The English Language Needs of PolyU Research Students

Date: 22 June 2006

Time: 14:00-15:00

Venue: AG 434

THE HONG KONG
POLYTECHNIC UNIVERSITY

香港理工大學

Department of English
Effective English for Postgraduate Research Students

Presentation Outline

EEPRS
- Brief background – EEPRS

Needs Analysis of English Support for Research Postgraduate Students
- Reasons for conducting a needs analysis
- Research methodology
- Key findings
  - Writing
  - Reading
  - Speaking and listening
  - The perceptions of supervisors and students
- Pedagogical implications
- Q & A session

# *Effective English for Postgraduate Research Students (EEPRS)*

- Funded by the University to provide advanced English for academic purposes support at the PolyU since 1998.

- Main services include:
  - CSRCE taught subject (non-credit bearing)
  - Mentoring sessions
  - Workshops

Services Offered

Types of Services	No. of Groups/ Workshops/ Mentoring Sessions	Total No. of Students Served
CSRCE	18	339
Workshops	99	2,120
Mentoring	453	453
Total		**2,912**

Why do a Needs Analysis?

Number of Research Postgraduate Students at PolyU 1998-2006
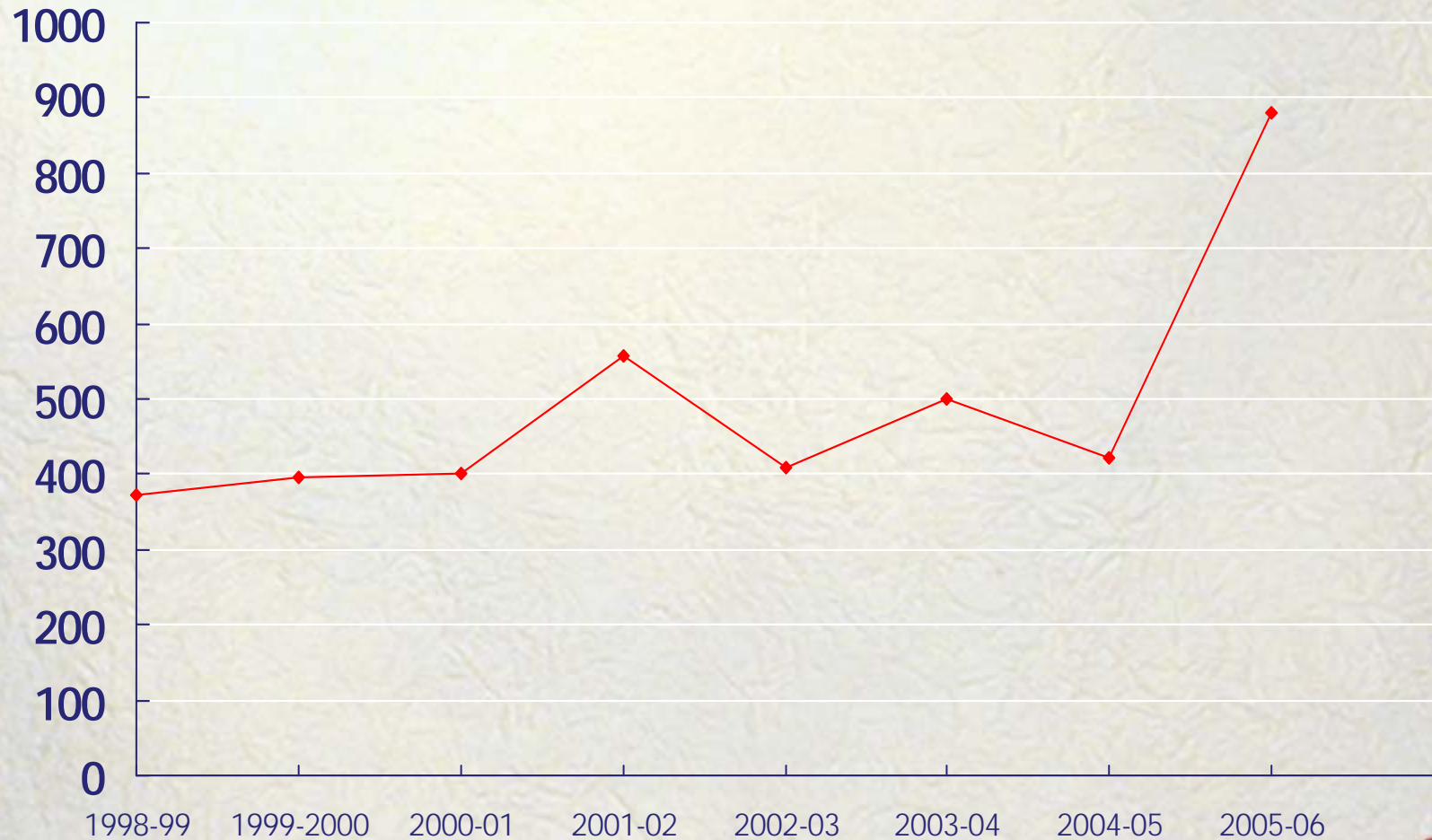
- The changing population of postgraduate research students at PolyU

Research Students Enrolment (Headcount)								
Place of Origin	Local		The Mainland of China		Other Places in Asia		The Rest of the World		Total
Mode of Study	FT	PT	FT	PT	FT	PT	FT	PT	
2003/04	248	57	164	2	16	-	12	2	501
2004/05	165	77	146	6	14	-	12	3	423

Why do a Needs Analysis? (continued)

For Students:

- The importance of mastering advanced English skills is an essential requirement

- To provide the best possible English language support for postgraduate students

For the University:

- The English standard of research postgraduates is frequently a source of concern for supervisors and the Research Office

- The reputation of PolyU is directly related to the postgraduate students' research profile and the quality of their thesis writing

Research Aims

- Enhance our understanding of the challenges faced by our students when studying through the medium of English

- Inform planning and development of academic English language support

- Provide useful and relevant information for departments and academics

- Start a discussion about the needs of research students at PolyU

- Extend knowledge about the needs of research students in other contexts where postgraduates are studying in a second language

Research Methodology

- Subjects:
  - Postgraduate research students and supervisors

- Data Collection Methods:
  - Questionnaires
  - Interviews
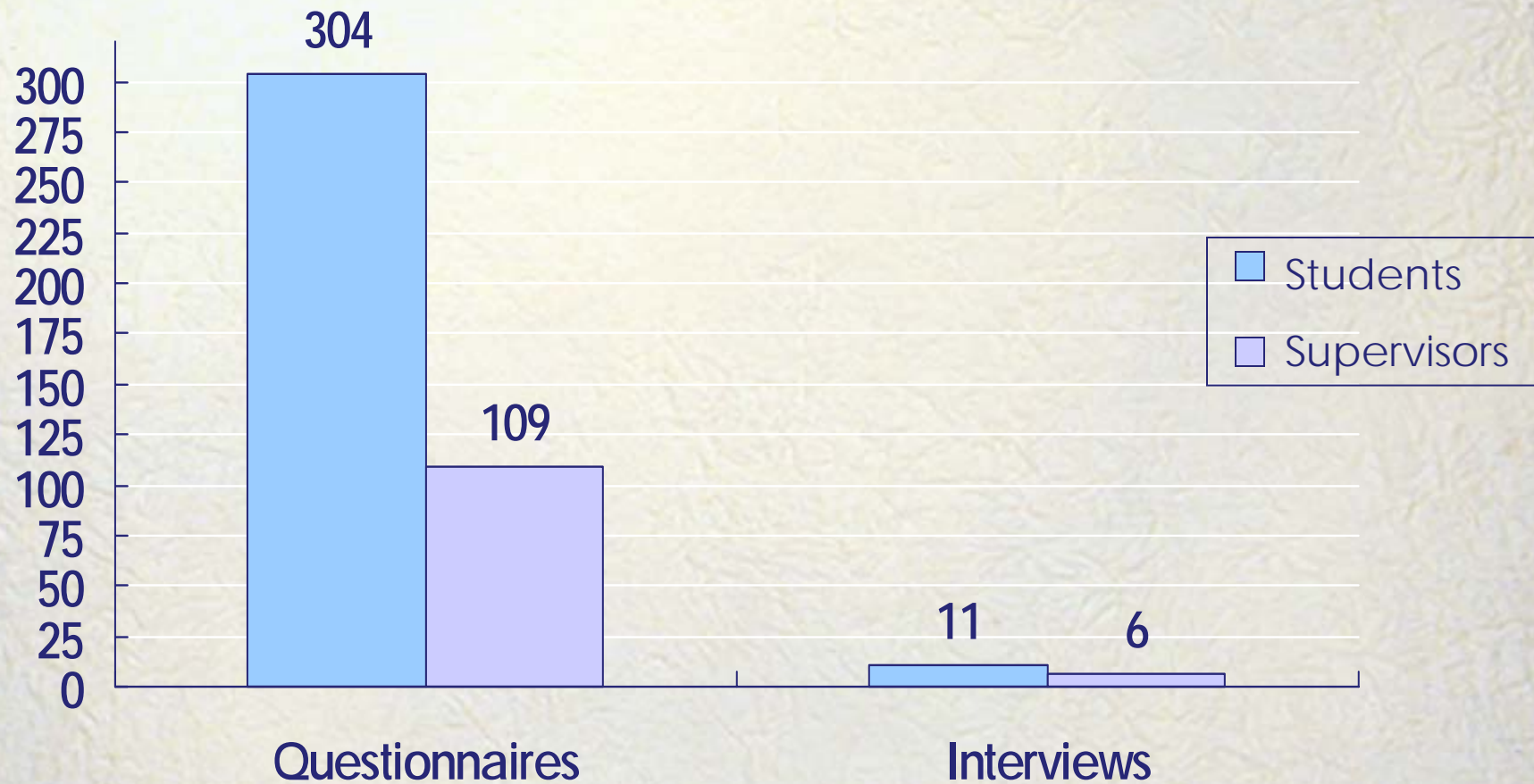
- Analytical Methods:
  - SPSS
  - Content analysis

Questionnaires

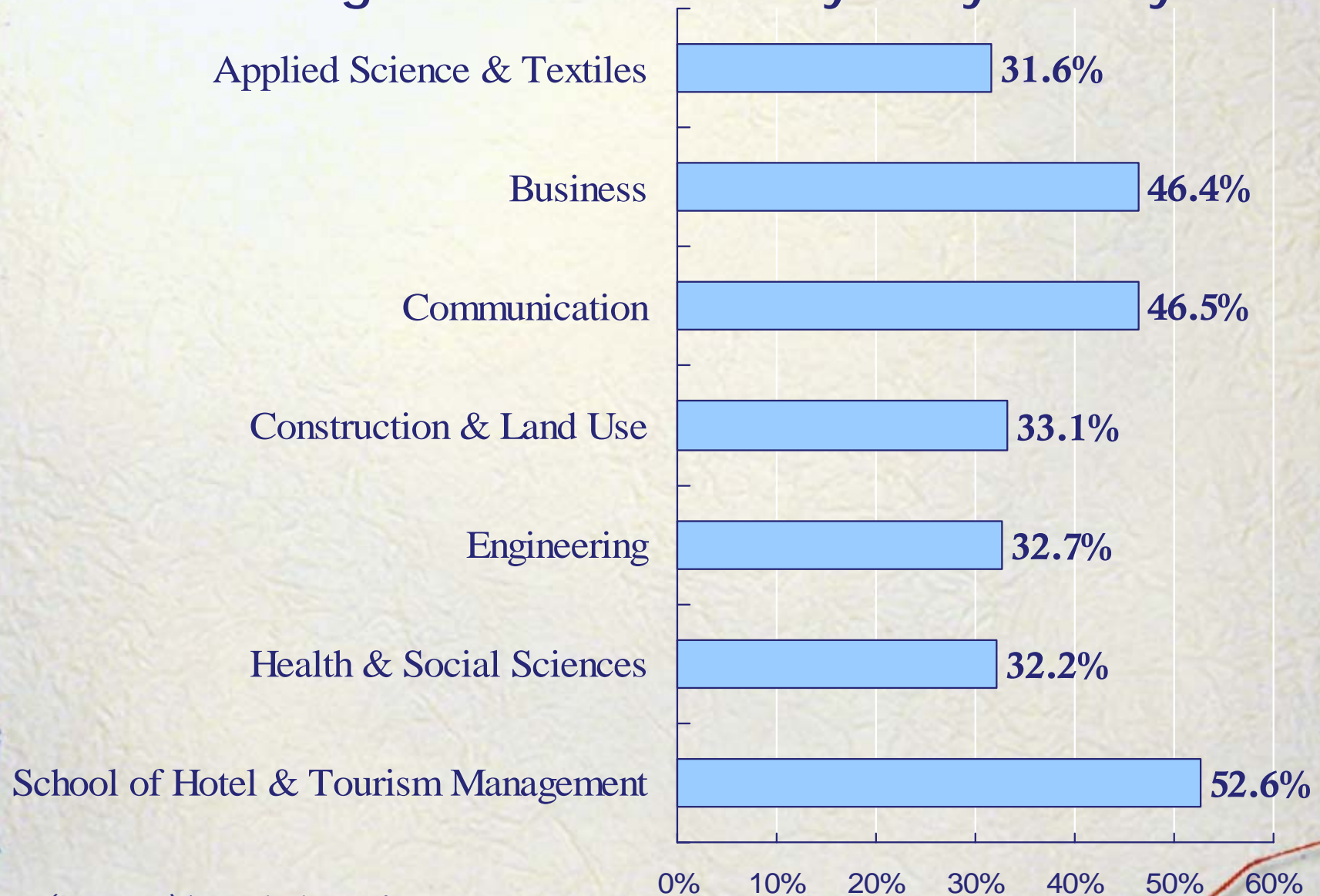| Sections	Items included
Personal information	Department, mode of study, mother tongue
Writing skills	19 items on writing skills
Reading skills	11 items on reading skills
Speaking/ listening skills	13 items on speaking/ listening skills
Language support for postgraduate studies	Opinions about language support at PolyU

Interviews

– Respondents' research background/supervision experience

– The importance of English skills when studying for a research degree at PolyU

– The challenges students face in terms of writing, reading, speaking and listening in English

– Opinions about the language support for research students at PolyU
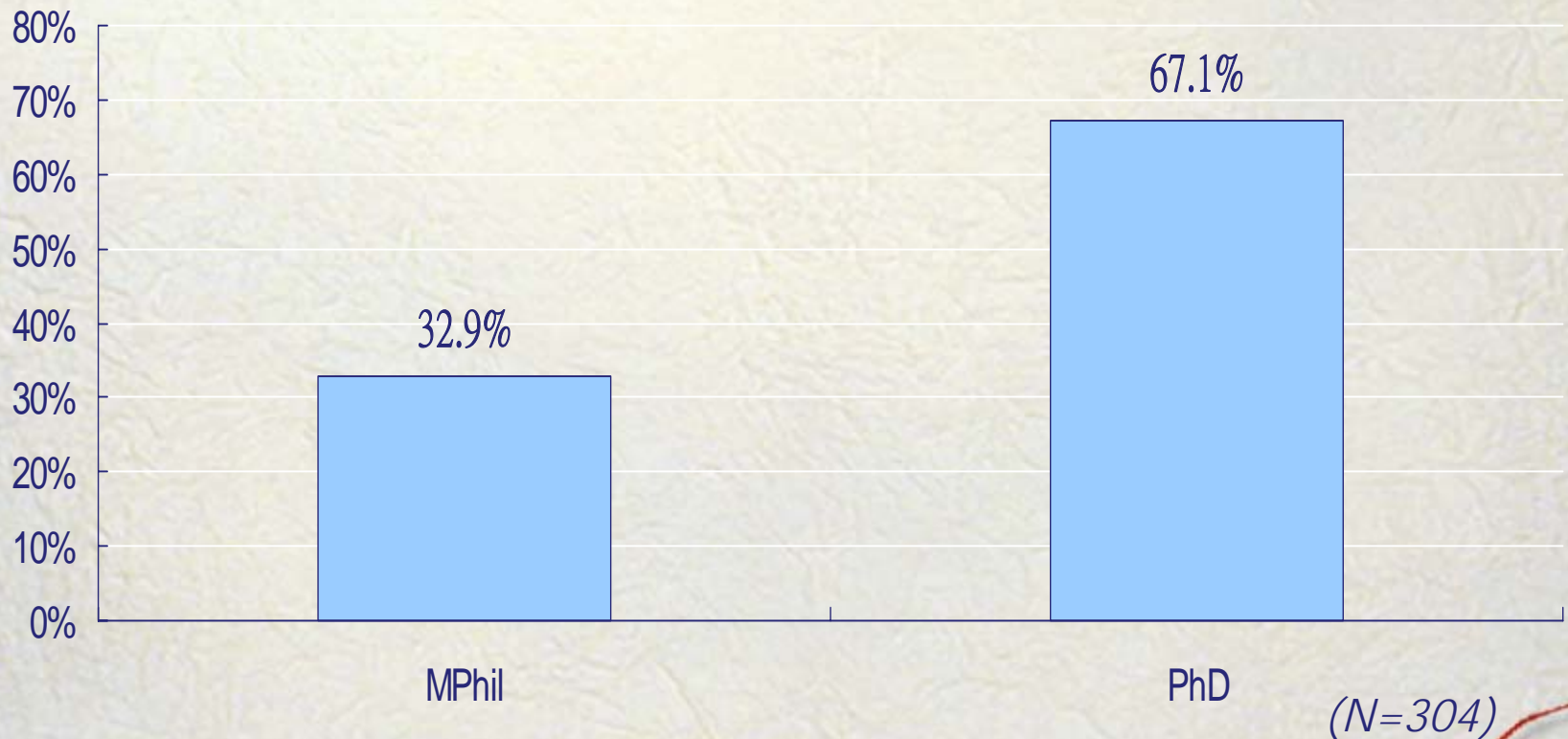
Number of Subjects

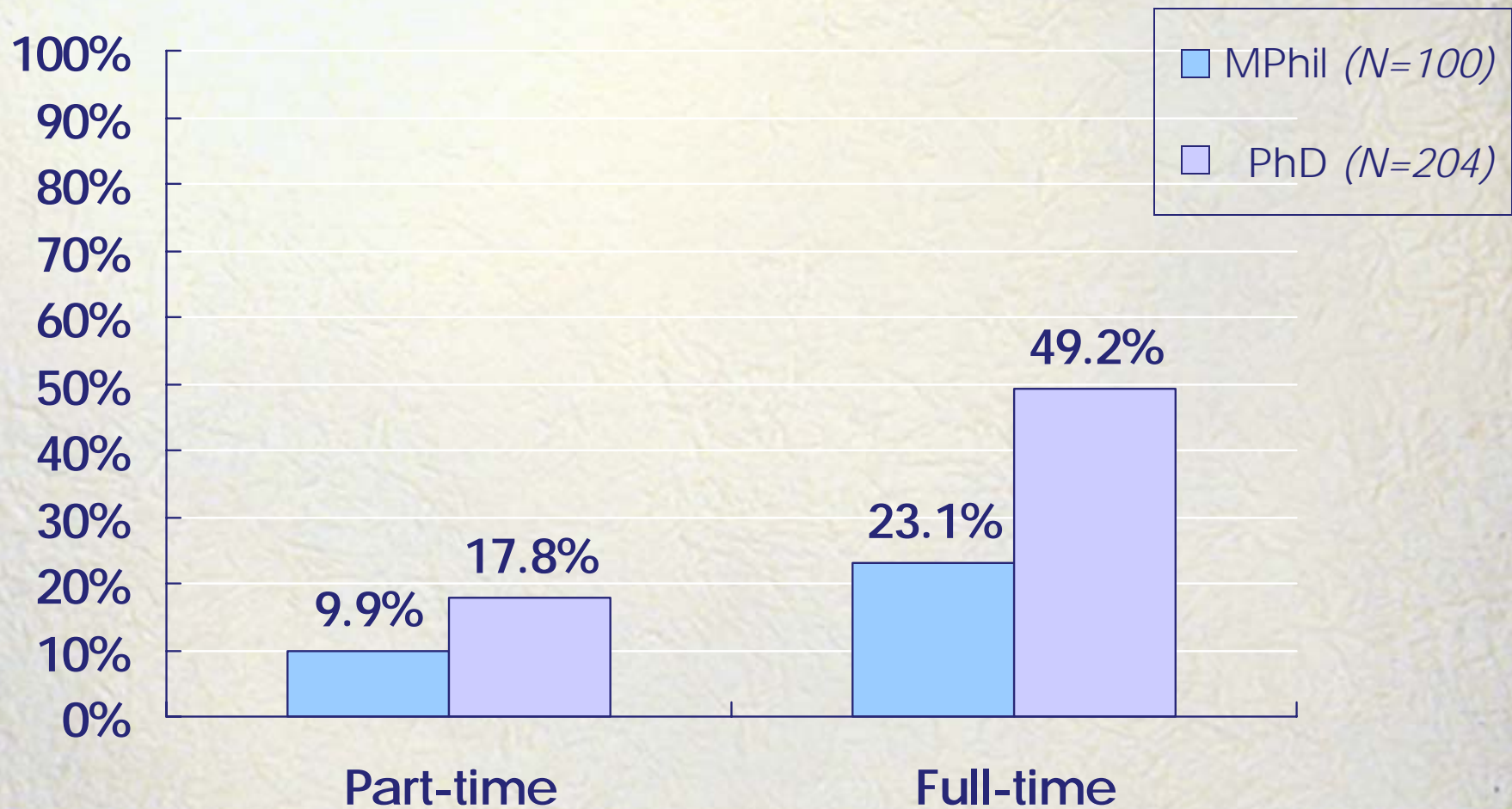# Percentage of Students Surveyed by Faculty

Faculty	Percentage
Applied Science & Textiles	31.6%
Business	46.4%
Communication	46.5%
Construction & Land Use	33.1%
Engineering	32.7%
Health & Social Sciences	32.2%
School of Hotel & Tourism Management	52.6%

(N=303)*1 missing data

A Profile of Student Respondents

Programme

(N=304)

Mother Tongue

0.7% 4.6%

34.5%

60.2%

- Cantonese *(N=183)*
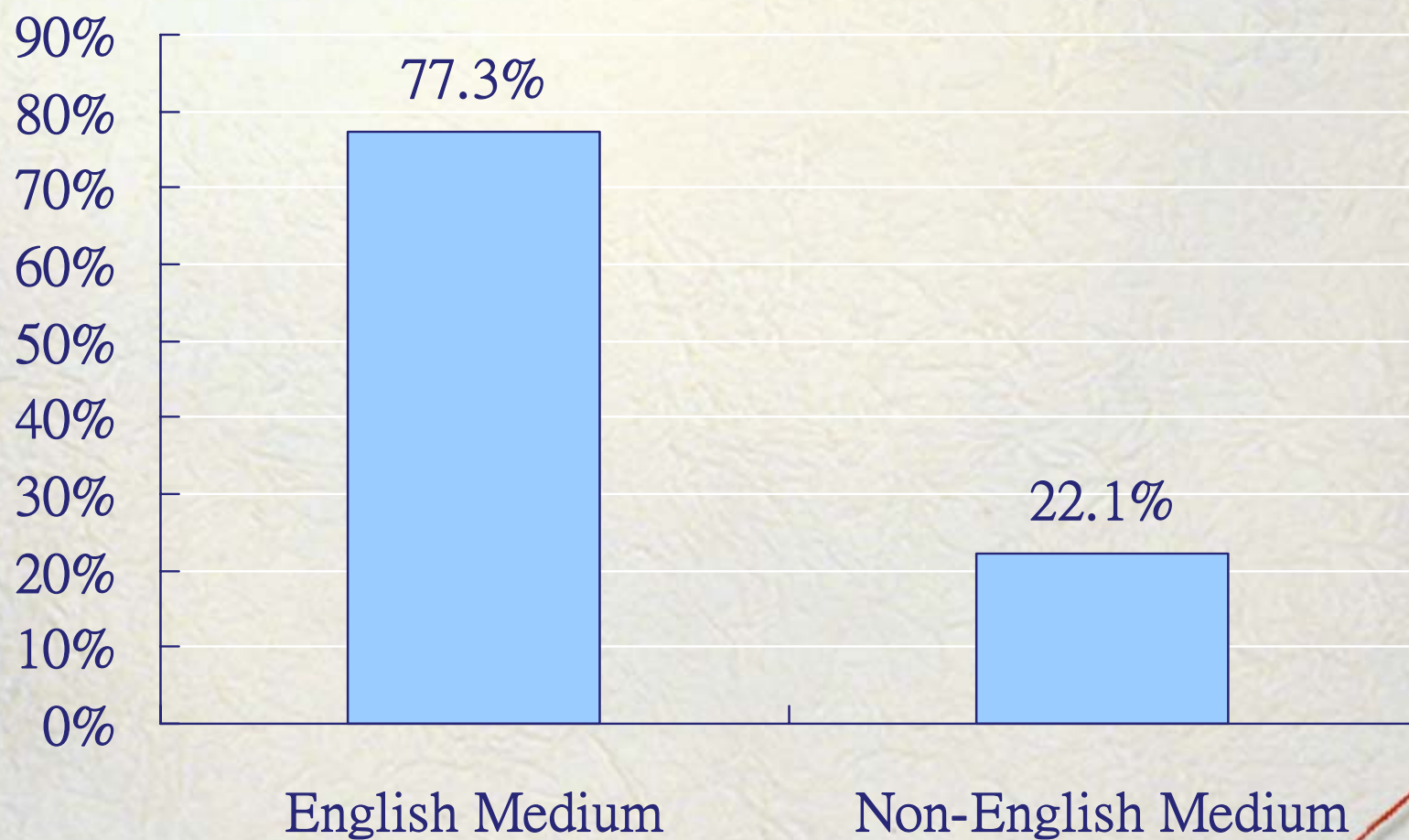- Mandarin *(N=105)*
- English *(N=2)*
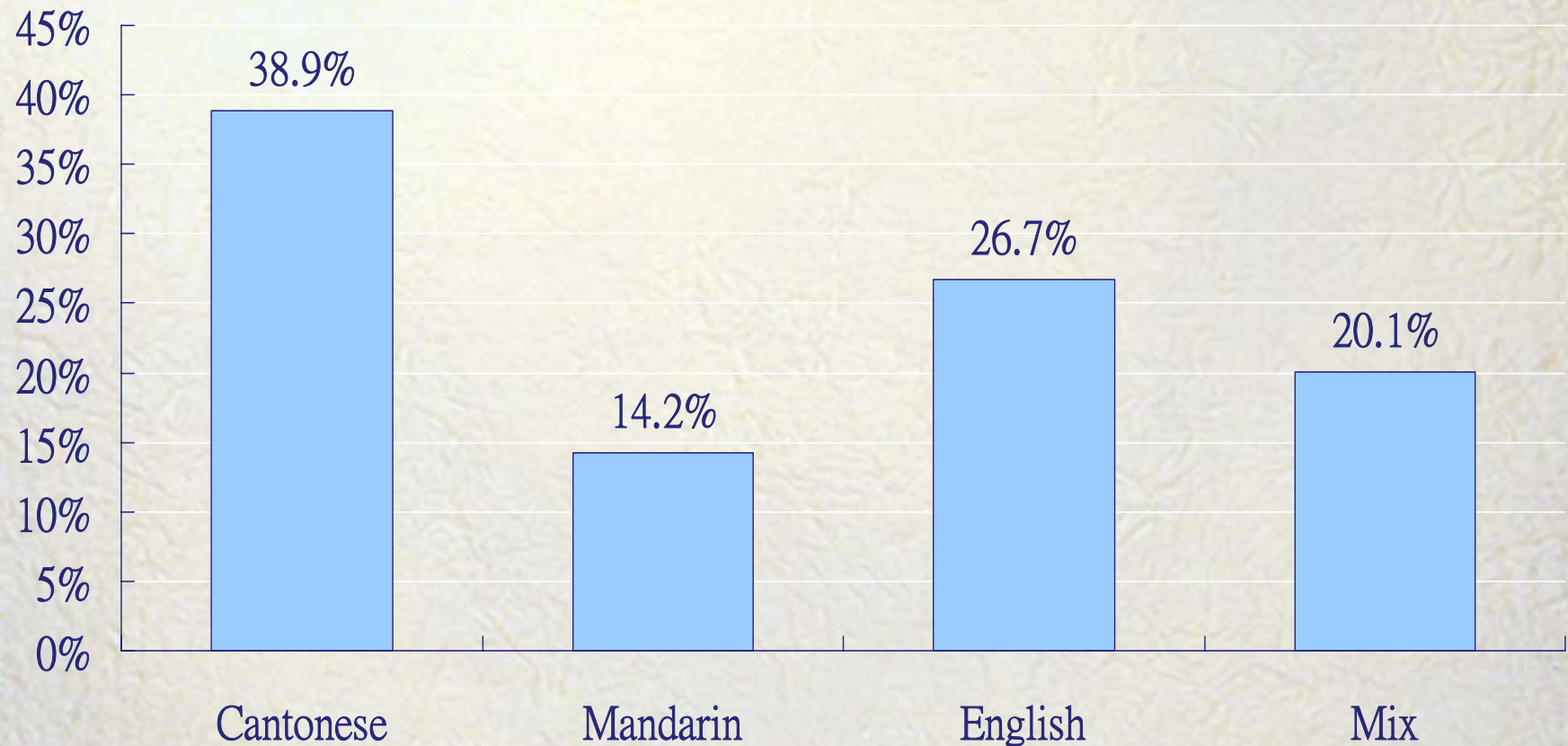- Other languages *(N=14)*

Medium of Instruction when Studying the Last Degree

(N=304)

# Main Language of Supervision

(N=304)

The Challenges Our Students Face
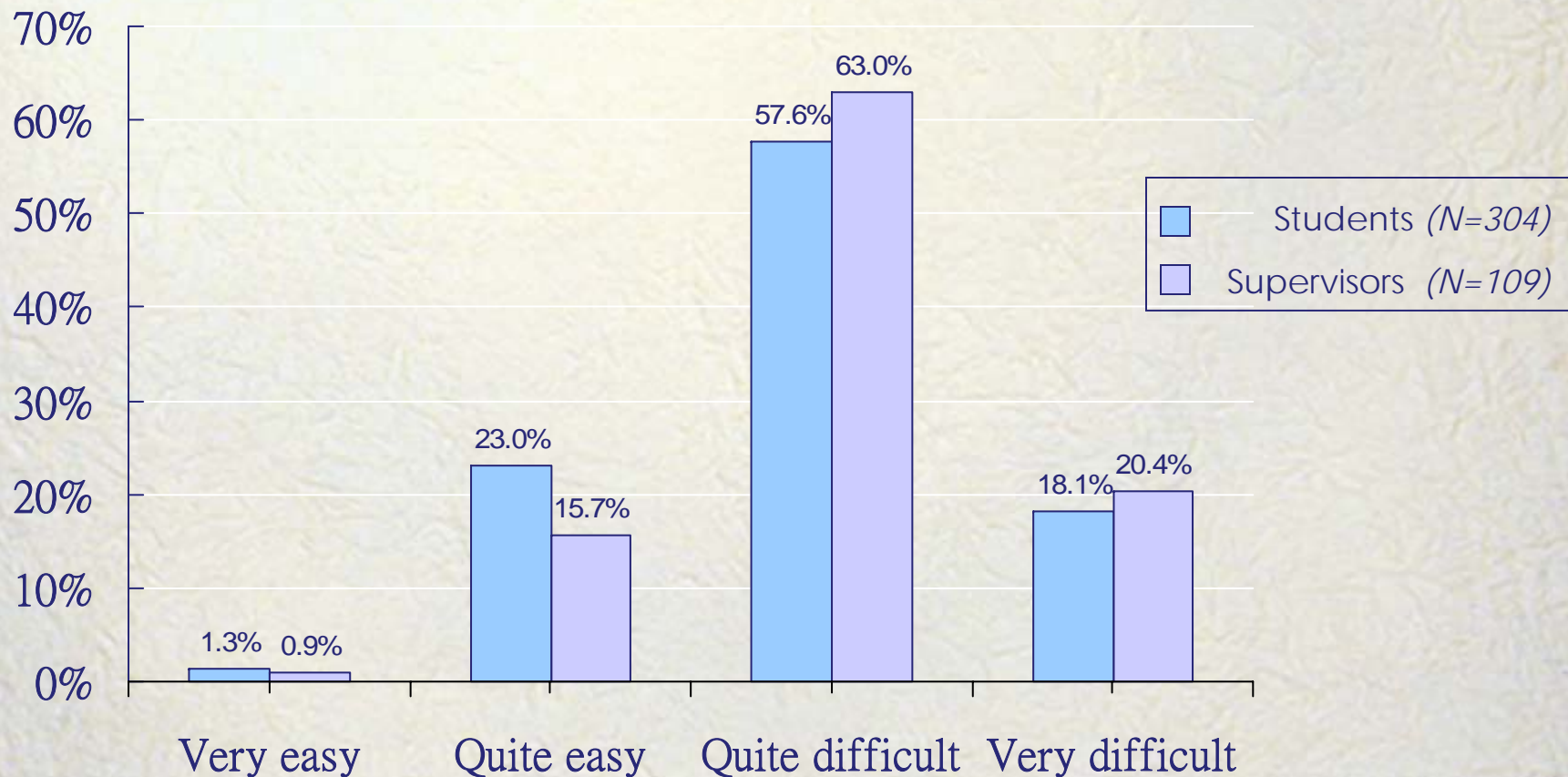
- **Academic Writing Skills**

    – Using a range of appropriate vocabulary

    – Writing in an appropriate academic style

    – Revising written work

    – Summarising/paraphrasing other's ideas in their own words

    – Organising ideas into coherent paragraphs

The Most Difficult Academic Writing Skills

Skill	Students (N=304)	Supervisors (N=109)
Using English grammar accurately	2.52	2.86
Organising ideas into coherent paragraphs	2.66	2.91
Revising written work	2.77	2.79
Summarising/paraphrasing others' ideas in your own words	2.75	2.93
Using a range of appropriate vocabulary	2.92	3.03
Writing in an appropriate academic style	2.8	2.97
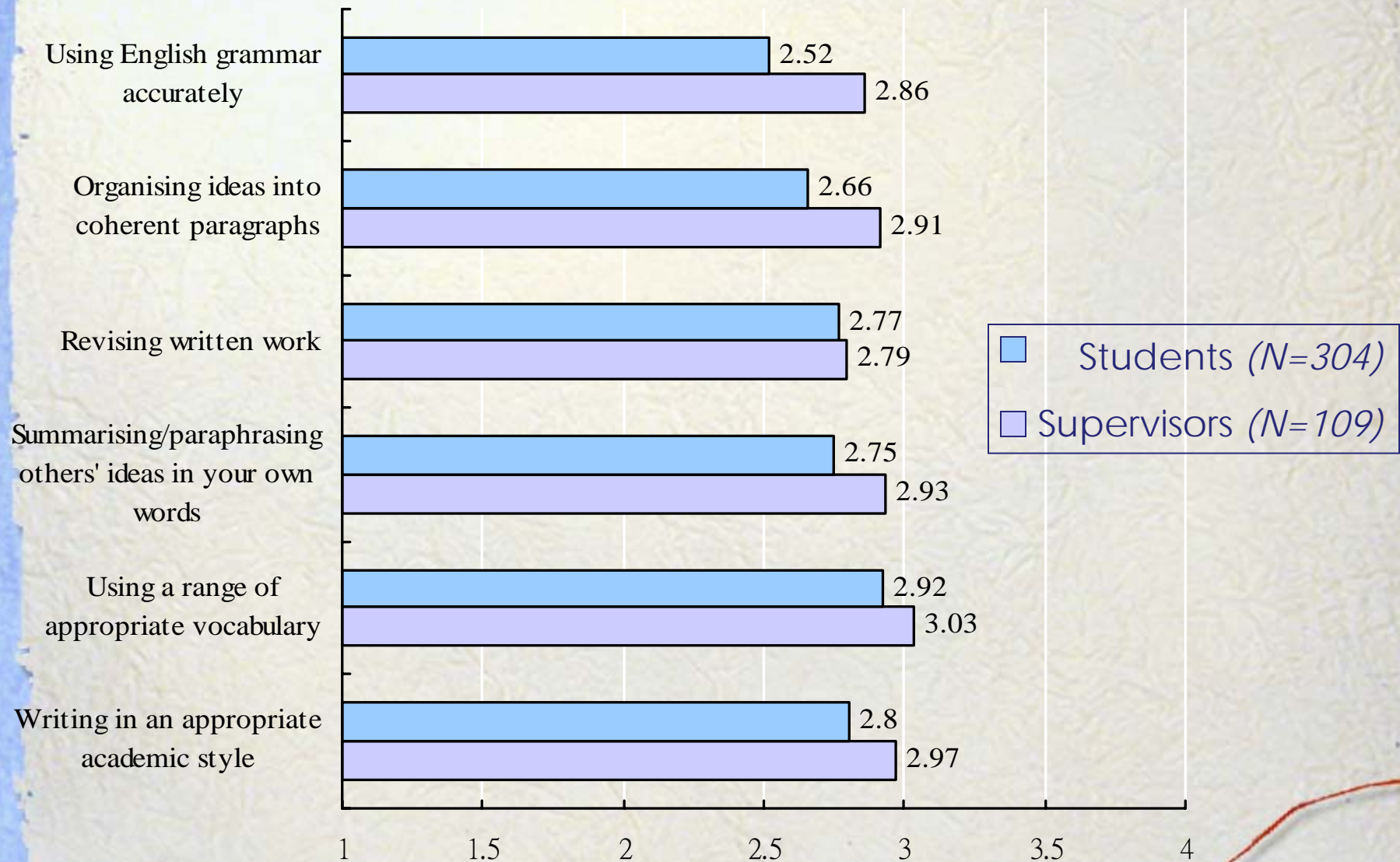
# Using a Range of Appropriate Vocabulary

Interview Data

'traditional Chinese words are difficult to explain, when I write, it is difficult to translate Chinese philosophical words…I can't find (the translated terms), I have no other choice, I just translate (it)'

(PhD, SD)

'Sometimes writing is difficult for me…I usually write very flat because my vocabulary is not very good…'

(PhD, AMA)

Writing in an Appropriate Academic Style
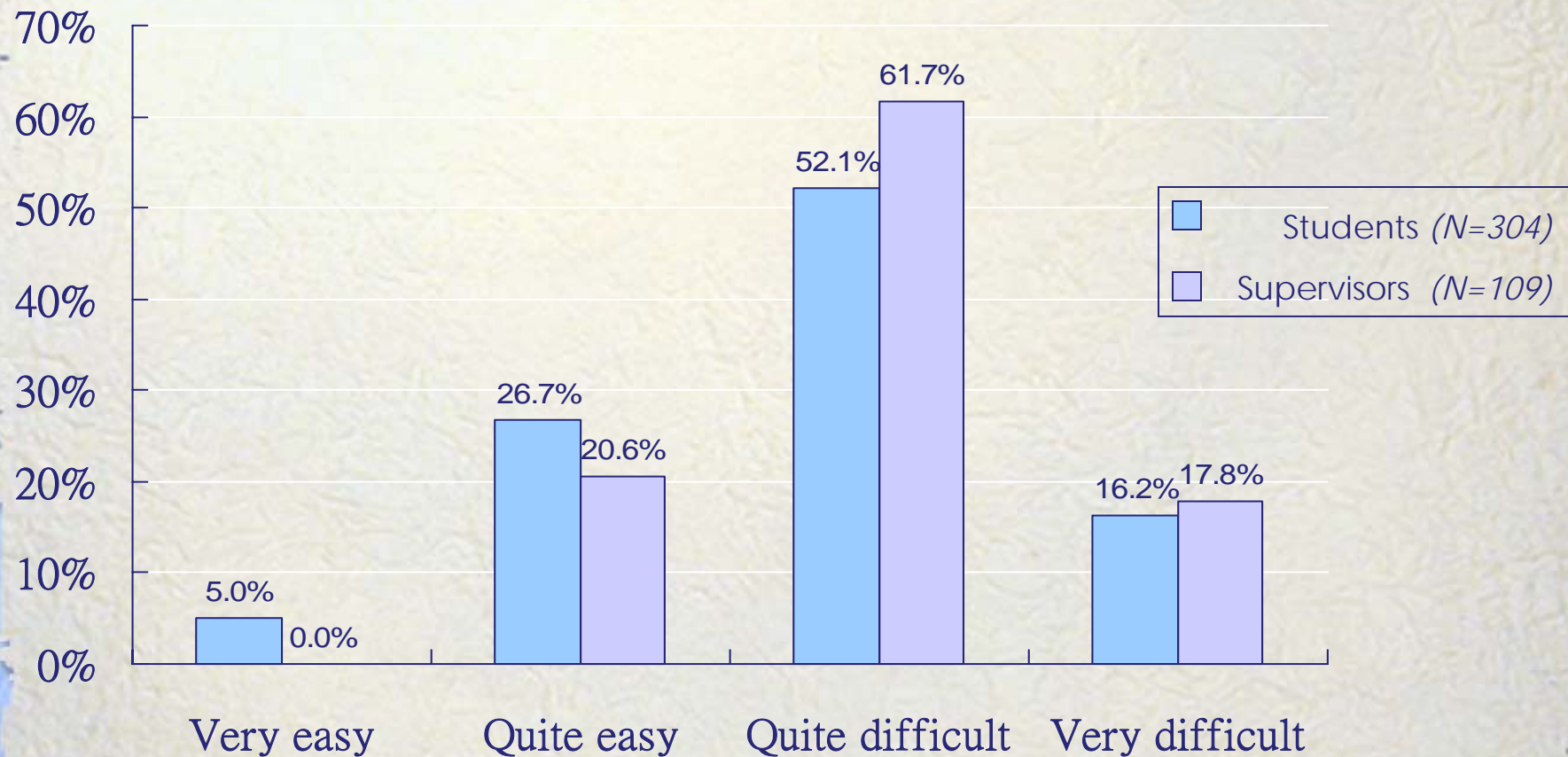
Interview Data

'Writing style (is the most difficult thing when writing), but I am not really sure what do I did wrong!'
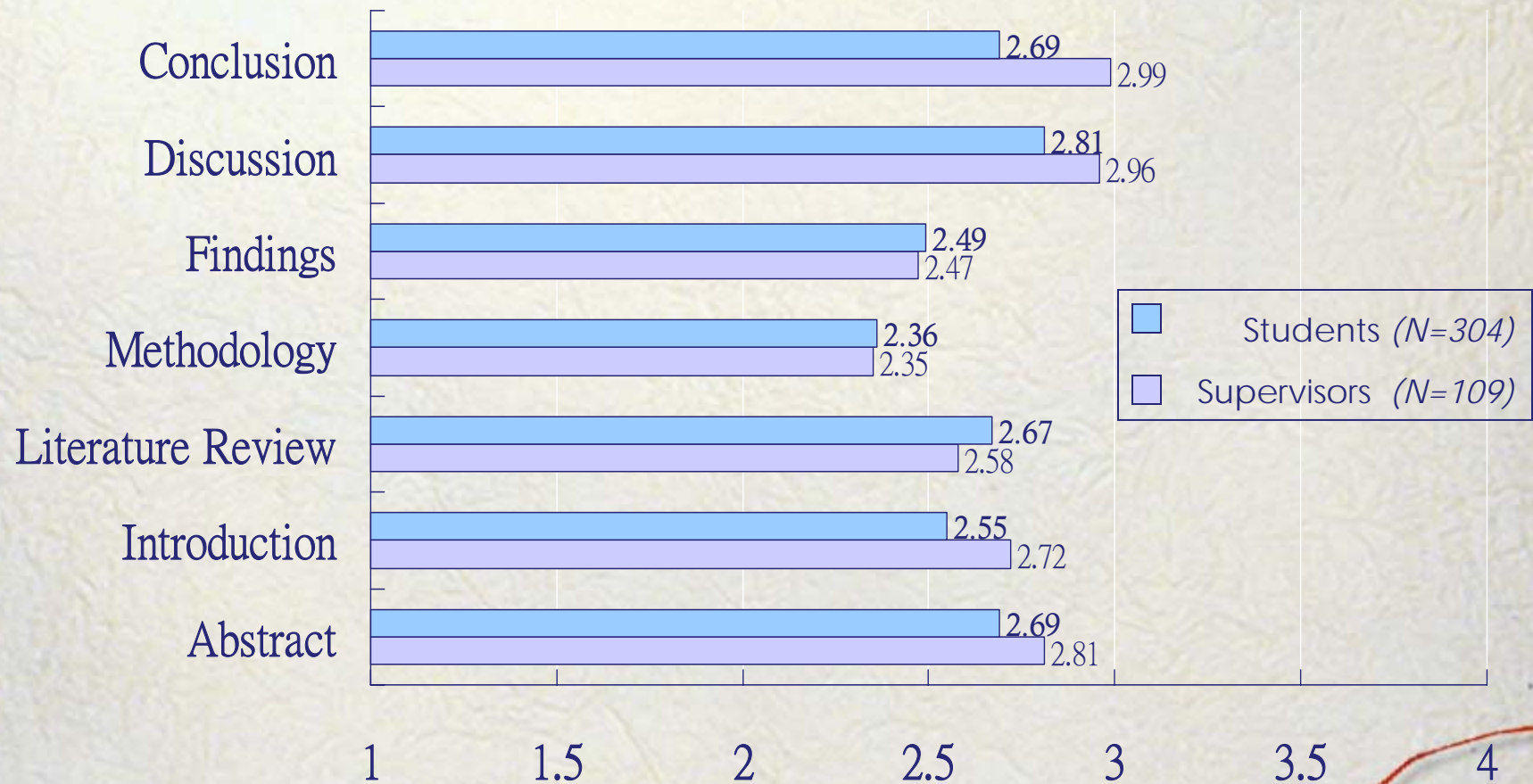
<div align="right">(PhD, ITC)</div>

'... I am also not very sure whether my writing style is close to (an) authentic English style, or whether I am still (writing) in a Chinese style. Although my supervisor said my writing is okay, but I am not sure...'

<div align="right">(MPhil, SHTM)</div>

Sections of Research Writing

- Discussion and conclusion were the most difficult sections for students to write

Section	Students (N=304)	Supervisors (N=109)
Conclusion	2.69	2.99
Discussion	2.81	2.96
Findings	2.49	2.47
Methodology	2.36	2.35
Literature Review	2.67	2.58
Introduction	2.55	2.72
Abstract	2.69	2.81

Interview Data

One ABCT student explained the complex nature of discussing findings:

'the discussion is the most difficult for me because you have to analyse your own research, compare it with the literature and identify research implications based on that comparison. However, the area could be very broad, so you have to read a lot of papers and select relevant information that support or contradict your argument. In the meantime, you also have to present your argument to support your findings and analysis. So, you have to be very familiar with your own project as well as other studies.'
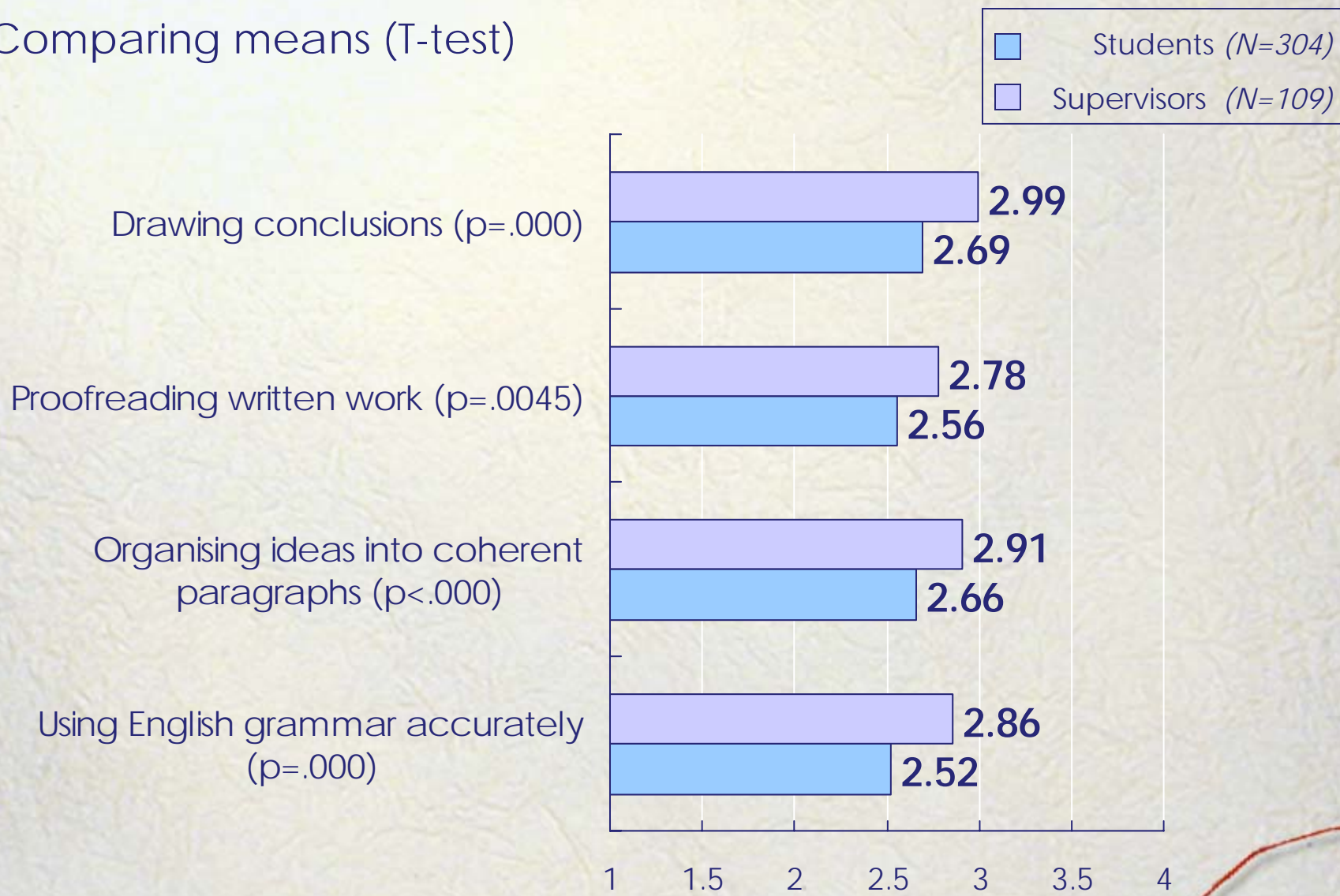
Interview Data

'I think literature review is not a big problem for students as they just need to refer and modify others' ideas. However, the discussion and finding analysis which completely relies on original writing would be the most difficult for students. Students' critical thoughts are hindered by their language ability that influences their writing performance.'

(Supervisor 5)
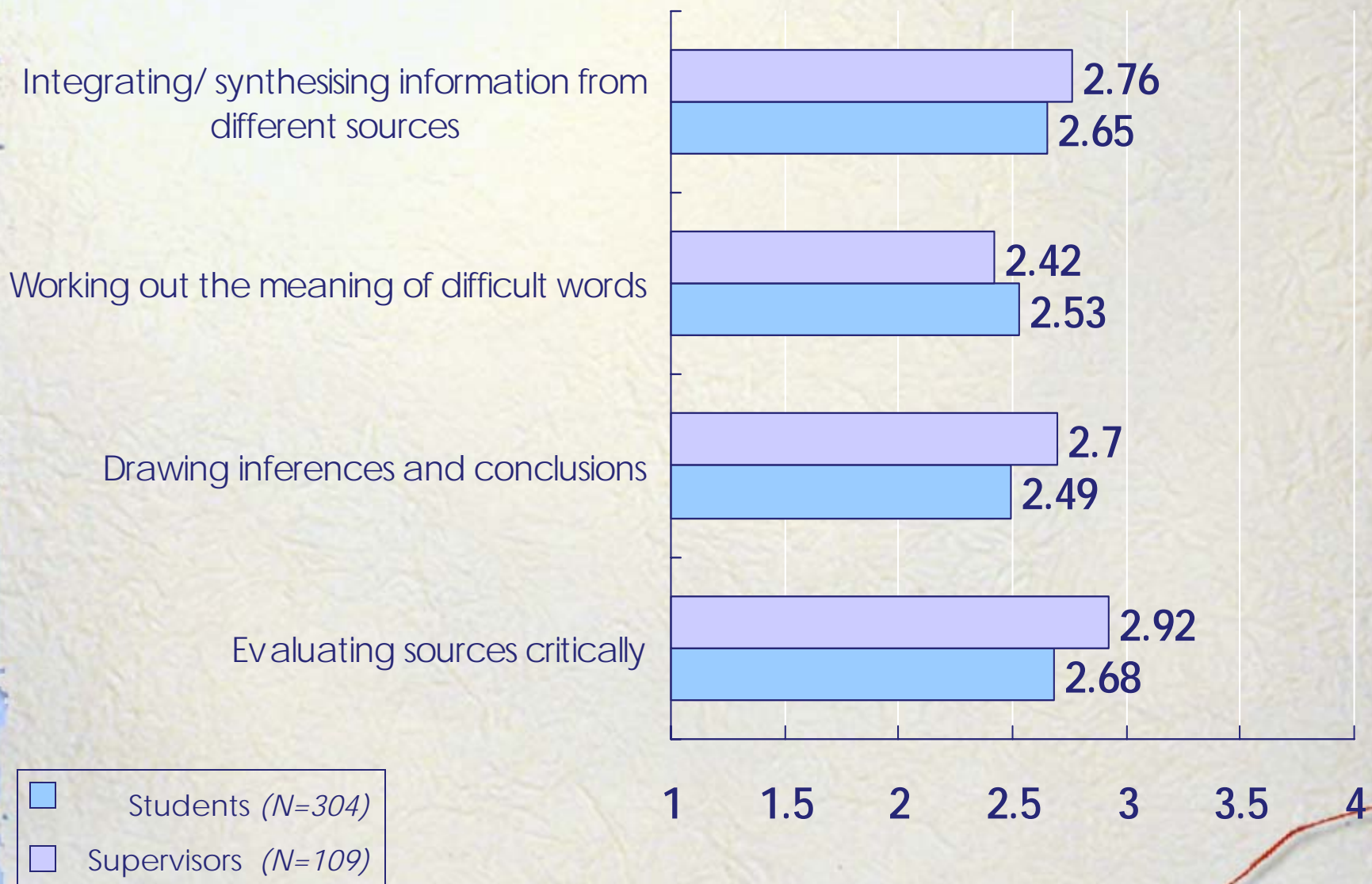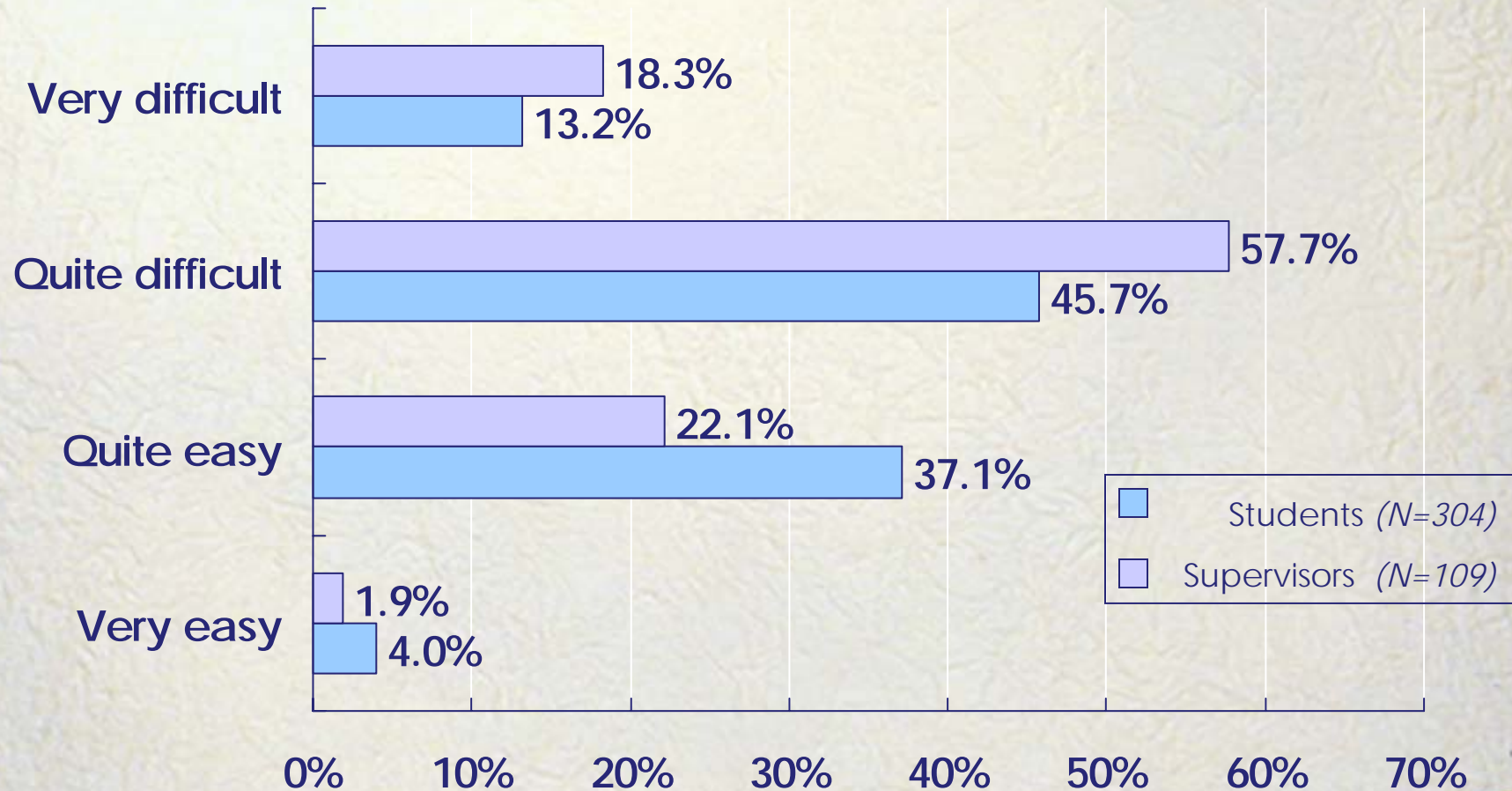
Academic Reading Skills

- Evaluating sources critically

- Drawing inferences and conclusions

- Working out the meaning of difficult words

- Integrating/ synthesising information from different sources

The Most Difficult Academic Reading Skills

Integrating/ synthesising information from different sources
- 2.76
- 2.65

Working out the meaning of difficult words
- 2.42
- 2.53

Drawing inferences and conclusions
- 2.7
- 2.49

Evaluating sources critically
- 2.92
- 2.68

Students *(N=304)*
Supervisors *(N=109)*
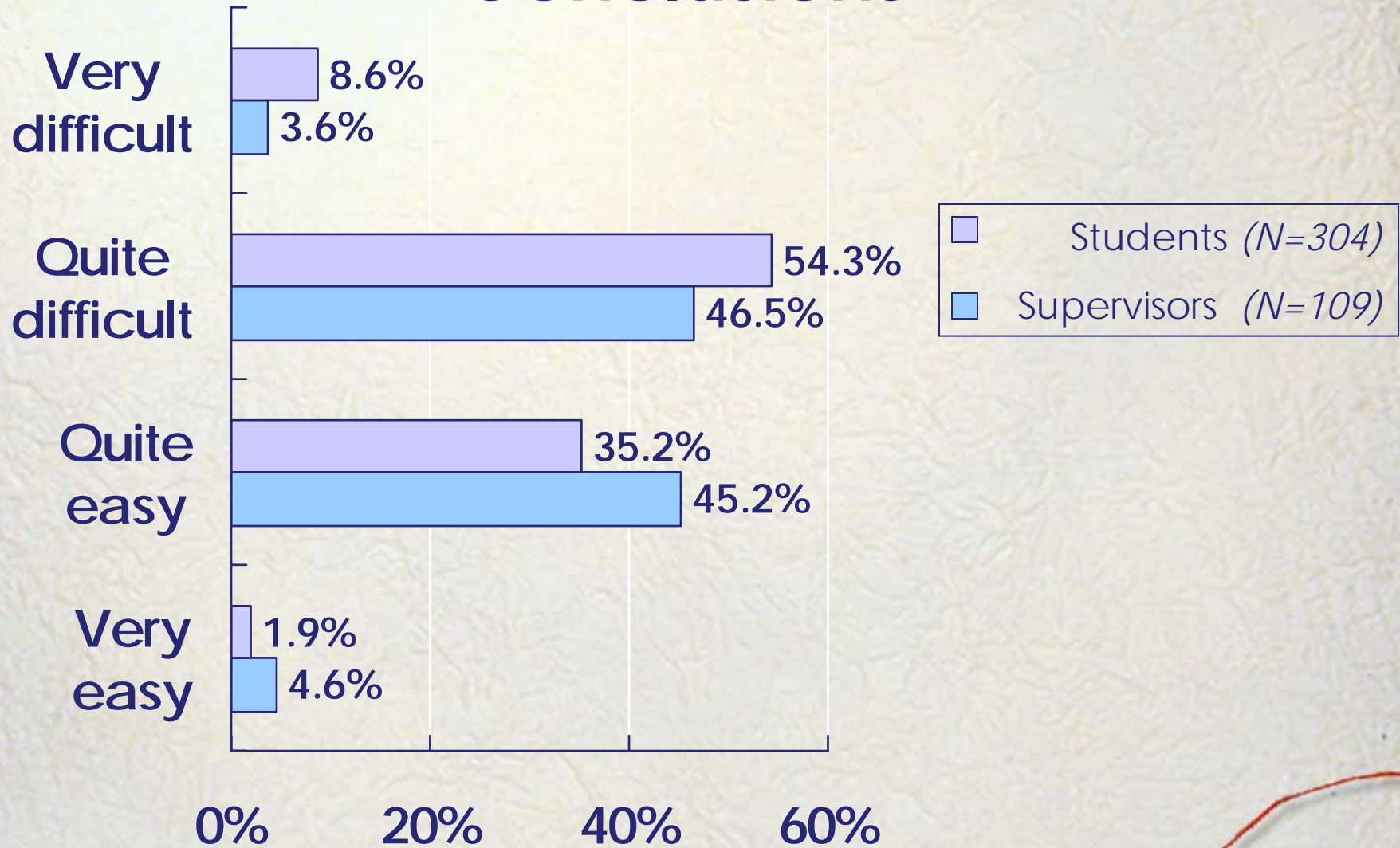
1   1.5   2   2.5   3   3.5   4

Interview Data

'…when I read one paper, I think it is okay, and when I read another paper, I think it is okay too... I don't know how to criticize it!'

(PhD, ENGL)

'…generally, reading is easy, but if you need to think and do your own critic (based on the articles), it is difficult.'

(PhD, SD)

Interview Data

'*I think Hong Kong students generally, when they read, they just decode and understand the text. I think Hong Kong students, need to develop a more critical perspective, to criticize somebody else's research…so I think part of the difficulty is going from just understanding the text to be able to critically draw on and use the text to contribute to developing your own argument.*'
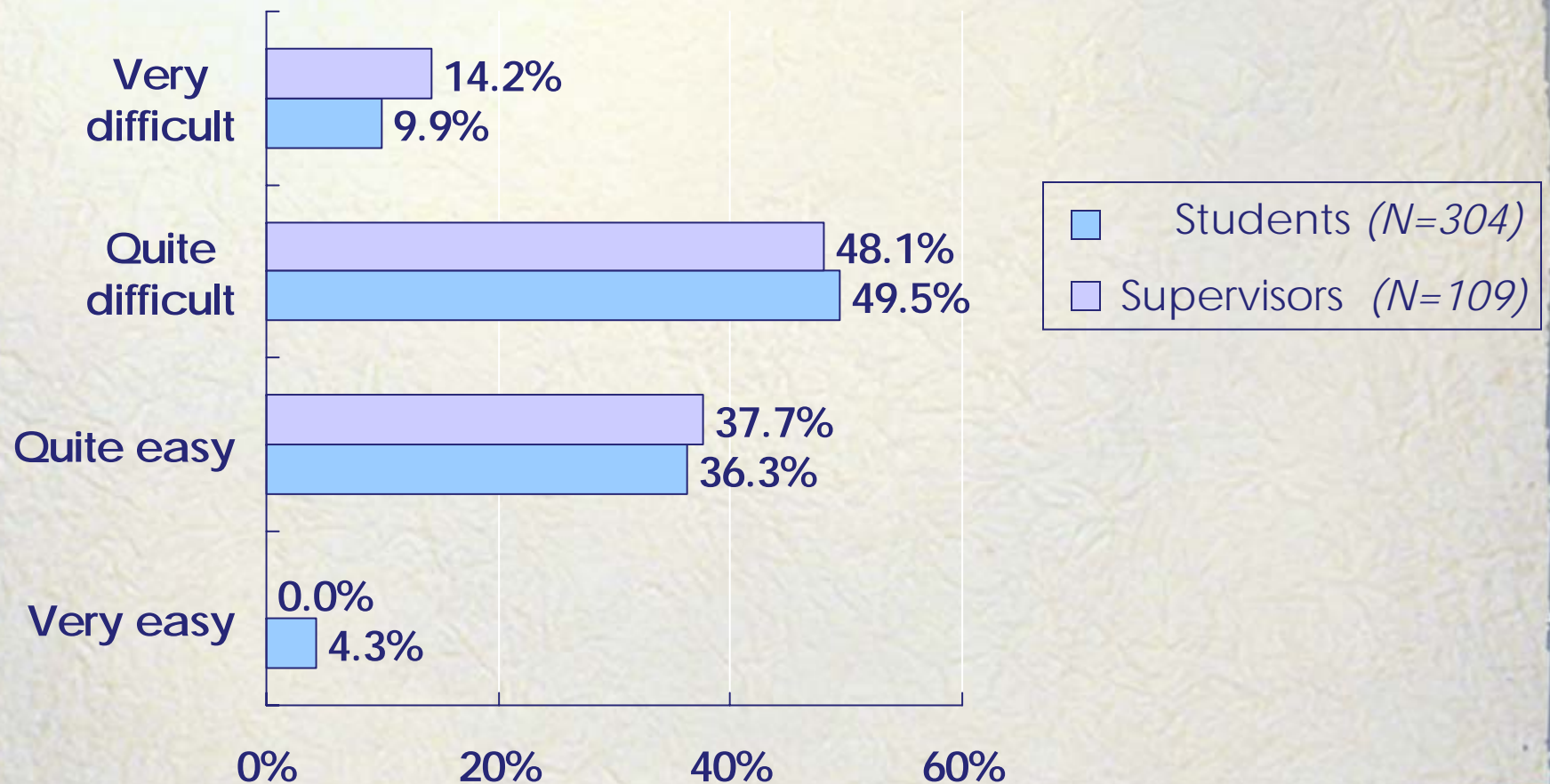
(Supervisor 1)

The Perceptions of Supervisors and Students
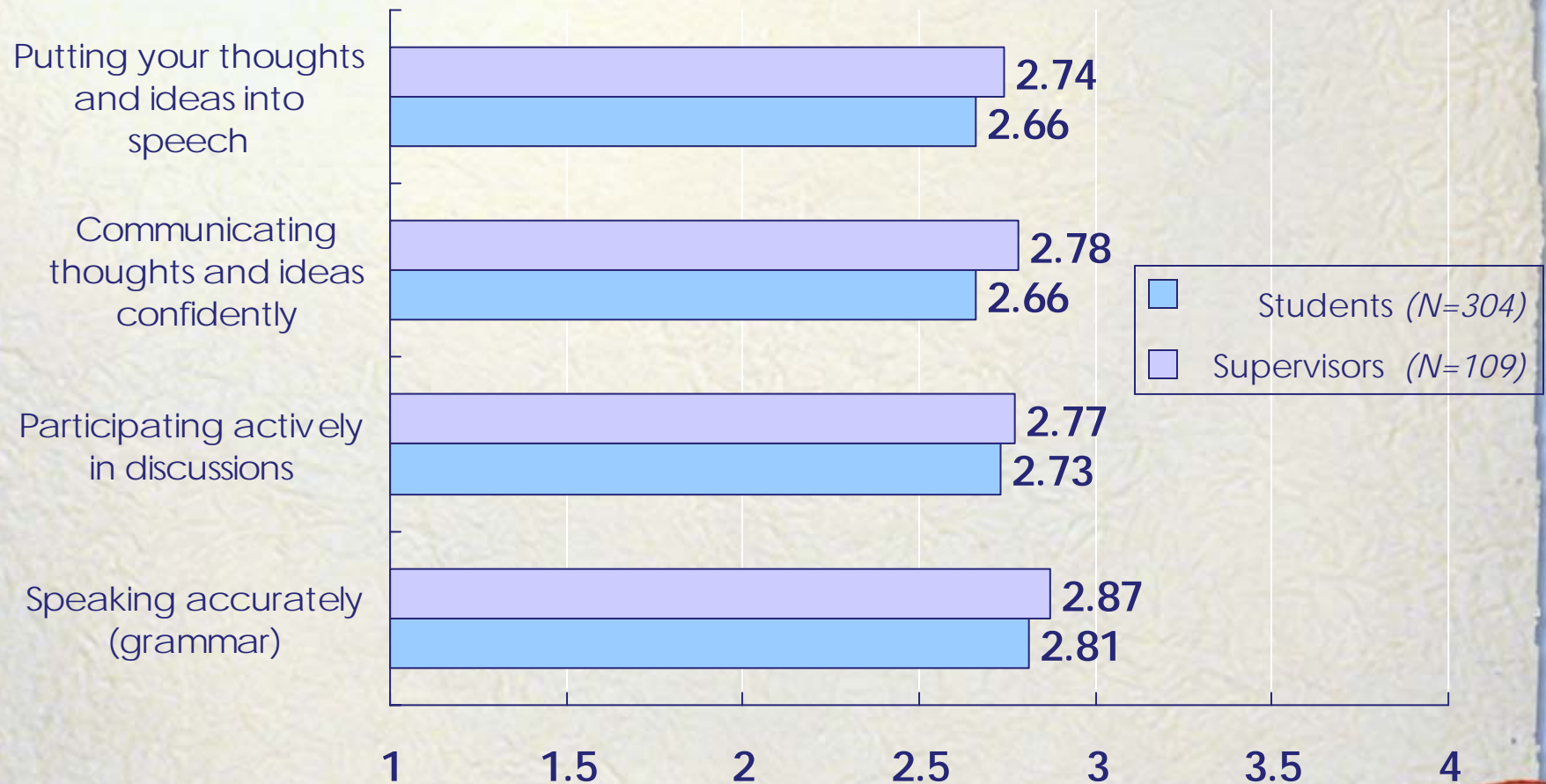
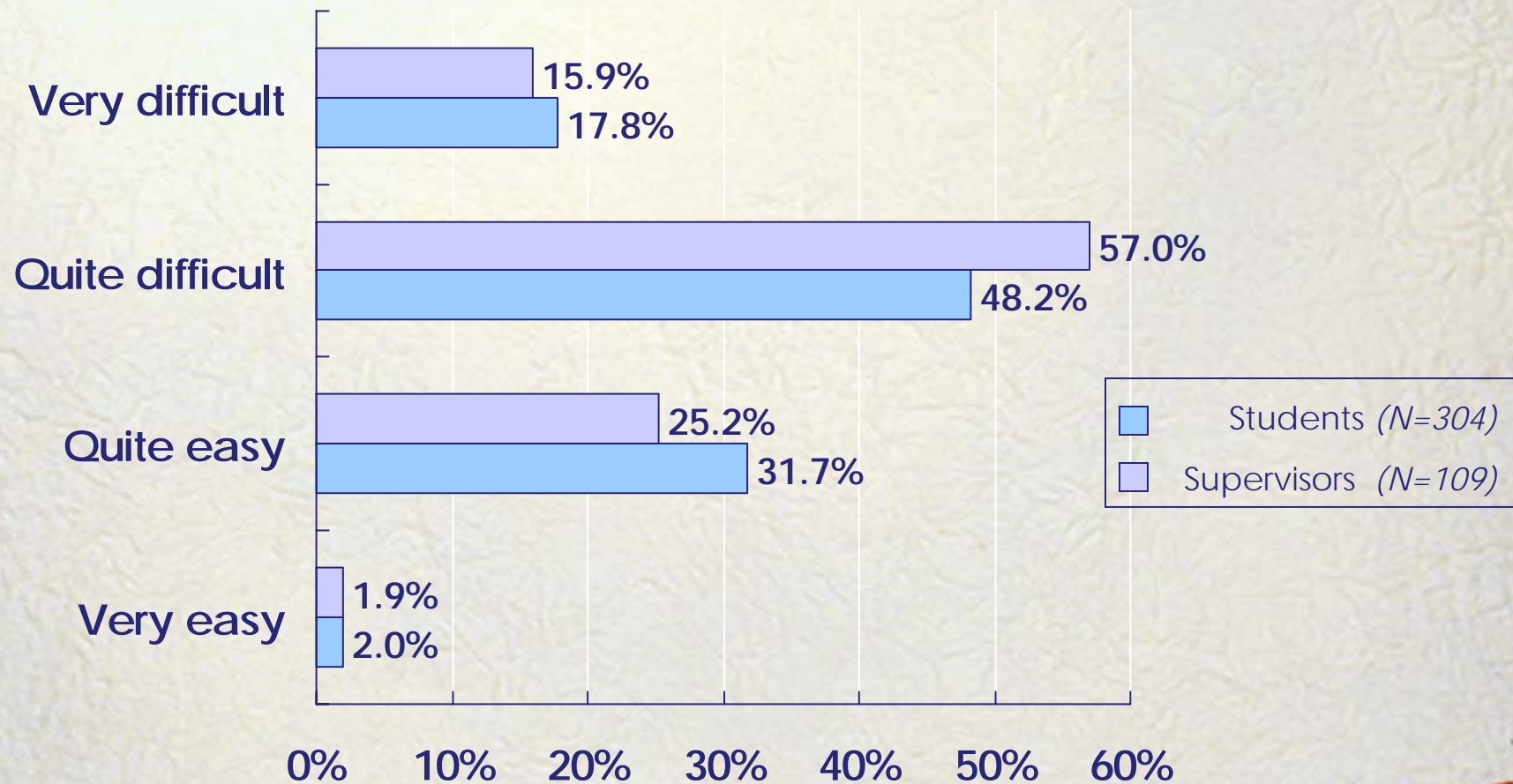Comparing means (T-test)
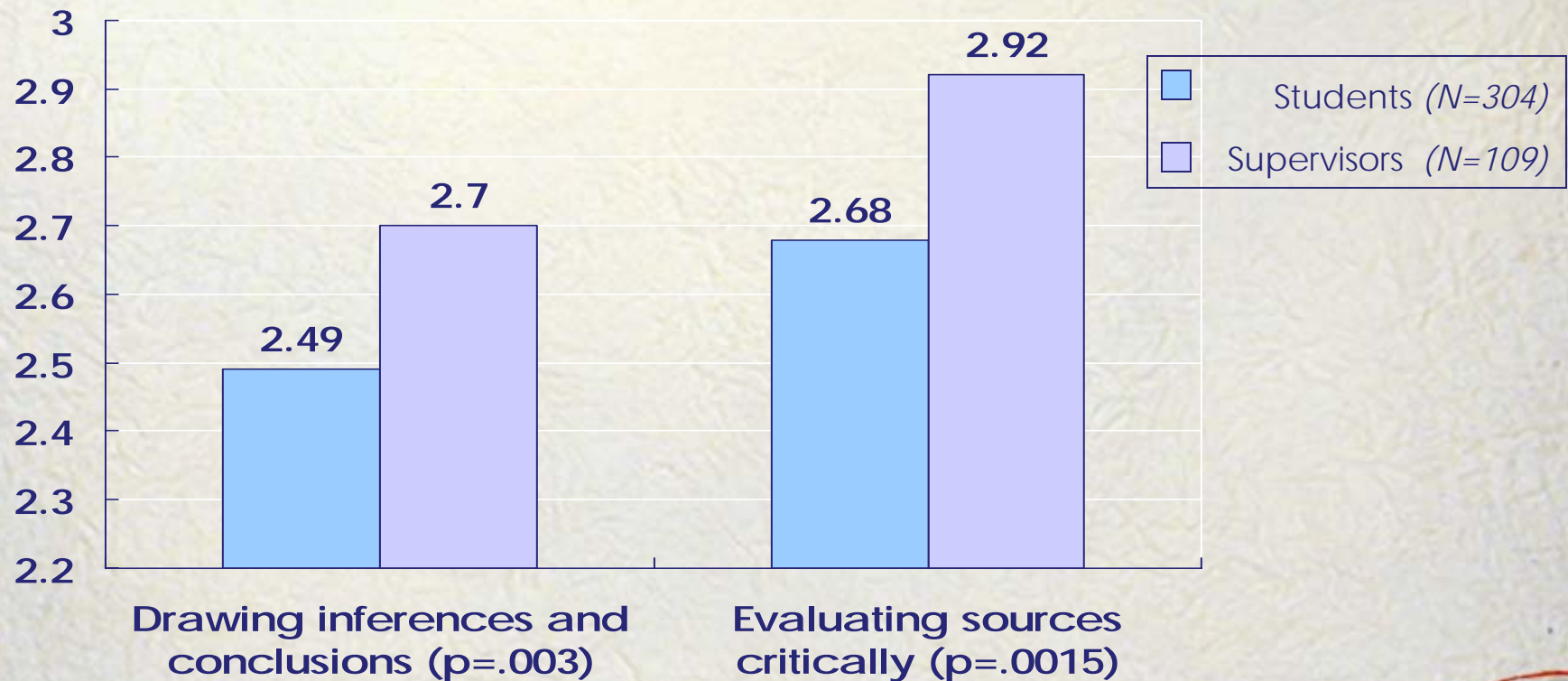
Academic Speaking & Listening Skills

- Speaking accurately

- Participating actively in discussions

- Communicating thoughts and ideas confidently

- Presenting from notes/prompts/keywords

The Most Difficult Academic Speaking & Listening Skills

Putting your thoughts and ideas into speech
Supervisors: 2.74
Students: 2.66

Communicating thoughts and ideas confidently
Supervisors: 2.78
Students: 2.66

Participating actively in discussions
Supervisors: 2.77
Students: 2.73

Speaking accurately (grammar)
Supervisors: 2.87
Students: 2.81

Students (N=304)
Supervisors (N=109)
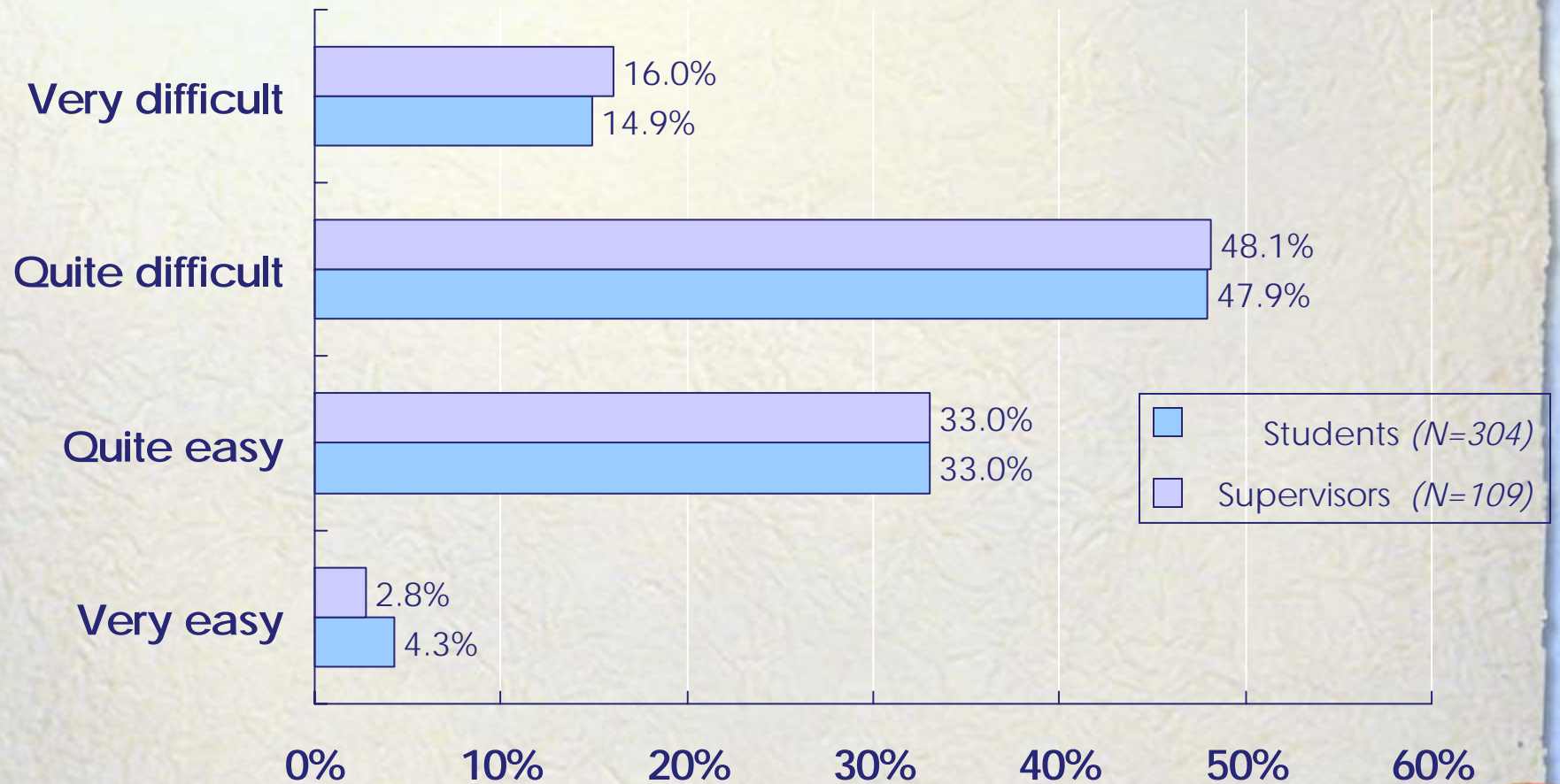
Interview Data

'...I want to make it grammatically correct, but it takes time for me to organize my speech before I can speak.'

<div align="right">(MPhil, ENGL)</div>

'Speaking in general is not difficult (for me), (but) it is difficult to speak well.'
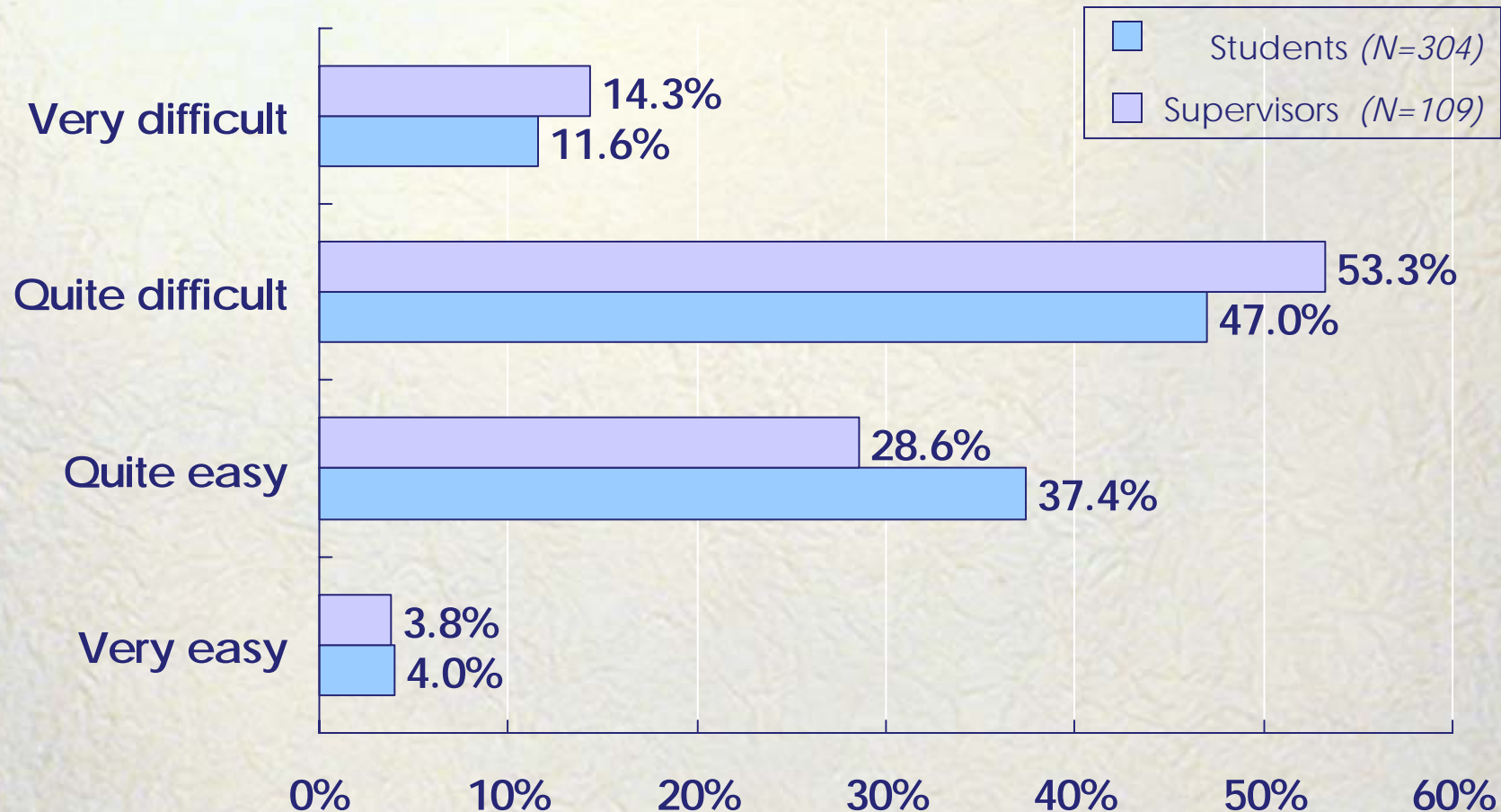
<div align="right">(PhD, ISE)</div>

Interview Data

'...I feel nervous many times, and it takes time for me to think about what I should say, how to communicate with people effectively...'

(PhD, SD)

'...when I can't have enough time to prepare (in discussions), I don't really know what to say sometimes, and I will be tongue-tied more easily...'

(PhD, LSGI)

Communicating Thoughts and Ideas Confidently

Legend:
- Students *(N=304)*
- Supervisors *(N=109)*

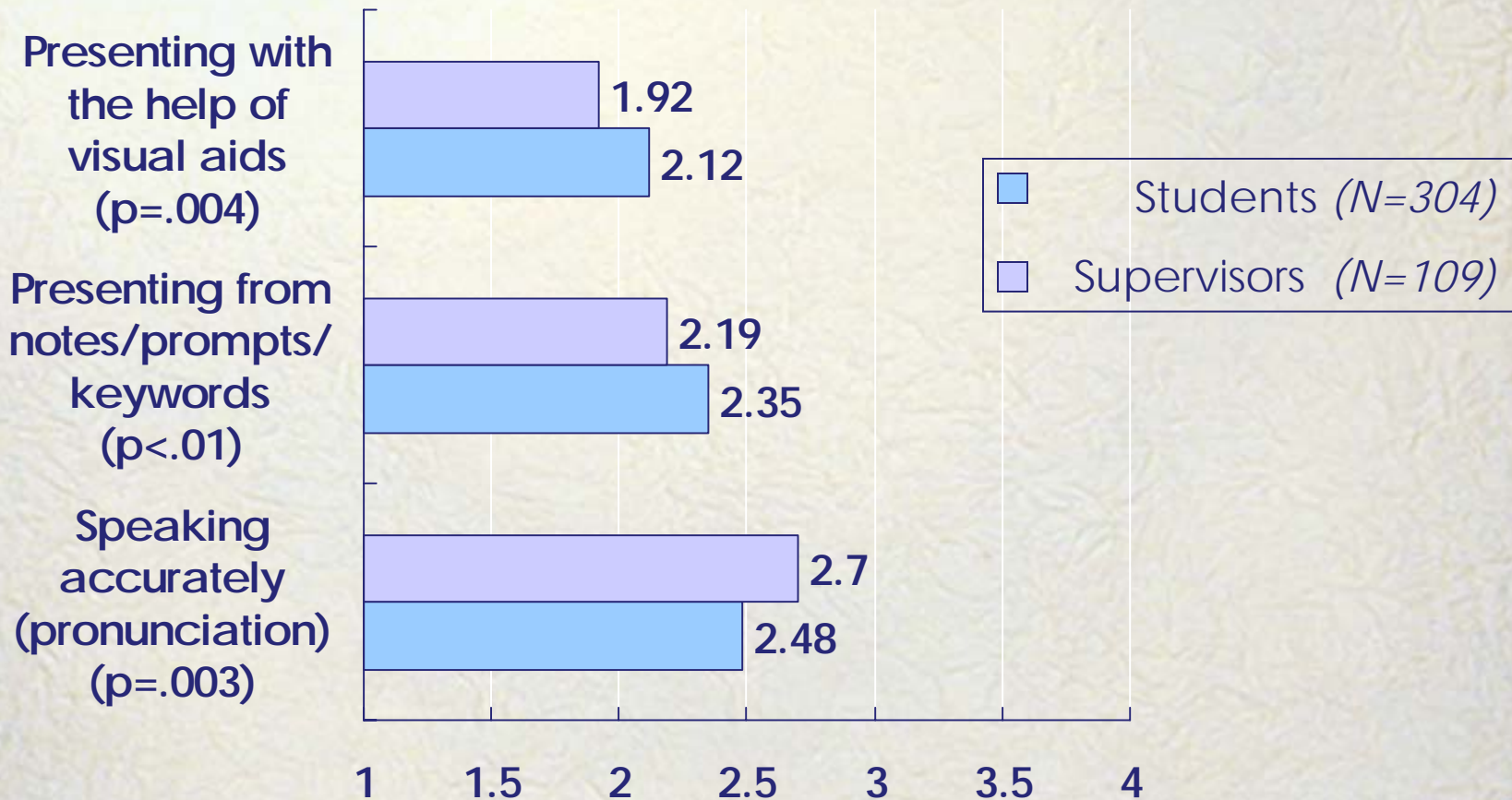| Category	Supervisors	Students
Very difficult	14.3%	11.6%
Quite difficult	53.3%	47.0%
Quite easy	28.6%	37.4%
Very easy	3.8%	4.0%

Interview Data

'...they are not confident enough to understand the questions and that influences their capability to answer questions during the Q and A session.'
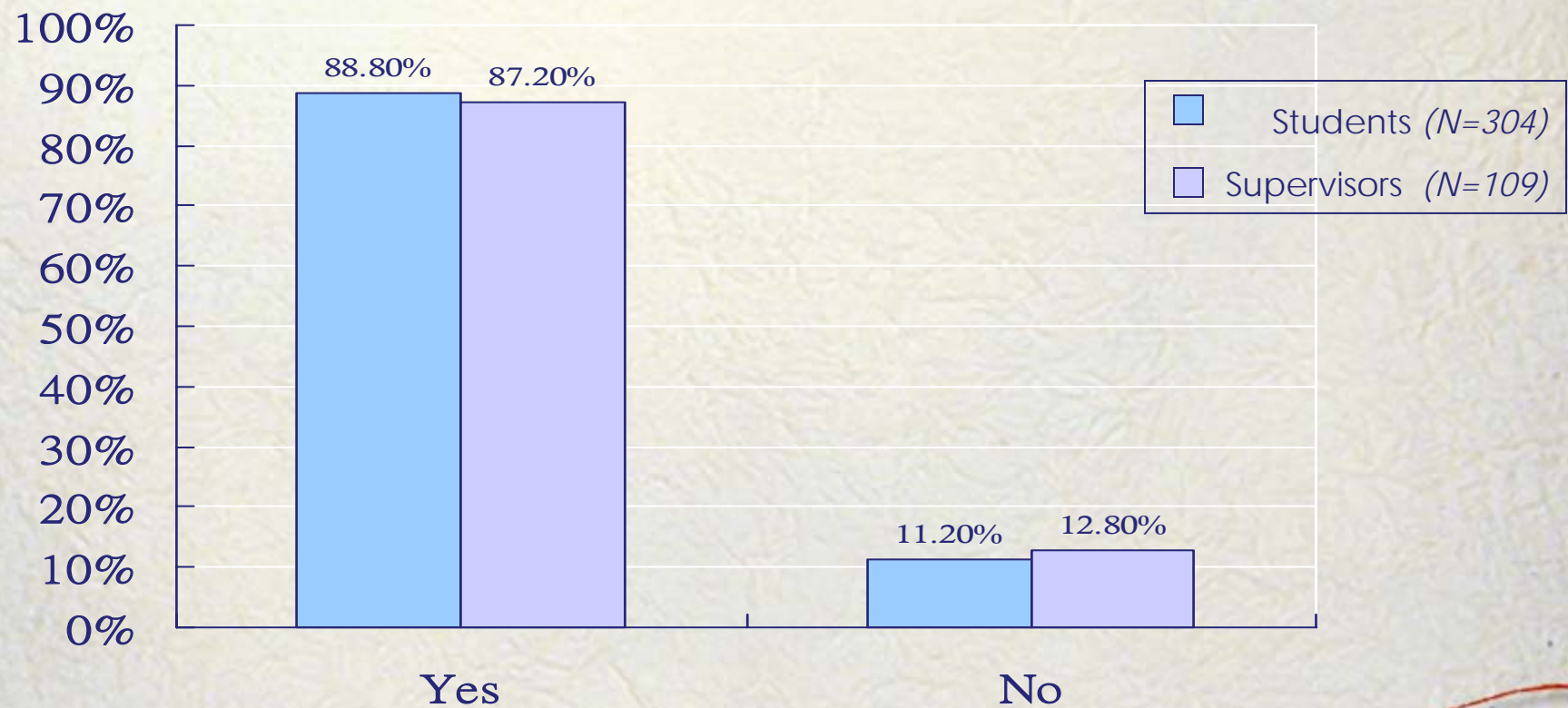
(Supervisor 4)

Language Support for Postgraduate Research Studies

- More English language support is needed

Interview Data

'although the English proficiency of research students is increasing recently, students (particular who graduated in non-English instructed institutions) are lacking in confidence. I wish there were more resources for English support in the future…I think more resources should be increased in mentoring as our Department doesn't have enough resources to help the students' with their written work…'

(Supervisor 2)

'…more resources invested on revising written work could improve the overall research output (of the Department/ University).'

(Supervisor 6)

Conclusions

- Supervisors and postgraduate research students recognise the importance of English language skills for academic success, and acknowledge the value of language support provided by the University.

- Supervisors perceived that their supervisees had greater difficulty with their English than the students themselves.

- Many research students at PolyU lack confidence and practice in the use of academic English language skills at postgraduate research level.

- Areas that students find particularly problematic:
  – Writing in an appropriate academic style
  – Reading critically
  – Speaking accurately

- **There is a very clear need to increase language support for research postgraduates.**

Pedagogical Implications

For Subject Design

Support for Academic Style
– Ensure teaching and learning of the appropriate academic style

Discipline-specific Content
– Major differences were found when comparing students from different disciplines.

– Discipline-specific courses should be designed and provided in order to meet the specific needs of students from different subject areas, such as applied sciences, engineering and humanities.

Needs-based Language Support
– Respondents from different language backgrounds have different needs.

– Consider - designing particular courses/ services for students with different language backgrounds, such as international students and Mandarin-speaking students.

For the University

An English-Speaking Academic Environment
– An English-speaking environment can increase the students' opportunity to practise their English.

– An increase in the number of exchange students could enhance the campus's English-speaking atmosphere.

On-going Needs Analysis of Research Postgraduates
– In order to evaluate and to improve the language support for our students, we have to understand their changing needs.

– Research into this area is limited.

– Need more extensive studies to comprehensively assess and explore the needs of postgraduate research students.

Thank you to the RO!
Thank you for your support!

A report will follow shortly.

Questions please…