

Gender and Schooling as Determinants in the English Language proficiency: A study of Functional and General English Students in Srinagar

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Abstract

English has occupied a unique place in the educational system of the valley. Fluency in English enhances an individual's personality, presentation skill, confidence and eventually his career. In second language learning, socio-psychological factors play a major role in enhancing language learning. The present study focuses on what is considered as the two most important variables: gender and schooling. This paper analyse the relation of gender and schooling with the proficiency of English language in both General English students and Functional English students.

Key Word

Functional English, General English, Proficiency, Gender, Schooling.

Introduction

English, though a foreign language, occupies a unique position in the educational system of India, with the situation in Jammu and Kashmir not being much different from rest of the Indian union. The language serves as the medium of education in private as well as government schools. In the recent past, the focus of teaching English has shifted from teaching of English literature to the teaching of communicative English. It owes to the overwhelming spread and dominance of the theory of communicative language teaching in the world.

General English forms an indispensable part of curriculum at the higher secondary level in Kashmir valley. It is an obligatory subject for students of all disciplines. The syllabus of General English usually is more focused on teaching of various literary genres. Functional English has also been introduced as one of the optional subjects at the higher secondary level. The Functional English curriculum focuses on developing speaking, listening, reading and writing skills in the students so as to make them able to communicate effectively in a wide range of situations. Many socio-cultural factors have a strong bearing on learning

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a second language. These include variables like age, gender, educational institute, educational background, etc., that can help or hinder language learning.

According to Aslam (2009) females and males are observed to employ various strategies in language acquisition. In a similar study, Ehrman and Oxford (1990) who looked at the strategies used by 1200 university students came to this conclusion that gender differences made a profound influence. Kimura (2006, cited in Piasecka, 2010, 146-149) thoroughly discusses the differences between females and males in terms of various abilities. With respect to verbal abilities, girls usually start speaking earlier than boys; they use longer sentences. Their articulation and grammar are more correct. Consequently, they have a richer vocabulary. Moreover, they are better at spelling, reading and tests in which they have to generate words according to a certain rule.

Similarly schooling also plays an important role in enhancing proficiency in English language. Most of the schools in Srinagar city strictly ask their students to use English language in order to maximize their opportunities to learn English language. Lubega (1979) argued that in any school subject, be it mathematics, geography or biology, the competence or knowledge that the learner achieves results not only from the teaching that goes in the classroom but also from extra-school influences. Most of learning is achieved through practice which cannot be provided only in classroom setting. Carrol observed that language proficiency attained by graduate students, also expressed a similar view that, the more exposure to the target language the greater the success of students in proficiency tests.

Given this backdrop the present paper aims to find out the relation of gender and schooling with the proficiency of English language in both General English students and Functional English students in Srinagar.

Methodology

The data was collected from higher secondary institutions of Srinagar city where both Functional English and General English were taught. The sample for the study comprised of a total number of 160 respondents. The distribution of the informants is shown in table 1 as under:

	Male	Female	Total
Functional English	40	40	80
General English	40	40	80

Table 1: Sampling

The sample was divided into 4 groups, i.e.

- 11th Functional English
- 11th General English
- 12th Functional English
- 12th General English

A questionnaire was designed to collect data for the proposed work. The questionnaire consisted of two parts. Part one was designed to elicit personal

information about the student which included items such as their schooling at high school level (govt. private, missionary), economic background, educational qualifications of their parents and so on. The other part was prepared for elicitation of data which was designed to test the student's knowledge of all the four language skills, namely, reading, writing, speaking and listening.

The present work used four separate schedules (one for each skill) and the students were tried out in the field through a pilot study. Based on the results drawn through the pilot study, the questionnaire was later modified and then finalized. The test was administered in two stages. The data was later codified and then quantified. The quantitative data was captured in a software program called Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 14.0 for its final analysis and tabulation.

Analysis and Interpretation

The analysis of the data showed some interesting results with regard to the relationship of gender and schooling with the proficiency in English language. The results are discussed below.

a) Relationship between Gender and Proficiency

Many research works have showed that there are many learner-related factors that influence language learning; even if the same instruction was given to a group of learners the outcome turned out to be quite different and varied. Several scholars in the fields of language education, SLA, and bilingualism have addressed the influence of gender on language learning outcomes. Ehrman and Oxford (1990) and Ellis (1994) concluded their research studies with the claim that females have an advantage over males in language acquisition, both in L1 and L2. The present study aims to check the relationship of gender with proficiency in various skills. The result of the study are tabulated as under:

	Functional English				General English			
	Male		Female		Male		Female	
	Mean	Stddvt	Mean	Stddvt	Mean	Stddvt	Mean	Stddvt
Writing	3.02	.77	3.48	.91	2.88	.82	3.1	.63
Reading	3.25	.93	3.7	.79	3.3	.69	3.38	.59
Listening	2.23	.95	2.48	1.15	2.1	.84	2.36	.93
Speaking	2.4	.98	2.88	1.02	2.15	.77	2.65	.70

Table 2: Mean scores showing difference between male and female respondents in both Functional English and General English streams.

As is clear from above table with regard to difference between males and females in terms of writing, reading, listening and speaking, females have higher mean scores than males. It also shows comparison between Functional English respondents and General English respondents.

The table also depicts that females with Functional English perform better in all skills than females with General English. Similarly males with Functional English shows higher mean scores than males with General English. However, the mean scores are higher in females in both Functional English respondents and General English respondents. In case of Functional English, the mean score in writing ranges from (3.48) in females and (3.02) in males. In reading, the mean score ranges from (3.7) in females and (3.25) in males. In listening, the mean score ranges from (2.48) in females and (2.23) in males. In speaking, the mean score ranges from (2.88) in females and (2.44) in males.

Similarly in case of General English, respondents the mean score in writing ranges from (3.1) in females and (2.88) in males. In reading, the mean score ranges from (3.38) in females and (3.3) in males. In listening, the mean score ranges from (2.36) in females and (2.1) in males. In speaking, the mean score ranges from (2.65) in females and (2.15) in males.

Hence it can be concluded that the overall performance of females is much better than males in both Functional English and General English. Moreover the table also highlights the mean scores of writing, reading, listening and speaking. It is observed that the highest mean score among all the four skills is found to be in reading ranging from (3.7-3.25) followed by writing (3.48-2.88), speaking (2.88-2.15) and listening(2.48-2.1).

Functional English

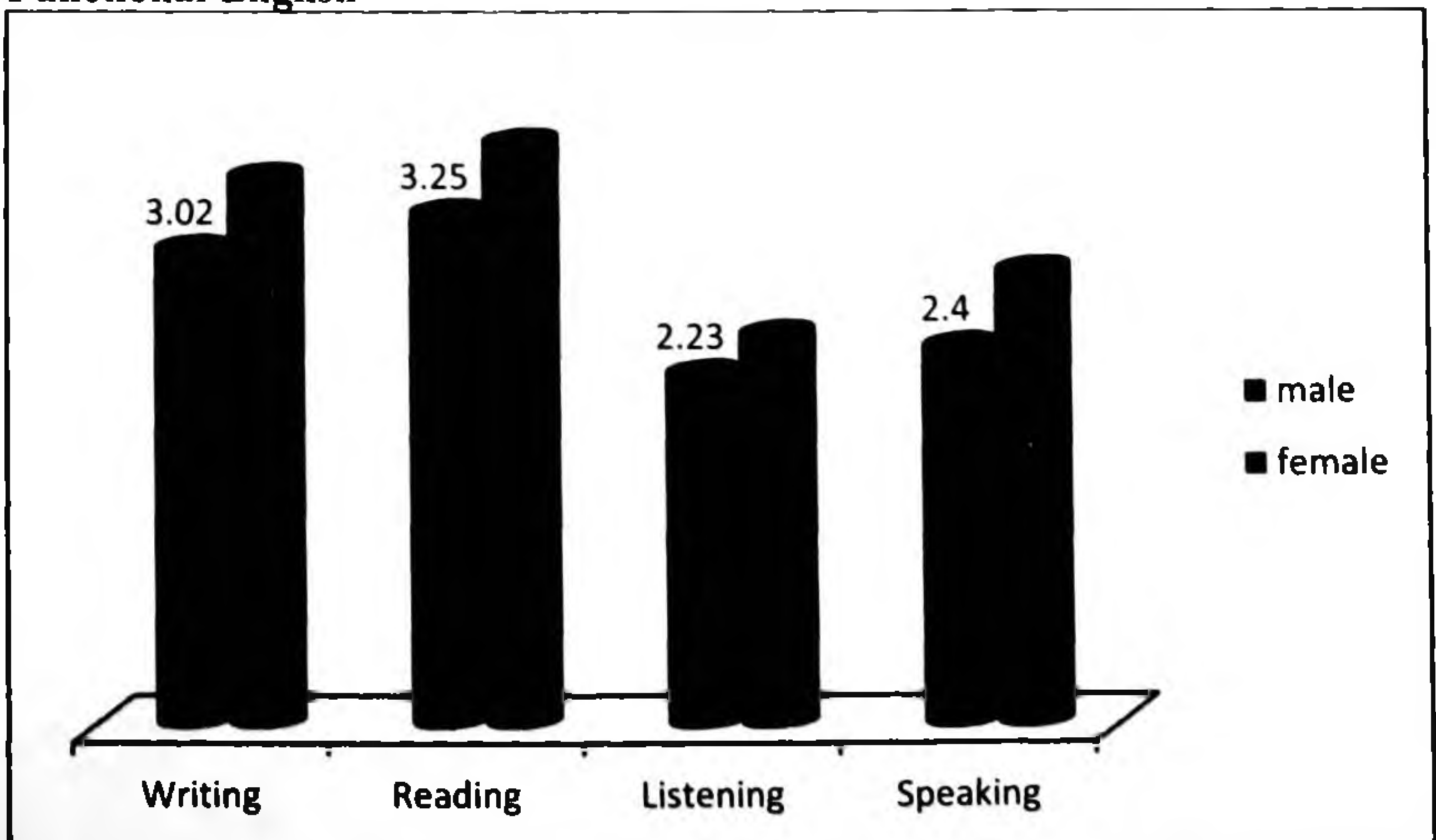


Fig 1(a): Mean scores showing difference between Male and Female respondents in Functional English

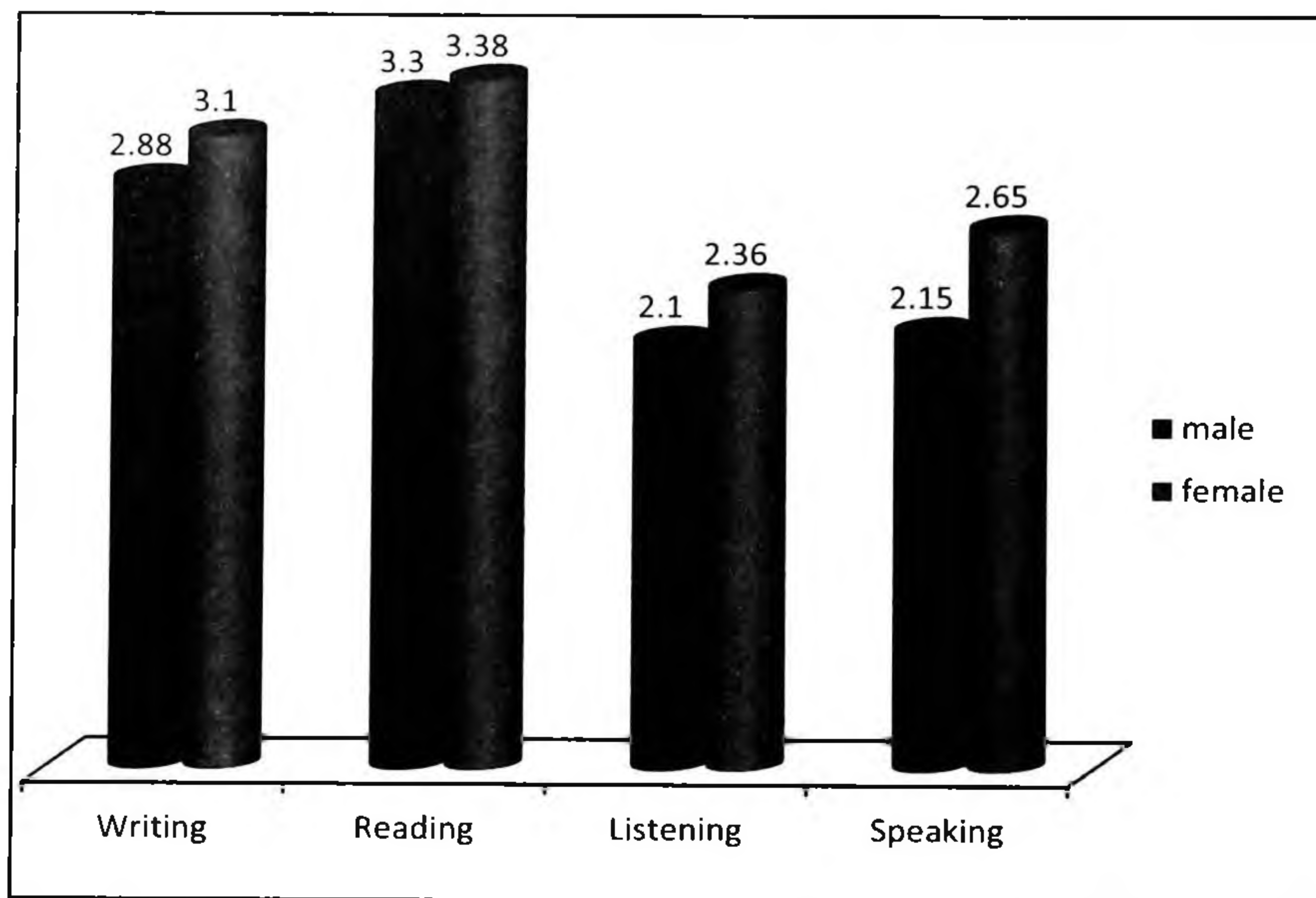
General English

Fig 1(b): Mean scores showing difference between Male and Female respondents in General English

As is evident from graphical representation gender seems to be a significant factor and here females appear to be more proficient in English language than males. It is because of the fact that females are more prestige conscious and have tendency towards the symbols of higher status (Trudgill 1972). In Kashmir also, females appear to lean more towards the prestige norms. The above figures indicate that female respondents both from Functional English and General English have good English language skills than males. However the highest mean scores are in Functional English respondents.

b) Relationship between Schooling and Proficiency

Education in previous schooling matters a lot in terms of English language proficiency. It is assumed that if an educational institute has English language as a medium of instruction then the learner's proficiency in English will be better. The missionary schools and few private institutions in Kashmir insist their students to use English language in their school domain, thereby increasing exposure to English. To check the relationship of schooling with proficiency, respondents for the study were chosen from different school backgrounds. Based on previous schooling, the classification of the sample is as under:-

Institutions	Frequency	percentage
Govt. school	12	7.5
Private school	112	70.0
Missionary school	36	22.5
Total	160	100

Table 3: previous schooling

Table 3 shows us the previous schooling of the respondents in which 70% students have studied in private schools, 22.5% in missionary and only 7.5% in government schools. The results obtained for the relationship between schooling and proficiency are provided below:-

	Functional English						General English					
	Governm ent		Private		missiona ry		Governm ent		Private		missiona ry	
	me an	Std dvt	me an	Std dvt	me an	Std dvt	me an	Std dvt	me an	Std dvt	me an	Std dvt
Writi ng	2.5 6	.73	3.1 1	.78	4 .69		2.6 7	.58	2.9	.78	3.3 3	.49
Read ing	2.5 6	.53	3.4 3	.84	4.0 6	.73	2.4 8	.58	3.3 6	.64	3.4 5	.65
Liste ning	1.5 6	1.0 1	1.6 2	1.0 2	2.7 8	1.0 0	1.3 6	1.0 0	2.0	.93	2.3 9	.85
Spea king	1.4 4	.73	2.6 6	.96	3.1 7	0.5 8	1.3 9	.55	2.0 4	.78	2.6 1	.78

Table 4 : Mean scores showing difference among Government, private and missionary respondents in both Functional English and General English streams.

As is clear from above table, the difference between government, private and missionary respondents in terms of writing, reading, listening and speaking skills is that the respondents who had done their previous schooling in missionary and private schools have higher mean scores than the respondents who had their schooling from government schools.

The above table also depicts that the highest mean scores are observed in missionary schools which are followed by private and finally government schools. In case of Functional English the mean score in writing ranges from (4.0) in missionary, (3.11) in private and (2.56) in Government. In reading, the mean scores range from (4.06) in missionary, (3.43) in private and (2.56) in Government. In listening, the mean scores range from (2.78) in missionary, (1.62) in private and (1.56) in Government. In speaking, the mean scores range from (4.0) in missionary, (3.11) in private and (2.56) in Government.

Similarly, in case of General English same trend is followed. In writing, the mean scores ranges from (3.33) in missionary, (2.9) in private and (2.67) in Government. In reading, the mean scores range from (3.45) in missionary, (3.36)

in private and (2.48) in Government. In listening, the mean scores range from (2.39) in missionary, (2.0) in private and (1.36) in Government. In speaking, the mean scores range from (2.61) in missionary, (2.04) in private and (1.39) in Government. Thus it indicates that respondents from missionary and private schools, where they had studied up to 10th irrespective of their present schooling, shows better proficiency in English language in both Functional English and General English . It can also be observed from the above table that out of four skills, speaking and listening show low mean scores than reading and writing.

Functional English

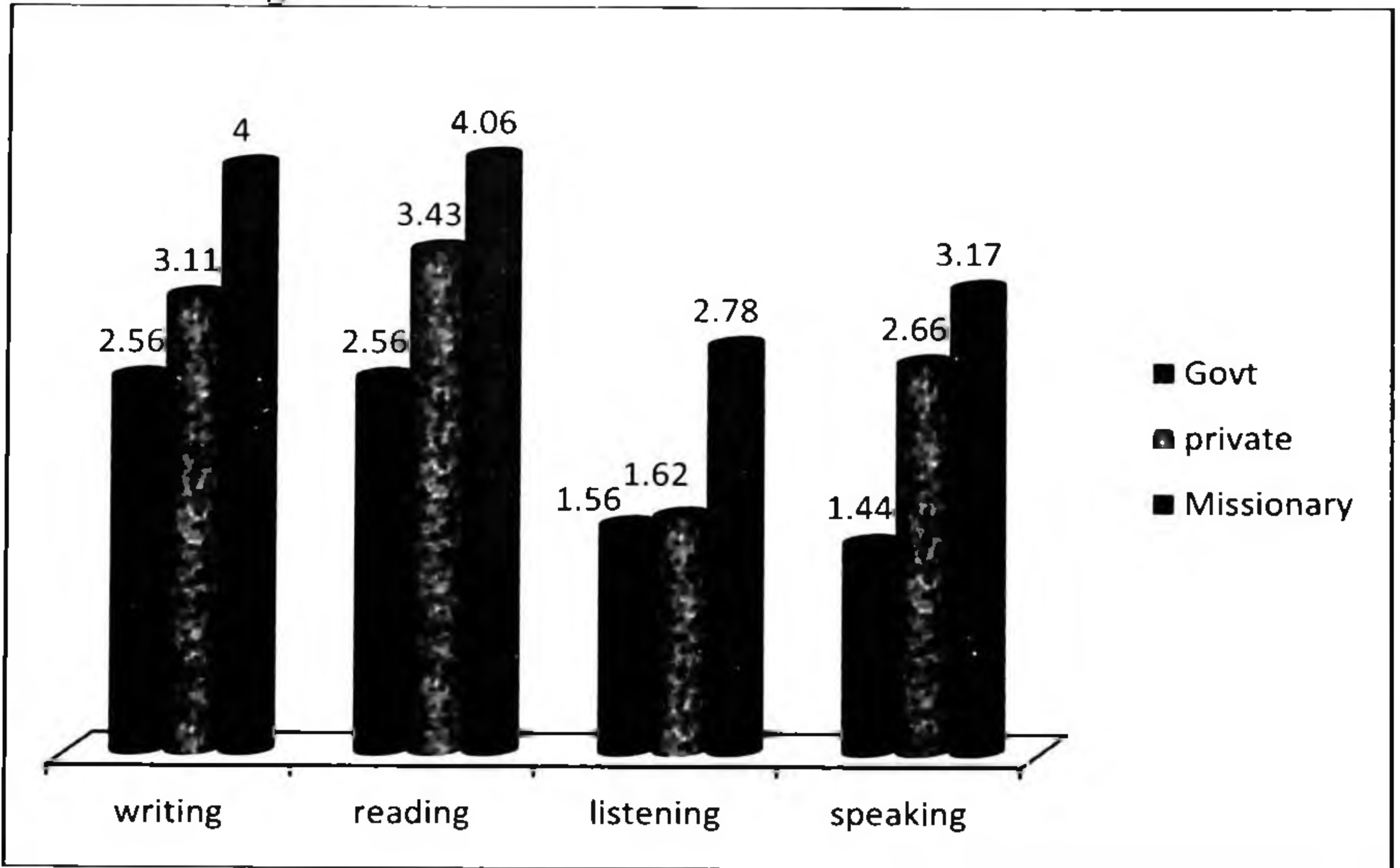


Fig 2(a): Mean scores showing difference between Government, private and missionary respondents in Functional English

General English

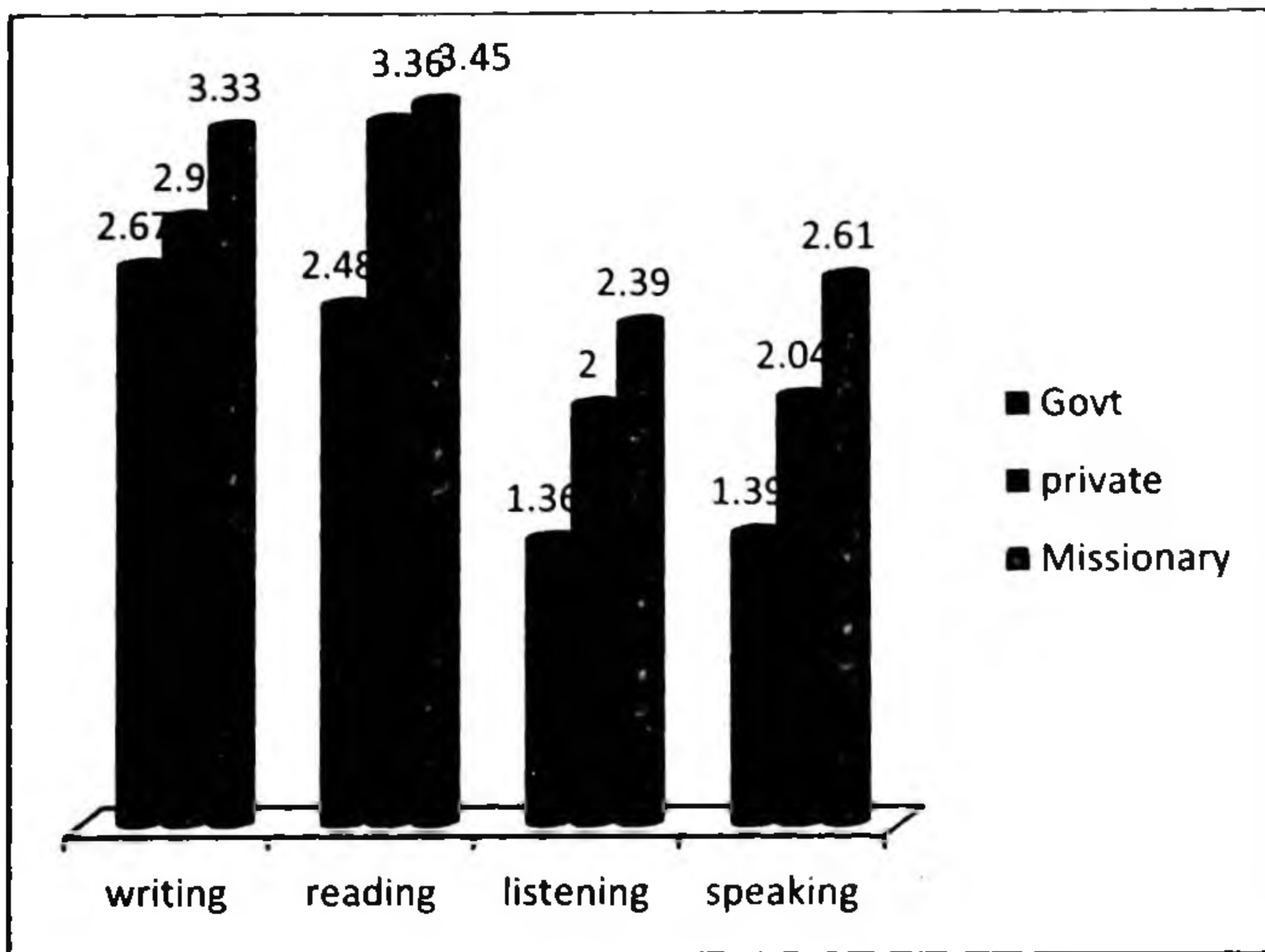


Fig 2(b): Mean scores showing difference between Government, private and missionary respondents in General English

Language proficiency is observed to be influenced by the nature of the educational institute. Not only is the standard of education a factor, but there is a difference in terms of exposure and opportunities. In present study language proficiency is observed to be highest in the respondents who have studied in missionary schools. They are followed by the respondents who have studied in private and in government schools as can be seen from the above figure. This is because of the fact that the medium of instruction in missionaries and in some private schools is English language from the beginning. Their English skills are polished from the primary classes which influences their English even later in their life. While as in government schools, the preferred medium of instruction is mostly Urdu and even sometimes Kashmiri. Students from missionaries and private schools use English more often in their communication. Thus proficiency of English language can be said to be influenced by educational institution that a student belonged to.

Conclusion

The present study reveals significant difference between gender and proficiency in English language. The findings of the study revealed that females appear to show better language proficiency than males in both General English and Functional English but the better mean scores are in Functional English students.

The study also came up with the conclusion that there is a significant relationship between schooling background and their proficiency in English language. Language proficiency is observed to be highest in students who studied in missionary schools which are followed by private and government school students. The result of the study also showed that reading and writing have greater mean scores in all four groups than speaking and listening skills. Through this study also it can be seen that reading is most developed skill in all four groups. Furthermore the results also reveal the fact that Functional English course helps the students to achieve proficiency in English language to a greater extent. It may be due to the fact that communicative language teaching method is predominantly used in Functional English course.

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