

## Oral presentation and exams: A better alternative to written examinations for students with English language challenges especially writing skills?

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### Abstract

The researcher investigated the extent to which oral and written assessments or examinations are being run at Botho University. The investigation extracted the views of the students and also the lecturers on how the two modes of assessments are being implemented at the university. The researcher has tried to find out if either modes is the correct method to use considering that most students seem to be having problems with English as a secondary language, especially with written examination. The study investigates the advantages and disadvantages of either form of assessments and also tried to see how the advantages and disadvantages can be mitigated to come up with the best approach to assessments. The analysis may also impact on the way teaching can be delivered to obtain the best out of the students at Botho University. The study has highlighted work done by other international researchers in this topic and tried to compare with their findings. The results on oral versus written shows a 50% split on whether the two types of assessments are appropriate or not. About 65% of the teachers indicate that poor command of English affects either type of exams negatively, therefore the best approach would be to incorporate both types of assessments for the benefit of the different types of students.

**Keywords:** Oral exams, written exams, assessments, presentation skills, writing skills, objectivity.

### 1. Introduction

The study involved students who are in their last year and are enrolled in different programs at the university. The students are coming from slightly different backgrounds. The researcher selected at random students from two batches that joined Botho University program after completing the NIIT (National Institute of Information Technology) program which is a franchise professional diploma course from NIIT India. The assessments from this two year program included presentation assessments, structured written exams and also online exams. These students have joined another franchise program run under the Teesside's University of the UK. Assessments in this program are mainly written exams and projects presented as vivas. The course is a one year top up program.

The other group of the students randomly selected also went through the NIIT program but opted for the Botho's own programs after completing a year with NIIT. The exams in the Botho program have both oral presentations and practical assessments, but most exams are written assessments. From this sample, the

researcher came out with a fair analysis of the views of the students and the teachers.

### Rational

A substantial number of students may be failing due to poor English language command and poor writing skills and yet they may be technically very good on subject matter. It may not be fair for universities e.g. Botho University to drop out such students. The students may have fared better if they had been assessed using a different approach in which they may have demonstrated their knowledge content e.g. in an oral exam, the examiner can also guide the student in understanding questions better as compared to written ones. This has become even more pertinent after the students' sponsors have put more restrictions on sponsoring progressing students where by a student is supposed to pass at least half of the modules taken in a semester or lose sponsorship.

A good understanding of the students' assessments problems or skills may result in the implementation of the best approaches to assessment and also the lesson delivery of the learning process by both the lecturer and the students themselves.

## Objectives

The study had the following objectives.

- 1) To find out if usage oral exams can be used effectively at Botho university.
- 2) Solicit and extract the students' and teachers' views on the current assessments modes.
- 3) Find out and explore if alternative appropriate assessments approaches can be implemented.
- 4) Try and examine if current teaching and assessments methods can be improved.

## Research questions

- 1) To what extent does Botho University run oral assessments and what are the views of students and lecturers on oral exams versus written exams?
- 2) How much does usage of the English language affect students' scores in exams and what are the teachers and students view on this?
- 3) To what extent are oral exams and written exams being applied at Botho University?
- 4) Are current the current teaching methods the most appropriate for the caliber of students enrolled?

## Hypotheses

- 1) Assessments through usage of secondary language have an influence on students' performance.
- 2) The assessments approach has an influence students assessments grades.
- 3) The teaching approach should influence the assessment approach and vice versa.

## Literature Review

Many writers have researched on assessments approaches and have discussed the advantages and disadvantages of each. Dunn , (2005) discussed the oral assessments approach and the problems associated with it, such as student anxiety, student domination , and the reliability of oral communication as factors that affect running of oral exams. Race, (2007) explores the pros and cons of Vivas as a form of oral exams. Bendix (2002) explores the pros and cons of oral exams and written exams and how they affect students' scores. Hairer (2005) also did a lot of research on the performance of students learning via a secondary language. His research picks up such problems as stress, language, and questionable fairness, as problems associated with oral presentation and oral exams. He has suggestions on how these problems can be addressed to implement a good oral assessment exercise.

These researchers have produced empirical data in their areas of research which I have compared with my findings.

I have structured my approach to data collection based on their work and used excel spreadsheet to analyze my data. The results are shown the findings and analysis sections.

## Methodology

The problem has been approached as a case study. I used questionnaires and structured interviews to gather information from current students registered in different programs at Botho University as mentioned earlier. My questions are similar to those that other researcher like Hairer (2005) used in their work.

The questionnaires were distributed across batches focusing mainly on final year students who have had 4 years experience of assessments so that they should give a true picture of their experience with assessments.

The researcher triangulated information gathering techniques. The research used self completion questionnaires from quantitative primary data was gathered. Structured interviews and questionnaires were used to get qualitative data that helped in understanding the quantitative data. Interviews were done after gleaning through the responses on the questionnaire. The researcher randomly selected the interviewees across the different programs at Botho University. A questionnaire was also designed for the lecturers in different programs at Botho University and compared their views to those of the learners. A researcher gathers more meaningful data if they triangulate data gathering methods.

To get the best out of a case study one has to do the following

- 1) Pick the fitting candidates for the investigation.
- 2) Extract the best out of them
- 3) Be precise and simple in information gathering.
- 4) Be aware of the nature of the respondent.
- 5) Ensure timely feedback to all involved.

For quantitative analysis spreadsheets were used and showed data in the form of bar graphs. Usage of spreadsheets enabled the extraction of meaningful interpretation of the data collected from the respondents. Interviews also helped to understand more on quantitative data gathered as some of the responses to different questions seemed to conflict in some aspects. The researcher did some empirical studies and conducted analysis of what other researchers on the topic have found out. This was done thorough literature reviews and secondary data analysis and comparisons of results was done.

The outcome of this research may be a recommendation to a modification of assessments policy and also teaching methods. Different modules may need new assessments approaches. Syllabi and milestones may need restructuring. There should be proposed different approaches for the different modules e.g. for theory based modules, oral questions or presentations can be implemented and balanced depending on the study level. For practical oriented modules, it will be recommended that the students should explain what they are doing, as

compared to the current approach where the students leave their results behind for later marking after the practical. There is no constructive feedback, which is the fundamental reason why we teach.

This research took about one and half months and involved 27 out of 40 students enrolled under the Botho program, 17 out 25 from the Teesside's program and 10 lecturers from different faculties based at Francistown campus. The respondents were randomly selected. I would have wanted to involve students at the other two sister campuses at Maun and Gaborone but could not do so due to time pressure. I intend to that in the near future.

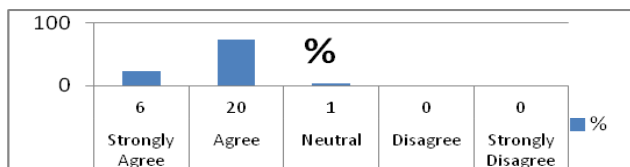
**Collection of data and findings from Botho Program Students**

1) Did you ever have to give an oral presentation before?

		%
No	0	0
Yes	27	100

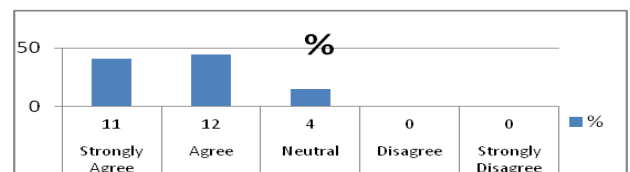
2) Do you think it was a useful exercise to you?

		%
Strongly Agree	6	22
Agree	20	74
Neutral	1	4
Disagree	0	0
Strongly Disagree	0	0



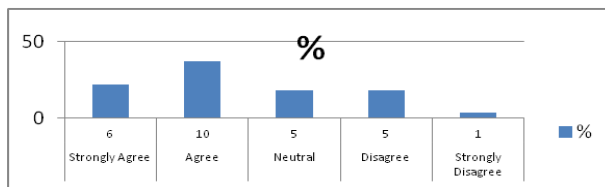
3) Do you think it was a useful exercise to others?

		%
Strongly Agree	11	41
Agree	12	44
Neutral	4	15
Disagree	0	0
Strongly Disagree	0	0



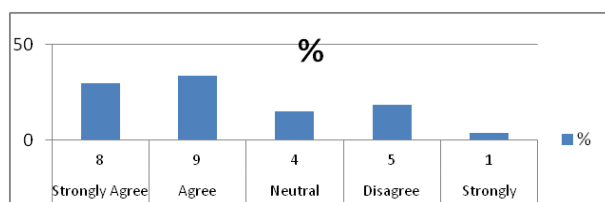
4) Oral presentations are easy

		%
Strongly Agree	6	22
Agree	10	37
Neutral	5	19
Disagree	5	19
Strongly Disagree	1	4



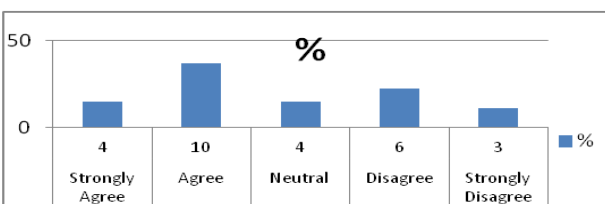
5) Oral presentations are a way for weaker students to be aware of their mistakes and to get advice from fellow students / the teacher

		%
Strongly Agree	8	30
Agree	9	33
Neutral	4	15
Disagree	5	19
Strongly Disagree	1	4



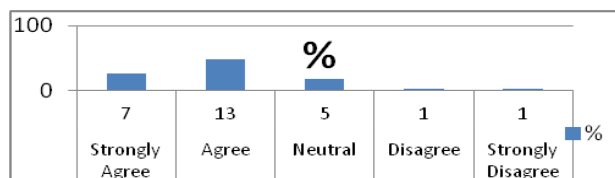
6) Weaker students are publicly humiliated by oral presentations

		%
Strongly Agree	4	15
Agree	10	37
Neutral	4	15
Disagree	6	22
Strongly Disagree	3	11



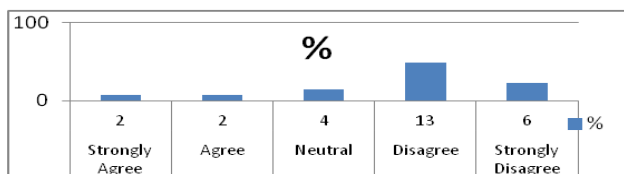
7) To the statement, it is useful to listen to oral presentations given by stronger students because they explain the exercise differently from the supervisor / teacher

		%
Strongly Agree	7	26
Agree	13	48
Neutral	5	19
Disagree	1	4
Strongly Disagree	1	4



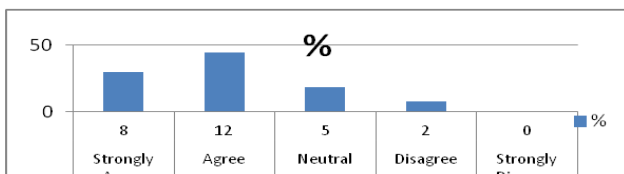
8) It is useless to listen to oral presentations given by stronger students because they only take it as an opportunity to show off.

		%
Strongly Agree	2	7
Agree	2	7
Neutral	4	15
Disagree	13	48
Strongly Disagree	6	22



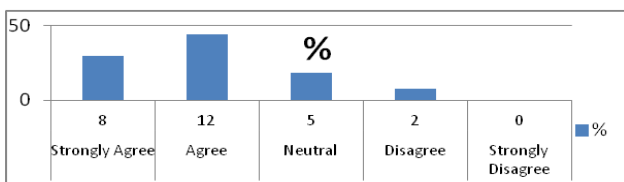
9) Do you think communication skills in general will be useful in your work after Graduation?

		%
Strongly Agree	8	30
Agree	12	44
Neutral	5	19
Disagree	2	7
Strongly Disagree	0	0



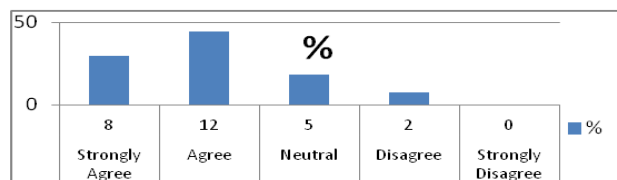
10) Your personal communication skills are good?

		%
Strongly Agree	8	30
Agree	12	44
Neutral	5	19
Disagree	2	7
Strongly Disagree	0	0



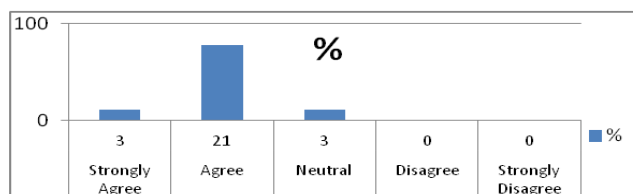
11) It would be good to see more emphasis put on oral presentations during your studies?

		%
Strongly Agree	3	11
Agree	15	56
Neutral	2	7
Disagree	2	7
Strongly Disagree	7	26



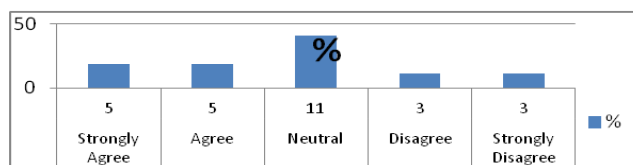
12) Did you ever have to pass an oral examination?

		%
Strongly Agree	3	11
Agree	21	78
Neutral	3	11
Disagree	0	0
Strongly Disagree	0	0



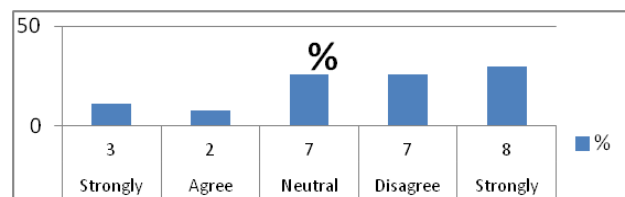
13) Do you think oral examinations are harder or easier than written examinations?

		%
Strongly Agree	5	19
Agree	5	19
Neutral	11	41
Disagree	3	11
Strongly Disagree	3	11



14) Oral examinations are fairer than written examinations?

		%
Strongly Agree	3	11
Agree	2	7
Neutral	7	26
Disagree	7	26
Strongly Disagree	8	30



**Data analysis**

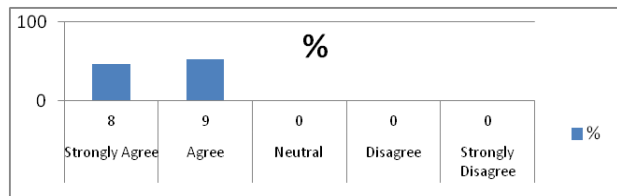
All Botho program students who responded have been assessed orally through presentations and over 96% found it useful to them and others as empirical data

shows. The results show that students learn more from stronger students as they may explain material differently from the teacher. 23 % of them thought that presentations are difficult. This may be due to lack of communication skills, as about 25% of them doubt their strength in that area. Over 75% of the respondents believe that communication skills will be necessary after graduating. Over 60% of the students feel that the weaker ones are publicly humiliated during oral presentations. On oral examinations, there is a 50-50 split on whether they are difficulty or easy. Surprisingly 80% of the students doubt the fairness of oral examinations.

**Findings and data analysis for Teesside students**

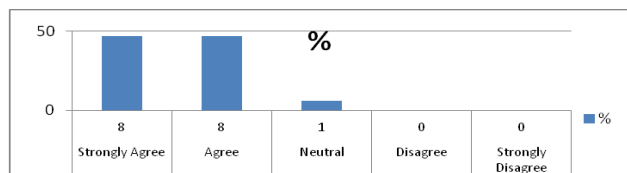
1) Do you think it was a useful exercise to you?

		%	
Strongly Agree	8	47	
Agree	9	53	
Neutral	0	0	
Disagree	0	0	
Strongly Disagree	0	0	



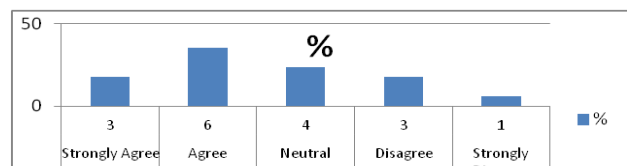
2) Do you think it was a useful exercise to others?

		%	
Strongly Agree	8	47	
Agree	8	47	
Neutral	1	6	
Disagree	0	0	
Strongly Disagree	0	0	



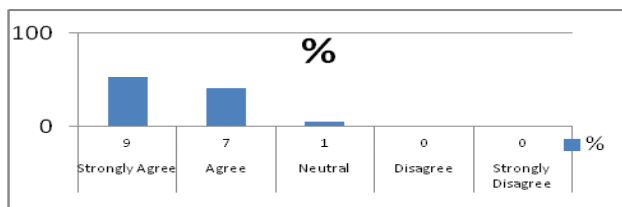
3) Oral presentations are easy

		%	
Strongly Agree	3	18	
Agree	6	35	
Neutral	4	24	
Disagree	3	18	
Strongly Disagree	1	6	



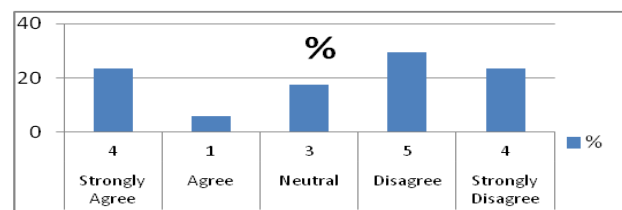
4) Oral presentations are a way for weaker students to be aware of their mistakes and to get advice from fellow students / the teacher

		%	
Strongly Agree	9	53	
Agree	7	41	
Neutral	1	6	
Disagree	0	0	
Strongly Disagree	0	0	



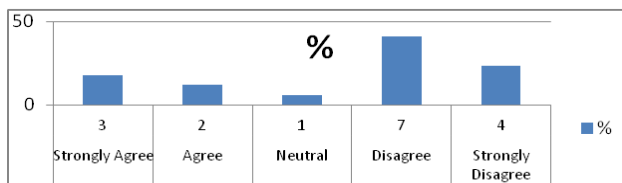
5) Weaker students are publicly humiliated by oral presentations

		%	
Strongly Agree	4	24	
Agree	1	6	
Neutral	3	18	
Disagree	5	29	
Strongly Disagree	4	24	



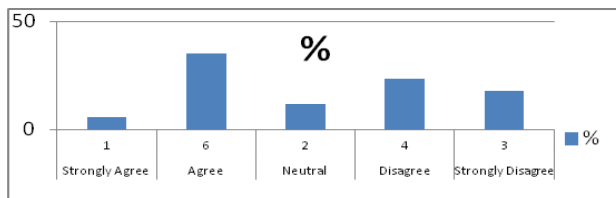
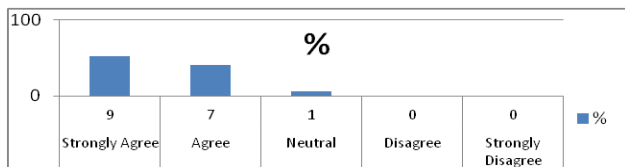
6) To the statement, It is useful to listen to oral presentations given by stronger students because they explain the exercise differently from the supervisor / teacher

		%	
Strongly Agree	3	18	
Agree	2	12	
Neutral	1	6	
Disagree	7	41	
Strongly Disagree	4	24	



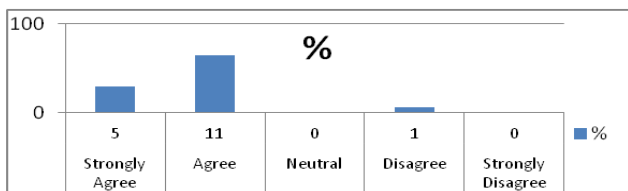
8) Do you think communication skills in general will be useful in your work after Graduation?

		%	
Strongly Agree	9	53	
Agree	7	41	
Neutral	1	6	
Disagree	0	0	
Strongly Disagree	0	0	



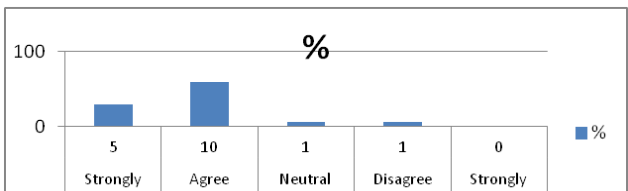
9) Your personal communication skills are good?

Category	Count	%
Strongly Agree	5	29
Agree	11	65
Neutral	0	0
Disagree	1	6
Strongly Disagree	0	0



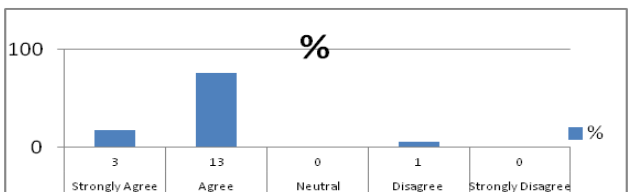
10) It would be good to see more emphasis put on oral presentations during your studies?

Category	Count	%
Strongly Agree	5	29
Agree	10	59
Neutral	1	6
Disagree	1	6
Strongly Disagree	0	0



11) Did you ever have to pass an oral examination?

Category	Count	%
Strongly Agree	3	18
Agree	13	76
Neutral	0	0
Disagree	1	6
Strongly Disagree	0	0

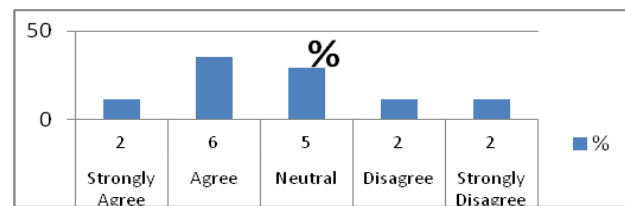


12) Do you think oral examinations are harder than written examinations?

Category	Count	%
Strongly Agree	1	6
Agree	6	35
Neutral	2	12
Disagree	4	24
Strongly Disagree	3	18

13) Oral examinations are fairer than written examinations?

Category	Count	%
Strongly Agree	2	12
Agree	6	35
Neutral	5	29
Disagree	2	12
Strongly Disagree	2	12



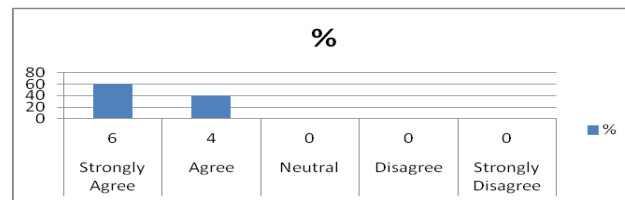
All respondents enrolled in the Tee sides program indicated that they had been assessed orally during their studies. Over 96% agree that the exercise was beneficial to them and their colleagues although about 50% think that they benefit more from the teacher than from stronger students. Still over 90% believe that there should be more emphasis on oral presentations. These tallies with 90% who say they have good communication skills. Over 95% believe that communication skills will be very important after they graduate. Over 60% of this group thinks that weaker students are not necessarily humiliated when giving oral presentation. (NIIT experience)

There is a 50-50 split on whether oral examinations are harder or easier for them and also on their fairness.

**Analysis of the teachers' response**

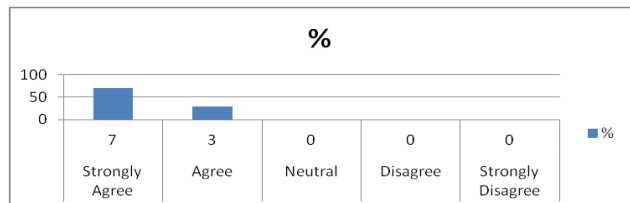
1) Students at Botho have poor writing skills.

Category	Count	%
Strongly Agree	6	60
Agree	4	40
Neutral	0	0
Disagree	0	0
Strongly Disagree	0	0



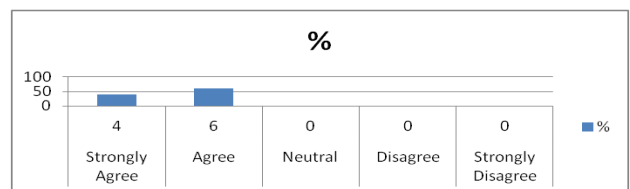
2) Students at Botho have a poor command of English language and thus have poor presentation skills.

		%
Strongly Agree	7	70
Agree	3	30
Neutral	0	0
Disagree	0	0
Strongly Disagree	0	0



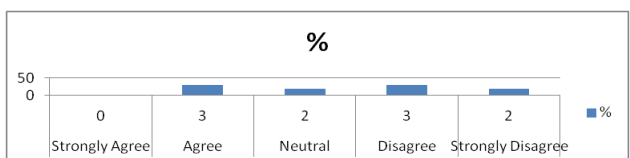
3) Poor English language command affects pass rates.

		%
Strongly Agree	4	40
Agree	6	60
Neutral	0	0
Disagree	0	0
Strongly Disagree	0	0



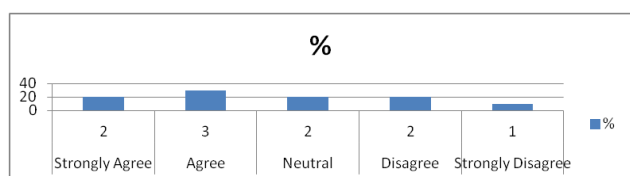
4) Oral presentations are easy for students

		%
Strongly Agree	0	0
Agree	3	30
Neutral	2	20
Disagree	3	30
Strongly Disagree	2	20



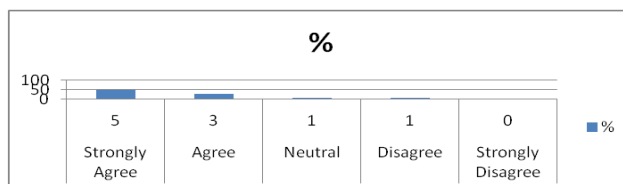
5) Oral presentations are a way for weaker students to be aware of their mistakes and to get advice from fellow students / the teacher.

		%
Strongly Agree	2	20
Agree	3	30
Neutral	2	20
Disagree	2	20
Strongly Disagree	1	10



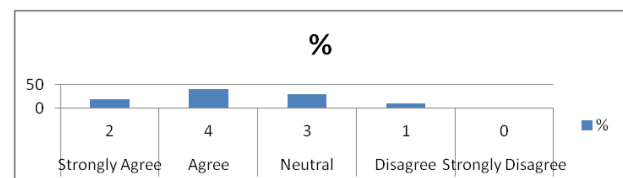
6) Weaker students are publicly humiliated by oral presentations.

		%
Strongly Agree	5	50
Agree	3	30
Neutral	1	10
Disagree	1	10
Strongly Disagree	0	0



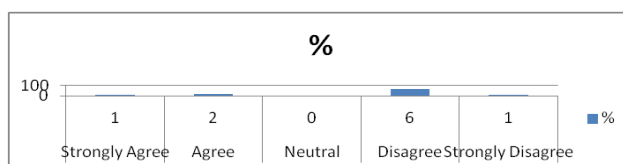
7) To the statement, It is useful for students to listen to oral presentations given by stronger students because they explain the exercise differently from the supervisor / teacher

		%
Strongly Agree	2	20
Agree	4	40
Neutral	3	30
Disagree	1	10
Strongly Disagree	0	0



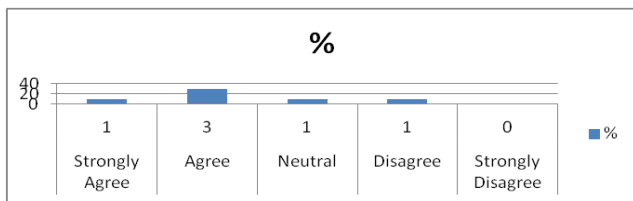
8) It is useless to conduct oral presentations as stronger students only take it as an opportunity to show off.

		%
Strongly Agree	1	10
Agree	2	20
Neutral	0	0
Disagree	6	60
Strongly Disagree	1	10



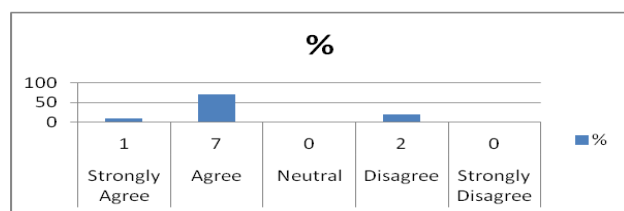
9) It would be good to see more emphasis put on oral presentations during your teaching

		%
Strongly Agree	1	10
Agree	7	70
Neutral	0	0
Disagree	2	20
Strongly Disagree	0	0



10) It would be good to see more emphasis put on oral presentations during your teaching

Response	Count	Percentage
Strongly Agree	1	10
Agree	7	70
Neutral	0	0
Disagree	2	20
Strongly Disagree	0	0



Most of the respondents indicate that students at Botho University have poor command of the English language and have poor writing skills. Over 70% believe the students have poor presentation skills as well. They all agree that this affects pass rates in both oral and written examinations. Over 90% believe that oral presentations by stronger students is beneficial to the weaker ones as they may explain material differently from what the teacher does. About 80% believe that there should be more emphasis on oral presentations at Botho. About 90% of the teachers are of the opinion that weaker students are publicly humiliated during oral presentation. This tallies with the views of Botho program students. 60% of Teesside program students see it differently.

**Qualitative analysis**

I have attached the structured interview questions in the appendices. In answering the interview questions, the students prefer oral presentation because they learn from the stronger students and also there is immediate feedback from the teacher during deliberations. Normally during presentations, students share common questions and they can compare their performance with those of the stronger students. Those that do not prefer such assessments site anxiety fear of humiliation, stage fright as their major problems. The teachers feel that most students fear humiliation and this agrees with Botho program students views but contradicts with what the Teesside ones highlighted. This may be due to the fact that Teesside students had longer experience with the NIIT assessments approach which were more based on presentations and collaborative learning.

The Botho program students who are against oral exams mainly question the fairness of such an assessment. The fear is that the assessors may have

preconceived opinions and thus mark down the students. There is also the fear of stage fright and stress. The teachers feel that, due to poor writing skills, the students may perform better in oral exams as there is a chance to rephrase questions to the benefit of the students.

**Contribution to the knowledge domain**

Several researchers have contributed their findings on the pros and cons of different assessments methods and how they can be conducted. Hairer, (2005) describes several ways in which oral exams can be conducted:

- 1) Guided examination with preparation time. Assessors prepare a number of questions covering the syllabus and print them on cards. A student picks one and gets time prepare before answering orally, before one or more assessors. The assessors then agree on a final mark.
- 2) Guided examination without preparation time. The assessor asks a generic question which requires immediate answers. He can assist the student by asking probing questions to extract as much content from the student before awarding a mark.
- 3) Free examination.

A topic is given to a student who prepares for a lecture after 30 minutes.

Hairer (2005) research looks at the pros and cons of such approaches to exams and how best they can be handled. Bloom came up with a concept referred to as The Bloom’s Taxonomy which was revised by Krathwohl D. Krathwohl , D (2002) suggests that students at different levels should be assessed for knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. The different levels should have different assessment approaches. Bendix(2003) et al compares the merits of oral exams against those of written exams. He recommends how the demerits of each can be addressed to the benefit of the learner. Each and every of these researchers has contributed tremendously to the knowledge domain of different approaches to assessments.

In my research I have realized that students benefit more from learning from each other through their stronger colleagues. Presentations and collaborations activities should be noted and incorporated during the construction of syllabi and milestones. There should be a proper proportional balance between the student input and that of the lecturer at every level mentioned in the Bloom’s taxonomy. These views agree with what the other mentioned researchers mentioned have found out. Most university lecturers do not have a teaching qualification and should be encouraged to get one so that they can identify the different learning skills by different students. With such qualifications, they should also be able to conduct oral presentations and exams in the most appropriate way for the benefit of the learning process.



**Conclusion**

I hope that my own findings are going to be relevant to Botho University and other tertiary institutions which use English as a second language. I look forward to the authorities designing different syllabi, to find it necessary to recommend appropriate teaching methods for the syllabi and also appropriate assessments approaches. As shown in the outcome, there should be more incorporation of collaborative learning among students. Every lecturer should be aware of the challenges facing students in all assessments including oral, written and presentation assessments. I will also recommend that all lecturers without a teaching qualification should enroll in postgraduate teachers programs . They should also be encouraged to do research work in higher education . It is important to be aware that students have different learning preferences as mentioned in my work. Another recommendation will be that the module Communications Studies and Skills (CSS) be taken more seriously and probably be awarded more credits. These measures may mitigate the challenges associated with oral examinations, presentations and written exams.

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**Appendix 1**

Qualitative Questionnaire for students and lecturers

- 1) Give your views on oral presentations on why they are good or bad for students.-----  
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- 2) Do you think there should be emphasis on oral presentation during the learning process-----  
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- 3) How should oral presentations be improved since most learners agree that they benefit from them?-----  
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- 4) Why do most students agree that oral presentations will be good for them after graduating?  
5) Give your views on oral exams-----  
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- 6) Do you think there should be more emphasis on oral exams?-----  
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- 7) Why would most students prefer written exams over oral exams when most prefer oral presentations?-  
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