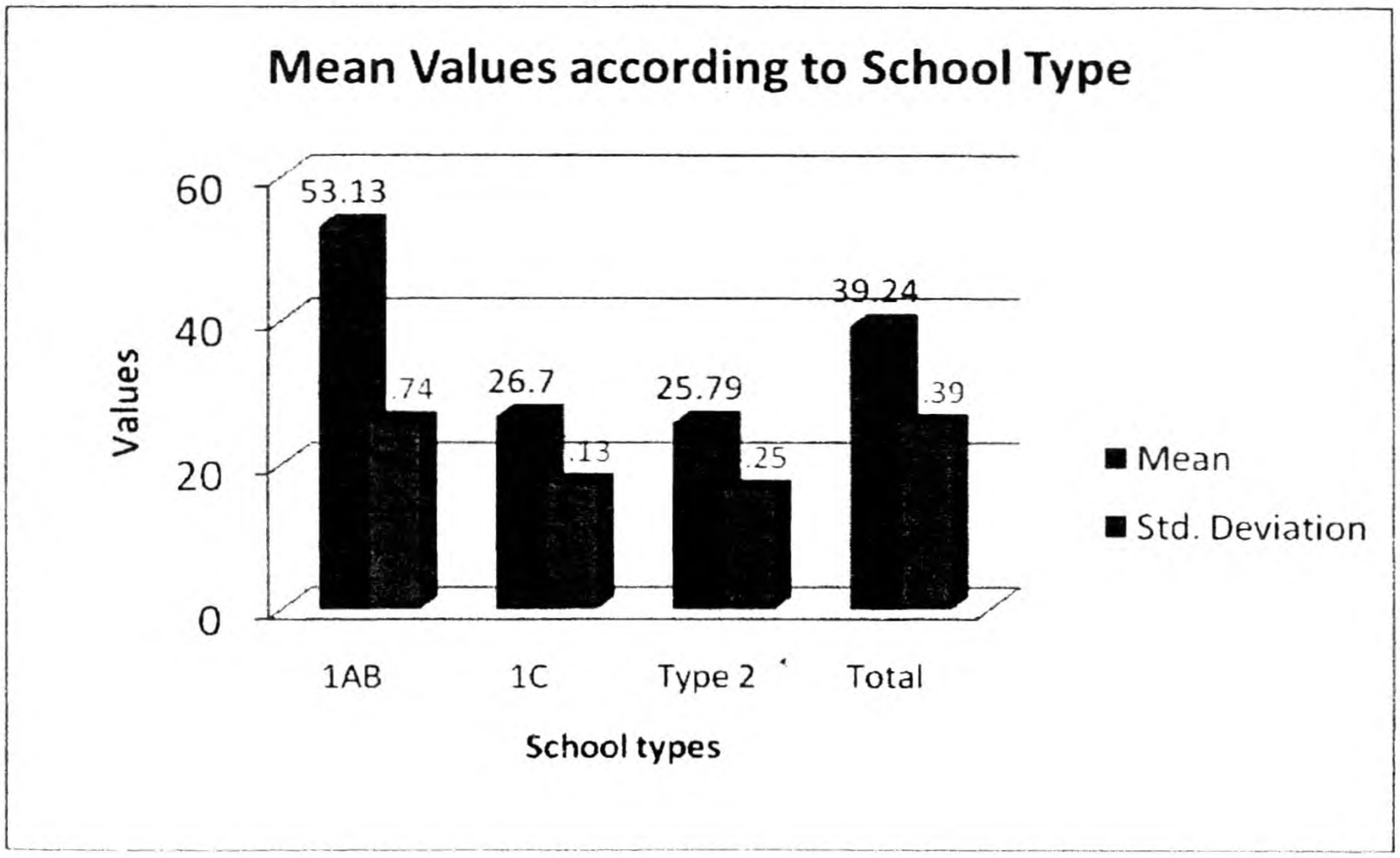
Table 13 – Skewness values and Std. Errors of Skewness of English Language

School type	Sample	Skewness value	Std. Error of Skewness
1AB	1890	-.193	
1C	1154	.915	
Type 2	884	.925	
Total	3928	.405	

It was observed that the mean value obtained for 1AB schools (53.19) is higher than the mean values of the other two school types (1C= 26.70 and Type 2= 25.79) and the mean value obtained for the total sample (39.24). The highest Std. Deviation is also observed from the same sample. This means that there is a high variation among the achievement levels of the students in the IAB schools. Lowest Std. Deviations are observed from type IC and type 2 schools and the reason may be that the representation of these schools is high in the sample.

In relation to type 1AB schools, the percentage of students scoring above the mean value (65%) is higher than the percentage of students scoring below the mean value (33.5%). An opposite trend can be observed in relation to Type 1C and type 2 schools where the percentages of students scoring above the mean value (20.8% and 24.6% respectively) is lower than the percentage of students scoring below the mean value (79% and 82% respectively). This data suggests that there is a considerable difference in student achievement levels of English Language between type 1AB and type 1C schools and also between type 1AB and type 2 schools.

Figure 14. Mean Values according to school types



Analysis of mean difference (ANOVA) also confirm that there is a significant difference (F. 763.393 and p value = .000) between the achievement levels of students studying in type 1AB , 1C and type 2 schools. This reflects the variations which exist among the three types of schools with regard to both physical and human resources.

5.0. Conclusions

The main conclusion of this study is that Grade 10 students studying in the sample of schools have demonstrated a poor achievement level with regard to English Language which is further illustrated by the positively skewed frequency polygon. A considerable number of students in the total sample (47%) have scored between 10 and39. In relation to the total sample, more than half of the students have scored below the mean value. The percentage of students scoring above the mean value is only 47%.

The students who are studying in the English medium have shown the highest mean out of the three media. The analysis of variance supports the above finding that the differences that exist among the three media are statistically significant at 0.01 level.

Male students outperformed the female students as shown by the achievement levels in English Language. However, there are nearly 56% of students in the male sample and 59% of the female sample who have scored less than the mean value of the total sample. Analysis of variance supports the finding that the difference existing between males and females is statistically significant though the difference is negligible.

It could be concluded that the achievement levels of students studying in 1AB schools are higher than the achievement levels of students studying in Type 1C and Type 2 schools. Even though there is a substantial difference between the distribution of scores of Type 1AB and 1C, 2 schools, the frequency distributions of the Type 1C and 2 schools are falling on the same line showing a similar distribution.

6.0 Recommendations

In order to improve their achievement levels the following recommendations are made.

At the **Ministry level** the following procedures can be implemented.

(a) Deployment of teachers should be done according to the regulations approved by the Ministry of Education. Priority should be given to requirements of the schools when transferring English teachers.

(b) Continuous teacher training programmes should be conducted through NIE and different other institutions to upgrade the knowledge and skills of English teachers and participation in those programmes should be made compulsory for teachers.

(c) The difference between Type 1AB schools, 1C and 2 schools should be narrowed down by continuing the Stage II of norm-based unit cost resource allocation according to the needs of the schools.

(d) Students should be encouraged to participate in extra –curricular activities related to English Language that are introduced at Ministry level and rewarding mechanisms should be in-place as a strategy to improve student participation.

It is suggested that the following procedures should be implemented at school level to improve the achievement in English language of Grade 10 students.

(a) The use of English among students should be improved by introducing a variety of activities at school level.

(b) Each school should give prominence to English Language as a subject until the students sit for the O/L examination.

(c) As far as possible, qualified and trained teachers should be allocated to teach English in Grade 9, 10 and 11 as the students are being prepared to sit for GCE O/L examination.

(d) Schools should develop special action research projects for improving creative writing abilities of students with the support of English Teachers and the most effective programmes should be identified and rewarded.

The following recommendations are made for teachers in the school system.

(a) All the English teachers in each school should work collaboratively to improve the achievement levels of their students in English.

(b) English teachers should be encouraged to use new innovative teaching methodologies and technologies in the teaching-learning process.

(c) English teachers should update their knowledge and skills continuously by participating in training programmes.

(d) All English teachers should be equipped with action research skills to conduct intervention programmes aimed at improving English Language abilities of their students.

(e) Special attention should be paid by teachers to teach creative writing abilities to students.

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