

Challenges Faced by Tutors In Setting of Examinations

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Abstract

Regarding the testing /examination situation in English at Higher Education level most institutions hold test development workshops/seminars for their staff, have internal and external examination moderation, and the staff work as a team thereby making the staff conversant with the right techniques of setting examinations. This paper examines the challenges faced by tutors in setting of examinations. Data was collected by administering questionnaires to tutors to identify challenges faced in setting of examinations and forms of support required. The study was conducted in 2012 in an institution in Kenya. Findings of the study, remedies and recommendations are discussed herein.

The study concluded that during internal and external moderation of summative examinations some challenges are identified. As per the findings, some tutors require adequate support to acquire the necessary skills through workshops, seminars and mentoring by experienced colleagues. Providing proper orientation to tutors who require this is mandatory for setting of effective examinations. Equipping them with the needed skills improves the quality of examinations in an institution and gives tutors confidence.

Key words Challenges, tutors, setting examinations, remedies, quality, standard, testing, validity, moderation.

1. Introduction

Regarding the examination situation in English at Higher Education level, some tutors do not get opportunities to attend induction workshops. In addition, new tutors who join higher institutions of learning or those with little or no teaching experience tend to have difficulties in setting higher level questions and find testing challenging. I decided to work on this topic so that through the questionnaires the problems faced by tutors can be identified and solutions sought. Where challenges are noted, there is need to improve the quality of examinations set at higher institutions of learning specifically in my area of concern; English language. Questionnaires were administered to tutors of English and other subjects to find out if similar problems run across the board. Generally, examinations are given to; measure oral fluency and written accuracy, find out if pupils have mastered skills/content taught, identify pupils who have learning difficulties and need to be helped, identify students' strengths and weaknesses, get feedback on students' performance, measure the extent to which the teaching objectives have been achieved, grade and classify learners, facilitate learner's self evaluation on achievement/student progress, motivate learners to study, measure curriculum quality and facilitate certification and selection.

According to Ogula et. al (2006) examinations are an essential part of good teaching. There must be an objective of each assessment, topics and sub-topics to be covered. There ought to be a variety in question types reflecting all areas of the course outline.

To increase reliability, adequate training of markers, a detailed marking scheme and double marking or benchmarking will also be useful (Hughes, 1989).

Johnson (2001) identifies some key principles of language testing that make a good examination, which sometimes lower the quality of examinations if they lack, as discussed below.

Examination questions should have content validity by being a representative sample of the content of the course. Therefore, all questions should be in line with the subject matter taught reflecting objectives of the course.

A good examination should also have scorer reliability. If two different markers marked the same examination they should award comparable marks without a wide margin of difference in marks. To have reliability the same examination should give the same results if it is to be taken on two different occasions and questions should be clear and unambiguous. Having a good marking scheme ensures reliability of marking. It should specify the range of responses expected and the mark allocation for each question which should be commensurate with the demands. The marks on the question paper and marking scheme should be identical.

Concerning discrimination, examination items need to be able to tell who are the weaker and stronger students. A good examination should show the progress a student has made.

A good examination should also have objectivity thus it should be fair to all students and give them equal opportunities. Examinations should be administered in the same way for candidates to have a similar experience. Identifying students with a number and not a name also reduces subjectivity in marking.

2. Aims

To determine the areas of examination setting that are problematic to tutors and ways of addressing them for setting of standard examinations.

3. Objectives

To identify the the challenges faced by tutors in setting of examinations.

To identify problems/challenges that tutors encounter while setting Language examinations at Higher Education levels which result in examinations that do not succeed in effective testing.

4. Rationale

Some examinations set by tutors do not always achieve their aims in terms of validity and reliability. In most contexts internal end of semester examinations are internally moderated by members of the department and there after the examinations are then moderated by an external examiner. At higher levels all examinations are written by the tutor whether continuous assessment tests or end of semester examinations. This paper will focus on end of semester examinations.

The most common problems noted at moderation are;

- a) Some examinations are too easy. They are simple recall questions instead of higher level questions (of application, analysis, evaluation) and high marks are awarded.
- b) Some tutors do not use clear direction words resulting in verbosity including information which add no value.
- c) There could be overloaded questions which should be broken into parts as there should be one component per question. Sometimes marks distribution could be poor or not shown in the question paper.
- d) There are issues of inflated marks and some tutors not setting standard questions as some topics on the course outline are not reflected in the examination.
- e) Sometimes there could be misplaced questions or identical questions appearing in two different examinations which is a problem with design of course content and not the tutor's.
- f) In some instances a question requires examples yet none is given in the marking Scheme.
- g) There are occasions when the marking scheme is not followed by the marker while others prepare very sketchy marking schemes.
- h) Some tutors neither put remarks on marksheets nor indicate totals or sub-totals.
- i) There could be a wrong answer in the marking scheme. This results in lack of objectivity (subjectivity) in setting and marking of examinations.
- j) The compulsory question and other essay tests may lack content validity when all content reflected in the course outline is not covered.
- k) Sometimes ambiguous questions are set and instructions could be unclear.
- l) Some tutors do not put easy items first and place challenging items at/near the end as required.

5. Procedure:

Data was collected from nine tutors to identify challenges faced in setting of examinations and forms of support required. The questionnaire contained open ended questions (see appendix). Findings will help to devise ways of providing support for examination development. Reference here is made to end of semester examinations. At this level, examinations (end of semester and final) are written by tutors and not by an outside body as it happens with primary/high school examinations. I designed a questionnaire which was later coded to come up with pie charts for data analysis.

6. Data presentation, analysis and discussion

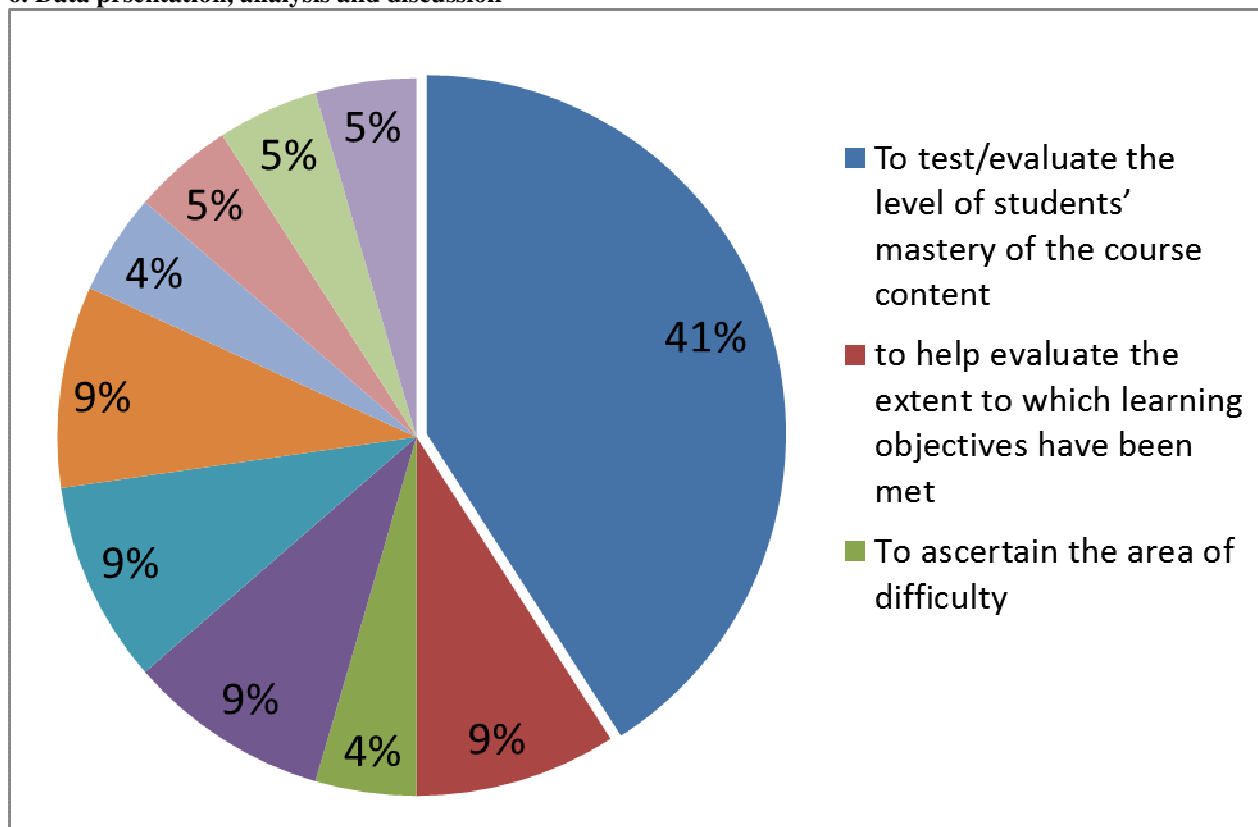


Fig. 1. Most important objective for examining.

There were various functions of examinations given as reflected in figure 1 but a majority, 41%, felt that examinations are mainly to test learners' mastery of course content.

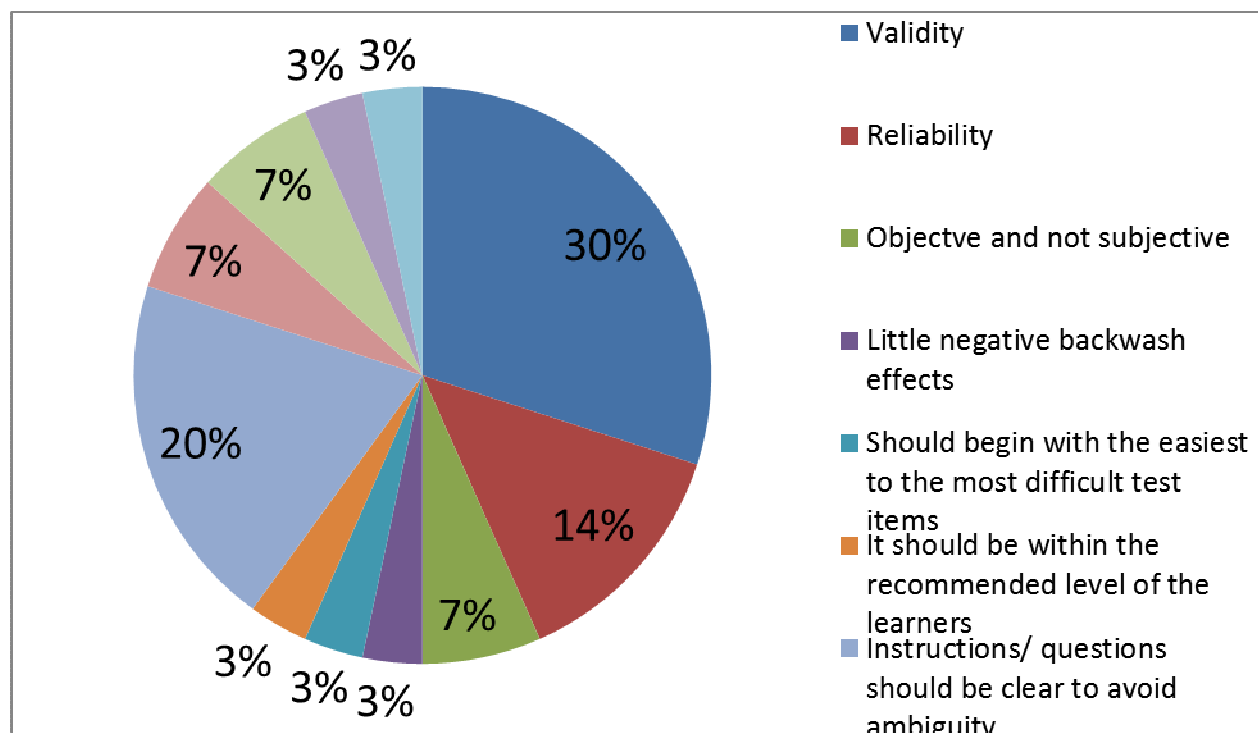


Fig. 2. Characteristics of a good examination.

30% of respondents, the majority, felt that validity (testing what it is supposed to test) is a major characteristic of an effective examination followed by 20% who identified clarity/lack of ambiguity as a factor. 14% were of the opinion that reliability is a characteristic of a good examination. Hence, among other characteristics represented in the pie chart, validity, clarity and reliability are among the major factors that characterise a good examination.

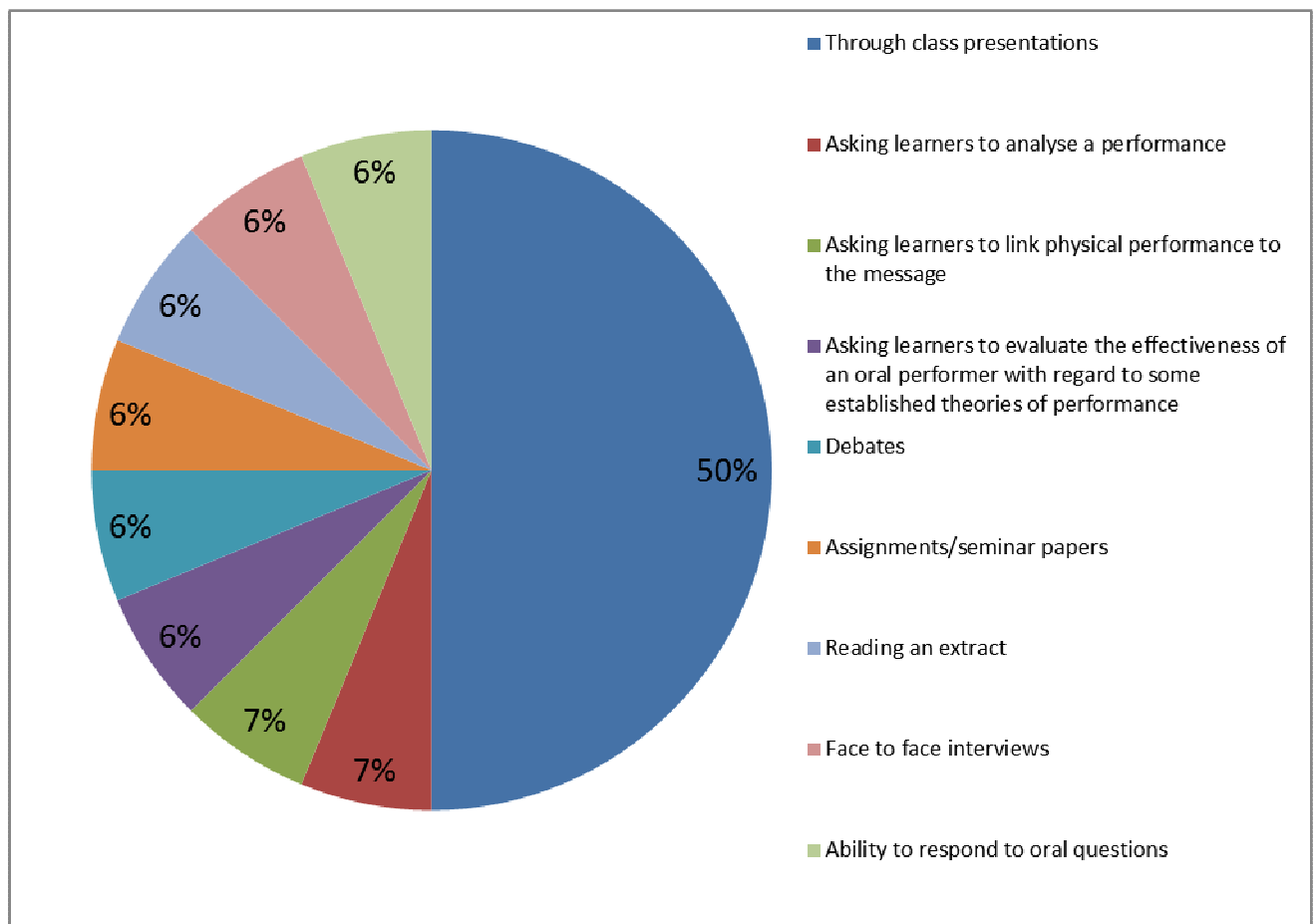


Fig. 3. Testing oral performance

The majority of respondents, 43%, indicated that they test oral performance through class presentations. This they do to test aspects like voice projection, pronunciation, confidence and clarity. This large percentage implies that although other forms of testing oral performance are used, class presentations are the most common at this level.

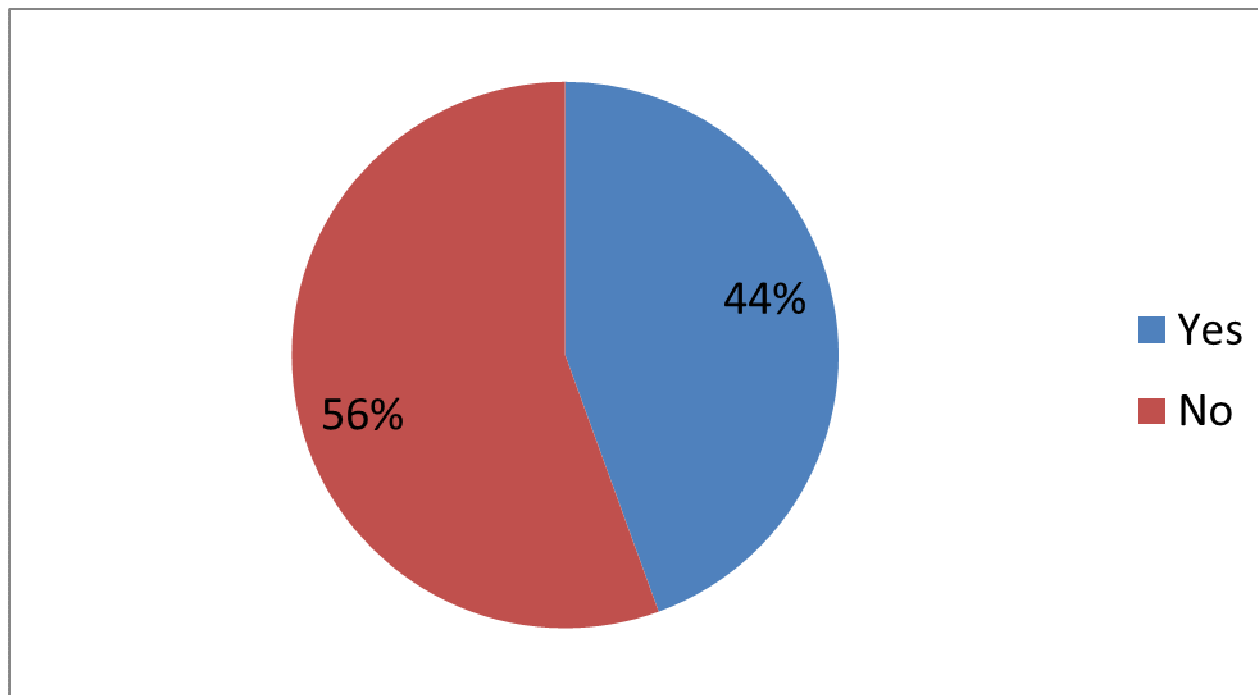


Fig. 4. Basis of evaluation methods.

44% of respondents concurred that it is alright for an examination to be only reading and writing as long as a tutor is able to use the two skills to evaluate all the target competencies and that it also depends on the objective of the examiner who can also incorporate other evaluation methods.

The majority, 56%, of respondents answered 'no'. They noted that an element of performance can be introduced and that Students should also be tested on practical skills through practicals since some learners might be disadvantaged if an examination is to be only based on reading and writing.

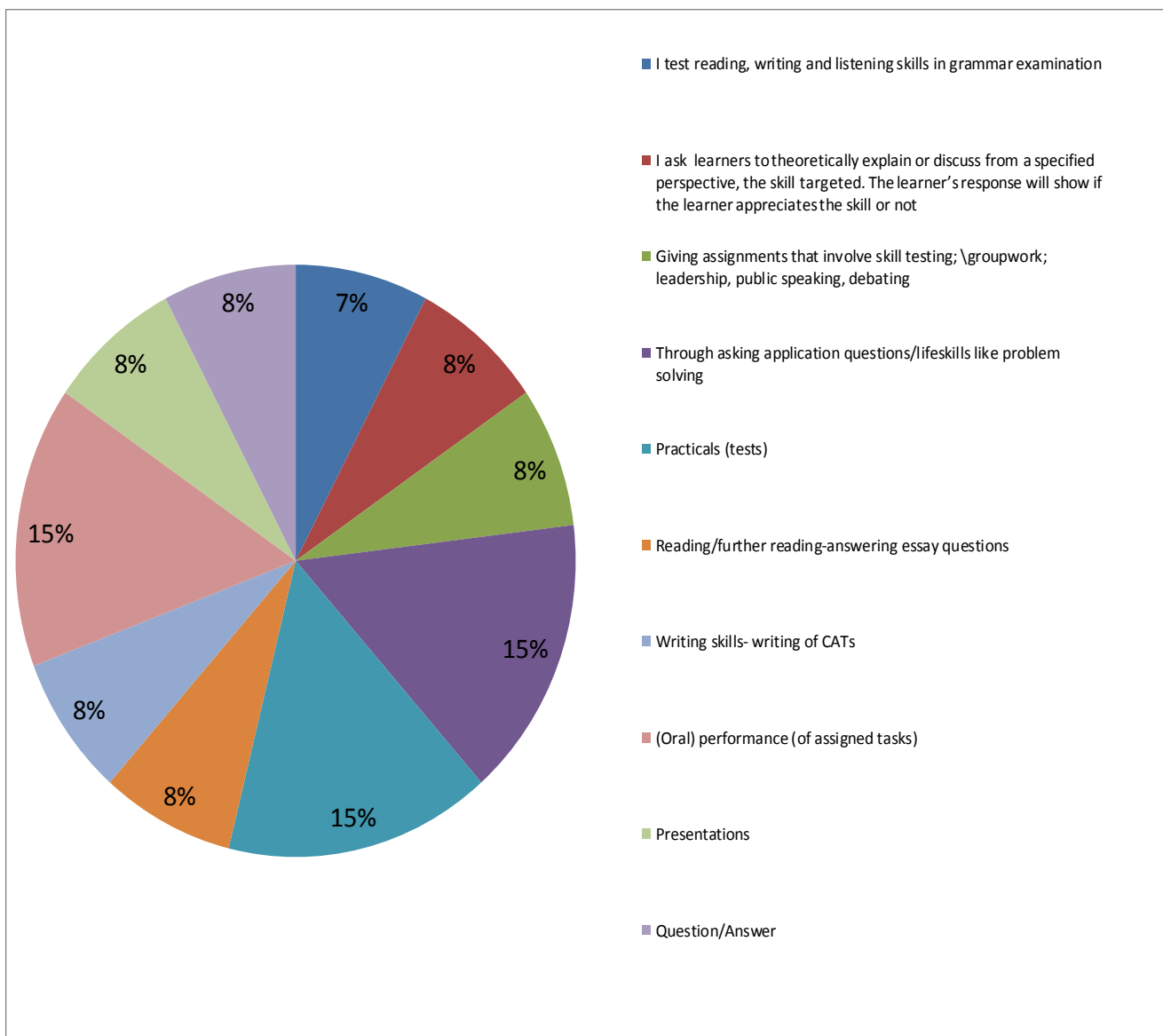


Fig. 5. Testing skills.

The most common ways of testing skills identified were through asking application questions/life skills like problem solving, conducting Practicals and having learners do (Oral) performance of assigned tasks. All these elicited 15% of respondents and are therefore the most commonly used methods of testing skills compared to the other ways identified.

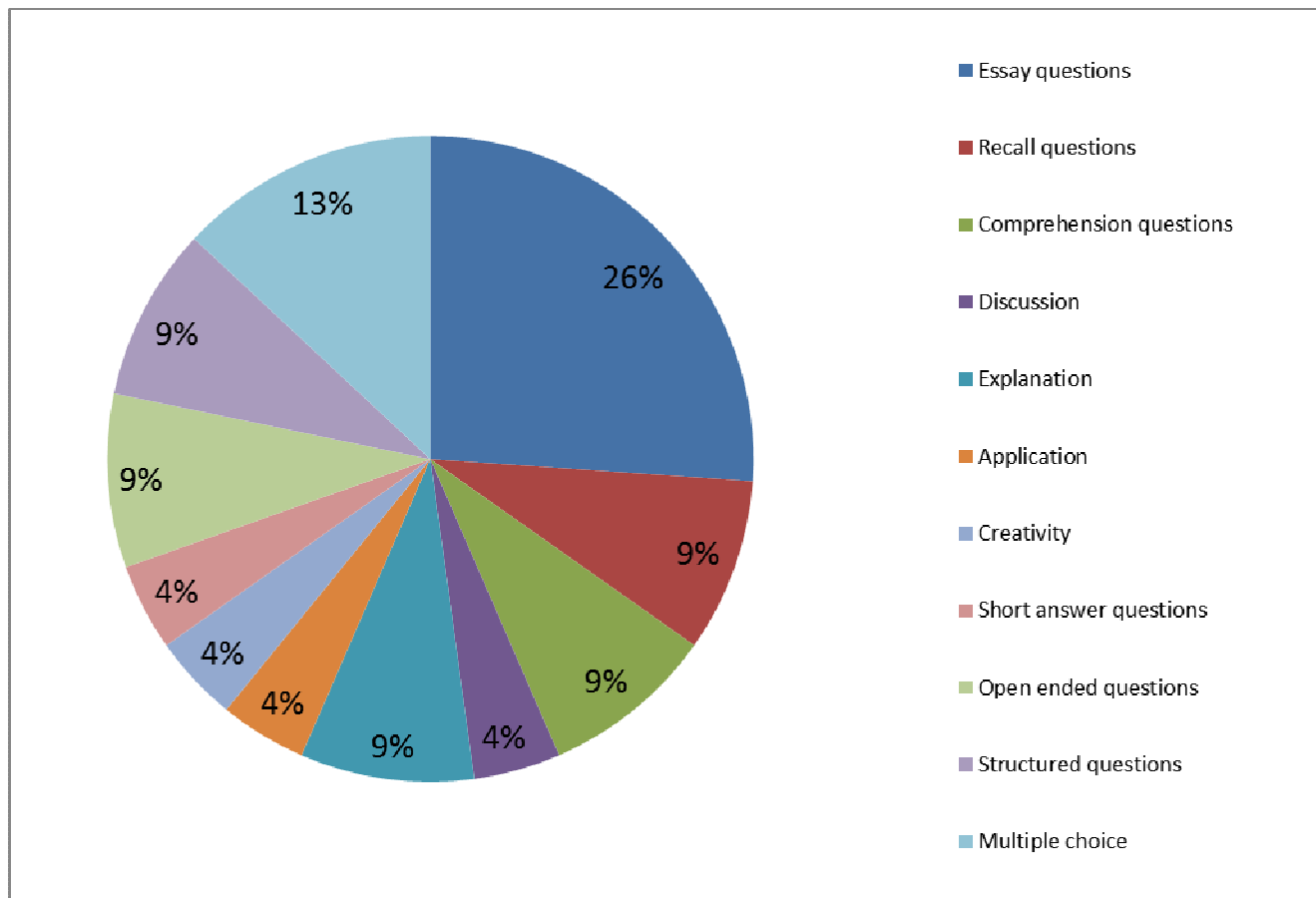


Fig. 6. Useful techniques/types of questions.

The techniques most commonly used for testing at this level are essay questions at 24% followed by multiple choices at 12%. Other various types of questions set are also reflected in percentage.

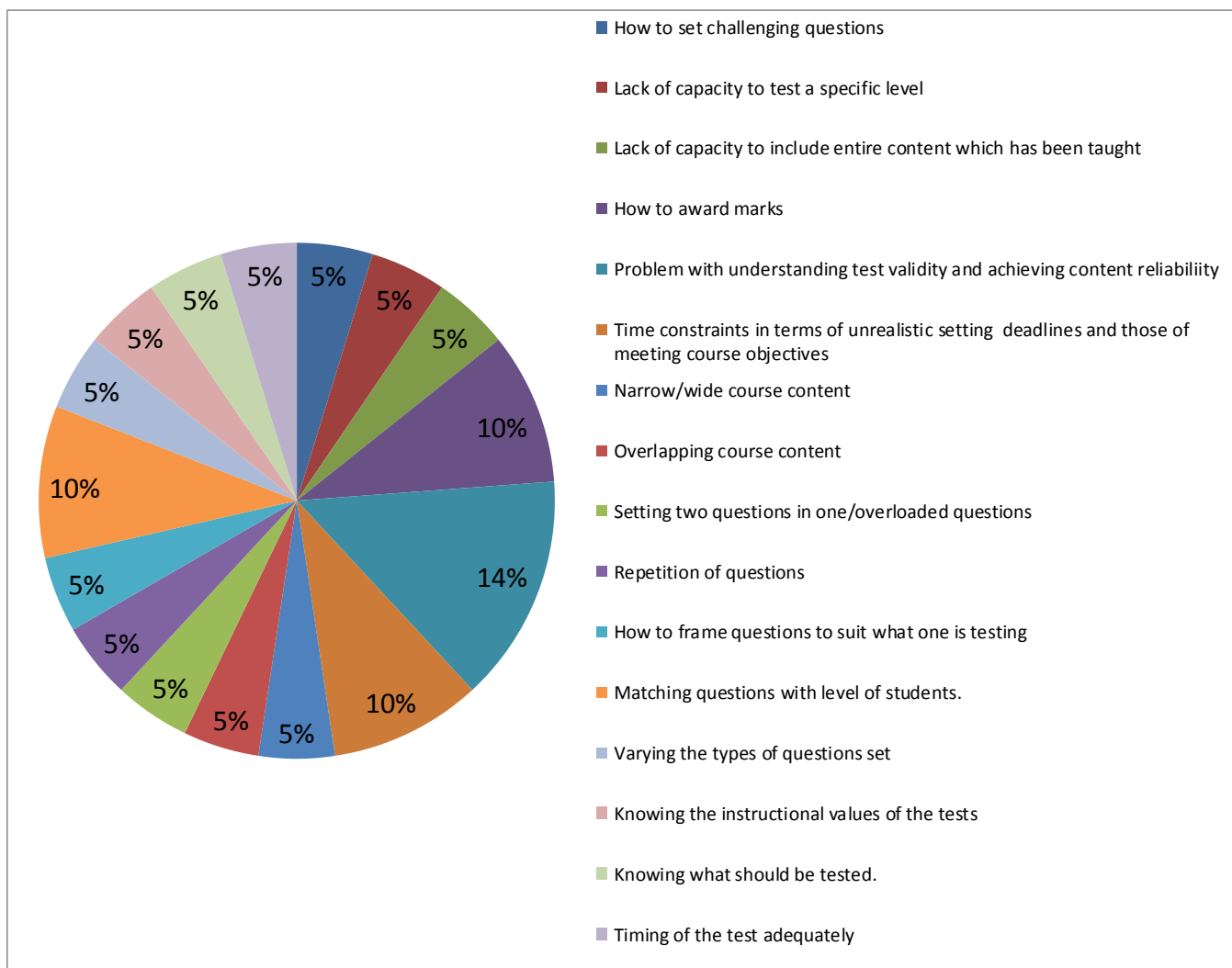


Fig. 7a. Tutors' examination-setting needs.

The most significant challenge identified by 14 % of respondents was the problem with understanding test validity and achieving content reliability. This was followed by three other challenges at 10%; how to award marks, time constraints in terms of giving unrealistic deadlines for setting plus those of meeting course objectives and matching questions with level of students. Other challenges were also identified as reflected in the pie chart with their percentages.

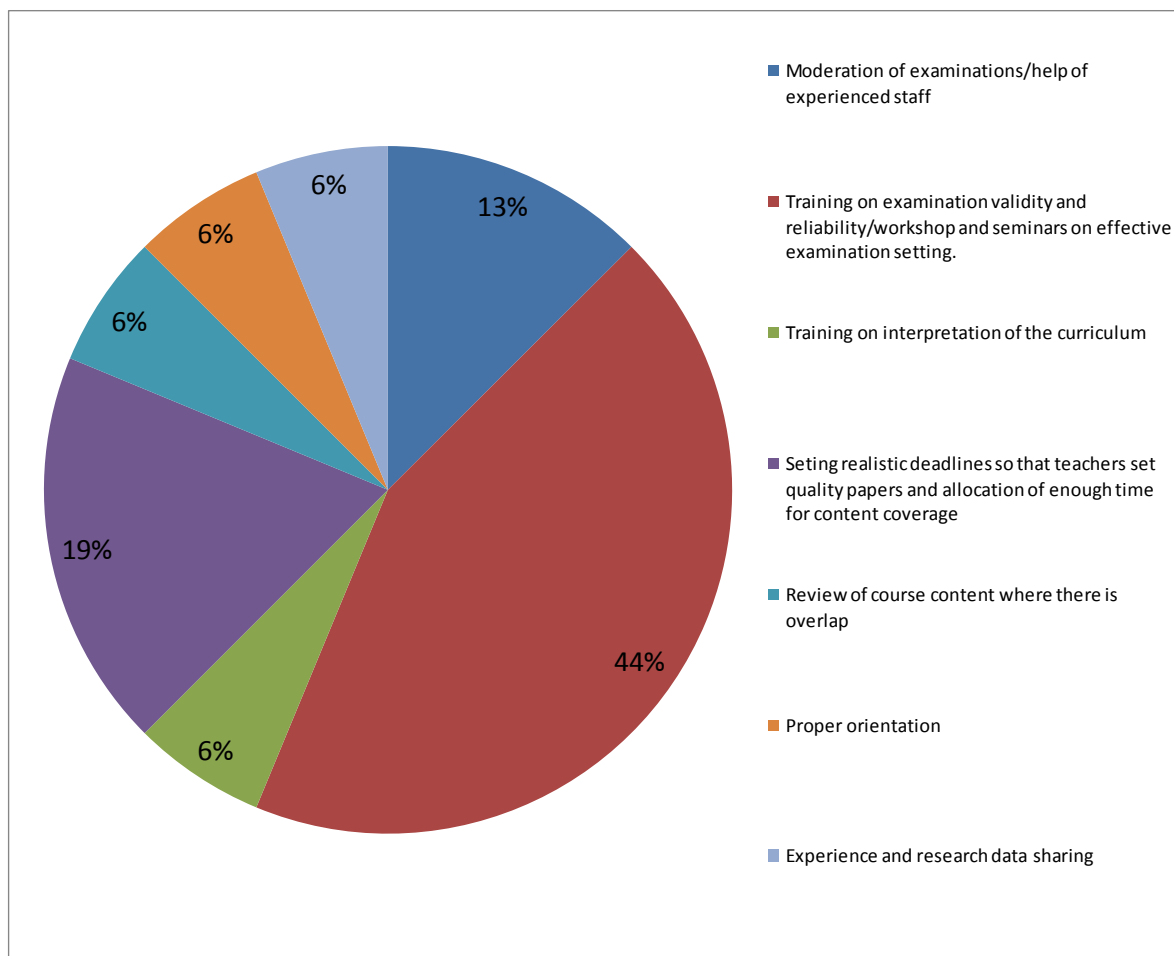


Fig. 7b. Needs of tutors

44% of respondents reflected/emphasised the need for workshops and seminars on effective examination setting to train tutors on examination validity and reliability. 19% indicated that sometimes the pressure of short deadlines for handing in set examinations and lack of adequate time to cover content leads to rushing and not doing a good job hence, achievable timelines should be set. 13% felt that moderation of examinations is a positive measure where both experienced and new staff members can identify areas that need improvement in draft examinations. Other forms of useful forms of support are also reflected in the pie chart with appropriate response percentages.

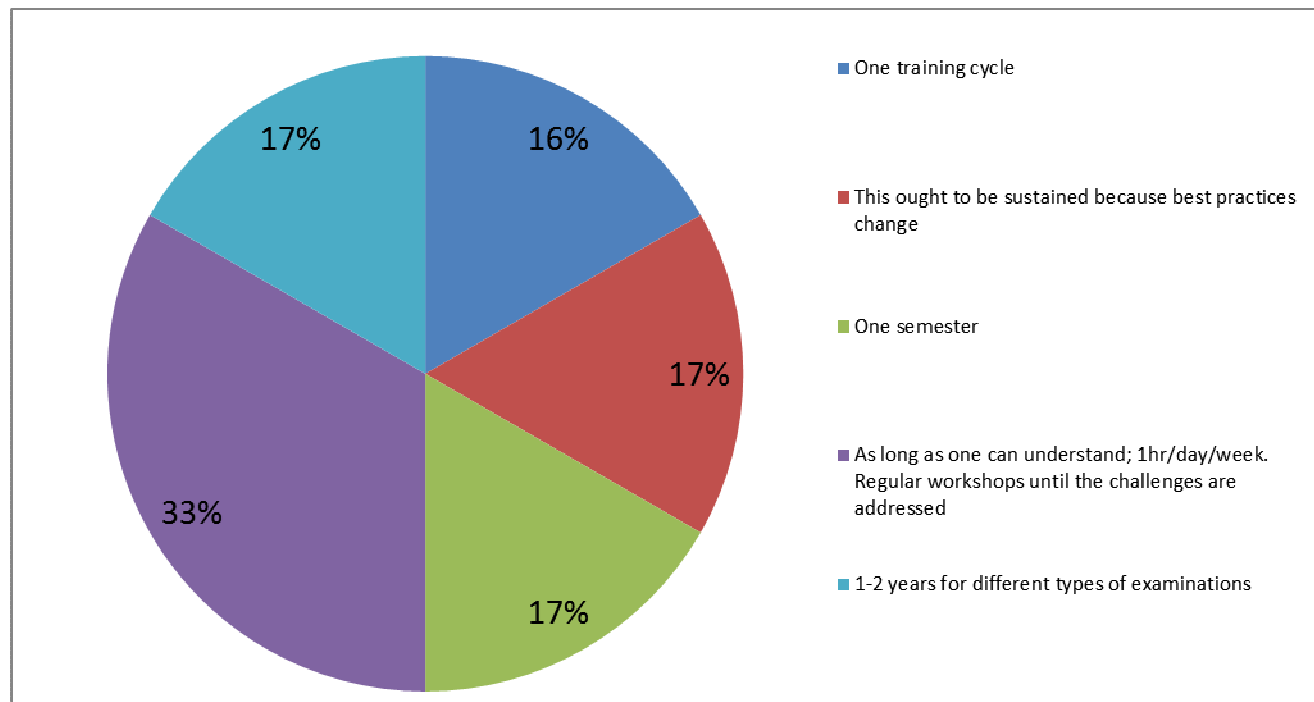


Fig. 7c. Duration for further support.

There were different percentages reflecting the length of time further support would be required for but the majority, 33%, felt that length of time would vary depending on how long one would take to master the skill. Hence, having regular workshops till the challenges are addressed. The pie chart also reflects percentages of other opinions.

7. Summary of findings

The study confirms that the objectives/functions of examinations are to evaluate students' mastery of the course content and the extent to which learning objectives have been met. They also help to ascertain the areas of the subject matter that students have difficulties with. Examinations are also used for placement/selection purposes, certification, they motivate learners to read/take studies seriously knowing that they will sit examinations, they help tutors to gauge their effectiveness in teaching and to evaluate students' application/creativity of knowledge. Examinations test skills and assess learners' general mental ability.

Regarding characteristics of a good examination, respondents noted that examinations should have validity by testing what they should test and cover all areas of the course content. They should also have reliability and should be objective not subjective with little negative backwash effects. The paper should begin with the easiest to the most difficult test items which are within the recommended level of the learners. Instructions/ questions should be clear to avoid ambiguity. Tutors should set various levels of questions that test all skills and language should be simple and accessible to learners. Questions should be open-ended to allow creative answers.

It was found that tutors test oral performance through class presentations to test aspects like voice projection, pronunciation, confidence and clarity. In literature, learners are asked to analyze performances, link physical performance to the message and evaluate the effectiveness of an oral performer with regard to some established theories of performance. Other forms include debates, giving students assignments/seminar papers to research on and report findings, asking students to read extracts, having face to face interviews and analyzing students' ability to respond to oral questions in class.

There are tutors who felt that giving only a reading and writing examination is satisfactory for as long as a lecturer is able to use the two skills to evaluate all the target competencies. Some tutors noted that it depends on the objective of the examiner and that the tutor can also add other evaluation methods.

The majority of those who felt that giving only a reading and writing examination is not good enough, argued that performance can be introduced and students should also be tested on practical skills through an experiment as some learners might be disadvantaged if the examination is only reading and writing.

On testing skills, it emerged that there are other skills other than the four language skills. Tutors test reading, writing and listening skills in grammar examination while others ask learners to theoretically explain or discuss the skill targeted from a specified perspective then the learner's response will show if the learner appreciates the skill or not. Again, depending on the targeted skill, assignments that involve skill testing are given, for example, to test group work, leadership, public speaking and debating skills. Life skills like problem solving can be tested through asking application questions. Practical tests like oral/speaking tests do test listening and speaking skills. Some tutors test if learners have mastered effective reading strategies and academic writing skills by asking them to do further reading and answer essay or continuous assessment test questions. If it is hand written, then the hand writing could also be checked. (Oral) performance of assigned tasks through presentations and question/answer technique is also an effective way of assessing language skills.

The techniques/types of questions used to test depend on the level and competency being tested. My findings were based on a higher learning institution hence, examinations conducted test higher competencies. Depending on the level of awareness the tutor wants to establish, one may ask a learner to write an essay, discuss a concept or explain it. Other types of questions used include recall, application, creativity, short answer, open ended, structured, multiple choice, cloze tests and case study questions that require certain skills.

The challenges on examination setting that some tutors face which require support are; how to set challenging questions, lack of capacity to test a specific level and include entire content which has been taught, how to award marks, problem with understanding test validity and achieving content reliability, time constraints in terms of unrealistic setting deadlines and those of meeting course objectives, narrow/wide course content, overlapping course content, setting two questions in one/overloaded questions, repetition of questions, how to frame questions to suit what one is testing, matching questions with level of students, varying the types of questions to set, knowing the instructional values of the tests, Knowing what should be tested and timing of the test adequately.

Tutors need support on; moderation of examinations through which experienced staff can help new tutors identify aspects that need to be rectified. Training on effective examination setting through workshops and seminars on examination validity and reliability is necessary. Through these, tutors will be taught how to apply the table of specification when setting, gain skills on how to frame test items, identify the different types of examinations and how to test them. Training should also be offered on interpretation of the curriculum which will help tutors to identify overlaps and disjointedness of content. During setting of examinations realistic deadlines should be set so that tutors set quality papers. There ought to be enough time allocation for content coverage. To avoid overlapping questions in different examinations, curriculum developers should review course content. The findings emphasized the need for proper orientation on examination setting for tutors. It is also important that tutors share their experiences in examination setting. Research findings should also be made available to the tutors in order to acquire insights.

Concerning how long tutors would expect to have extra or further support, the majority felt that there should be regular workshops until the challenges are addressed. Other views indicated that training ought to be sustained because like in any other field, best practices change and others felt it should be done as long as one can understand which could be one hour/day/week. Some tutors preferred one to two years for different types of examinations and there were those who suggested one training cycle or one semester.

8. Conclusions

From the above findings, it is clear that during moderation of summative examinations it is noted that some tutors have challenges in setting examinations. As per the findings, tutors require adequate support to acquire the necessary skills through workshops, seminars and mentoring by experienced colleagues. Providing proper orientation to tutors is mandatory for setting of effective examinations. Equipping them with the needed skills improves the quality of examinations in an institution and gives tutors confidence. Figure 1 confirms that the majority of tutors know the purpose of examinations which is to test learners' mastery of course content but the problem is to do with doing it effectively. Most tutors also confirm that validity, testing what is supposed to be tested, is the major characteristic of a good examination. However, it was noted that with the staff development workshops quality was eventually attained.

9. Recommendations

In the light of the results of my questionnaires, I recommend that through workshops, seminars and mentorship, tutors should be given regular adequate support to make testing more efficient. A model of a one day test development workshop that I would organize would make reference to three main principles of testing namely validity, reliability and the discriminating nature of test items. The procedure would include soliciting tutors' expectations from the workshop and stating the objectives of the workshop. This would be followed by outlining some practices that go against theoretical principles of testing mostly touching on the problems that tutors encounter while designing examination questions and how to design complete, effective and efficient tests. This would be concluded by a plenary session.

The tutor has to prepare a table of specifications for the test to include items at each level of cognition to ensure that the test is balanced and comprehensively covers all areas of knowledge as in Bloom's taxonomy (content validity). Most institutions hold test development workshops/seminars for staff, have internal and external examination moderation. Working as a team is also very important because one becomes conversant with the right techniques of setting examinations.

Tutors should use a variety of testing methods. The most common testing methods for English, some of which might not be appropriate for higher levels, include; making oral presentations, gap-filling exercises, clozes, oral skills, Question/Answer exercises, composition writing, dictation, language games, rewriting sentences, substitution tables, comprehension tests, grammar, paragraph writing, functional writing exercises, essay questions, Performance tests, for example, Teaching Practice and objective questions which include; short answer test items, matching, true-false test items and multiple choice test items.

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Appendix

A questionnaire for tutors on examination setting.

As part of my research I am looking at effective testing and support required by tutors. I would greatly appreciate if you could spare a few minutes to share with me your opinion on this in the following questionnaire. Thank you for your time, Everlyn.

1. Identify what you think is the most important objective for examining.
2. Provide what you think are the most important characteristics of a good examination.
3. How do you test oral performance?
4. Should methods of evaluation only be based on reading and writing?
5. How do you test skills?
6. What techniques/ types of questions do you find most useful in examining your students?
- 7 a). Which challenges on examination setting do experienced/new tutors face that they require support on?
b). What kind of support do tutors need ?
c). How long would you expect to have extra/further support for?

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