

A Piecemeal Advance: Language Assessment Literacy in South Africa

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Abstract

This paper reflects on the assessment of language ability, and evaluates the significance of developments in language test design in South Africa over the last three decades. In this environment the development of language assessment literacy (LAL) has been a piecemeal advance, prompted by private efforts. In their administration of large-scale international tests at primary and secondary school level, public education authorities have commissioned this private expertise to evaluate the quality of existing public examinations. In higher education, the learning about assessing language ability more professionally has been focussed on the testing of academic literacy. Several institutional, one inter-institutional initiative and one organisation intended for individual professionals have contributed to a sustained engagement with the assessment of language ability. Engagement, however, does not yet constitute demonstrable or wide national gains in competence to assess language ability. There is a serious lack of research on LAL despite this having secured the attention of language testers globally for more than two decades. The work done within the organisations mentioned shows how awareness may be converted into competence. Having achieved some gains in the latter, the investigations have also revealed significant gaps in expertise. There are still equally significant challenges to be met.

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Prompts for Development, and What Makes Development Significant¹

What follows links to some quite comprehensive recent discussions of the notion of language assessment literacy and its relevance especially for educators (Coombe et al.,

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2020), but has a narrower focus. This contribution seeks to identify the prompts that led to language assessment coming into the public view with increasing prominence in South Africa in the last three decades. The first of these triggers was the opening up of higher education on scale after the adoption of a new constitutional dispensation. This happened at more or less the same time, the mid-1990's, that the massification of tertiary education affected education institutions globally. Since then, language assessment in South Africa has come into focus ever more sharply. In a multilingual context such as this, a direct result of allowing more students into higher education is that new entrants, coming from a diversity of language backgrounds, may not be able to cope with the language demands of education at this level (Cliff, 2024; Weideman et al., 2021). Simply put: since the language of instruction is in most cases an additional language to these new entrants, their level of academic literacy may not be adequate. That then becomes a challenge for tertiary studies being accessible to them. It should therefore come as no surprise that the challenges this has presented for especially the higher education sector were a noteworthy stimulus for the assessment of language ability at that level.

As I wish to set out below, awareness of the need to measure language ability in a theoretically defensible and responsible way does not instantly convert into competence in doing so. The construct of language assessment literacy (LAL), defined as consisting of the familiar components of conceptual knowledge of language assessment and its procedural practices, to which may be added a policy or ethical dimension (Baker, 2016; also Baker & Riches, 2018) is today informed also by Taylor's (2013:410) dynamic or differential model for various stakeholders (e.g. teachers, test developers, administrative users of test results). By "conceptual knowledge" reference is made to the theory, principles or knowledge of language testing, while "procedural practices" refer, in turn, to professional experience in how tests are administered.

This contribution will reflect on the developments in language assessment in South Africa, and specifically on how those relate to the achievement of higher levels of competence in assessing language ability. Though it will refer to some existing analyses (e.g., Van Dyk, 2021) and documentation either publicly available or directly provided by the various actors involved, it will not be a comprehensive or exhaustive survey of these developments. Rather, it will use the notion of historical significance to focus on key improvements. To this end, I use the concept as in its historical sense, as expressed or signified influence.

This needs some further explanation. Historically significant influence, once it is exercised, means that change becomes possible. One of the yardsticks of significance is evident when such change affects not only individuals, but also organisations. In the same breath, we would associate desirable change as indicating an advance, in the same way as we would perceive of undesirable change as evidence of regression. This is another reason that this reflection on developments in South Africa will not be comprehensive. Concentrating on 'significance' introduces both an element of

selectiveness and subjective evaluation, and a way of achieving sharper focus. A significant development, characterised as it is by influence exercised and change happening, certainly also qualifies as progress. The conclusion reached in a recent evaluation of our professional history as language test designers and users was that, in a global context, LAL constitutes an historical advance for the profession (Weideman, 2024b; also, 2024a). This analysis will seek to test that conclusion with reference to South Africa.

In what follows, I shall first describe the initiatives which emanated from government, specifically from those public institutions concerned with assessing language ability on a national scale. Then non-governmental endeavours, mainly of an organisational nature, will be explained. In both cases, the evidence presented will refer to the significance of a growth in knowledge and ability to assess language. Finally, two promising new initiatives will be mentioned, before the analysis will conclude by considering the large gaps in research on LAL in South Africa, as well as the newer, future challenges that greater awareness has created. If ignored, they could signify stagnation or even regression, rather than progress or an advance.

Government Initiatives

To ensure that standards are maintained in what is undoubtedly South Africa's highest stakes assessment, the Grade 12 (National Senior Certificate or NSC) exit examinations are certified annually as adequate by the Council for Quality Assurance in General and Further Education and Training, known as Umalusi. Umalusi is a statutory body, intended to operate independently of the provider of public education, the Department of Basic Education. In practice, however, as will be noted below, it finds it difficult to hold the latter to account. Nowhere is that clearer than in the assessment of what are known as "home languages". Home languages is a term used in this context instead of first language or mother tongue, since the latter are fraught with complications and potential confusion in South Africa's multilingual, urbanized environment. In order to assuage their own concerns, the council commissioned several studies into the fairness of the exit examinations in the 11 languages offered as home languages (Umalusi, 2012a, 2012b, 2012c). The discrepancies were immediately evident when one looked at the averages over a four-year period at that time (Table 1). There is an almost 12% gap between the highest and the lowest, and similar misalignments as regards the pass rates. Moreover, the latter set of rates is wholly out of kilter with the much lower ones of other NSC subjects.

Table 1

Four-year Average Learner Performance in the HL Examinations across Provinces, and Their Pass Rates: 2008-2011 (Umalusi 2012a: 9)

	Average 2008-2011	Average Pass Rate
Sesotho	52.9	98.8
English	53.0	94.0
Afrikaans	55.5	96.5
Setswana	55.7	99.2
Sepedi	57.4	99.0
IsiXhosa	59.5	99.6
IsiZulu	60.0	99.0
SiSwati	61.7	99.1
Xitsonga	62.7	99.0
Tshivenda	63.4	99.8
IsiNdebele	64.4	99.4

In 2012, Umalusi then commissioned the Inter-institutional Centre for Language Development and Assessment (ICELDA) to undertake yet another study. This led to several investigations, the results of which were reported on not only to Umalusi, but also in the form of journal articles (Du Plessis et al., 2016; Weideman et al., 2017; Du Plessis, 2021, 2016, 2014; Du Plessis & Du Plessis, 2015; Du Plessis & Weideman, 2014), an MA dissertation (Steyn, 2018; 2021) and a PhD thesis (Du Plessis, 2017). Along with pointing out further concerns than those noted in the prior reports, all the analyses confirmed the points already made in those earlier studies (Umalusi, 2012a, 2012b, 2012c). The 2012-2013 study went one step further, however. It proposed a new allocation and weighting of the four components that made up the assessment, namely a mark awarded by the school (continuous assessment), and marks for the three papers (Du Plessis, 2017). It further proposed that a proportion of the final marks (ideally: 20%) be allocated to a standardised component testing advanced language ability, as specified in the curriculum (Department of Education, 2011). Steyn (2018, 2021) then extracted the functional language components from this *Curriculum and assessment policy statement* (CAPS) (see Appendix A), and came up with a set of specifications (Table 2) for such a test, which would eventually ensure equivalence or at least a high degree of comparability across languages.

Table 2

Specifications for a Test of Advanced Language Ability (TALA), Modified for an Institutional Client

Subtest / Task Type	Specifications of Items (60 Marks)	
Vocabulary knowledge (tested in shorter, sentence length contexts)	(12) The meaning of words, collocations, figurative expression	
	The format could be either one-word or two-word multiple choice items.	
Understanding texts Candidates must answer questions about a given text at the appropriate level to demonstrate their understanding of content and features of the text.	(24)	
	✓ Distinguish essential from non-essential ✓ Categorising and comparing ✓ Identifying cause and effect ✓ Making inferences and seeing implications ✓ Comparing text with text (coherence) ✓ Vocabulary in context – 4 marks of the 24 for this section ✓ Handling metaphor and idioms	Primary
	✓ Communicative function: e.g. stating/questioning/explaining/exemplifying ✓ Sequencing ✓ Cohesion / cohesive ties	Secondary
	(In addition, one could test verbal reasoning under “Making inferences”)	
Understanding graphic information This subtest has questions on graphs and simple numerical computations.	(7)	
	✓ Trends ✓ Proportions ✓ Differences between categories ✓ Comparisons of categories	
Text organisation In this subtest we have an altered sequence of sentences which the candidate must re-assemble in the correct order as paragraph.	(5)	
	✓ Sequencing	
Grammar and text relations The final subtest requires the candidate to identify where words have been deleted, and which words belong in those places in the text where words have been systematically omitted	(12)	
	A test of advanced ability to handle structure and grammar. The text is systematically mutilated. Components that are likely to be measured include prepositions, conjunctions, vocabulary, word morphology, concord, tenses, and language functions.	

The proposal was that both construct equivalent, and back-translated and corrected versions should be experimented with across the 11 languages, and that their results be used, after logistic modelling, to test the comparability of the full set of marks. Sadly, despite these numerous reports, three in-person presentations to the council by the researchers involved, and design proposals to remedy the situation, nothing has happened. The spin-offs from the learning about language test design have, fortunately, been heartening. I return below to those.

A second government initiative has been the internal development of what were known as ANA's (Annual National Assessments), for administration in schools. There were objections from teachers' unions, and this undertaking, while now apparently back on track, was interrupted. Mphalala and Mncube (2017) and Van den Berg (2015) provide analyses of the meaning, the potential, and the possible misconstruing of the results of these tests.

A third set of initiatives is the participation by the public education provider in international studies like TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study- South Africa [TIMSS-SA], 2025) and PIRLS. Because LAL is our focus, the present analysis is concerned with PIRLS. Its main recent findings (Spaull, 2023) indicate not only that South Africa was placed last out of 57 countries, but also that it has shown regression in reading ability at school level since 2016. Its results present nothing short of a dismal outcome, and signals a huge challenge.

Initiatives from Non-Government Institutions

As depressing as the lack of action and the undesirable outcomes of government undertakings and neglect may be, as heartening are the various initiatives of especially the higher education sector. The work of the CEA (Centre for Evaluation of Assessment, 2025), located at the University of Pretoria, includes contracted responsibilities in the national administration of PIRLS, while the Centre for Educational Assessments (2025; CEA) of the University of Cape Town has made a lasting impact by focussing for some time on bringing to the fore the notion of 'readiness' for tertiary study (Cliff, 2014, 2015; Cliff et al., 2006; Yeld, 2001). A wide-ranging review of their more than three decades of work in academic literacy and 'readiness' is to be found in Cliff's reflection (2024) on their work at this university.

Apart from these initiatives which are tied to two separate institutions of higher education, another organisation, the Inter-institutional Centre for Language Development and Assessment (ICELDA) (2025), has brought together four other universities, North-West University, Stellenbosch University, the University of Pretoria, and Akademia. ICELDA came into existence more than two decades ago. Its original aim was to offer an alternative to the poor quality, commercially available tests of language proficiency which universities were using at the turn of the century. It sought to replace these with theoretically defensible tests of academic literacy – see the analyses listed by the Network of Expertise in Language Assessment (NExLA)

(2025). ICELDA's work has now extended into curriculum design and language policy articulation and evaluation, the latter evident in its management of one of the 'nodes' of the South African Centre for Digital Language Resources (SADiLaR), (SADiLaR, 2025; Van Dyk et al., 2023). This organisational venture has in the first instance stimulated wide-ranging analyses of language tests, and in particular tests of academic literacy.

The particular significance of these tests has been twofold. First, the wide adoption of the original construct of academic literacy, first introduced by Yeld (2001), and later refined further (Patterson & Weideman, 2013a, 2013b; also, Weideman & Pot, 2015; Weideman, Patterson & Pot, 2016) influenced a rethink of the way that readiness to meet the language demands of further and tertiary education in South Africa was defined. Two good examples of how the refined construct has been used are the Afrikaans version of the Test of Academic Literacy for Postgraduate Students (TALPS), called TAGNaS (Toets van Akademiese Geletterdheid vir Nagraadse Studente) (Keyser, 2017), and the Assessment of Preparedness to Present Multimodal Information (APPMI) (Drennan, 2019). Second, the use of this construct and the test specifications that operationalised it have attracted international attention on several fronts. It gained prominence when Read (2016) noted the advances that a close attention to articulating the construct of academic literacy yielded, when it was oriented to as in this South African version of what he has termed Post-Entry Language Assessments or PELA's. Thus, this test development work gained further significance further afield. It also bore fruit when the undergraduate test (Test of Academic Literacy Levels, or TALL) and its postgraduate counterpart, the Test of Academic Literacy for Postgraduate Students (TALPS) (Pot, 2013) began to be used in far-flung locations such as Singapore, Vietnam, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Namibia. A good further example of the reach of developing tests in this fashion is the design, piloting and use of a similar test, the Academic Literacy Levels Test (ALLT) for the University of Southern Queensland (Green et al., 2025).

A second stimulus for professional interest in language assessment has come from an initiative, originally launched with the support of a grant from the International Language Testing Association (ILTA), called the Network of Expertise in Language Assessment (NExLA). It currently functions as a special interest group (SIG) of the South African Association for Language Teaching (SAALT), and, unlike ICELDA, which ties tertiary institutions into a collaboration, NExLA's membership is individual professionals. Its bibliography (NExLA, 2025) contains a comprehensive list of the more than 100 publications, in the form of articles in reputable journals, master's dissertations and doctoral theses which analyse the results of, or refer to, these tests. This bibliography is also used annually to update the global one maintained by ILTA. These two developments, a realisation that construct articulation is indispensable for responsible test design (Weideman, 2021, 2022), and that organisational support can multiply awareness of language testing, are significant for the levels of LAL in South Africa. For a wider understanding of the meaning of this, I turn first to a brief

description of the main themes that have stimulated further analysis and research of language assessment, and then to a description of the building of capacity to design and develop tests.

The Main Themes in Language Assessment Research

Van Dyk (2021) presents a review of the major themes in language assessment research in South Africa. It shows publications across a fairly wide range of journals, both national (in 11 cases) and international (at that point: four), in which research on language testing had been published since 1999. The bibliography of the Network of Expertise in Language Assessment (NExLA, 2025) lists these more fully, and up to the present.

Perhaps more significant, and interesting, is the list of most frequently used keywords in the articles analysed (Table 3). It clearly shows the preoccupation of analysts of the results of tests designed in South Africa with fundamental notions such as validity and impact (Weideman, 2024b), and the preponderance of tests of academic language ability. Though not in the top 20, other applied linguistic fundamentals, like fairness, accountability, transparency and responsibility also figure in these publications.

Table 3

Topics Covered as per Keyword Identified by Authors (Van Dyk, 2021, p. 222)

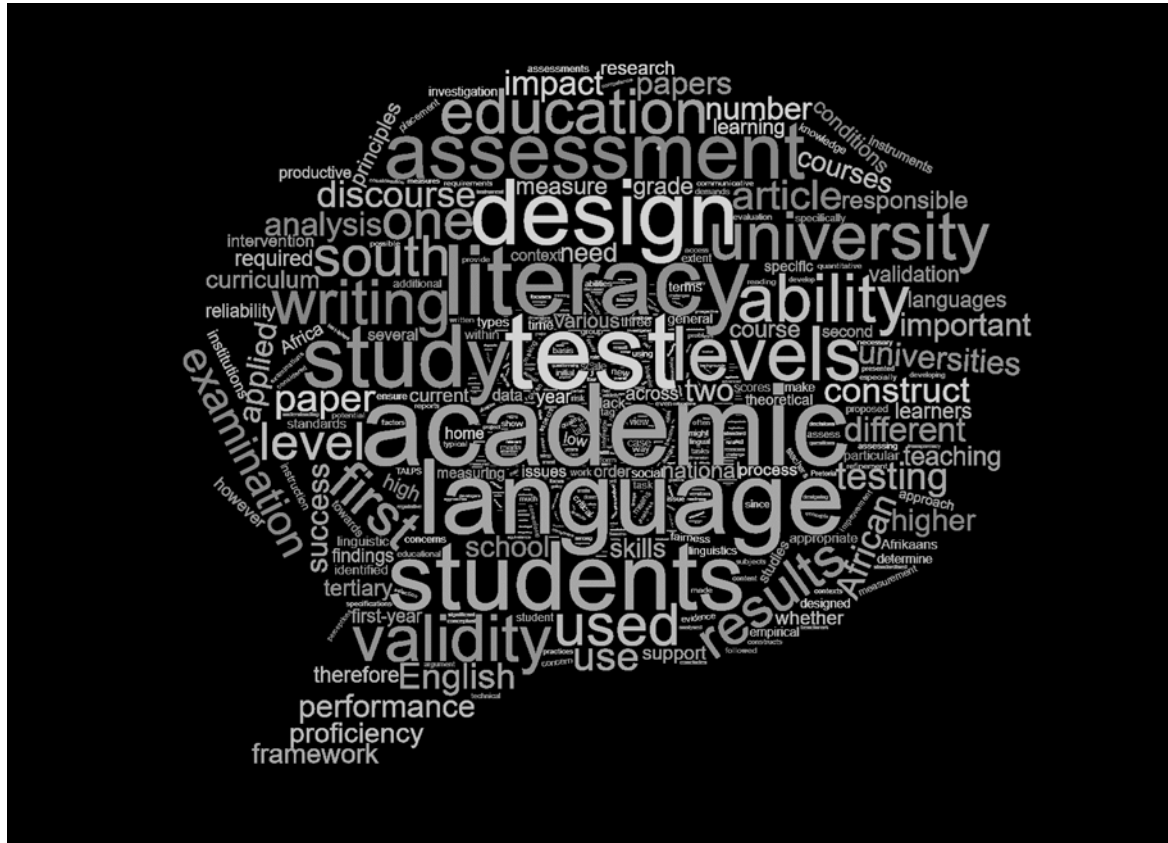
Position	Number of Appearances	Keyword
1	58 x	academic
2	43 x	language
3	36 x	literacy
4	20 x	test
5	18 x	writing
6	14 x	testing
7	11 x	assessment
8	10 x	validity
9	8 x	ability
10	7 x	impact
11	7 x	design
12	6 x	vocabulary
13	6 x	proficiency
14	6 x	postgraduate
15	6 x	education
16	5 x	evaluation
17	5 x	access
18	5 x	discourse
19	5 x	diagnostic
20	5 x	development

In addition, Van Dyk (2021, p. 225) coded the abstracts and introductions to the publications in his 1999-2019 corpus of articles for terms frequently used in these

texts. The word cloud (see Figure 1) that was produced contributes, as he noted, to a “better understanding of what is typically found in the South African testing literature” with terms like **academic**, **language**, **literacy**, **test**, **assessment**, **design**, and **validity** standing out.

Figure 1

Prominent Concepts in Language Assessment Research in South Africa (Van Dyk, 2021, p. 225)



One looks forward to someone undertaking a similar study of what has been published on LAL. However, despite this having been a point of discussion of at least one conference paper, subsequently published (Weideman 2019), the suspicion is that there has been very little attention to either the concept or to surveys offering quantitative data of the level of LAL in the broader education sector. This hunch needs to be investigated, and is one of the gaps in our better understanding of LAL in South Africa. As a SIG of the South African Association for Language Teaching, NExLA has offered workshops for teachers at past conferences, and it plans to do more. In particular, their intentions are to extend their offerings on test and item level analyses using Classical Test Theory, using Tiaplus (Centraal Instituut voor Toetsontwikkeling [Cito], 2013) to include training workshops in Rasch analysis (Linacre, 2018) at the 2026 SAALT conference. This will no doubt begin to contribute in a small way to higher levels of LAL.

Building Capacity in LAL

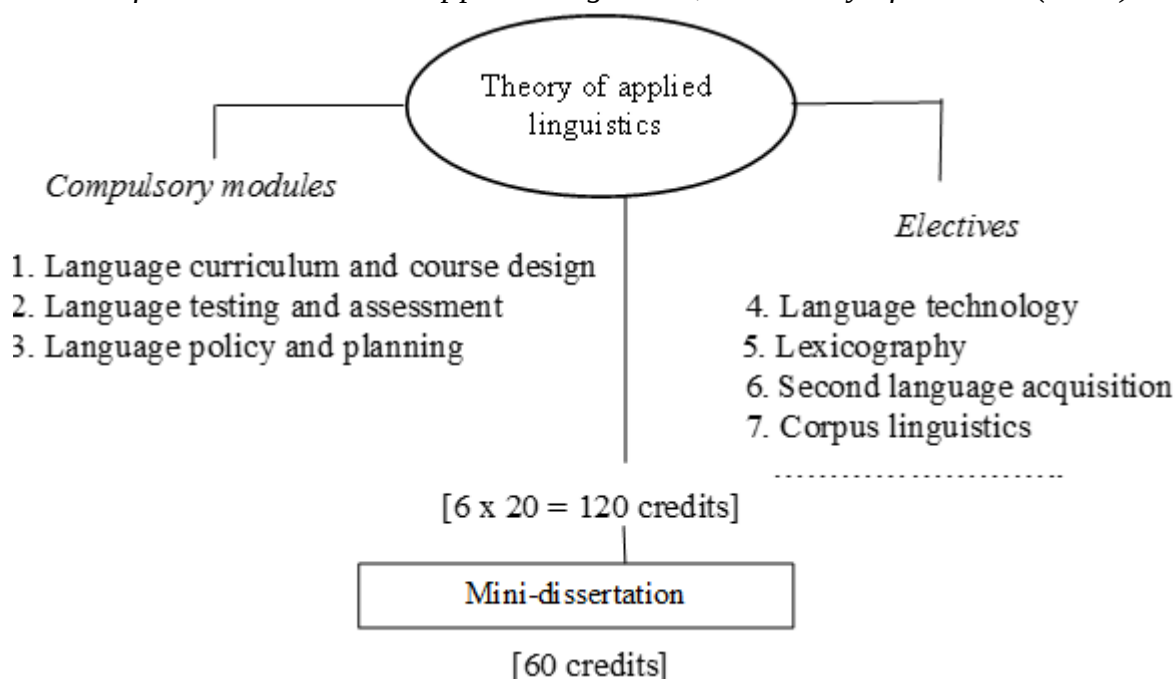
The themes highlighted in the previous section present a picture of past investigations and initiatives in familiarising a larger group of language professionals, especially teachers, with what it means to design language assessments responsibly.

What is currently becoming more significant are two initiatives in building more capacity. These advance the process of professionalisation of those involved in designing language interventions (e.g., language courses, language tests, and language policies).

The first of these endeavours is the introduction, in 2025, of a newly instituted MA in Applied Linguistics at the University of Pretoria, generously supported by ICELDA in the form of seed funding and student bursaries. ICELDA offered to support this in order to begin to broaden the small base of potential PhD candidates in applied linguistics. Its argument was that South Africa's multilingual environment yielded more than enough challenges in the form of language problems crying out for responsibly designed language solutions than could be solved in a lifetime, and that a larger corps of professional designers of language interventions has therefore become imperative. The current curriculum of this postgraduate qualification (Figure 2) includes one compulsory module in language assessment (of which there are four, with two electives), and one would hope that, when students choose the topics of their mini-dissertations, at least some would also be in that subfield of applied linguistics.

Figure 2

Choice of Modules on MA in Applied Linguistics, University of Pretoria (2025)



A second, and perhaps equally significant development is the envisaged introduction of a new Postgraduate Diploma in Assessment Literacy at North-West University

(NWU). Though it is intended to tackle head on the professional development of those involved in any form of educational assessment, it is likely to give prominence to, and cater fully for those interested in language assessment in particular. This is evident in its seven modules, of which three are core modules:

- Research methodology
- Themes, trends and theory in assessment literacy
- Assessment accessibility and accountability: social justice and inclusion

Its elective components are:

- Formats for assessment
- The design and development of assessments
- Data use: the empirical properties of assessments
- Assessment in different educational settings
- Advanced test design: item writing

One of its core modules (Table 4) is designed to utilise basic and general assessment design principles which apply to language assessment design as well.

Table 4

Outline of Lectures for Core Module on Postgraduate Diploma in Assessment Literacy, NWU

Lecture plans: Themes, trends and theory in assessment.....	2
Weeks 1-13.....	2
Outline of lectures: Themes, trends and theory in assessment.....	3
Week 1: Expectations, resources and procedures	3
Week 2: Defining assessment, testing and evaluation	3
Week 3: Finding appropriate assessment formats.....	4
Week 4: How theories relate to formats for assessment	4
Week 5: Investigating models of assessment design.....	5
Week 6: The five phases of assessment design [1]	5
Week 7: The five phases of assessment design [2]	5
Week 8: The five phases of assessment design [3]	6
Week 9: Applying the five-phase model.....	6
Week 10: The principles of assessment [1]: Test integrity	6
Week 11: The principles of assessment [2]: Scope and range	6
Week 12: The principles of assessment [3]: Reliability and validity.....	8
Week 13: The principles of assessment [4]: Emotional and theoretical defensibility	8

This proposed postgraduate diploma also has the potential to lead, at the next level specified by the national qualifications framework, to an MA qualification at NWU

such as the one already in operation at another ICELDA partnering institution, the University of Pretoria, which was discussed above. It has the further potential to be transferred from its initial institutional base, NWU, to be used in the design of a similar postgraduate diploma at the University of Pretoria. That qualification, in turn, would enable and institutionally establish another feeder programme into the MA of the latter.

These initiatives come at a time when there is also increasing interest in language tests other than those of academic literacy, but also, in the case of the latter, at other levels. Taking the last mentioned here first, there are now ICELDA-owned South African tests in emergent literacy (Gruhn, 2015; Gruhn & Weideman, 2017), a Test of Early Literacy (TEAL) (Steyn, 2014), and a test of academic literacy (with specifications comparable to TALA, the test of advanced language ability) aimed at Grade 10 level (Myburgh-Smit, 2015; Myburgh-Smit & Weideman, 2021). In addition to the Test of Academic Literacy Levels (TALL) and its Afrikaans version, TAG (Toets van Akademiese Geletterdheid) for undergraduate students, there are also TALPS (Test of Academic Literacy for Postgraduate Students) and another, developed at the University of the Free State for students transitioning to postgraduate study, called APPMI (Assessment of Preparedness to Present Multimodal Information (Drennan, 2019; Drennan, Joubert & Weideman, 2024). Experimentation with tests of academic literacy translated and adapted for other languages fits well into meeting the multilingual demands in the tertiary education sector (Butler, 2017; Mahlasela, 2023).

Other than these tests of academic language ability, there are also now QARL (Quick Assessment of Reading Ability, aligned with the Common European Framework of Reference or CEFR: Council of Europe, 2018; Drennan et al., 2026), APLAC (Assessment of Professional Language Capacity, for use in call centres and office environments), ALEF (Assessment of Language for Economics and Finance, for use in the training of prospective employees in the banking sector), all developed by a private test-making venture, Language Courses and Tests (LCaT, 2025) along with ProficiT. The latter was commissioned by ICELDA as a test of general language proficiency with specifications similar to TALA – see Table 2. QARL was initially developed as a quick test of reading ability for use in schools in Southeast Asia, while APLAC and ALEF are used mostly in professional and training environments. ProficiT will be used by a university of technology to gauge the level of English proficiency of their first-year students.

Discussion and Reflection

The diversification of tests across various domains signals rising levels of awareness of the use of tests in professional contexts. The development of an awareness of language assessment, combined with the existing and new initiatives described above, indeed points to a significant and increasing interest in what tests can do, and how they can be utilised in diverse settings, such as education and business, and for ever more varied purposes.

Awareness does not automatically translate into competence, however, and these are only the initial steps towards higher levels of LAL. Moreover, as awareness and competence have increased, other and further challenges have emerged. We have begun to ask the question: why was our interaction, as language assessment designers and developers, so unsuccessful in engaging with Umalusi, or with the department of education a decade ago? Are we engaging in the right way with policy makers (Schildt, Deygers & Weideman, 2024)? It would appear that we do not yet know enough about how to engage productively with test result users and policy makers. Unlike elsewhere, as in Europe, where language tests are used for immigration, in South Africa the high-stakes tests are those that are used for university entry (Sebolai, 2016; Myburgh-Smit, 2015). Do the administrators who apply criteria for enrolment based on the results of language tests have sufficient levels of LAL to be able to interpret them responsibly? While there is now a substantial review of the language resources of South African universities and universities of technology (Van Dyk et. al., 2023), there remains a huge gap here, in respect of LAL, that cries out for attention in serious research.

There are also other spaces for improvement. The assessment of language for the school exit examination, the NSC, is supposed to be done in terms of specifications, called Subject Assessment Guidelines (SAGs), which derive from the curriculum, CAPS (Department of Basic Education, 2011). The various investigations into these examinations referred to above confirm a worrying mismatch between curriculum and assessment, a drifting away over time from the original, and laudable, intentions of the former, which hark back to their still relevant theoretical bases in sociolinguistic theories of Habermas (1970), Hymes (1971), Halliday (1978), Halliday and Webster (2002, 2003). Instead, the last of the Umalusi-commissioned reports, summarized in Du Plessis et al. (2016) and Weideman et al. (2017), present evidence of an ever-greater reliance on the examination papers of previous years. Moreover, the SAGs also appear to be an example of overtesting, or at least overly detailed prescriptions on how to assess progress. But this latter suspicion is at this point only a hunch. We need investigations that will reveal whether these concerns are legitimate, and propose ways of designing assessments that will be more productive. Thus, at two levels, we are looking not only for LAL, but for language policy literacy (as in the SAGs), and language assessment policy literacy.

The challenge will be to become informed by evidence-based findings in order, first, to raise especially the level of discretion in interpreting test results responsibly, and second, to develop the professional judgement to know whether and when one is undertesting or overtesting. For now, the work done by ICELDA, NeXLA and other private institutional initiatives will remain an anchor in promoting language assessment literacy in South Africa. But three further points mentioned above need to be placed on the agenda:

- Language policy literacy and language assessment policy literacy must become a top priority in further research projects, especially with the high-stakes tests at the exit of secondary school level.
- Possibly in combination with this first priority, the work done on investigating the resources of tertiary institutions referred to in this discussion must be followed up by the implementation of a plan to develop capacity in language policy development in higher education institutions.
- Language assessment experts must, both through research and engagement, seek an understanding of what kind of advice is appropriate for authorities in language assessment, and how that advice must be delivered to be effective.

Should we ignore these challenges, the gains made over the last 30 years may be frittered away, and there will be either stagnation or regression. For test designers and developers, the stewardship of making more professional advances must remain their shared goal.

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No use has been made of Generative AI.

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World Medical Association (WMA) Declaration of Helsinki–Ethical Principles for Medical Research Involving Human Participants

Participation in and data generated for the tests being referred to here were properly cleared with participants and stakeholders beforehand, and the data were studiously

anonymized, along with the settings in which the data were gathered. The research did not involve any human for experimental medical research.

Competing Interests

There are no interests to declare in this respect.

Data Availability

Enquiries with the author: albert@lcat.design.

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Appendix A

Components of Advanced Language Ability

From Curriculum, Assessment and Policy Statement (CAPS), relevant for a language proficiency test

Learning a language should enable learners to:

- acquire the language skills required for academic learning across the curriculum;
- use language appropriately, taking into account audience, purpose and context;
- use language to access and manage information for learning across the curriculum and in a wide range of other contexts; and
- use language as a means for critical thinking... interacting critically with a wide range of texts... challenging the perspectives... embedded in texts; and for reading texts for various purposes, such as ... research, and critique.

(Department of Basic Education 2011: 9)

Key language component and functions associated with this are to be able to

- Understand the meaning of words, and use knowledge of prefixes, suffixes and common roots to determine the meaning of words and their connections to word families
- Use textual context and cues to determine the meaning of unfamiliar words
- Identify and understand the use of common phrases, proverbs and idiomatic language, figurative language, rhetorical devices, collocations
- Skim and scan text, and also to read it intensively and critically
- Make predictions; understand sequence and order
- Make connections, attending to word choice and language structures
- Make sense of a text, using structure and language features to recognise text type
- Make sense of visual information (e.g. graphs)
- Compare and contrast
- Distinguish between main and supporting ideas, fact and opinion, cause and effect, denotation and connotation
- Answer questions, explain and report
- Evaluate
- Infer, and see what basis there is for the inference and to draw conclusions
- Synthesise