

## **CHAPTER 5: RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION**

### **5.1 Overview**

This chapter reflects on the main issues raised by the respondents in relation to washback effects of feedback from COSC English language marking board. Suggestions will be made with regard to ways of addressing some of these issues. These will be followed by concluding remarks.

### **5.2 Reflections on the main issues of the study**

General findings in relation to respondents' views and experiences will be highlighted and related to the research questions in this study.

Main question:

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:

1. What are teachers' views and experiences about feedback from English language marking board?
2. How is this feedback disseminated to schools and teachers?
3. How do teachers respond to this feedback?

The study sets out to address concerns raised by stakeholders in Lesotho education in relation to the poor English language results. The issue of washback effects of feedback from COSC marking board was investigated with the aim to find out if such feedback fosters positive or negative effects. There was a mismatch among the views of the respondents in this study in relation to the question of washback effects of feedback from localised marking. A large majority of respondents (85 percent) thought that there are beneficial effects. A small minority (15 percent) of respondents, two TMs, one NTM, and the NCDC SO, thought that the effects were negative. Of greater importance is the fact that the same people who talked about the negative

effects also referred to positive washback effects of the same examinations and feedback from them.

The occurrence of these opposing views is a clear indication of the complexity of the concept of washback hence the ensuing debates on its existence, what it is, how it works and how positive washback can be fostered and negative washback minimised. As indicated in Chapter Two, contemporary research on washback since 1993 has shown that washback does exist and has both beneficial and harmful effects (Alderson and Wall, 1993; Brown, 1998, 2002). The literature examined for this research has again shown that some educationists take washback to mean measurement-driven instruction or ‘teaching to the test’, and for them washback will always be negative (Madaus, 1988; Cooley, 1991). These are the same people who argue strongly against high-stakes testing. They maintain that such tests tend to narrow-down the curriculum. On the contrary, other educationists have shown the benefits of such tests. Gipps (1994) posits that when teachers are aware that their students’ performance and achievement will reflect upon them professionally, it tends to create a strong washback. Critchley (2004:10 of 14) asserts that washback into teaching means that teachers will do whatever is essential for their students to be successful in their courses. I agree with Critchley’s (ibid) assertion that

While this kind of measurement-driven instruction is often criticised, if the final exam closely matches the task-based, communicative objectives set for the course, “teaching to the test” is exactly what teachers should be doing.

The major findings are as follows:

**5.2.1** Localised marking and the feedback from it have positive effects on teachers and students. Teachers now tend to know the expectations of the examinations and they focus all their efforts to the betterment of students’ performance and this is

evidenced by the steady improvement of students' scores over the period under study. It has to be noted however, that there could be other factors that have contributed to this improvement.

Some stakeholders in this study said that localised marking through ERs and other information from marking board have affected their teaching both negatively and positively. These are: one non-teacher-marker, two teacher-markers and the NCDC English language subject officer. The dilemma here is that the same people said that to some extent the feedback has benefited their colleagues and themselves because presently, they know what Cambridge expects and they teach their students accordingly and students perform well. This group of people confirm that washback has both positive and negative effects.

**5.2.2** In relation to the availability and utilisation of the examiners' reports there were again conflicting views of the stakeholders involved in the study. All the respondents here except ECOL officers agreed that the ERs are rarely available at schools, when they arrive they do so as late as September. ECOL officers believed that ERs reach schools, but the Registrar only realised during the interview that ERs do not always reach schools for the 2001 and the 2002 reports were not sent out to schools by her office. The STLs and the principals especially the one from school C and the NCDC and ECOL officers all maintained that ERs are not used constructively by all teachers. Though the allegations about partial utilisation of ERs may hold water, their non-availability and non-accessibility evidenced by the responses throughout the report is a matter for concern. I could not obtain ERs either at the various schools I went to or from ECOL office where they are produced. Their usefulness, which was expressed in no uncertain terms by the teachers, appears to be limited by their non-availability at schools.

5.2.3 Provision of detailed scores bring about positive effects because schools, teachers, principals, and students compare themselves with other schools and those that are doing well strive to maintain their performance and those who are trying put in more effort to improve.

5.2.4 According to the teachers, the usefulness of examiners' reports may be guaranteed if:

- they contain feedback which is directed towards helping teachers with useful approaches to addressing common problems such as the teaching of Comprehension and Summary writing
- it exposes teachers to assessment expectations
- a number of workshops are held regionally and nationally for dissemination of ERs
- the ERs are not vague but detailed, specific and diagnostic, allowing for opportunity for repair. This is also recommended by (Shohamy, 1992).

5.2.5 There were two opposing views on the issue of full localisation of the examinations. On the one hand, some stakeholders felt that the status quo should be maintained where setting is done by Cambridge and marking is done locally by Basotho. Their apprehensions revolve around issues of lowering of standards and lack of international recognition of fully localised examinations and curriculum. On the other hand, there are those who advocate for full localisation of the COSC. They believe this could ensure relevance and appropriateness of the examinations to Basotho needs.

**5.2.6** Selection and training of markers seem to be unfair according to the questionnaire responses and the non-markers' views. This is in accordance with what was claimed by one teacher in the "Public Eye" newspaper accusing ECOL of having a stake in poor results. This teacher wrote,

Secondly, criteria for selecting examiners and markers have to be revisited with the aim to seek an alternative. It appears that the same teachers are granted monopoly to feature in marking every year. When non-marking teachers approach them for information pertaining to examinations, they refuse under the pretext that information they have acquired when marking, including marking memoranda are "highly confidential (Rakhapu, P. Public Eye Newspaper, April 2003).

The respondents suggested that markers should be recruited from the ten districts to ensure justifiable representation of all districts in the marking board. This will in turn cater for fair distribution of marking board information.

**5.2.7** The respondents said that teachers and students have negative attitudes towards English language. Related to this problem is lack of confidence among students and among the teachers. There are many factors that could be contributing to this demotivation. The fact that English is a 'failing' subject of the high-stakes tests put pressure on these teachers and students and when they cannot perform well they get frustrated and panic. Low expectation of success on the part of students is demotivating. Packer (2003) seconds this view. Lack of full control over the examinations could be contributing to this problem since Basotho teachers have no say in the content and test design of the examinations. This is in agreement with Brown (1998). This lack of involvement and knowledge about examinations may be a cause for lack of confidence and motivation, hence negative washback. Wajnryb (1989 as cited by Critchley 2004) asserts that confidence in learners is fostered through evidence of their own success.

**5.2.8** Teachers should stop threatening students by telling them that English is difficult and they will fail it. Maybe the government should reconsider its policy on language with regard to English. The issue of attitudes towards English language as a subject and students' motivation were not part of this study. It appears that they could have given more insight into this study.

**5.2.9** Teachers claimed that they have grown professionally and they changed their teaching methods and strategies as a result of the benefits of feedback from marking board. This is attributed to the fact that they now have insight into the expectations of the examinations. They are well-informed about the examinations. This training promotes positive washback. This concurs with (Hughes, 1989).

The above findings negate what has been found out through empirical studies conducted by Wall and Alderson (1992) and Cheng (1995). According to their findings, examinations have had positive washback on materials development and attitudes, not on teaching methods. It has been noticed through the questionnaire that some teachers' attitudes and perceptions about English language have changed as the aftermath of localisation. This question on perceptions was not fully answered. Though we have talked about teachers being more resourceful as a result of feedback from marking board, real washback on materials development could have been the issue if the syllabus is localised.

**5.2.10** Central Inspectorate seems to ignore its responsibility of monitoring the ERs. If there is no follow-up on the ERs, it could mean a serious negligence on the part of concerned department. This calls for particular attention on the dissemination and utilisation of feedback from the marking board and how it is being monitored.

Consequently, these reports which are so vital according to the respondents in this study, end up not reaching teachers (2001 and 2002 reports). This leads to failure in their full utilisation for the benefit of improving English language teaching and learning.

On the basis of the above findings, I will attempt to provide some recommendations, which I hope will benefit all the stakeholders in English language teaching and learning and those who desire to see improvement not only in students' results, but also in English education.

### **5.3 Recommendations**

On the basis of the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made which are in line with what was suggested by the stakeholders in this study:

- The Ministry of Education (MOE) should revisit the education policy on examinations, for example, English as a 'failing subject'.
- The (MOE) should supply resources to all schools in order to inculcate the reading culture they propagate year in and year out. Availability of materials will also enhance teaching and learning.
- At micro-level - there should be collaboration and co-operation at schools among teacher-markers and non-teacher-makers, and experienced and inexperienced teachers on matters that relate to their pedagogical practices across the country.
- At macro-level, collaboration and co-operation is encouraged between the major agents of localisation of COSC that is, ECOL and NCDC. This is in agreement with what is posited by (Brown, 1998; Alderson, 1992).

- ECOL should revisit the feedback structures and mechanisms in order to promote positive washback of feedback from the marking board in relation to dissemination; timing of reports, detail, clarity and specificity. This can be achieved if more thought and time is devoted to the writing of the reports first by markers and then by ECOL. My contention is that the writing of the ERs should not be rushed over as is the case at present.
- All the information contained in the Passlists which is directed to teachers should be included in the ERs.
- Teacher-training is imperative. Teachers need back-up support and resources to function well in their field. Messick (1996); Fullan and Hargreaves (1992); Goodman (1992); Goodson (1992) agree with this. Regular in-service training is essential so that teachers become ‘informed consumers’ who can make informed decisions about what they should take from the ERs and how they can use that in classroom situations. De Vincenzi (1995) has alluded to the concept of ‘informed consumers’. Teacher empowerment is the key issue in educational circles.
- Fully-fledged localisation of both the marking and setting which takes cognizance of international standards could improve teaching and learning of English language and hence students’ performance.

#### **5.4 Recommendations for further Research**

- The role of the Central Inspectorate needs to be investigated in relation to the monitoring of the dissemination of marking board information and the ERs. Apparently, Central Inspectorate through its subject-specialists, is vested with the responsibility to monitor the alignment of teaching, curriculum and

assessment in Lesotho secondary schools. They are mandated to safeguard quality education. So their role in monitoring the dissemination and utilisation of the ERs is crucial.

- In order to improve on this research, the criteria for the ‘selection of markers’ for training and marking which is done by ECOL may be investigated in order to reveal whether it is justifiable or not, whether it contributes to fair, and wide dissemination of ERs and other marking board information to all teachers of COSC English language across the country.
- An attitudinal study towards the subject ‘English language’ among both teachers and students could highlight crucial issues pertinent to fostering positive or negative washback of COSC examinations.
- Further research on washback effects of examinations should incorporate classroom observation in order to give a complete picture of the washback effects of the high-stakes examinations such as the COSC in Lesotho.
- In order to dig deeper into positive effects on learners it may be necessary to investigate the issue of motivation among students. The effects of localised marking on students were not clear. It would be necessary in future research to include students as subjects of research.

## **5.5 Conclusion**

As it has been indicated several times throughout the report, the main aim of the research has been to find out if teachers obtain any benefits of feedback from localised marking of the COSC examinations. There is enough evidence that shows that there is positive washback, reference is made to Chapter Four particularly section 4.4.6. The analysis of students’ scores of the three selected schools is indicative of

positive results of feedback from localised marking board. However, no attempt is made here to generalise the findings as representative of all Lesotho secondary schools. We avoid the generalisation because there is some evidence from the teachers' views that there are other factors that may influence the students' performance in either a positive or negative way. These other factors are among others: teacher change and development, attitudes, policy, availability of resources both human and material, co-operation and collaboration among concerned parties. Findings in this research have shown that the flow of feedback from the marking board to teachers is problematic. With regard to the feedback, we have discovered that dissemination of marking board information is pivotal to the whole question of improvement of English language instruction. Something needs to be done to improve how feedback is channelled down to teachers and how it is utilised so that it could benefit students as well.

Another debatable issue is that of high-stakes testing. It has been indicated that high stakes tests can be harmful if schools work towards increasing their high-stakes tests results by getting rid of struggling poor students, hence increasing the drop out rate. This is undesirable. I agree with Packer (2003) that accountability is needed, students need to be pushed, and low expectations are unhealthy. He continues,

But these views do not automatically lead to more standardised tests as requirements for graduation. Policy makers need to think of the future demands for careers and citizenship (2003:4 of 5).

I concur with the view that in order to ensure validity of high-stakes tests some accommodations should be made for English second language learners. The issue of accommodations is relevant in the case of COSC examinations for as long as these examinations are set in a foreign culture, and the curriculum is the responsibility of an outside body. The major concerns of the stakeholders with regard to relevance,

appropriateness of examinations, unity and continuity between the JC and the COSC examinations will never be realised if the status quo is maintained. However, I suggest that decisions about students and policy should not be based solely on high-stakes tests, other factors have to be taken into account.

The Registrar of ECOL, in the interview with the researcher, also expressed her concern about the type of examinations students write which place them at a disadvantage. She advocated full control of the curriculum and assessment and an option of subject examinations whereby students could write high or lower grade papers in accordance with what they need for their further educational development.

It has to be noted that since the decision to localise the COSC until 2003, the time for the writing of this report, the localisation innovation in relation to the COSC examinations has not been reviewed. The only document which is available is the report on 'Evaluation of the Secondary Revised Curriculum in Trial Schools leading towards Localised O'level Curriculum' (June 2002). In this report, developments in relation to localisation are highlighted. What has been achieved so far is full control over the JC curriculum and examinations but the full localisation of COSC curriculum and examinations remains a problem.

It is hoped that this research report will provide information which will assist policy makers to make informed decisions on policy alternatives in many educational areas such as strengthening the monitoring of ERs through the Central Inspectorate, and indeed take action on the recommendations made here, which might contribute positively towards improving teaching and learning of COSC English language and hence students' performance.

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