CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Overview

This chapter is an introduction to the research report. It provides the context and background information of the study. The aim and rationale for the study, the research questions, which provide the basis for the study, as well as the limitations of this study are presented.

1.2 Purpose of study

The purpose of this study is to investigate how feedback from the Cambridge Overseas School Certificate (COSC) English language examinations marking board is disseminated to teachers and other stakeholders in Lesotho secondary schools. Teachers’ responses to this feedback are also investigated. The researcher believes that localised marking of Cambridge Overseas School Certificate (COSC) could have positive effects on teaching and learning of English language in Lesotho secondary schools. However, this is dependent, though not exclusively, on the accessibility and utilisation of the marking board information by teachers for ultimate improvement of students’ results. Therefore, teachers’ and other stakeholders’ views, their attitudes and perceptions about feedback, as well as their responses to the feedback from marking board were solicited through interviews and questionnaires. The discourse of the examiners’ reports and passlists were also analysed.
1.3 Context and background to the study

Lesotho is a very small country located in the Southern African sub-region and it is completely landlocked by South Africa. It is an ex-colony of Britain with a population of two million (MoE (1997b). The society is predominantly monolingual, with English and Sesotho as the two official languages. Formal education and the introduction of English language came with the colonisers and the missionaries who accompanied them to Lesotho in the 19th century. Before this period, Basotho children learned informally through indigenous settings, whereby boys learned from their fathers and girls learned from their mothers. There were also traditional initiation schools at which both boys and girls were prepared for manhood or womanhood respectively, and how to fit into their societies as adult members.

Lesotho became a colony of Britain in 1868. English is the language of the British Empire. The British foreign policy was to educate the subjected people in both the local languages and thereafter English. Initially, the British adopted the Orientalist model (policies in favour of education in local languages for both the colonised and the colonisers (Pennycook, 1994). This was later replaced by the Anglicist model (this refers to policies in favour of education in English) which led to the widespread use of English under colonialism hence its current position in the globe (Pennycook, ibid). The British government was not interested in improving education for Basotho people. For them, Lesotho was to remain the labour reserve economy for South African mines, therefore education became the business of the missionaries. The education system was restricted to educating clerks and the local clergy. During both the colonial and the post-colonial
eras English was the language of education and the successive governments were not interested in the status of local languages such as Sesotho, Sephuthi, Hindi and French. Pennycook (ibid) posits that the colonised people had no choice but to accept the language of the colonisers because of the inequality in international power relations. This means that the colonisers were in control of both the political and economic power over the colonised.

The hegemony of English was facilitated through such bodies as the British Council. The British Council had an office in Maseru, the capital town of Lesotho. Like it did in other parts of the world, the Council played its role in spreading the English language and the British culture to the Basotho. Contemporary English language books and materials were in abundance at the British Council offices. One needed to pay a small membership fee to gain access to all services and goods at the centre. The centre could even arrange for the delivery of books from Britain if the client needed them. It was closed in 2001 as it was no longer serving the interests of the coloniser. The property was donated to the Ministry of Education and the administration and control became the responsibility of the same Ministry.

Despite the efforts to promote English in colonised countries, the effects of the status of English in Lesotho are by and large negative. Heugh, (1995:46 in Heugh et al 1995) argues that in Anglophone Africa, English second language education has failed the majority of students even more comprehensively than it has failed minority students in Britain and the United States of America. Phillipson (1992:253) supports the argument
about this failure in that English Language Teaching ‘has failed to produce the goods’. This is due to the concerted linguicism which ensures Third World models “qualify the few and disqualify the many” (Phillipson, 1988:350). In addition, Mateene (in Heugh et al, 1995) concurs with the above assertions that in the Third World countries dominated by English, the vast majority of children get little benefit from schooling, linguistically and conceptually. Every year about 30% of Basotho children who sit for COSC English language examinations manage to get a credit and academic advancement (Passlist 2000) (Appendix D).

Localisation of Lesotho Examinations

Before 1961, when the idea of localisation began, Lesotho examinations were controlled by the Joint Matriculation Board (JMB) under the umbrella of the University of South Africa. Lesotho decided on localisation because the JMB could not allow Lesotho to arrange the curriculum to meet its local needs. An example was its refusal to use Lesotho’s orthography in Sesotho. This misunderstanding forced Lesotho to move to the Cambridge Overseas School Certificate (COSC) of the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (UCLES) even though COSC was not deemed to meet the needs of Lesotho by Basotho. The idea of localisation was reborn in 1970 under the auspices of The University of Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland Examinations Council (UBLSEC). A Working Party on Localisation was established led by Deakin (Working Party Report on Regional School Certificate Examinations, 1975). Deakin's party discouraged the idea of localisation on the grounds that UBLSEC lacked public recognition and there was a shortage of staff. More commissions were set up to pursue the issue of localisation, but to
no avail. In 1986 serious discussions on localisation resumed between Lesotho and the UCLES. The United Kingdom was changing its Ordinary level examinations to General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) to cater for a wider ability group – so International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE) was offered to overseas countries. Lesotho thought seriously about localising the O’level curriculum and examinations instead of moving to IGCSE. As a result of these discussions, ECOL started the process of localising in 1989. It has to be noted that localisation of curriculum was discussed further in 1995 at the National Seminar for localisation of secondary education. The concept of localisation of examinations, which made part of the package for discussion in that Seminar will be dealt with in more detail in Chapter Two of this report.

1.4 Aim

This study undertakes to investigate the washback effect of information emanating from examiners’ reports and marking memoranda of the marking board of the COSC English language examinations. It also intends to find out how feedback is channelled to teachers and other stakeholders for effective teaching and learning of English language in Lesotho secondary schools. Thirdly, teachers’ responses to this feedback are investigated.

1.5 Research questions

The main question that this study aims to answer is:

Does feedback from COSC English language marking board foster positive or negative ‘washback’ effects on English language teaching and learning in Lesotho secondary schools?
Sub-questions

In order to answer the main research question, the following sub-questions need to be answered:

1. What feedback from the O’level English examinations is disseminated to teachers?
2. How is this feedback disseminated to schools and teachers?
3. How do teachers respond to this feedback?

1.6 Rationale

There is a concern in Lesotho about students’ poor performance in COSC examinations, particularly in English language. English language has a high status in education in Lesotho. It has been accorded this status by the Lesotho Constitution of 1994, which stipulates:

The official languages of Lesotho shall be Sesotho and English and accordingly, no instrument or transaction shall be valid by reason only that it is expressed or conducted in one of those languages (The Constitution of Lesotho 1994, Chapter 1- Section. 2:14)

This provision came into effect despite the presence of other minority language groups such as Setebele, Setloakoa, Sekholokoe, Setaung, Sephuthi, as well as French, German, Chinese and Hindi (Akindele, 1999) The Ministry of Education Manifesto, in promoting English language in Lesotho states:

Sesotho is the medium of instruction from Standard 1 to Standard 4 English is the medium of instruction from Standard 5 upwards; English and Sesotho are taught as subjects both at Primary and Secondary levels (Ministry of Education, 1995:21)

In addition to being both an official language and a medium of instruction (MoI), English became a ‘failing subject’ both at junior and senior secondary levels. This means, that a
student who has not passed English language cannot proceed to the next level, even if s/he has passed other subjects. That is, no student will pass Junior Certificate or COSC if s/he has failed English. Research findings by Chabisi (2000) revealed that parents and teachers are not happy with English as a failing subject but they prefer it to remain the Medium of instruction. Those who attain a pass in English stand a good chance of entering university for further education or of obtaining employment. English language therefore tends to be a barrier for Basotho children’s academic, social and economic mobility. The Registrar of the Examinations Council of Lesotho (ECOL) once commented:

**English language** continues to be the main cause of failure. Even above average candidates who managed to obtain merits and first classes in JC obtained a lower class grade because they could not obtain a credit in English language (February, COSC Passlist – (1999:ii) (Bold type in original).

She showed similar concern on February 14, (2001) when she stated:

English is essential as a medium of instruction and learning in tertiary institutions, while Mathematics plays a pivotal role in both the Science careers and in the commercial world. Why do these subjects continue to become hurdles in candidates’ paths? There must be a way forward (COSC –Passlist –(2001:ii).

The fact that COSC examinations are controlled by the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (UCLES) in the United Kingdom, seems to cause greater concern for the poor results. Some stakeholders in the country complain about the irrelevance and inappropriateness of such examinations for Basotho children. In 1995 a National Seminar was held on the issue of localisation. Participants constituted representatives of major stakeholders in education. The Seminar marked a turning point in the Lesotho assessment system. The participants agreed on the urgency of localisation of secondary education in Lesotho (Ministry of Education Seminar Report, 1995). Some of the reasons raised for localisation by the Seminar (1995) were the following:
• Full control over educational standards
• Introduction of an examination system and forms of assessment that are responsive to local needs and circumstances
• Localised examinations would lead to coherent and relevant educational programmes
• Localisation may enhance continuity from JC to COSC
• Teachers’ involvement may lead to improvement in the quality of teaching and learning
• To reduce costs (Pule, 1995).

Having stated the rationale for localisation to the satisfaction of all participants, there was a need to come up with an agreeable definition of localisation. Localisation was defined by the Seminar participants thus:

Localisation means taking charge and control and responsibilities over curriculum development and assessment (Ministry of Education Seminar Report, 1995).

It has to be noted that the process of localisation is a broad and long-term one meaning that it had to be phased. Therefore, after its adoption, it had to be implemented gradually, and in phases (Khati, 1995). From 1995 to date, localisation has been realised only in so far as marking of scripts is concerned. This study hopes to identify any successes, constraints and/or problems related to the dissemination of post-marking information from examiners’ reports which may promote or hamper teaching and learning of English language at high school level. Moreover, it is hoped that this study will reveal that feedback from COSC marking could be useful in changing teachers’ practices and hence, students’ performance. This will depend on how such information is filtered down to
teachers and how it is utilised by the latter. In a nutshell, the study is likely to reveal any positive or negative washback of the feedback from localised examinations marking.

Many allegations have been levelled against the ECOL about their malpractices in administering localised marking. Some teachers claim that they do not receive feedback about the COSC examinations. A concerned teacher complained in these words:

I suspect that ECOL is also a stakeholder in poor results through its examiners and markers. There is a need for a systematic research in this regard. Otherwise, many of us will remain suspicious indefinitely (Public Eye, April 2003).

This study hopes to reveal whether these allegations are true or not. Again this study hopes to find out the role of the ECOL in disseminating examinations marking information to teachers.

As an Education Inspector whose responsibility is to assist second language teachers to improve the quality of English language in Lesotho schools, the researcher feels obliged to find ways and means through which this goal can be achieved. It is hoped that this study will contribute positively to the design and development of education policy strategies that will bring about improvement in Lesotho English language examinations for the benefit of Basotho students taking the COSC examinations. Furthermore, teachers and learners may benefit from the findings of this research. If those factors that hinder the flow of information are addressed, assessment-driven information could be used to change both teaching methods and strategies in order to enhance learning.

In personal communication with one educator who is also involved in marking COSC English language, she expressed her concern that the possible reason for poor results
could be attributed to some teachers’ tendency to ‘dumbdown’ instruction (Cummins, 1996). This means that some teachers tend to rely on contextualised and cognitively undemanding learning activities or tasks which fail to prepare students to acquire the proficiency required by COSC examinations. This is done at the exclusion of higher-order cognitively challenging tasks. This discrepancy prevents students from doing well in COSC proficiency tests. The researcher wishes to discover if there is any truth in these allegations.

It is against this background that my interest was triggered to investigate whether feedback from COSC examinations has had any positive or negative effects on teaching and learning of English language in Lesotho secondary schools.

1.7 Limitations of the study

Initially the researcher had made some assumptions about this study. She assumed that all the documents that she would need for the study would be readily available and accessible to her. Unfortunately, the reverse was the case. The researcher struggled to find the Examiners’ Reports for 1998-2002. She could not find them either at ECOL where they are compiled; neither could she find them at schools. The researcher had difficulty accessing examiners’ reports. The worst scenario was when she could not get the COSC Passlists/Results Booklets which are sent to schools after the release of the examinations results. This problem of non-availability of documents caused the researcher to return to Lesotho several times so that she could secure such documents. Finally, the researcher had to settle with Examiners’ reports for four years-1998, 1999,
2000, 2002 – the 2001 Report is not available. The 2002 examiners’ report was downloaded from the computer. Another problem the researcher encountered was limited literature in local libraries, on the ‘washback effects’ of university entrance examinations. The researcher had no problem issuing questionnaires to teachers. There was a high return rate of 34 questionnaires out of 40. However, some of them were half-completed while other responses show little understanding of the questions – they were partially addressing some of the questions. One may assume that some teachers rushed through some questions.

It has to be noted that the washback effects of university entrance examinations (COSC) on teaching and learning are best understood in a classroom situation (Alderson and Wall, 1993). However, my position as a full-time student in South Africa put some constraints on undertaking that kind of data collection. It would be difficult within the time limit of my programme, which is one year, to attempt to visit classrooms in Lesotho. Therefore, no attempt will be made to overgeneralise the findings of this study. But it is hoped that the findings from the other methods of data collection, employed in this study will be informative not only to the policy makers (the government) and the implementers (teachers), but also to the beneficiaries of education (Basotho children). The section that follows is an overview of chapters of this study.

1.8 Overview of chapters

**Chapter One** provides an introduction to this dissertation by giving the background and the context of the study without which there will be a gap between the aims and the
rationale of the study. Moreover, it introduces the research questions and sub-questions, which provide a basis upon which the research is conducted.

**Chapter Two** is the literature review which focuses mainly on literature on ‘washback’ effects of testing in relation to feedback from COSC examinations and how such feedback filters down through the education ladder. Literature on English assessment in general and English language assessment in Lesotho will be looked into. Reference will be made to the following concepts -localisation, colonialism, accessibility and utilization of feedback from external examinations, high-stakes testing, teacher-change and critical discourse analysis.

**Chapter Three** will consist of methods of data collection. The research methods and the selection of data as well as the rationale will be highlighted. Sources of data collection include: semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, and analysis of documents.

**Chapter Four** will present the findings of the research and their analysis.

**Chapter Five** will highlight major findings and draw conclusions and then make recommendations for further research.