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L2 English and L3 Foreign Language Use and Needs in Foreign Affairs

Abstract

The present study investigates English and L3 foreign language use and needs in the Royal Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, a government ministry with numerous international contacts and extensive foreign language use. We used an online survey combining multiple choice with open-ended questions. It was answered by 486 of the 1447 employees in and outside Norway, giving a 35% reply rate. The findings show that while English dominates, the L3 languages are used extensively and considered highly important, but more often in informal or social contexts. The most used L3 languages were French, German and Spanish, while some less frequently taught languages such as Arabic or Chinese were under-used. While English proficiency is considered high, there is still need for improved knowledge of highly specialized vocabulary and advanced oral and written genres according to subject and area of responsibility. For the L3, improving general language proficiency and language maintenance are most needed, in addition to additional speakers of several less frequently taught languages. For both English and the L3 it is also necessary to develop the linguistic and cultural awareness needed for rapport building in formal and informal situations. A key implication for higher education is the need to integrate the teaching of occupationally relevant English and L3 language skills into non-language degrees.

Key words

Language needs analyses; language in diplomacy; English for Specific Purposes; Languages for Specific Purposes; L3 languages

1 Introduction

Which foreign languages do employees in a ministry of foreign affairs need to be able to speak to promote or protect national interests, and how well? Can one assume that they have the advanced English skills needed to master the “diplomat speak” of difficult situations, or the ability to switch to other languages when needed? In situations where a misplaced comma, a poorly chosen word or a gauche or culturally insensitive comment can cause difficulties, it is clear that advanced levels of foreign language competence are needed. However, is it enough with English, (which is taught as an L2 in Norway), or are other languages, hereafter referred to as L3 languages, also necessary? While a Danish study tends towards English only (Andersen, M. S., & Verstraete-Hansen, L., 2013), a British Academy report states that while “many government departments and agencies believe they can currently ‘do the job’- though perhaps not as well” in English, there is a “growing acknowledgment of the need for and importance of [other] languages” (Project Muse, 2013, pp. 244-245). In Norway, however, while we are strong in English (Education First, 2025), we can no longer take it for granted that employees with advanced L3 skills are available (Carrai, 2022). This is the backdrop for our present study, which investigates foreign language use and needs in the Royal Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (RNMFA), with particular focus on the relationship between English and L3 language use. Our study draws on an online survey of language use and needs answered by 486 (about 35%) of the employees in the ministry, in and outside Norway. It has as overall research question:

What characterizes foreign language use in the Royal Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, a government ministry with extensive international contacts?

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This is operationalized as the following sub-questions:

- What characterizes the use of English and L3 languages?
- What perceived competence do employees have in English and L3 languages?
- What are the challenges encountered in English and L3 languages?
- What are the perceived needs for improved English and L3 language skills?

We contend that our findings from a government ministry characterized by extensive foreign language use at advanced levels should be of interest, and useful, for comparable institutions, and for designing language courses and programs in higher education. We also hope they can inform the ongoing discussions about the need for L3 language skills.

1.1 The Norwegian language context

Norwegians are considered highly proficient in L2 English, in 2025 ranking fifth in the Education First English Proficiency Index (Education First, 2025). This is possible because English and Norwegian are linguistically similar, because English has since 1959 been a compulsory subject from grade 1 in primary school to upper secondary school, and because it is supported by extensive extra-curricular input (Brevik & Hellekjær, 2018; Rindal, 2015). Indeed, experts consider the status of English in Norway and the other Nordic countries to be close to that of a second language (Graddol et al., 2007). Still, although Norwegians' General English proficiency is high, this is not necessarily the case for occupationally relevant language skills (Hellekjær & Fairway, 2015; Nielsen, 2019).

The situation for the L3 languages, elective subjects with teaching starting in grade 8, is more heterogenous. According to the Norwegian National Centre for English and other Foreign Languages¹, 73% of Norwegian pupils start on an L3 language in lower secondary school, primarily French, German or Spanish (The Foreign Language Centre, 2024). However, the L3 languages in both secondary and higher education are currently struggling with declining interest, increasing drop-out rates, and course closures (Carrai, 2022; Spalek et al., 2023; The Foreign Language Centre, 2023). This development has been criticized by the Confederation of Norwegian Enterprise (NHO), with the caveat that L3 and English skills are needed in combination with other professional skills, also known as “double competency” (Ehrenreich, 2010). This has only recently been recognized in Norwegian higher education (Spalek et al., 2023).

2 Language needs analyses

Language Needs Analyses (NAs), of which the present study is an example, are studies that aim to identify which languages, areas and levels of language competence are needed in specific contexts and occupations. They are typically carried out to develop language courses that align with the identified needs (Hutha et al., 2013). In the present study, we define NAs as “the processes involved in gathering information about the needs of a particular client group in industry or education” (Brown, 2009, p. 269).

NAs have a long tradition in the field of English for Specific Purposes (ESP). While initially focusing on linguistic items such as vocabulary and grammar, they over time shifted towards identifying language functions and situations for language use, in particular tasks and professional genres (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998; Long, 2005). Long (2005) has also addressed earlier validity issues by arguing the need to supplement predominantly quantitative NAs with qualitative studies, or by using mixed-methods research designs. He also stresses the importance of including the insider

¹ The Norwegian National Centre for English and other Foreign Languages in Education (Fremmedspråksenteret): https://www.hiof.no/fss/sprakvalg/fagvalgstatistikk/elevene-sine-valg-av-fremmedsprak-i-ungdomsskolen-23_24_en-delig.pdf

perspective of the language users themselves, especially regarding what the language skills are needed *for*.

3 Review

3.1 Public sector NAs targeting English and L3 language use

Since Norway is closely integrated with the European Union regarding economic and educational policies, our focus in the following review has been on European NAs. Most of those found, however, were conducted with the aim of improving business communication, such as ELAN (Hagen, Davila-Philoppon & Nordgren, 2006), while those from the public sector are scarce. Most of the studies found are not even NAs, but spring from common considerations such as the pervasive use of English subject-specific vocabulary, or the need to use multiple languages in public administration in the European countries due to immigration and migration (Başaran, 2023; Garavelas & Chita, 2015; Ongaro and van Thiel, 2018). Others highlight the importance of the intercultural element of language competence and cultural sensibility (e.g. ElKaleh & Stryker, 2023). In fact, outside of the Nordic countries, the only NA exploring foreign language use in the public service sector is a 2014 survey of Greek public administration (Garavelas & Chita, 2015). This study provides information about everyday foreign language use, ranging from elementary to advanced oral and written communication, and about challenges involving aspects of intercultural communication and cultural sensitivity.

As mentioned, in the UK there are a number of NAs and action plans that highlight the problem of overreliance on English and the need for foreign languages, for instance for security and diplomatic purposes. Indeed, since many government ministries have experienced difficulties due to the lack of L3 skills, recent studies and calls for action stress the need for competence in more than just English (e.g. Davie, 2022; Kelly, 2018; Project Muse, 2014; The British Academy 2019, 2020; Tinsley & Board, 2017).

3.2 Nordic NAs

In the Nordic countries, there are several public sector NAs. In the sole Swedish study, Alberius et al. (2017) map the more than 60 language subjects offered in Swedish higher education and discuss these in the context of the actual needs of both authorities and aid organisations. These involve promoting Swedish interests abroad, and dealing with increasing migration and consequent multilingualism at home. In Denmark, apart from action plans focusing on the overall need for and use of foreign languages (e.g., Regjeringen 2006; Arbejdsgruppen for uddannelse i fremmedsprog, 2011), there is a large-scale survey from Danish government ministries (Andersen & Verstraete-Hansen, 2013). This study replicated Hellekjær's (2010) NA from the Norwegian government ministries, with focus on the need for foreign languages in relation to the larger question of education policy. In contrast to the UK experience, the Danish NA revealed that English was considered the only foreign language needed for relations with non-English-speaking countries.

In Norway, the first public sector NA was Hellekjær's (2010) large-scale survey comprising 835 respondents from all 17 government ministries and the Prime Minister's Office. As in business (e.g. Hellekjær, 2012), it found that while L2 English and the L3 languages were used frequently and extensively, English dominated and was often used in situations even when speakers of L3 languages were available. Later, a follow-up NA from Norwegian state directorates (Hellekjær & Fairway, 2015), found that employees often lacked the English proficiency needed for advanced occupational language use, which reflects business NAs' findings (Hellekjær, 2012; Nielsen, 2019). Further, Hellekjær and Hellekjær (2015) found that ministerial job advertisements almost exclusively required language skills together with professional degrees in non-language subjects, also known as "double competencies" (e.g. Ehrenreich, 2010). Such combinations are quite rare in Norwegian

higher education, and the need for these was confirmed in a recent NA comprising both public and private sector employees (Spalek et al., 2023).

This brings us to the present study, where our aim is to provide a more detailed analysis of advanced L2 and L3 language use, and needs, in The Royal Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (RNMFA).

3.3 Theoretical concerns

The present study uses the Common European Framework Rating (CEFR) scale, from A1 (beginner) to C2 (proficient) for English and the L3 to rate proficiency levels for foreign languages (Council of Europe, 2020). There is, however, no doubt that actual language use is more complex than can be captured in those level descriptions; therefore, some additional aspects of language use need to be considered.

For English, its increasingly widespread use has led to it being reconceptualized as English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), which is defined as “a contact language between speakers and speaker groups when at least one of them uses it as a second language” (Mauranen, 2018, p. 2). Furthermore, Jenkins (2015) claims that it is also a *multilingua franca* since the context of ELF use is always multilingual, and research on concepts such as translanguaging (Garcia & Wei, 2014) suggest that several languages may be used fluidly at the same time with no conscious ‘code switching’ from one language to the other. Depending on context, this means that an individual’s repertoire of languages and communication goals may lead to hybrid forms of language use (Cogo, 2016). In addition, the aspects of intercultural competence in CEFR descriptors have in ELF research been found to affect interactions considerably (e.g. Baker, 2018). Thus, since ELF is characterized by extreme variety, it challenges the view of standard languages upon which much English language teaching and the CEFR are based. This means that concepts such as “competence” and “proficiency” levels must be treated with some caution (Seidlhofer, 2018).

It should also be mentioned that the data in this study was collected before the widespread usage of AI and Large Language Models (LLMs), which most likely have had an impact on English L2 and L3 use in this context. As to how this might affect language use, for instance, Koo’s study (2025) found that LLM output in English was considered to be of higher quality and more creative in English than in Arabic and Chinese; suggesting further dominance for those who master English. Still, there are problems with LLMs in English, too. For example, Wilson and Rose’s (2025) comparison of AI and human interpersonal written communication in English showed that the limited emotional and contextual understanding of AI tools was a hindrance, and that these must be used with caution. Such findings are relevant both for future studies of foreign language use in the context of the present study, as well as for how to define competence in a way that includes AI literacy for language learners (Wilson & Rose, 2025).

4 Methodology

The present NA was carried out in 2020 in cooperation with the Foreign Language Service School at the RNMFA. The online questionnaire was designed to support the school’s recently expanded role of providing language courses for employees in all ministries, while also providing research-relevant data for independent analysis and publication. It was sent to a number of government ministries, and the main findings were made available in an internal, Norwegian language report to the school. For this study, our analysis focuses on data from 486 respondents from a single ministry, the RNMFA. While the questionnaire drew heavily on the multiple-choice items used in Hellekjær (2010), it added new items on the extent of language use, and perceived levels of language proficiency. It also added open-ended questions designed to provide richer information about key aspects of English and L3 use and needs. This was in line with Long’s (2005) call to supplement quantitative studies with other, primarily qualitative data sources, and introduced a *quant-qual*, mixed-methods approach to the

online survey (Teddle & Tashakori, 2009). The present study, however, focuses primarily on the quantitative data.

4.1 Research instruments

The Norwegian language questionnaire comprised 31 items, mostly multiple choice using a 5-point Likert scale (the questionnaire is available on request). There were background questions about ministry affiliation, education, current position, and frequency of contact with different geographical areas. It also included a filter question where respondents were asked whether they used English (L2) only, English along with one or more other foreign (L3) languages, only L3 languages, or never used a foreign language at all (see Figure 1). While providing important information about overall language use, it also functioned to steer respondents away from irrelevant items to prevent drop-outs.

The questions on language use and needs were largely identical for L2 English and the L3 languages. Key multiple-choice items dealt with frequency of use and situations in which poor language skills had caused difficulties, with adjacent open questions asking the respondents to describe these difficulties and situations in their own words. Others were about self-perceived proficiency levels in English and L3, with scores based on the CEFR scale from A1 to C2 (Council of Europe, 2020, p.30) and about the need for language courses. The latter also included adjacent open-ended questions asking for more detailed information about the language course needs.

4.2 Procedure and sample

The present study was based on an anonymous, online survey. According to the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research (SIKT)² guidelines, this precluded the need to register or apply for approval. Furthermore, any information in the answers to the open-ended questions that might make identification possible has been omitted or anonymized.

The Foreign Language Service School at the RNMFA sent the link to the online questionnaire to the human resources units in the different ministries. A number of factors led to several ministries not participating, and in some cases the link was forwarded to sections only. After three weeks, 965 of the about 4600 employees at 12 of 15 ministries had answered, giving a 20% reply rate. The reply rate was highest from the RNMFA, with 486 respondents comprising about 35 % of the about 1447 employees in and outside Norway. This subsample was selected for further analysis.

4.3 Analysis

In the present article, our analysis focused on the quantitative data in the survey, on descriptive statistics, percentages and distributions from the part of the collected dataset relevant for the research questions of this article. For reasons of space, our analyses were limited to overall trends and selected examples that could expand upon and exemplify perceived language difficulties and language needs. More detailed, thematic analyses of the answers to the open-ended questions are planned in separate studies.

It can be mentioned that a mistake in the design of the online questionnaire, in which matrix questions instead of rating scale questions were used, was corrected by merging these answers to single variables using the statistical software SPSS 29.

4.4 Validity

The main limitation of the study is the 35 percent reply rate, with answers from 486 respondents out of the 1447 ministerial employees in and outside of Norway. This means that the findings must be interpreted with some caution. As mentioned in point 3.3 above, the same is the case with regard to the CEFR rating scales. Still, we contend that our study provides useful information about foreign

² SIKT (Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research): www.sikt.no.

language proficiency levels, use, and needs relevant for other government ministries and similar institutions in Norway and comparable countries, with implications for in-service training as well as language teaching and program design in higher education.

5 Results and analysis

In the following, it should be kept in mind that the numbers of English and L3 users differ, and that some items were not answered. We therefore specify the number of answers to the one-item questions. For the multi-item questions the answers may vary from 461 to 486 for English users, and from 241 to 302 for the L3 language users.

We start by examining which languages are used (5.1), followed by employee qualifications and language competence (5.2), experienced communication difficulties (5.3) and finally, perceived needs for extra competence (5.4).

5.1 Foreign language use

A key issue in this study was the extent of foreign language use in the RNMFA, addressed by the question “*Which languages do you use in your job?*”. Figure 1 presents an overview of the answers. For comparison, it also includes the answers of the 479 respondents from the other ministries.

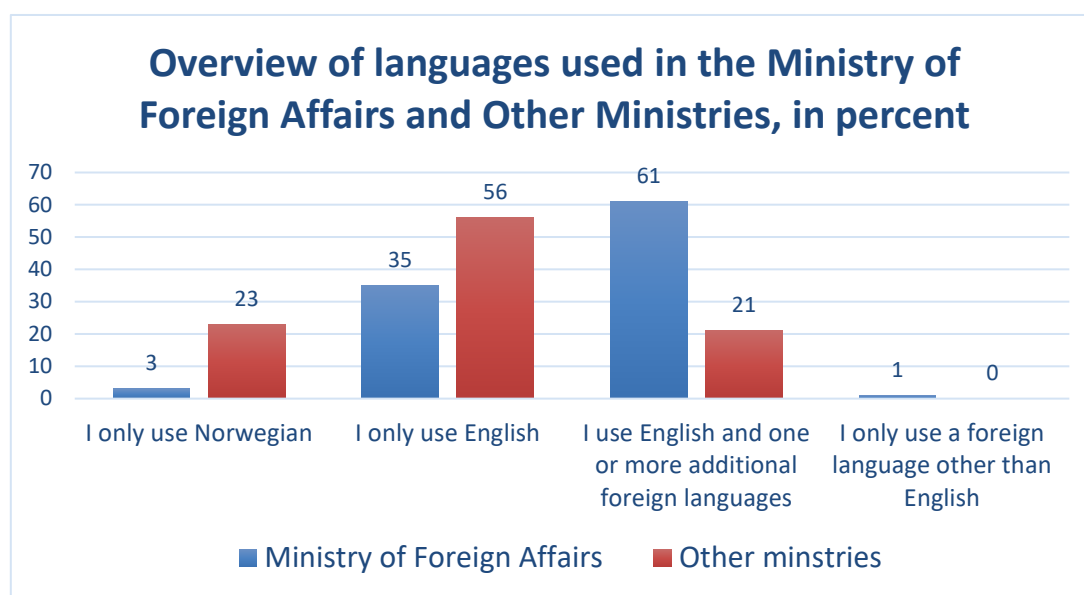


Figure 1. An overview of the occupational use of English and/or other foreign languages, or Norwegian exclusively, in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs ($n=486$) and Other ministries ($n=479$). Answers are in percent

This overview shows that English is used extensively in all of the ministries, and by 96% of the employees at the RNMFA, compared to 81% in the other ministries in the complete dataset. It also shows that 61% of the employees in the RNMFA use an L3 language in addition to English compared to 21% in the other ministries.

Returning to the RNMFA sample, an additional question elicited reasons for the non-use of L3 languages. About 25% of the 290 respondents explained that this was due to inadequate L3 skills, 19% because those they communicated with preferred English, 8% that they preferred to use English, and 1% because their superiors preferred English while 7% specified other reasons.

Next, an overview of how much of their work was done in English or an L3 is presented in Figure 2 below.

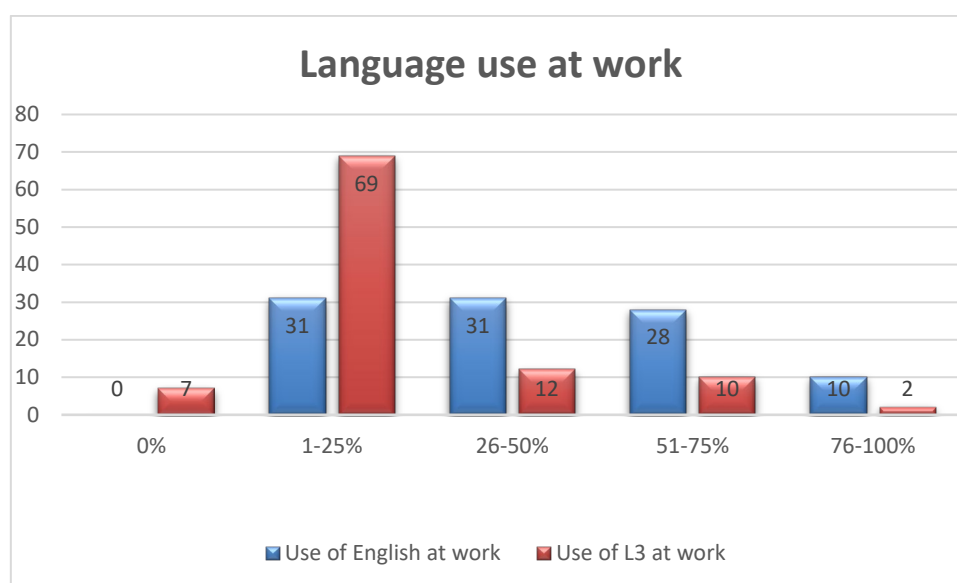


Figure 2. Extent of work done in English or the L3. English users ($n=486$), L3 users ($n=302$)

As displayed, the employees at the RNMFA use both English and the L3 extensively, often for a large part of their working hours. English is most used, with 59% using it for 26% to 75% of their working hours, 28% from 50 to 76%, and 10% for 76% to 100%. In comparison, 69% used the L3 from 1% to 25% of their working hours, 24% from 26% to 50%, 10% from 51% to 75%, and 2% from 76-100% of the time. About 7% do not use their L3 at all.

5.1.1 Which L3 languages are used?

The next issue is which L3 languages are used, and how frequently. An overview is presented in Table 1.

How often do you use the following languages?	Arabic N=269	French N=284	Chinese N=266	Russian N=267	Spanish N=283	German N=276	Other languages N=176
Never	86	29	93	81	58	47	55
Seldom	7	24	3	6	12	22	12
Sometimes	4	30	3	4	16	20	16
Often	2	10	0	6	7	5	9
Very often	1	8	1	4	7	6	9

Table 1. Frequency of L3 language use. The answers are in percent

Based on the answers *sometimes*, *often* and *very often*, French is the most used L3 language with over 40%, followed by *Other languages* (34%), German (31%), and Spanish (30%), while Chinese, Arabic and Russian are less used. Interestingly, the most frequently mentioned L3 languages are also the most frequently taught L3s in Norwegian schools. Further information about *Other languages* was elicited using an open, follow-up question, which received 94 answers. Portuguese is most frequently mentioned, with approximately 6% of the respondents, followed by Italian with 2%. The other languages mentioned, such as Arabic, Latvian or Urdu, received less than 1%, with from one to four speakers each.

The limited use of less frequently taught languages such as Arabic, Chinese and other smaller languages presented in Table 1 stands in contrast to the extensive communication RNMFA employees had with diverse geographical areas, as presented in Table 2 (Appendix). Based on the answers *often* and *very often*, the most frequently contacted areas are, in descending order, the Middle East (52%), the Baltic countries (49%), the Nordic countries (38%), USA/UK/Australia (31%), Africa (29%), Latin/South America (24%), Asia (17%), (China 16%), and with Europe, the Baltic and Nordic countries each getting (15%). A more detailed comparison between areas contacted and languages used proved difficult due to missing categories in the questionnaire items. Still, there appears to be a clear gap between the L3 languages used, and the frequency of contacts with areas such as China and the Middle Eastern countries.

5.1.2 In which situations are foreign languages used?

An important aim of a language NA is to design courses or education programs, based on data about in which situations and for which tasks foreign languages are used, and which are experienced as particularly demanding or problematic. Figure 3 presents an overview of the frequency of foreign language use in different job-related situations based on the answers *often* and *very often* (see also Table 3, Appendix).

Frequency of English and L3 use

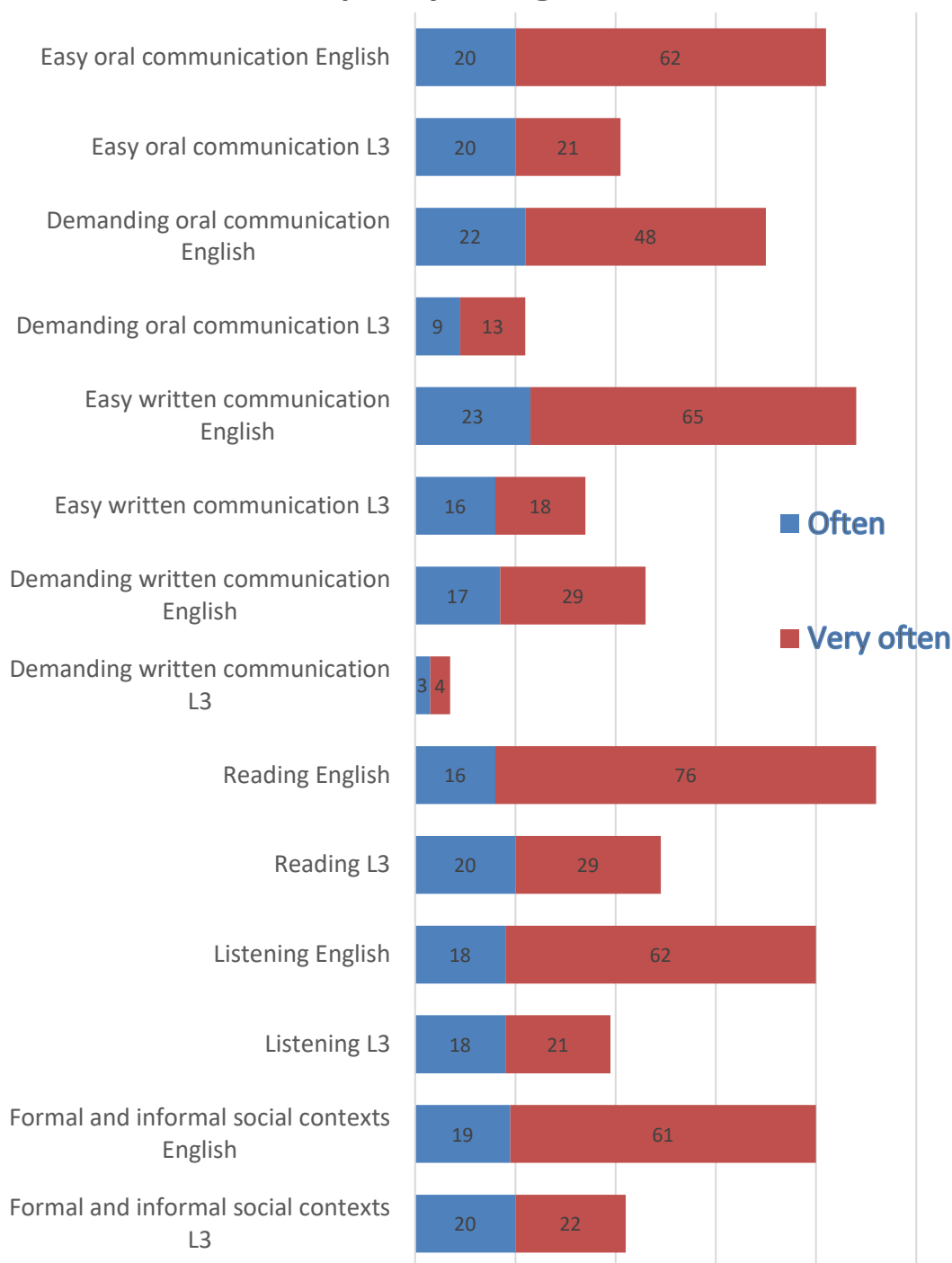


Figure 3. Frequency of English and L3 use in different situations for the answers often and very often, in percent of all the answers from never to very often. *n* for English varies from 461 to 486, for the L3 languages from 241 to 302

Not unexpectedly, the overview in figure 4 (see also Table 3, Appendix) shows that English is used more frequently than the L3 languages where more answers are in the *seldom* and *sometimes* categories. They are also used for much the same tasks. The main difference is that the L3 languages are

less used for *demanding oral communication*, such as meetings, negotiations and press conferences, and markedly less for *demanding written communication* such as reports, studies and articles.

5.2 Employee qualifications and perceived language competence

Positions in Norwegian government ministries are hard to get, and almost invariably require a graduate degree, or even a PhD. This is reflected in the survey, where 78% specified they had a graduate degree and 16% an undergraduate degree. Moreover, a study of ministerial job advertisements shows that these degrees are almost exclusively in non-language subjects, such as Economics, Computing or Veterinary Science (Hellekjær & Hellekjær, 2015). In Norway such degrees only rarely include language modules, which made it particularly interesting to investigate language proficiency levels. In the survey the respondents were asked to rate their self-perceived foreign language proficiency levels in the four skills Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing in English and the L3. The rating scale was based on the CEFR, from A1 (beginner) to C2 (proficient) for English and the L3 (Council of Europe, 2020). The answers are displayed in Figure 4.

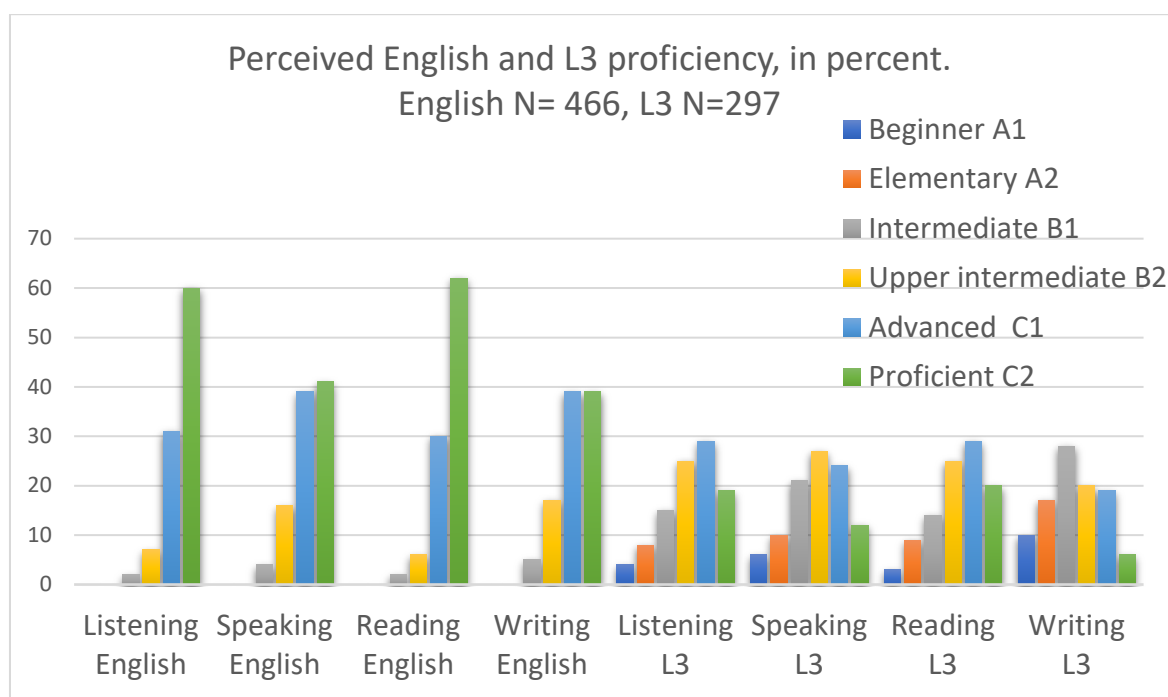


Figure 4. Perceived levels of listening, speaking, reading and writing proficiency in English and L3 on a scale from Beginner (A1 level) to Proficient (C2 level), in percent. English ($n=466$), L3 ($n=297$)

As can be seen, the respondents' perception of their English competence is quite high, with most ticking off levels C1 or C2, in ascending order, 68% for writing, 80% for speaking, 91% for listening, and 92% for reading. For the L3 the ratings are markedly lower and more evenly distributed, the percentage answering C1 and C2 answers are, in ascending order, 25% for writing, to 36% for speaking, 48% for listening, and 50% for reading. It is worth noting that writing proficiency is rated lowest in both English and the L3.

5.2.1 Origins of the employees' language competence

To further investigate language backgrounds, the survey included questions about factors which had contributed to the respondents' occupational language competence. The answers to the questions "*What has helped to develop your job-related skills in English and L3 languages?*" are presented in Table 4.

<i>Factors contributing to the development of job-related language skills</i>	Not at all		To a small extent		To some extent		To a large extent		To a very large extent	
	Eng	L3	Eng	L3	Eng	L3	Eng	L3	Eng	L3
Upper secondary school	1	21	7	8	34	27	32	25	25	20
Language courses/programs in higher education	32	24	14	7	18	13	13	20	24	37
In-service courses at the workplace	33	13	21	9	26	26	13	22	7	27
Language schools abroad	49	19	12	5	17	19	8	21	14	37
Teaching in the foreign language in non-language subjects at university	15	41	6	5	19	7	19	14	41	33
Longer stays abroad (at least 6 months)	10	5	1	3	5	4	11	14	72	74
Active use language as a working language in my current and/or previous position	0	9	3	10	6	15	15	14	78	53
It is my mother tongue	86	86	1	4	3	0	2	0	10	10
Other	26	54	1	3	8	8	26	12	40	23

Table 4. Factors contributing to the employees' development of job-related English and/or L3 skills. (*n* for English varies from 461 to 486, *n* for L3 varies from 241 to 302). Answers are in percent

Drawing on the answers to the category *To a very large extent*, the most important source of occupationally relevant English skills are active language use at work (78%), followed by longer stays abroad (72%), teaching in non-language subjects at university (41%), other sources (40%), upper secondary school language courses (25%), language courses/programs in higher education (24%), language schools abroad (14%), and in-service courses (7%). Unfortunately, the category *Other* was not followed by an open-ended question which could have helped to unpack this category.

For the L3, longer stays abroad are most important (74%), followed by active language use at work (53%), language classes/programs in higher education and language schools abroad (both 37%), teaching in non-language subjects in the foreign language at university level (33%), in-service courses (27%), other sources (23%), and upper secondary school language courses (20%).

In other words, the most important contributing factors for their development of occupationally relevant English are *longer stays abroad* and the *active use of the language at work*. While these are relevant for the L3 languages as well, other factors, such as *language programs in higher education* and *language schools abroad*, are also important for these.

5.3 Communication difficulties and perceived language needs

An important aim in this study was to elicit the extent of experienced foreign language communication difficulties, in which situations inadequate English or L3 proficiency might have caused “*misunderstandings, problems or obstacles for you in a work context*”. The questions use the same categories as in Figure 3, such as easy or demanding oral communication, on a five-point scale from *never* to *very often*. The answers are presented in greater detail in Table 5 (Appendix).

For L2 English we found that only a very small percentage of the respondents had experienced problems and challenges due to inadequate English skills, with almost 80% of the answers distributed between the categories *never* and *seldom* for almost all the situations in the list. Most of the relatively few who had experienced difficulties ticked the alternative *sometimes*. If the categories *sometimes*, *often* or *very often* are grouped together, about 20% ticked off *demanding oral* and *written communication*, and 20% difficulties caused by the *lack of knowledge of the relevant country's culture or cultural codes*.

For the L3 languages, the number of reported problems is markedly higher. The answers to the categories, *sometimes*, *often* and *very often*, ranged from 46% for *demanding oral communication*, (and in descending order of frequency), 45% for *easy oral communication*, 43% for *listening in a work context*, 40% for *formal and informal job-related social contexts*, 38% for *reading in a work context*, 34% for *easy written communication*, 34% due to *lack of knowledge of the relevant country's culture or cultural codes*, and 32% for *demanding written communication*.

To elicit more detailed information open-ended questions were included in the questionnaire asking respondents to “*describe in your own words, one or two situations where you have experienced that a lack of skills in English/L3 has caused misunderstandings, problems or obstacles for you in a work context*”. There were 172 answers for English, and 94 for the L3 respectively. Since more detailed thematic analyses are planned in future studies, we focus on presenting the main trends and illustrative examples.

For English, communication difficulties were reported due to unfamiliar intonation and accents (often with non-native speakers), and with unfamiliar varieties of English. As one respondent puts it, “English has many variants, some are quite difficult to understand”. Next, many struggled with a perception of one’s own lacking competence that could hinder the spontaneity of communication. Others again reported difficulties with cultural and intercultural aspects of communication. What was most interesting, and reflecting their advanced and often specialized language, was that many mentioned their lack of specific (technical) terminology, especially in oral conversations, debates or negotiations, not to mention in writing. As one comment puts it: “the lack of knowledge of technical English and relevant areas makes negotiations more difficult”.

Before continuing with the L3, it is important to note that the answers also describe a context where L3 and English use often overlap, with English being preferred in formal professional contexts, and the L3 languages being used when the interlocutors are not fluent in English, for conversations in social contexts, for “icebreaking”, or to achieve better contact with their partners – the latter being particularly important when stationed in an L3-using country. This being said, for the L3 the main reported difficulties were attributed to not knowing relevant L3 languages altogether, the need for better knowledge of the L3 languages, as one comment puts it: “Francophone groups in the diplomatic community are exclusionary if you don't master the language well”. Another mentions: “I have experienced not understanding the culture that is strongly associated with the language, and thus ending up outside the inner core, which consisted of native speakers”.

It is a common denominator, however, that the respondents consider the use of L3 languages to be particularly important. One respondent emphasized that: “In general, I believe that one should know the language of the country one works in, also out of respect for the host country”.

5.4 Perceptions of the need for extra competence.

A key aim of the present NA was also to investigate whether the respondents felt the need to improve their skills in English and/or L3 languages. The respondents were therefore asked “*To what extent do you think that it would be beneficial for you to be offered an English/L3 course in order to perform your work tasks in a better and more efficient way?*”. The answers are presented in Figure 5.

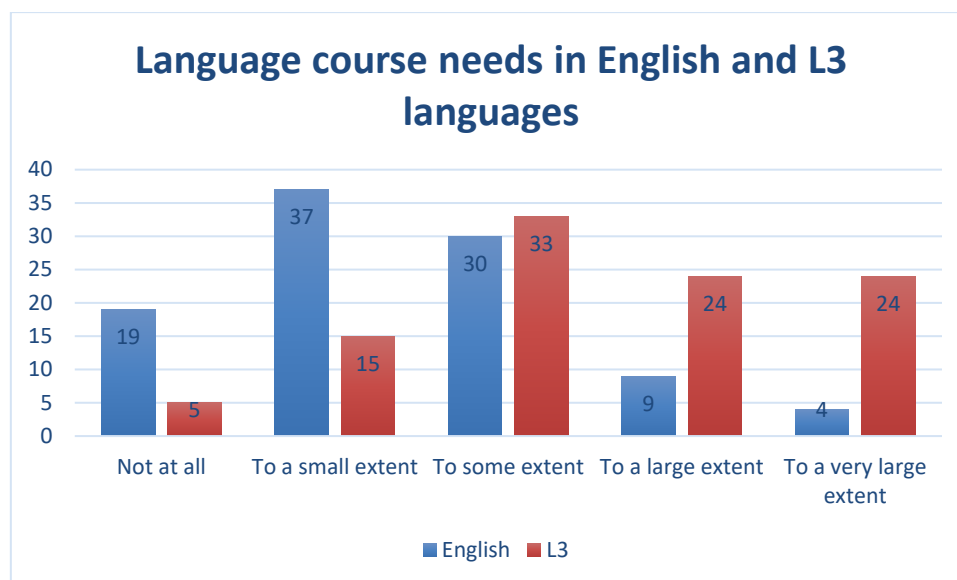


Figure 5. Perceived need for language courses, in percent. English ($n=466$), L3 ($n=293$)

As displayed, few respondents feel a strong need for English courses, with only 13% answering *to a large or very large extent*, and 19% indicating that they did not need courses at all. For the L3 languages, however, the perceived need is markedly higher, with 48% answering they needed such courses *to a large or a very large extent*.

To elicit further information, open-ended questions asked for further detail; “*Can you give one or two examples of your need for English and/or L3 teaching that would help you do your job better?*” There were 123 comments for English, and 149 for the L3. While these, as mentioned above, are to be further analysed in separate articles, a preliminary analysis for English shows two salient trends that reflected the advanced, English for Specific Purposes (ESP) related tasks employees worked with. One was the need for advanced, occupationally relevant language courses, first and foremost on different aspects of advanced writing and speaking, such as negotiations or writing reports, or as one respondent mentioned, the “kind of texts that we usually write”. The second was for highly specialized, also ESP-related courses on for instance “technical terms and special expressions within various narrow subject areas the respondents worked with, e.g. “law and international relations, the energy field and even medicine”.

For the L3, however, the answers reveal the need for more general language courses comprising both grammatical issues and the need to develop all four language skills. The need to maintain their present competence, is mentioned repeatedly, along with becoming better at handling social situations such as “icebreaking” and other aspects of contact-building – for learning how to understand and handle “the intercultural elements of daily speech”. Overall, the answers reflect a lower level of language competence in L3, and that these involved less specialized tasks than in English. Still, there were also requests for advanced, specialized courses such as for “language related to foreign policy”, or for courses that “expand the vocabulary into new, technical/subject-specific areas”.

6 Discussion

The aim of this article was to investigate foreign language use in a government ministry with extensive foreign language use, comparing the use of English and L3 languages, levels of language competence, and possible needs for improved language skills.

6.1 What characterizes English and L3 language use

To start with language use, our first finding is that the majority of the respondents used English, while the most used L3 languages were French, German, and Spanish (see Table 1). We contend that this reflects availability as much as actual need, since these L3 languages are also the most frequently taught in the Norwegian school system (The Foreign Language Centre, 2023). Other L3 languages are far less used and often have only a few speakers, and our analysis reveals a mismatch between frequency of contact with some areas and the use of the local languages, such as Arabic or Chinese.

6.1.1 Different uses of English and L3 languages

As displayed in Figure 3 (see also Table 3, Appendix), while English is definitely the most used language, the L3 languages are still used extensively and for most of the same tasks and situations, with the exception of demanding oral and written communication. L3 languages are still considered highly important, in particular in formal and informal social contexts such as maintaining personal contacts and “ice-breaking”. This indicates that English and L3 use tends to overlap, with English dominating in formal contexts and the L3 in social and informal ones, and highlights the importance of drawing on ELF research. It also mirrors recent research on ‘translanguaging’ showing that foreign language use might overlap and be mixed all the time (Cogo, 2016). Indeed, it seems likely that drawing on a wide repertoire of languages is considered particularly important for rapport building. Furthermore, our findings also show the need to focus more on intercultural aspects of language competence, as do many other studies (e.g. Baker, 2018, Başaran, 2023, Lázár, 2017, Nielsen, 2020).

To return to the less frequent use of the L3, our survey indicates that this is often due to the lack of available speakers in their own institutions or among those contacted (Hellekjær & Fairway, 2015). However, some respondents also mention that this also can be due to their interlocutors, or even their superiors, preferring or being convinced that English is sufficient (see also Andersen & Verstraete-Hansen, 2013; Hellekjær, 2010; The British Academy et al., 2020). The present study also goes to show that limited L3 language use is determined by availability as much as need, the most used L3 languages are also the most frequently taught in the Norwegian educational system (The Foreign Language Centre, 2024). While these are considered highly important, even vital, the present study (see Table 2, Appendix) shows that other L3 languages such as Arabic and Chinese are needed as well. Further, the need for additional languages is also confirmed by respondents’ answers in our survey.

6.2 Levels and sources of language competence

One of the particularly interesting findings in this study, as displayed in Figure 4, was that the overwhelming majority of the English users ranked their proficiencies at the C1 or C2 levels. For the L3 languages the rankings, not unexpectedly, ranged from B1 to C1. Of course, these levels are self-reported, and their accuracy should be investigated in separate studies. Still, we found the high levels for English particularly interesting, since previous studies have shown that upper secondary school English courses are usually the main formal language qualification of the otherwise highly educated employees (Hellekjær 2010, 2012). This raised the question of where this increased proficiency came from. For English and the L3, our survey showed that learning through active language use at work is considered most important, followed by long stays in the target language countries (see Table 4). The L3 users also valued language programs in higher education, in-service courses, and language schools abroad. However, many of the L3 languages needed are either not taught in the Norwegian educational system, or are available to relatively few, so addressing this lack will call for selective hiring or extensive training programs. In any case, further studies of the language backgrounds and sources of occupational language learning in English and L3 are called for.

6.3 Language challenges and meeting the need for additional competence

One of the points we consider important to discuss is whether the high perceived levels of English proficiency, as displayed in Figure 4, and the relatively few experienced difficulties as displayed in Table 5 (Appendix), explain the RNMFA employees' limited interest in improving their English competence. As was also displayed in Figure 4, this is not the case for L3 skills (see also Table 5, Appendix). Fortunately, the answers to open-ended questions provided interesting pointers with regard what the respondents felt they needed.

To start with English, there appears to be two areas of desired additional competence, both ESP-related. One is the need for improved knowledge of different aspects of advanced written or oral communication such as negotiations or meetings, which can be provided in more generic courses. What is more problematic, however, is the need for highly specialized English vocabulary and textual knowledge relevant for the respondents' varied areas of responsibility and the subjects in question, such as law, economics or biodiversity. The inevitable small groups and the extensive specialization may make it highly difficult to offer traditional courses. In other words, could low expectations with regard to relevant courses, explain the employees' apparent lack of interest?

For the Foreign Language Service School at the RNMFA, or comparable institutions, the perhaps most effective alternative might therefore be to try to support and enhance the employees' on-the-job learning. This could of course be done by tutoring or mentoring, and /or by offering individuals or milieus the support of language specialists on the job, for instance through feedback on the English in written oral texts. Yet another way of doing this might be the systematic use of AI LLMs, albeit in combination with more traditional teaching methods for more fine-tuned interactional skills. Of course, higher education could help develop such specialized knowledge by integrating English modules in different professional degrees, which are rare in Norway. Another option would be studies in English-speaking countries, or English-Medium instruction, the teaching of non-language subjects in English.

A third area that this study identifies is the need to develop an understanding of the fact that English functions as a multilingua franca that is used in a translingual manner, along with numerous L1s and L3s. Indeed, this should be considered part of any definition of 'competence' in foreign languages for this context and be reflected in any courses offered, especially as far as oral and informal communication is concerned.

With regard to the need for additional L3 competence, the data in Table 4, and the employees' answers to the open-ended question, indicated that they were most interested in more general language courses, or in improving or maintaining their skills. There was also some interest in the same advanced and highly specialized Language for Specific Purposes courses in the L3 that were mentioned for English. Another issue was of course the need for skills in additional L3 languages that are less frequently taught in the Norwegian educational system, such as Arabic and Chinese.

Additional challenges related to cultural and intercultural understanding came up in the comments section for both English and the L3 languages, reflecting those of numerous other studies (e.g. Ongaro & van Thiel, 2018; Garavelas & Chita, 2015). This would suggest that any courses in the use of foreign languages for this context should include learning about how culture impacts upon language use and interactions in complex ways (Baker, 2018), similar to the way languages are used fluidly in translanguaging practices (Cogo, 2016).

Finally, while this data pre-dates the advent of AI LLMs, these need to be considered part of current language practices and have an impact on how we perceive competence in a foreign language and how to teach it. For English we have mentioned that AI LLMs might help address the highly specialized ESP-related needs of many respondents. They might well also prove useful for L3 use and skills, but it is important to take note of the varying quality of LLM output in languages other than English (Koo, 2025). This could lead to misunderstandings, and even to more extensive use of

English. In addition, as new studies show, such English and L3 use would often be rather generic and less able to adjust to human emotions, context and interpersonal relationships (Wilson & Rose, 2025). Thus, in the complex multilingual and multicultural world of foreign affairs, unintended slights and other complications might ensue from overreliance on AI. Still, AI literacy for foreign language communication needs to be considered in future language courses.

7 Conclusion

The present study provides unique insight into language use and needs in a large, public institution characterized by extensive and advanced foreign language use and high levels of language proficiency. Although limited to a 35% sample from a single institution, our findings largely reflect those from other NA studies, from the business as well as the public sector. We would therefore contend that our findings should be of interest, and useful, for comparable institutions with extensive international contacts and advanced foreign language use, in Norway as well as in comparable countries.

Our perhaps most salient finding is that English is not enough, that L3 languages are also extensively used and considered highly important. In some milieus and contexts, they are even considered indispensable. Further, while the use of English and L3 languages might overlap, they are often used for different purposes and in different contexts. For instance, our findings indicate English is most used in highly formal as well as in much routine work, while the L3 languages are often used in informal, social situations and are crucial for rapport building.

With regard to language needs, both L3 and English users feel the need for improved skills in handling intercultural communication and handling social relations across borders and cultures. For English, this also involves the ability handle English as a *Lingua Franca*. Next, although English skills are high, employees still feel the need for improved ESP-related language skills for genres such as negotiations, meetings or press conferences. Many also feel the need for help with ESP-related specialized vocabulary and textual knowledge required by their areas of responsibility. Since this will often involve individuals or small groups, this will require highly individualized approaches such as tutoring or systematic cooperation with a language expert over time. For the L3 languages, however, while improved general language proficiency and language maintenance are most needed, the lack of speakers of some less taught but important languages such as Arabic or Chinese is also a problem. This might make it necessary to go beyond immediate availability in the Norwegian educational system to meet the need for additional languages.

With regard to further research, several follow-up studies that draw on the dataset used for this study are planned. The first will seek to gain a deeper understanding of foreign language use in diplomacy through thematic analyses of the responses to the open-ended questions about language use and language course needs, and the quantitative questions directly linked to these. These could be followed up by new qualitative studies using observations and interviews to investigate the respondents' occupational, and often specialized use of English or the L3. It would also be interesting to investigate more closely how English and L3s are used, and mixed, in the same situations, to understand how and how and why employees draw on their language skills in a 'translingual way' (Cogo, 2016). Last, the growing impact of AI on communication, especially on writing, also needs to be further investigated.

In conclusion, however, we would contend that the perhaps most important finding in this study is the lack of research on language use and needs in the public sector, and the present study contributes towards addressing this gap.

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Appendix

<i>How often are you in contact with the following areas?</i>	Africa	Asia (except China)	Baltic countries	Europe	China	Latin or South America	Middle East	Nordic countries	USA Canada Australia
Never	21	25	4	28	33	25	4	11	17
Seldom	25	33	10	33	31	28	13	21	25
Sometimes	26	25	26	25	20	24	30	30	28
Often	15	11	27	10	8	13	27	24	15
Very often	14	6	32	5	8	11	26	14	16

Table 2. Frequency of contacts with different geographic areas ($n=461$). The answers are in percent

<i>How often do you use oral or written English or L3 in the following situations?</i>	Never		Seldom		Sometimes		Often		Very often	
	Eng	L3	Eng	L3	Eng	L3	Eng	L3	Eng	L3
Easy oral communication (telephone and video links)	-	9	8	21	12	29	23	20	62	21
Demanding oral communication (meetings, presentations, negotiations and press conferences)	2	35	11	23	17	21	22	9	48	13
Easy written communication (e-mails, letters and text messages)	-	15	2	21	11	30	23	16	65	18
Demanding written communication (reports, studies and articles)	8	52	21	32	25	8	17	3	29	4
Reading	4	9	1	12	6	31	16	20	76	29
Listening to texts (speeches, lectures and press conferences)	1	12	5	20	14	29	18	18	62	21
Formal and informal job-related social contexts	1	7	6	19	14	33	19	20	61	22

Table 3. Frequency of English and L3 use in different situation, complete table (n for English varies from 461 to 486, for the L3 languages from 241 to 302). The answers are in percent

<i>Specific situations for the use of English and L3, indicated difficulties</i>	Never		Seldom		Sometimes		Often		Very often	
	Eng	L3	Eng	L3	Eng	L3	Eng	L3	Eng	L3
Easy oral communication (telephone and video links)	42	21	44	35	12	36	0	6	1	3
Demanding oral communication (meetings, presentations, negotiations and press conferences)	32	23	48	31	19	36	1	7	0	3
Easy written communication (e-mails, letters and text messages)	48	24	43	43	9	25	1	7	0	2
Demanding written communication (reports, studies and articles)	34	32	46	35	16	22	3	7	1	3
Reading in a work context	44	23	46	42	10	29	1	5	0	3
Listening to texts (speeches, lectures and press conferences)	40	23	48	36	11	33	1	5	0	4
Formal and informal job-related social contexts	40	20,6	49	39	10	32	1	6	0	2
Situations with a lack of knowledge of the relevant country's culture or cultural codes	30	25,2	45	41	18	26	1	6	1	2

Table 5. Frequency of experienced difficulties when using English and L3 (*n* for English varies from 461 to 486, for L3 from 241 to 302). The answers are in percent