

Referral Trends among Students of the Communicative Skills Course in a Ghanaian University

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ABSTRACT

While there exists an exponential increase in studies on learner needs over the last three decades, research into trends of performance of university students is rare. The present paper explores the referral trends of first year students of Communicative Skills, an EAP course, at the University of Cape Coast in Ghana. Data were mainly obtained from the University's Student Records and Management Information Section (SRMIS) over an eight year period from between 2003 and 2010. Key findings showed that generally the referral rate among male students was significantly marked than among female students. The study also found that this trend was consistent across all the faculties and schools safe the School of Business. Finally, the analysis showed that students of this School had the lowest referral rate, and that there was no statistically significant difference between the sexes. The study bears implications for course designers, policy implementors and best interventionist programmes.

Keywords: referral trends, performance, Communicative Skills, University of Cape Coast

1 Introduction

Recent studies in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) have continually shown the monumental relevance of English in the success of students' pursuit of tertiary education in their various fields of study (Jordan, 1997; Afful, 2007; Kodom-Gyasi, Nartey & Coker, 2011). In second

language contexts, such as the Ghanaian situation, the objectives of EAP are contained in Communicative Skills (CS), a three-hour mandatory course read by all first year students in all public universities in Ghana, as is the case at the University of Cape Coast (UCC). This course is anchored on empirical beliefs that high school students entering university “are seen to have a culture, practices, and values different from those of universities or tertiary institutions” (Alfers & Dison, 2000; cited in Afful, 2007: 142). University students are required to demonstrate express knowledge of writing in specific genres for specific communicative endeavours, a task they may have hardly been exposed to at the pre-tertiary level. They are, for example, expected to demonstrate such productive skills as narrations and descriptions of accounts and events, as well as write expository and argumentative discourses of varying genres to say the least.

Thus since its inception in 1985, the Communicative Skills programme of the University of Cape Coast (UCC) has aimed “to stem the downward trend in the quality of writing of students in various discipline-specific contexts” (Afful, 2007: 145). To date, the essay prompts of a number of first year university students are blemished with errors of spelling, tense and concord (Yankson, 1994; Dako & Forson, 1997; Edu-Buandoh, 1997). In a recent study conducted among first year CS students at the University of Cape Coast, Kodom-Gyasi, Nartey and Coker (2011) found that the students had an abysmal knowledge of basic word classes. The study showed that this poor performance could be experienced both at the single isolated sentence level and within continuous writing such as in the context of paragraphs. Based on these observations, Kodom-Gyasi *et al.* (2011) concluded that the inability of CS students to know the parts of speech of words is one of the major factors contributing to their weak performances in CS. Research has also shown that the essay prompts of first university students in Ghana are typified by lack of cohesion, weak thematic progression leading to flat paragraphs and undeveloped rhemes (Dako, 1997; Appiah, 2002; Adika, 2003).

The *raison d'être* for this poor performance has largely been laid at the doorstep of the teaching methodology and curriculum of the course. One of such criticisms is that CS is overtly monolithic, unvariant and acontextual (Dzameshie, 1997; Afful, 2005). According to Dzameshie (1997), CS as a current ESL pedagogy in Ghana is deficient because it does not adopt a communicative, skill-oriented approach whose ultimate goal should be not merely to equip students with grammatical competence. The proposed emphasis on communicative competence,

Dzameshie argues, will enable ESL learners to communicate in socioculturally appropriate ways in English in both native and non-native environments. The author, therefore, opines that teachers of Communicative Skills adopt a multi-faceted approach to the teaching of the programme. Exactly a decade later, Afful (2007) reechoes these concerns more vociferously. He decries the idea that “the underlying premise of CS as foundation course is that language skills can be decontextualised from the content and that academic language is unvarying across disciplines” (p. 145). Afful calls for a change in the curriculum of CS from a deeply rooted remediation tradition to one that addresses issues of general and discipline specific writing. This move, he believes, is commonplace in many advanced countries such as the United Kingdom and the United States where CS is known as English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and Freshman Composition or lately Writing in the Disciplines respectively. His initial stance would have been “an outright rejection of the remedial aspect of CS, while declaring an unquestioned preference of (*sic*) the foundational dimension” (Afful, 2007: 147). The proposed change, Afful (2007) intimates, should reflect the current notion of academic writing as a social practice.

While the views of Dzameshie (1997), Adika (2003) and Afful (2007), among others, are commendable, it is, however, unfortunate that the curriculum designers of CS have little empirical knowledge of the trends of poor performances of students of the course. Such an investigation is, therefore, important in order to enable curriculum and course designers to introduce best intervention programmes geared towards identifying solutions to problems with the view to improving practice (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000). The present study in Referral Trends (RT) is thus useful because it is a form of practitioner research intended to help practitioners to improve upon professional practices in their work places. For it is only when pedagogues and researchers identify patterns in students’ weak performances that they can devise learner-centered and task-based curricula (Berwick, 1989; Dudley-Evans & John, 1998; Ababio, 2009). We, therefore, employed this analytical framework to enable us to diagnose problems faced by CS students in order to inform teaching practices.

2 Rationale of the Study

Specifically, the present study examined gender differences in Communicative Skills (CS) referral rate of Level 100 students of the University of Cape Coast across seven faculties and schools from 2003 to 2010. Referral or failure, in the context of the University of Cape Coast, is

defined as the inability of a student to obtain a pass mark of 50 per cent, the corresponding grade of which is E. Table 1 below details the grading system of the University.

Table 1: University of Cape Coast Grading System for Undergraduate Students

| GRADE | MARK | CREDIT POINT | DESCRIPTION |
|----------------|----------|--------------|-------------------|
| A | 80-100 | 4.0 | Excellent |
| B ⁺ | 75-79 | 3.5 | Very Good |
| B | 70-74 | 3.0 | Good |
| C ⁺ | 65-69 | 2.5 | Very Satisfactory |
| C | 60-64 | 2.0 | Satisfactory |
| D ⁺ | 55-59 | 1.5 | Very Fair |
| D | 50-54 | 1.0 | Fair |
| E | Below 50 | 0.0 | Unsatisfactory |

(Source: SRMIS, University of Cape Coast, 2012)

Students who are, however, referred are given another chance to resit a particular course, in this case CS.

The emphasis on gender is premised on the fact that the cut-off points for admission for female applicants into many programmes at UCC is lower than those of their male counterparts, and thus serves as a form of motivation for granting females access to university education. As Litosseliti (2006: 85) points out, “Motivation for learning ... plays an important role in female and male learning in L₂ classrooms”. In what follows, we present an abridged version of the course content of CS and its mode of assessment. The population of CS students from 2003 to 2010 is also captured to serve as a reference point for our on-going discussion.

3 The Nature of CS at UCC

Communicative Skills (CS) is a course run by the Department of Communication Studies of the University of Cape Coast (UCC). At its embryonic stage, CS was designed to offer remediation to freshmen and women whose language and general study skills lacked the rigour to enable them to function quite optimally in their areas of study in the University (Kodom-Gyasi *et al.*, 2011). The course covers such skills as reading, writing, speaking and listening, and also emphasises effective ways of gathering, storing and retrieving information. A number of students still remember the arduous task of taking and making notes in their very first days at the lecture

theatres or how they were supposed to write a piece of assignment for their lecturers. These problems and others related to language errors such as concord (e.g. subject-verb and noun-pronoun agreement), dangling modification, ambiguity, tense error, punctuation, spelling, wrong choice of prepositions, saw the birth of Communicative Skills, popularly known as ‘Com Skills’ or ‘CS’ among UCC students (Afful, 2007). Below is a short version of the course content for both first and second semesters.

3.1 Course Content

Semester 1

- Note taking, its values, methods of note taking from books (with emphasis on the outline and summary writing); notes from lecturers, the use of abbreviations, signs and symbols, diagrams etc.
- Different reading strategies; skimming, scanning, close reading of prescribed texts etc.
- Developing faster and efficient reading habits through motivation, concentration, rhythmic eye movement, the SQRS method etc.
- Conventions of Usage – spelling rules, punctuations, all the major punctuation marks and their effective uses;
- Developing writing skills etc.

Semester 2

- Grammatical processes of co-ordination and subordination, sequence of tenses etc
- The paragraph as a unit of thought, its length in expressing a controlling idea in a topic sentence with supporting sentences; different ways of developing the paragraph: using details, definitions, classification, examples, anecdotes, comparison, contrast, and cause and effect, or a combination of methods, etc.
- Writing the full essay – awareness of forms, discourse (narration, description, exposition, argumentation) ; the importance of a plan; limiting the topic; adequate treatment, unity, point of view, selection of ideas, logical arrangement of ideas, effective opening and ending, importance and types of sentence and paragraph linkers for unity and coherence;
- Appropriate use of register, level of usage;
- Importance and practice of editing.

3.2 Assessment

Assessment and grading are strictly based on the University's grading system, as indicated in the Students' Handbook (UCC Students' Handbook, 2012) as follows:

1. Continuous Assessment: 40%

This component of the assessment comprises a general quiz conducted mid-semester for all students of CS and bears a 20 per cent value. Other quizzes and modes of assignments also totalling 20 marks are administered based on the discretion of individual instructors.

2. End-of-Semester Examinations: 60%

The paper traditionally is made up of four sections, and tests students' knowledge of usage and in particular writing skills.

However, in order to achieve validity of results, students' scripts are rated after a co-ordination exercise is organised for all instructors of the various groups. At present, there exist 43 groups (Peniana, personal communication, 2012). At co-ordination the marking guide and other modalities about the examination are fully discussed such that conflictual observations are collaboratively resolved. Besides, no instructors are allowed to rate his or her own scripts as they are supervised by Chief Examiners or Team Leaders to whom they are directly accountable until they satisfactorily mark every script.

4 Data and Methods

The data for the present study were mainly obtained from the Student Records and Management Information Section (SRMIS) of the University of Cape Coast in March, 2012. SRMIS is the officially recognised section of UCC in charge of students' records. The study was limited to 2002/2003 because previous data were difficult to obtain. The faculties/schools included in the present study are Faculties of Arts, Education, Social Sciences, and Schools of Agriculture, Business, Biological Sciences and Physical Sciences. The study therefore excluded the recently established School of Medical Sciences and Faculty of Law. The data were then analysed by rigorous inferential statistical tools such as the t-test and standard error bar, using the Microsoft Excel (2010) in order to determine levels of statistical significance for the variables under consideration (Cohen *et al.*, 2000; Fraenkel & Wallen, 2000). Table 2 presents the population of all first year students reading CS for the period under review.

Table 2: Students' intake between 2003 and 2010

| YEAR OF ADMISSION | NUMBER OF STUDENTS ADMITTED |
|-------------------|-----------------------------|
|-------------------|-----------------------------|

| | |
|-----------|------|
| 2002/2003 | 3977 |
| 2003/2004 | 4138 |
| 2004/2005 | 4284 |
| 2005/2006 | 4966 |
| 2006/2007 | 3870 |
| 2007/2008 | 3792 |
| 2008/2009 | 3763 |
| 2009/2010 | 3536 |

Source: SRMIS, University of Cape Coast (2012)

5 Results and Discussion

This section first analyses the general trends of referral rates among Communicative Skills male and female students. It then proceeds to discuss failure trends per faculty with specific reference to sexes of the students.

5.1 General Trends in CS Referral Rate

On the large scale, the referral rate of students reading Communicative Skills (CS) at the University of Cape Coast appears quite disheartening. As could be seen, Figure 1 shows a decrease in the failure rate of students from a highest failure of 320 students in 2004, to a sharp drop of 207 in 2006. In 2008, however, the number again increased to another high figure of 308 although the referrals reduced thereafter in 2009 and 2010. It is, nonetheless, not clear whether this decrease is as a result of a conscious effort by course instructors to cause a positive change in students, or that the results could be described as simply accidental.

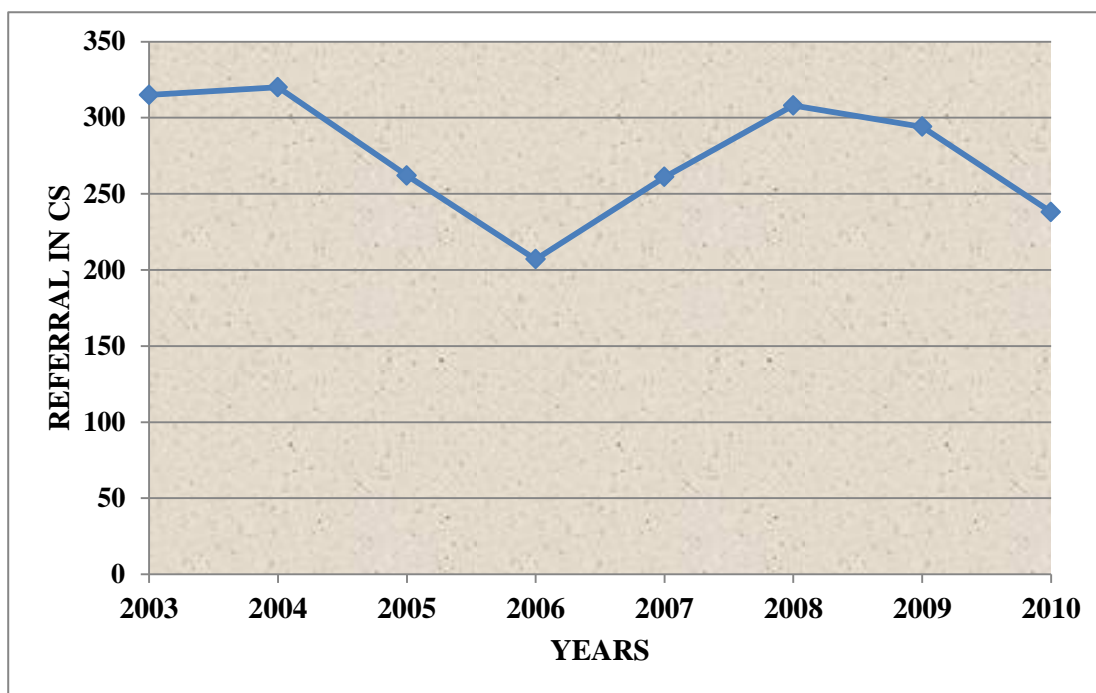


Fig. 1: General failure trends in CS in UCC

5.2 General Gender Comparison in CS Failure Rate

Figure 2 gives a gender comparative analysis of failures in CS for the period under review. The results showed that there is a statistically significant difference in their failures since the error bars did not overlap. On a year to year basis, there was, however, no such significant difference. This result was confirmed by a t-test that produced $M_m=204.13$, $SD_m=28.08$, $M_f=67.50$ and $SD_f=19.61$ with a *p-value* of 0.000. The Cohen's effect size (*d*) is 5.201 signified a marked difference. It can be concluded that male students were the worst hit although there was a downward trend in their failures, whilst the females' records saw a slight rise. This observation supports earlier findings that suggest that females are inherently verbally superior to males in the language acquisition process (Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974, Quansah, 2002), although reports appear conflicting (e.g. Ekstrand, 1980; Hirst, 1982).

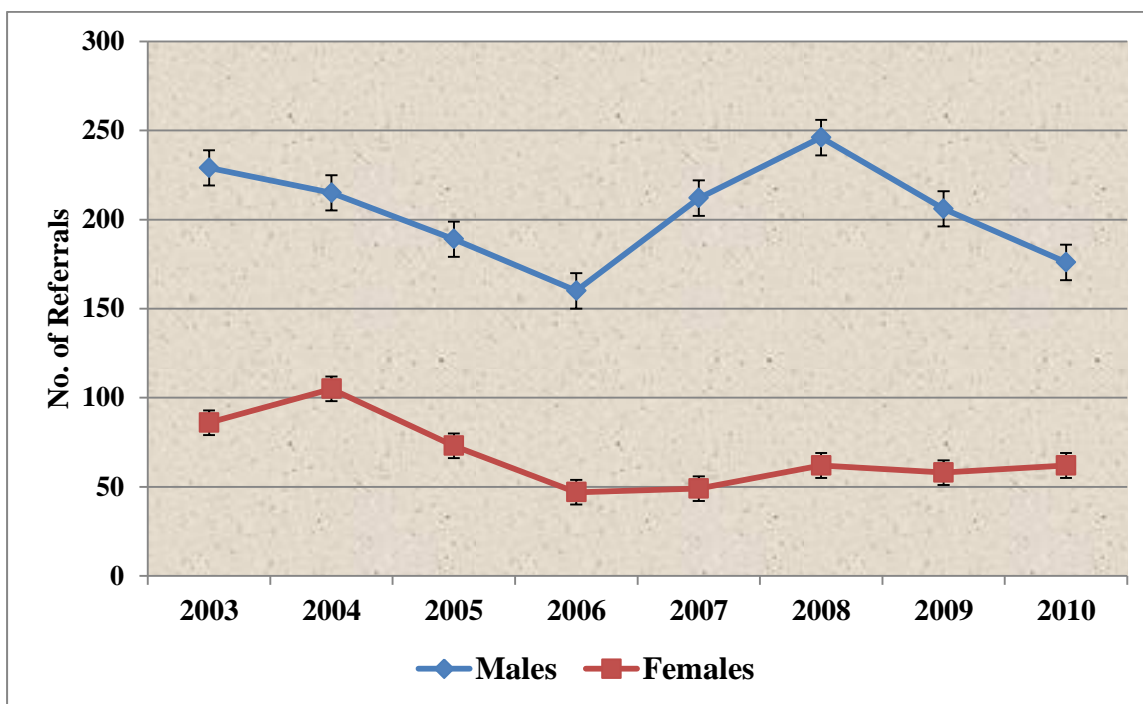


Fig. 2: Gender differences in CS failures in UCC

5.3 Gender Differences in Referrals within Faculties and Schools

The study also examined the situation in each faculty and school within the University.

5.3.1 Faculty of Arts

Although students in the Faculty of Arts, by way of the epistemology of their programmes, are supposed to be well predisposed to the English language upon which CS is premised (MacDonald, 1994; Kodom-Gyasi *et al.*, 2011), a majority were not spared from the wave of referral. Figure 3 shows that there was a sharp increase in males' and females' failures in 2007 and 2006 respectively. Generally, males in this Faculty failed in CS than their female counterparts, though the latter surpassed the males in 2006 only. The standard error bars revealed that the situation overlapped in only 2006, whilst it did not in the remaining years. This claim implies that there was a significant difference in their failures. The above conclusion was supported using the t-test which produced a *p*-value of 0.003 with $M_m=10.75$, $SD_m=3.54$, $M_f=5.13$ and $SD_f=2.75$. The computed Cohen's effect size (*d*) is 1.77 thus showing that a Referral Trends among Students of the Communicative Skills Course in a Ghanaian University
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difference of significance in their failures. One possible reason for this significant gendered difference may be attributable to attitude. As Litosseliti (2006: 85) avers, “Motivation for learning a foreign language, including learners’ attitude towards the foreign language, plays an important role in female and male students’ learning in L₂ classrooms”. It has been said that males are not as highly motivated to study language as do females, and so this lack of interest could result in their poor performance in CS. Figure 3 below shows this statistical difference more closely.

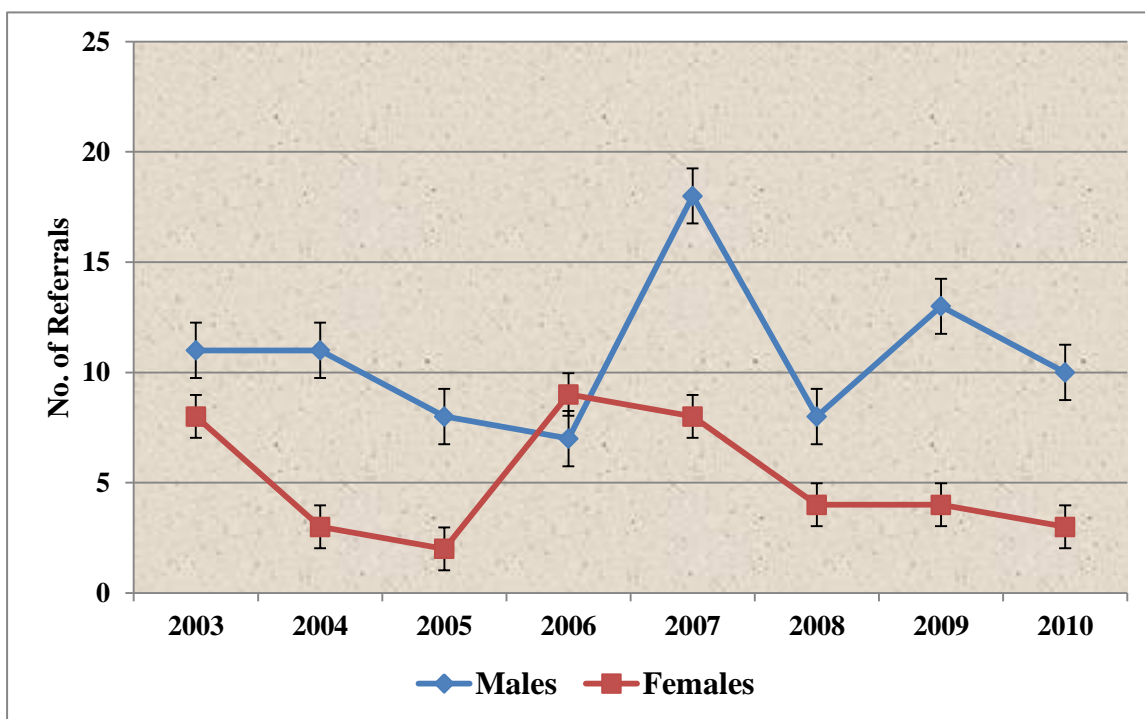


Fig. 3: Gender differences in CS failures in Faculty of Arts

5.3.2 Faculty of Education

A similar downward trend in the failure rate of students of CS was realised among students of the Faculty of Education. Like their male counterparts from the Faculty of Arts, males in the Faculty of Education recorded a higher rate of failure, as can be seen in Figure 4. Clearly, none of the error bars overlapped which is in itself an indication of a significant difference in males’ and females’ failures in the course. Whilst male students recorded the worst performance in Referral Trends among Students of the Communicative Skills Course in a Ghanaian University
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2008, their female counterparts suffered the same fate in 2004. Again, the application of the t-test on the figures also confirmed the above findings as the mean and standard deviation for males were 83.75 and 20.14 respectively as against 35.25 and 16.32 for females with an effect size (d) of 2.54. The implication is that the failure rate among males was extremely higher than that of their female colleagues.

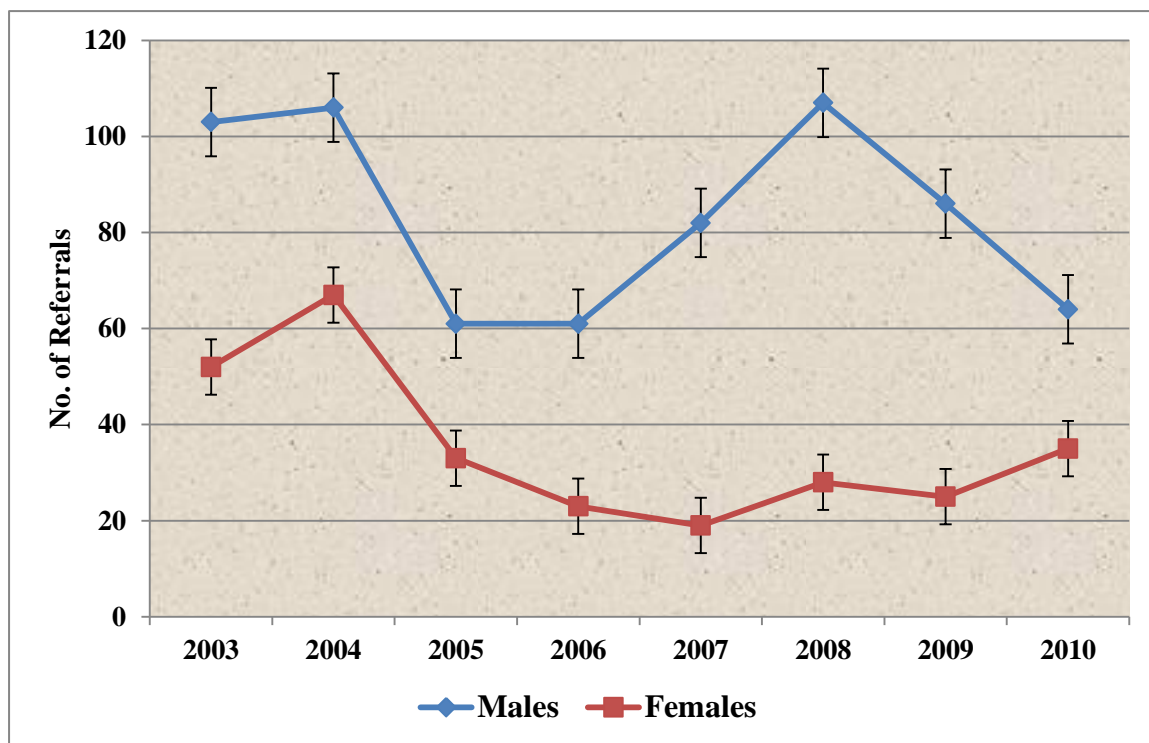


Fig. 4: Gender differences in CS referrals in Faculty of Education

5.3.3 Faculty of Social Sciences

Among male and female students of this Faculty, the highest referrals were recorded in 2005 and 2009 respectively even though low figures were seen in 2010. On the error bars, neither the records between the sexes overlapped, indicating a wide statistical difference. The application of the t-test also revealed the same conclusions with $M_m=34.50$, $SD_m=12.38$, $M_f=8.75$, $SD_f=3.28$,

$p=0.04$ and $d=2.31$. The effect size (d) 2.31 appears extremely large, meaning that the difference was huge. Figure 5 below presents a clearer picture.

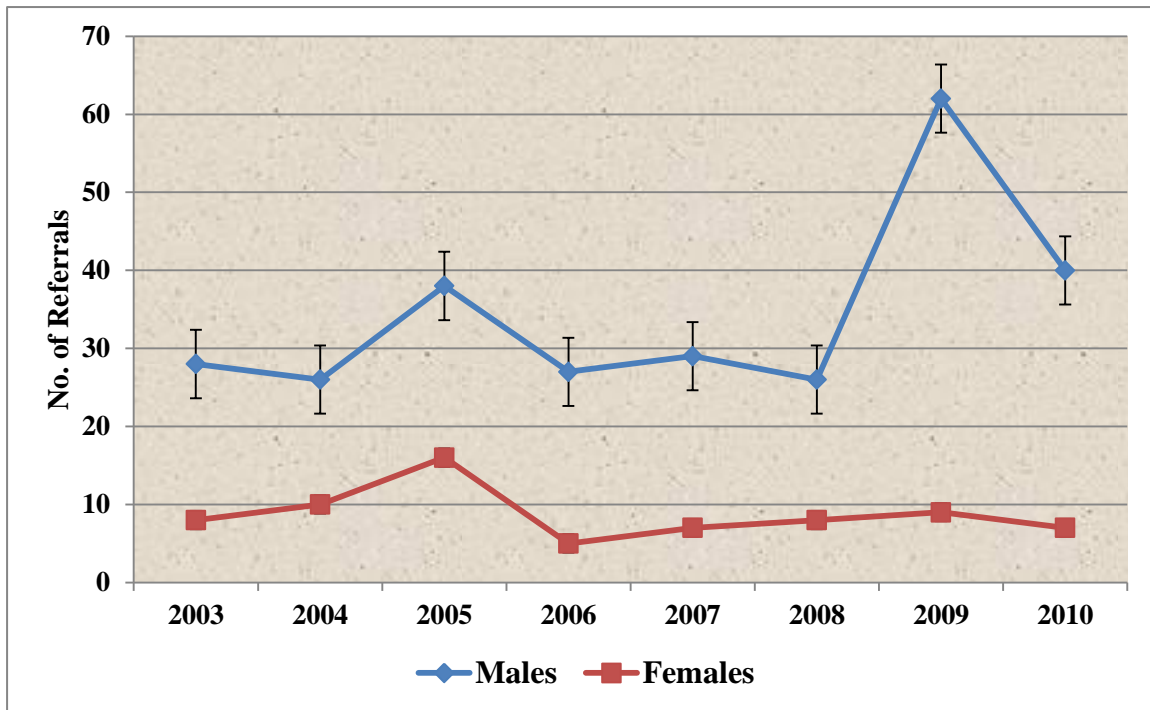


Fig. 5: Gender differences in CS referrals in Faculty of Social Sciences

5.3.4 School of Agriculture

At the School of Agriculture, an up and down trend was realised in males' referrals over the years, whilst the figures for females saw a relatively smooth and low trend. The error bars indicate a significant difference in their failure rates with males recording very high referrals. It was only in 2004 that there appeared to be no difference of significance in their failures as shown in Figure 6. This observation could, however, be sporadic rather than the product of a pedagogically interventionist attempt. Similarly, a t-test indicates a p -value of 0.000 (< 0.05) [$M_m=14.25$, $SD_m=7.85$, $M_f=0.75$, $SD_f=1.04$ and $d=1.77$]; implying that the difference was significant. The effect size (d) gave a signal of a great difference in the failure of males and females in the course.

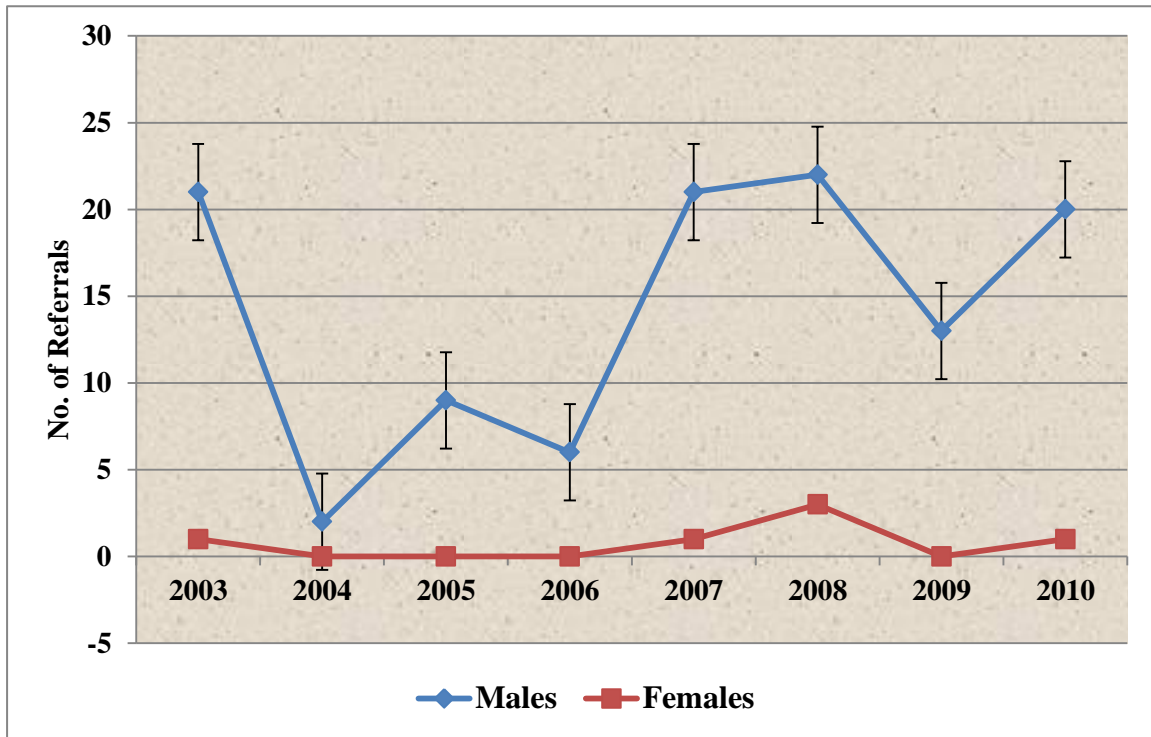


Fig. 6: Gender differences in CS referrals in School of Agriculture

5.3.5 School of Business

Similar trends were observed among students of the School of Business. In 2005, for example, the referral rates of males in this School ascended drastically to 36, and yet dipped significantly in 2007. Their female counterparts also recorded the highest failures in 2004 and the least in 2007. The standard error bars indicate no significant differences in 3 years out of the 8 years, though it is difficult to conclude on a difference of significance at this point without recourse to a t-test. Thus using the t-test, we observed a p -value of 0.06 (> 0.05) with $M_m=17.75$, $SD_m=11.61$, $M_f=8.38$ and $SD_f=5.24$. These values indicate that there is no statistically significant difference in the referral rates of male and female students in the School of Business. This claim is in sync with earlier findings of a study conducted at the University of Cape Coast by Kodom-Gyasi *et al.* (2011) which opined that Business students outperformed those other programmes of study in their knowledge of basic grammar. This performance may arguably be due to the quality of

results they entered the University with as they are required to have aggregates 08 and 09 for both males and females respectively. These aggregates mean that the majority of them may have as well had an A or at least a B in their English Language paper in their West African Senior High School examinations (i.e. SSCE or WASSCE). As Quansah (2002) among others have observed, the educational background of students, to a large extent, has an impact on their subsequent academic performance. It is, therefore, not surprising that both male and female Business students recorded low referral rates in CS as could be seen in Figure 7.

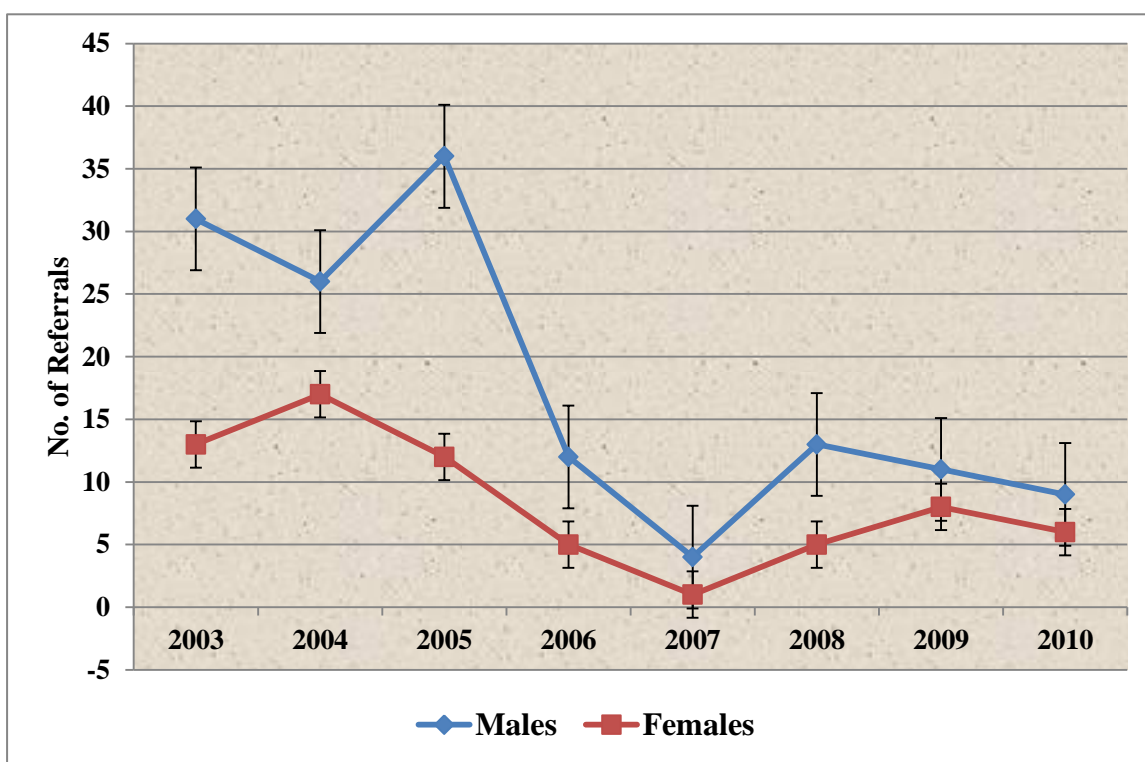


Fig. 7: Gender differences in CS referrals in School of Business

5.3.6 School of Physical Sciences

On the contrary, there had been an increasing referral rates in both sexes in the School of Physical Sciences although the rate of the males was drastic. Both sexes, however, recorded low figures in 2007. Clearly, the bars were not overlapping except in 2007, which is indicative of a significant difference. Following the t-test, these values were recorded: $M_m=23.88$, $SD_m=10.58$,

$M_f=3.63$ and $SD_f=2.00$ with a p -value of $0.000 (<0.05)$ and $d=2.05$. These corroborate the early claim of significant difference in the failure rates of both males and females. Males, nonetheless, continued to top with an average of 24 referral cases as against only 4 female students. Additionally, the value of the effect size implies that the difference was extremely large. This trend could be seen in Figure 8. It is, however, not clear whether the epistemological value placed on CS among students of the Sciences has a role to play in this poor performance. This is because it is generally believed that the Sciences emphasise numeracy, objectivity, brevity, and accuracy over and above literacy, expression, fluidity and creativity, which are desirable elements in the Communicative Skills course (Jolliffe & Brier, 1988, Jones, 2004).

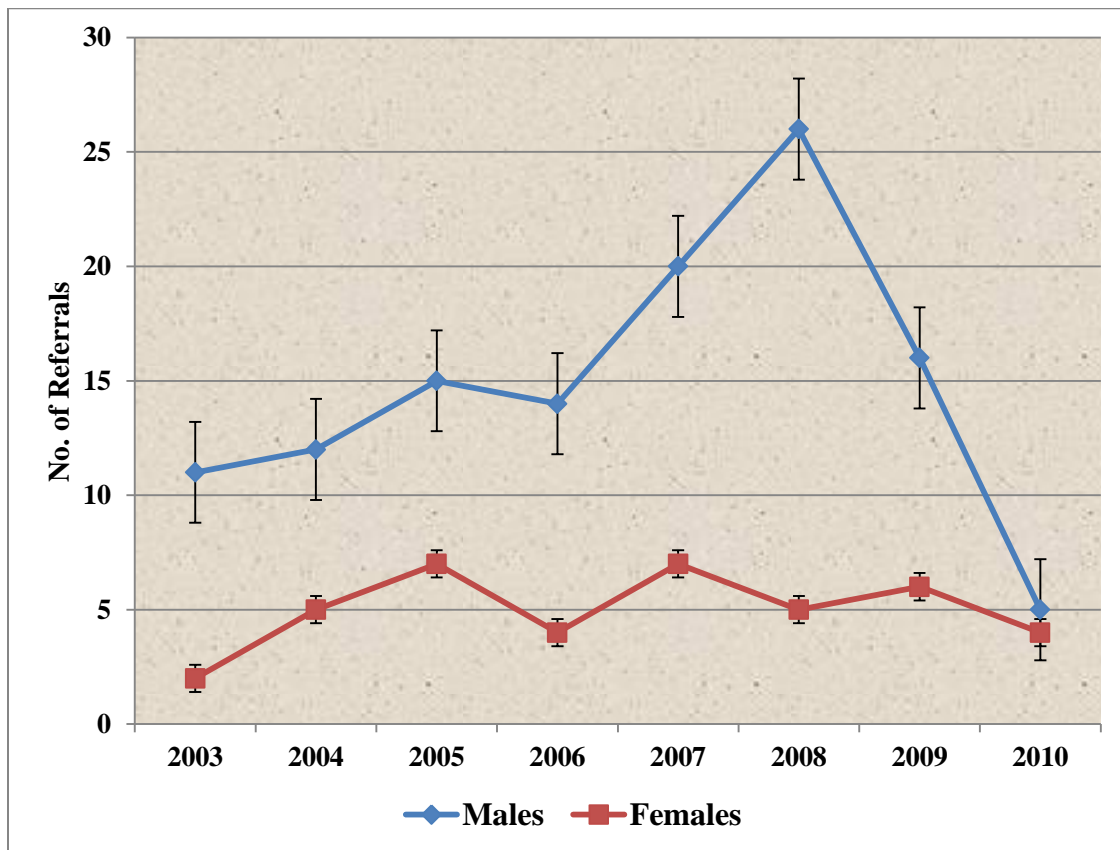


Fig. 8: Gender differences in CS referrals in School of Physical Sciences

5.3.7 School of Biological Sciences

Just as their mates from the School of Physical Sciences, students of the School of Biological Sciences also recorded very high referral rates. For example, male and female students from this School recorded the highest referrals in 2008 and 2005 respectively. It can also be seen that failures among males decreased sharply from 26 in 2008 to 5 in 2010. The error bars show that it was only in 2010 that there was no significant difference in the males' and females' referral figures. This is an indication of a difference. Confirming the above observation, we ran a t-test which indicates a *p-value* of 0.000 (<0.05) with $M_m=14.88$, $SD_m=6.24$, $M_f=5.00$ and $SD_f=1.69$. The effect size (*d*) of 1.82 was realised, and so means that the difference in their failures was very astonishing with male students failing massively. As indicated earlier, it is probable that Biological Science students also hardly give CS the needed attention it deserves. Below is the confirmation in Figure 9.

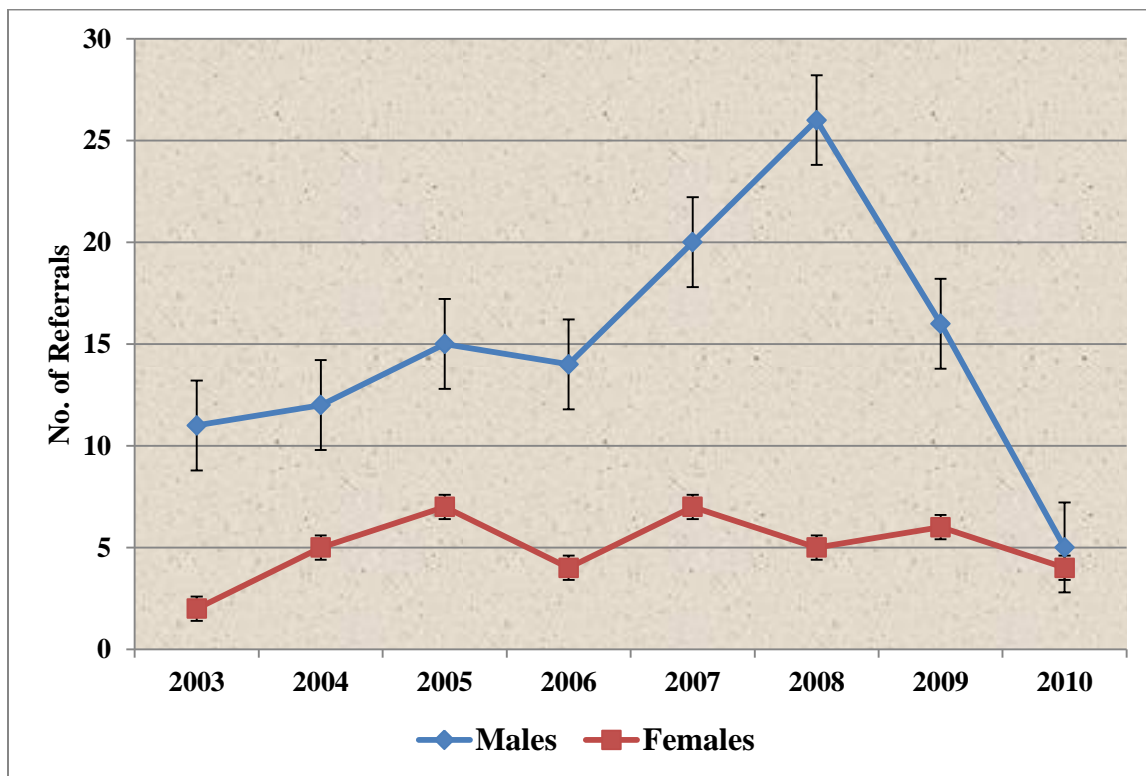


Fig. 9: Gender differences in CS referrals in School of Biological Sciences

6 Conclusions

The present study examined the rate of failure among first year students of Communicative Skills, an EAP course, at the University of Cape Coast, Ghana. Using data collected from 2003 to 2010, the paper focused on ascertaining the extent of failure between the sexes first on a general scale and secondly across specific faculties and schools.

The study yielded three key findings. First, we found that generally the referral rate among male students was significantly marked than among female students. This claim supports existing literature that suggests that females are inherently verbally superior to males in the language acquisition process (Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974, Quansah, 2002), although reports appear conflicting (e.g. Ekstrand, 1980; Hirst, 1982). The study also found that this finding is consistent across all the faculties and schools in the analysis. This means that more males than females failed CS from the Faculties of Arts, Education and Social Sciences, and Schools of Business, Physical Sciences and Biological Sciences. However, while it is difficult to explain the reason(s) underlying the extent of referrals among students in the Faculties of Arts and Social Sciences given the philosophies of their programmes, we believe that students in the Sciences, to a large extent, do not attach much importance to the study of CS (MacDonald, 1994; Jolliffe & Brier, 1988; Jones, 2004). Finally, the study showed that there was no significant difference in referral rates between male and female students from the School of Business. This finding means that comparatively Business students recorded the lowest failure rates than their counterparts in the other faculties and schools. The trend, as earlier confirmed by Kodom-Gyasi *et al.* (2011), may be attributable to the high quality of results these students enter the University of Cape Coast with.

Evidently, the findings above bear three major implications. At the level of the curriculum, it is hoped that the course designers of Communicative Skills reconsider the nature

of the course (Munby, 1978), its content and possibly its mode of assessment (Dillon, 1991; Brown, 1995; Richards, 2001). This is perhaps because students find a wide gap between the demands of pre-tertiary education and the task expected of them at the University. In respect of admission policies and procedures, it is only normal to expect that candidates seeking admission in the various public universities in Ghana make good passes in English. Possibly, prior to the commencement of their first semesters on campus, both freshmen and women should be exposed to more academic orientations on the value of Communicative Skills in the success of their individual programmes. Finally, the longer term implications for failures in the course, and whether the findings reported here are specific to the sexes, faculties/schools of the students or to the particular Senior High School attended, grade obtained in English Language at SSSCE/WASSCE level are issues worthy of further consideration in order to illumine our understanding of students' referral in Communicative Skills.

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