

**Language Assessment:**  
**An exploration of whether Critical**  
**Language Testing influences the**  
**testing of language in the FET phase**  
**of a selected high school**

**By**

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## DECLARATION

I, Robin Mahomet, declare that this Dissertation, “Language

**Assessment:**

An exploration of whether Critical Language Testing influences the testing of language in the FET phase of a selected high school” is my own original work. Where reference has been made to other work, this has been duly acknowledged.

**Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_

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**Date**

**As the candidate's Supervisor, I agree with the submission of this  
thesis**

**Signature: \_\_\_\_\_**

**Professor A. Sheik**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Date**

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## Abstract

Language teachers have multiple responsibilities in that they teach a subject which fits into the framework of the school curriculum as well as being the medium through which the majority of that school curriculum is taught. Literacy is also a requirement for the citizenry of the country to function effectively in our society. A further responsibility which is not always perceived is that language has power in that it is often the medium through which social, political and economic discourse occurs. Critical theory contends that competing ideologies seek to make their discourses dominant and in this way have control over relations of power in society. Consequently, language education is the means by which we can educate young people about these ‘discourses of domination’.

The focus of this study is teachers and the language assessments which they produce. Are these language assessments simple testing devices intended to gauge learners recall and understanding of the content of the text or can they go deeper than that? Can teachers engage with their learners on a Critical level to understand where texts come from and who created them and what was their purpose in creating them? These questions are in line with Critical literacy, so as to understand power relations in society and to mitigate against the domination of a particular ideology.

To merely analyse assessments would be insufficient thus this study goes further to try to understand how teachers’ personal paradigms impact on the assessments which they produce. The purpose here is to gain some understanding of whether or not teachers want to and are able to educate learners about more than just the content of the texts which are taught in the language classroom. This is achieved through the analysis of language assessments and then by semi-structured interviews with the producers of these assessments. The data achieved from this mixed method research is analysed through the lens of Critical Language Testing with the intention of trying to determine if the assessments produced, come from individuals who are concerned with social justice and equality; individuals who are aware of social, political and economic discourses in

society among other. The study also sought to determine if these are reflexive individuals who are also ethical in their approach to language teaching and assessment.

The thesis attempts to achieve these aims whilst always maintaining a self critical view point. This is done by engaging with the premises which underpin this research and trying to understand the motivations for this research. By attempting to deconstruct my own personal bias and ideological underpinnings the hope is to achieve a study which fairly represents how teachers assess language in the classroom.

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#### **LIST OF ACRONYMS**

• C.L.A.	Critical Language Assessment
• C.L.T.	Critical Language Testing
• F.E.T.	Further Education and Training
• N.C.S.	National Curriculum Statement
• N.S.C.	National Senior Certificate
• S.A.G.	Subject Assessment Guidelines
• C.A.P.S.	Curriculum Assessment and Policy Statement



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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW TO THE STUDY

#### **Introduction**

Assessment in one form or another has been going on for hundreds of years as part of education and it can be described as a process whereby an attempt is made to measure knowledge, skills, attitudes and beliefs. A more functional description of assessment from Linda Suskie in her book ‘Assessing Student Learning: a common sense guide’ describes assessment as an ongoing process which, *“establish[es] clear, measurable expected outcomes of student learning [and] ensures that students have opportunities to achieve these outcomes [whilst] systematically gathering, analyzing and interpreting evidence to determine how well student learning matches our expectations.”* (Suskie, 2004, p10). In the schooling system this process is formalized and is viewed as part of the curriculum. This study is an attempt to better understand assessment in schools in a realistic way, taking into account the teacher or assessor’s view and perceptions around these ‘knowledges’ skills, attitudes and beliefs, but not ignoring some of the problems which are encountered with regards to assessment. This chapter will consider some of the definitions of assessment and the role that it plays in schooling and it will highlight critical theories as they apply to assessment. It will then attempt to explain how critical theories around language have led to Critical Language Testing (henceforth referred to as CLT), a paradigm which provides the theoretical framework of this research.

Assessment has been described as, *“a means towards connected, purposeful education”* (Mentkowski, 1991, p258). The preceding quote from Marcia Mentkowski from her paper “Creating a context where Institutional Assessment yields Educational Improvement” is enhanced by her idea that assessment, *“calls for re-examining the explicit and implicit links between educational goals and student outcomes. It focuses a critical eye on relationships among teaching and learning, and any means that mirror or evaluate the consequences”* (Mentkowski, 1991, p258). However assessment also has other purposes, like the fact that it is used to determine the progression of learners and also as a reflection or measure of ability or proficiency of teaching and learning.

Mentkowski refers to it as assessment to ‘prove’ or ‘improve’ and it is this idea of assessment to ‘prove’ something which may impact on how assessment is conducted. Is it to prove that teaching and learning has occurred? And then the question becomes what teaching, and what learning?

From personal experience of interactions and conversations with English language educators, it would appear that some educators view assessment as merely one of the aspects of teaching which has to be done since it is stipulated in the Curriculum. Currently in the National Department of Education in this country, this process is informed by the Subject Assessment Guidelines document for English home language as well as the now ‘incoming’ Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) which was introduced into grade 10 in 2012 and will be rolled out in each following grade in the coming years. Thus language assessments are kept so close to the format stipulated by the Department of Education, as pertains to the format and weighting of questions in examination papers and tasks, that often they are merely a ‘collage’ of previous examinations and exemplars that are provided by the Department. The required assessments are explicitly stated and defined, an attempt is made through the SAG document and CAPS to allow for creativity and variety in the production of assessments, but it would appear that uniformity of assessments is the end result. Part of the reason for this could be because of the emphasis placed on the Matriculation examination in this country and the high value that a matric certificate has in our society, but as has been highlighted by other research, greater emphasis on criteria compliance and “*transparency of intended learning outcomes*” (Torrance, 2007, p282) can be viewed as something which “*encourages instrumentalism*”. Torrance goes on to explain this as,

*The clearer the task of how to achieve a grade or award becomes, and the more detailed the assistance given by tutors, supervisors and assessors, the more likely the candidates are to succeed. But transparency of objectives coupled with extensive use of coaching and practice to help learners meet them is in danger of removing the challenge of learning and reducing the quality and validity of outcomes achieved”* (Torrance, 2007, p282)

This is described as assessment *for* learning, becoming assessment *as* learning. This phenomenon, in my opinion, raises two questions. Firstly, how does this affect the quality of assessments? Are they merely a series of pro-forma which assess a learner's ability to produce the required outcome, without expecting the learner to engage in a critical way with language? And secondly, what effect is this having on teachers and their teaching in the classroom if they are choosing to view the teaching of specific assessments as all that is required of them in educating their charges? If this is occurring, it might be a rather limited and limiting view of education, or as Lorrie Shepard phrases it, "*School learning should be authentic and connected to the world outside of school, not only to make learning more interesting and motivating to students but also to develop the ability to use knowledge in real- world settings.*" (Shepard, 2000, p7).

This study seeks to determine if the assessments which take place in the English Home Language learning area in a selected high school contain elements of Critical Language Testing (henceforth referred to as CLT) and if this framework or some version of it, is considered or not by the testers, when they are planning to assess. The purpose of this is to gain some understanding into how English is being assessed in the schools; if it is assessment which tests competence in reading, writing and speaking as well as the skills of comprehension and recall, or if it challenges learners to understand texts in wider contexts which include but are not limited to the social, political, cultural and ideological. This research, in line with the principles of CLT, also attempts to understand if the teachers who set these assessments have or serve an agenda within the society as, "*CLT claims that testers need to understand the tests they create within a larger vision of society and its use of those tests*" (Shohamy, 2008, p363).

### **CLA and the link to CLT**

Critical language awareness is about the dynamic links between language and the relations of power in a society and the ideologies which underpin and also serve to maintain these relationships of power in society. The dominant idea of CLA would be to generate a critical enquiry around a text, to look at the language used and the ideologies which this language and the text give preference to, in the interpretation of the text.

In understanding this, one must recognise the assumptions which underpin CLA. Firstly that every text is a construction on the part of the writer or speaker thus the lexicon used, the grammatical structures, the recognition of certain groupings in society as well as the text's political or historical orientation along with many other considerations, are all choices made by the author. And consequently, *"The items that are not chosen are backgrounded or silenced, and their potential positions in the text represent textual gaps or silences."* (Ngwenya, 2006, p166) A second assumption of CLA is that the meaning of the text is to be found in the society or the context in which the texts was produced, as well as the belief that all societies or contexts are unequal and relationships within these contexts are, *"fundamentally mediated by power relations that are socially and historically situated."* (Lynch, 2001, p354) This assumption around power relations reveals the Marxist leanings of CLA and the idea that there are class divisions within society and that it is necessary to recognise these classes and their particular ideologies if you hope to better understand a text. Further assumptions which support the theory of CLA are that *"Language shapes meanings and attitudes and vice versa"* (Ngwenya, p167). Language is the medium through which we communicate in the world and about the world and the medium impacts on the message. Paolo Freire, a Critical literacy theorist and pioneer of critical literacy in the classroom, introduced this idea of 'Conscientisation', where it is necessary to recognise that texts have power in shaping how we perceive the world and in order for individuals to take control of their destiny they must engage in dialogue around the meaning and purpose of texts. Freire goes further, to put forward the idea of an oppressor who manipulates texts in order to advantage his particular ideology and maintain the status quo within society. This leads to the idea of a 'preferred meaning', where the author or other role players in the text's construction, *"foreground some meanings rather than others and to make them seem natural and neutral instead of being interested and partial"* (Ngwenya, p167). Consequent to this it follows that subject positions are not fixed, since if they can be constructed, they can be reconstructed, Freire recognised this fluidity in the subject positions which an individual could take and saw this as an opportunity for individuals to gain control of their destiny. Thus critical language awareness allows for an escape from

oppression, for individuals, *“to name their world, in order to transform it and thus to be makers of their own history.”* (Freire, 1970)

Critical language awareness allows for the reader to be more aware of how he or she might be manipulated, wittingly or unwittingly by a text. In the school situation, this is an ideal to be hoped for, to have learners who are critical interpreters of the texts which they engage with as part of learning. Thus they would recognize the artificiality of texts which are someone’s representation of reality and the texts carry with them particular ideological beliefs. Ngwenya voices a caution here where he points out that, *“Critical awareness of isolated language features without any agency on the part of the reader does not automatically lead the reader to be truly critical.”* (Ngwenya, p168) This injunction has validity in that we must recognize that merely providing the learners with the tools of critical reading does not necessarily make them critically literate. It requires a self reflexive person who is aware of other paradigms of thought and also aware of the domains in society which require one to have a critical perspective when considering them. In my opinion, the types of people who most require this critical attitude in the schooling situation are the teachers as it is they who are responsible for attempting to foster this critical attitude through their teaching. Thus this study focuses more on the creators of texts in the schooling situation, specifically language assessments, and these individuals are the assessors or teachers. This study attempts to understand if the teachers in a school have a critical attitude and if this then influences how they assess. In order to achieve this it is necessary to move from Critical language awareness, which focuses the reader’s engagement with a text, to Critical language testing. CLT engages with all the ideals and assumptions which arise from CLA but it foregrounds the creator of the assessment. CLT identifies this individual as a self reflexive, ethical individual who is aware of power relations within society and works to create a better, more critical assessment.

### **Rationale**

Language is not neutral and it is one of the ways in which power relations in society are instituted and maintained. Thus it would appear that a simplistic and unsophisticated

understanding of language would hinder a learner in accessing social, cultural and political discourses. The National Curriculum Statement which was developed by the Department of Education and which guides the implementation of curriculum in South African schools states in its introduction that,

*“the range of literacies needed for effective participation in society and the workplace in the global economy of the twenty first century has expanded beyond listening, speaking, reading, writing and oral traditions’ to include various forms such as media, graphic, information, computer, cultural and critical literacy”* (Department of Education, 2003, p9)

The motivation for this study is in line with the goals expressed in the NCS document in that I believe that a language teacher has a responsibility to teach more than reading, writing and the ability to use correct grammar. In my opinion teachers need to engage in a critical manner with language and they must attempt to impart these skills to the learners whom they teach. This motivation is also borne out of a personal view that language tests are often simplistic, recycled documents which owe little to a critical view of the current society but often merely serve the purpose of fulfilling a set of rather arbitrary requirements which are often decided upon by an individual teacher in a classroom. In my practitioner experience, testers do not engage much in a critical way with testing but view it as mainly a psychometric device used to see if a learner can remember a predetermined answer, argue according to a predetermined view or produce work which accords with predetermined criteria, or an even worse scenario where teachers assess merely for that sake of being seen to assess. This then moves the view of assessment from the view expressed earlier, supported by Marcia Mentowski, of education to ‘prove’ that learning has occurred, to a situation where the actual assessment itself is the determinant of whether or not education has taken place. Thus the idea of assessment ‘for’ learning becomes assessment ‘as’ learning.

An interesting aspect of assessment which arises out of the literature is that assessment changes not only the person being assessed, but also the assessor. *“Much of the literature investigating teacher thinking makes the assumption that revised teaching practice is closely related to changes in thinking about teaching”* (Offerdahl & Tomanek, 2011,

p782). Studies like the one referred to above propose the idea of simplified conceptions around teaching progressing to more sophisticated conceptions of teaching. This is achieved through the teacher becoming a more critical partner in the teaching and assessing process. In this way both role-players in the assessment process view it as, “*a source of insight and help instead of an occasion to mete out rewards and punishments*” (Shepard, 2000, p10). It is this process of: the thinking about; planning for and the implementing of assessment which will be examined and hopefully will illuminate in some way the role which teachers play in this process. Critical language testing, which is the theoretical framework which underpins this research, makes reference to testers needing to “*understand the test which they create in a larger vision of society as well as the use to which society puts these tests*” (Shohamy, 2011, p421). Ultimately the goal of C.L.T. is a more self reflexive practitioner who acts ethically in implementing a transformative pedagogy. However the humbler aims of this research could be described as seeking to understand some of the factors which play a role, or do not play a role when a teacher is planning to assess.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Critical Language Testing (CLT) has philosophical and scientific ties to Critical Theory, in that it recognizes that power relations are a major part of society, particularly in Education and that often power relations work to maintain class, race and gender oppression, be it intentionally or unwittingly. Lynch in his paper, “Rethinking assessment from a critical perspective” (2001) Refers to this paradigm as Critical Language Assessment (CLA) but refers to it as being interchangeable with CLT. He recognizes that to determine absolute, incontrovertible truth or fact is a problematic idea. That, “*the relationship between concept and object and between signifier and signified is never stable or fixed and is often mediated by the social relations of capitalist production and consumption*” (Lynch, 2001, p354).

CLT owes its existence to many sources, but it has emerged from the Critical Testing research of people such as Elana Shohamy and others. This research began by looking at testing from a global perspective where testing had become a contentious issue because of the power that the results of tests held for individuals and communities e.g. test results



as requirements for access to study or work or immigration. This power of testing can be used by some to maintain power relations in society and even to oppress individuals or groups for whom certain tests are very important. *“CLA assumes that the act of text is not neutral. Rather, it is both a product and an agent of cultural, social, political, educational and ideological agendas that shape the lives of individuals, participants, teachers and learners”* (Shohamy, 1998, p332). I have garnered a large amount of the definition of CLA from the work of Elana Shohamy, and her definition of CLA, which she refers to as CLT is explained in large part by fifteen principles. These principles have been grouped by Brian Lynch under four perspectives which are: the ways that language is related to issues such as gender, class and ethnicity and how they are interconnected; the notion that our research needs to consider paradigms beyond the dominant, postpositivist-influenced one; a concern for social justice and equality; and the requirement that critical applied linguistics assessor be self-reflexive. The 15 Principles are listed below.

**Shohamy’s Critical Language Testing Principles**

Table 1

- |  |
|--|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Critical Language testing is not neutral but is shaped by cultural, social, political, educational and ideological agendas.</li> <li>2. CLT encourages an active, critical response from test takers.</li> <li>3. CLT views test takers as political subjects within a political context.</li> <li>4. CLT views tests as tools within a context of social and ideological struggle.</li> <li>5. CLT asks questions about which and whose agendas tests serve.</li> <li>6. CLT claims that testers need to understand the tests they create within a larger vision of society and its use of those tests.</li> <li>7. CLT examines tests in terms of their measurement and assessment of knowledge vs. their definition and dictation of knowledge.</li> <li>8. CLT questions the nature of knowledge that tests are based upon: whose knowledge? Independent truth or negotiated and challengeable?</li> <li>9. CLT examines the influence and the involvement of the range of stakeholders in a testing context.</li> <li>10. CLT perceives the embedded ness of tests within social and educational systems.</li> <li>11. CLT admits to the limited knowledge of any tester and the need for multiple sources of knowledge.</li> <li>12. CLT approaches the dominant psychometric traditions and considers ‘interpretive’ approaches to assessment that allow for different meanings and interpretations rather than a single absolute truth.</li> </ol> |
|--|

13. CLT considers the meaning of test scores within this interpretive framework, allowing the possibility of discussion and negotiation across multiple interpretations.
14. CLT challenge the knowledge that tests are based upon and advocates a democratic representation of the multiple groups of society.
15. CLT challenges the primacy of the 'test' as assessment instrument and considers multiple procedures for interpreting the knowledge of individuals. (Lynch, p363)

These principles have relevance for my study because they provide a guide by which I can interrogate the assessments which teachers produce and implement in their classrooms. An important aspect of this study is that various domains in society impact on language teaching and assessment. Critical principles 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 & 10 make reference to the Critical attitude which an assessor must adopt when planning to assess if they intend to create an assessment which is reflective and respectful of domains such as gender, class and ethnicity amongst many others. And when collecting data in the study these principles will serve as a guide of what to look for in the data.

Lynch's second perspective that "*our research needs to consider paradigms beyond the dominant, postpositivist-influenced one*" (Lynch, p363) is a major consideration in my study, when I enquire of teachers how they choose questions for their assessment and what answers do they accept in response to those questions. This enquiry is guided by principles 7, 8, 11, 12, 13 and 15 in the box above. We must consider questions like, whose knowledge is the test based on (principle 8) and accept that the knowledge of any tester is limited (principle 11) and that discussion and negotiation is valid in arriving at an interpretation of language questions.

An underlying premise of this paper is that the assessment of language can be improved, not just in making it more representative of what the test taker knows but also that it can allow for discussion and debate around language. That concerns around language are related to concerns for a more just and equal society. Principles 2, 5, 6 and 14 describe these concerns. In my opinion, the diversity amongst learners displayed in the context of our country, and in the context of my study, demands that we attempt to foster a more Critical attitude in the language learners in our classrooms. This is especially relevant when we consider that English is becoming the language of commerce, study and the

workplace in society and the knowledge of English has implications for access within this society.

My interest in CLT as a framework for my study is because amongst its principles, it encourages an active and critical response from test takers and a critical and wide ranging understanding of the test on the part of the testers. It also examines the test itself; it interrogates what the test is actually testing and goes deeper to determine the nature of the knowledge on which the test is based. CLT requires that the tester is a self-reflexive individual as well as an ethical individual when it comes to language teaching and assessment. This is reflected in principles 5, 8 and 13. This again is one of the aspects which has relevance for my study as these principles construct the assessor as an individual who is not only capable of critical thought, but also considers it important as part of their assessment practices.

In this way I hope to use the principles of CLT to guide my study, not to create a list of things which I merely check off as being present or absent in the data, but as an overall way of viewing assessment and the assessor. CLT also considers the ideology and the politics behind language tests and even though I do not envision this to be a major concern of my study it ties in with the ideals of Critical Theory to examine issues of social and political control which was my initial interest and which lead me in the direction of Critical Language Testing.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **A REVIEW OF LITERATURE AROUND CRITICAL LITERACY AND LANGUAGE TESTING**

#### **Introduction**

This section of my dissertation reflects on ‘Critical thought’ in schools and my perception that there is a deficit in encouraging ‘Critical thought’ amongst our learners, specifically in the learning area of English language teaching. I intend to achieve this by reviewing Literature related to the area of Critical Literacy. I will then focus my attention in this rather large area to the specific aspect of Critical Language Testing because major contributors to this framework make claims like,

*“Critical language testing broadens the field of language testing by engaging it in a wider sphere of social dialogue and debate about the forms and practices of language testing and its relation to language teaching and language learning. This debate implicates the roles that tests play and have been assigned to play in competing ideologies and their respective discourses as well as the roles of language testers.*

(Shohamy, 1998, p333)

CLT has relevance for my study because it takes into account social dialogue and debate in language learning which I believe is an aspect which is under-represented in the English language learning area and CLT also takes into account the role of the assessor or teacher in this process of teaching and learning. The assessor with their personal belief systems is in my opinion an important role-player who must not be ignored in our consideration of teaching and learning. This review will also engage with current thought on assessment and I will make use of Educational Research Literature which reflects on the nature of assessment in our educational institutions. This review will also look at other research on Critical Literacy and research in contexts which are very similar to the context of my study; these will include theses which look at the idea of teaching English from a critical literacy perspective.

## Critical Literacy

This focus defined above, is borne out of my interest in Critical Literacy which can be described as the liberation of people through education so that they can be aware of the power structures in society and thus determine for themselves an informed personal version of reality and not just unthinkingly accept what others wish them to believe. This process was labelled as “Conscientization” by Paulo Freire (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 1972). This idea of an informed, critical group which questions the nature of social reality is in my opinion the ideal to be hoped for in our learners; however it is my belief that current language teaching and assessment has become something more akin to Freire’s idea of ‘Banking Education’.

*Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiques and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize and repeat. This is the "banking" concept of education in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as recognizing, filing and storing the deposits. (Freire, p53)*

‘Conscientization’ takes into account both the learners and the teachers as it is the process of dialogue between them which results in a “*Critical consciousness of reality*” and authentic learning. This correlates with what Freire explains as, “[*Learners who*] are creators of their own learning, who respond actively through dialogue rather than mechanically and passively to the anti-dialogue of imposed, dehumanizing, massified education” (Freire in Taylor, 1993, ). This idea of Critical Literacy also has consequences for the teachers, as this dialogue with their learners must hopefully make them self-reflexive in their practice. This is the phenomenon which I hope to study, teachers who question learners’ understanding of language in a dynamic way i.e. how learners interrogate and understand social, cultural, political, educational and ideological ideas and views. The hope is that there is dialogue between teachers and learners about these concepts, leading to a critical understanding and this understanding is probed in the Language assessments which the teachers set.

Critical Literacy has become more refined and defined in the area of Language teaching and testing over the years. A number of academics have contributed to the theoretical framework of Critical Language Awareness which followed on from Critical Literacy. Brian Lynch in his paper, "Rethinking Assessment from a Critical Perspective" (Lynch, 2001) illustrated this transition from the older, more traditional Critical Theory of which Critical Literacy is a part, to CLT. Lynch points out that Critical Literacy finds its genesis in left wing Marxist theory in which the political agenda was fore-grounded and it was important to understand that power relations are a major factor in maintaining the status quo in unequal societies. Thus Marxist theory had an emancipatory agenda for marginalized and oppressed groups, however there was increasing disillusionment with this theory because from a historical perspective the promise of Marxism, "*the potential for reason to provide a peaceful and just society, was seen to have failed.*" (Lynch, 2001, p352). This transition signals the move away from replacing one dominant ideology with another, so as not to merely replace the ideological views of colonialism and nationalism with socialism and then expect to get a more equal and just society. The changes in Critical theory with regards to language, Lynch attributes to theorists like Pennycook and McLaren, who define what they variously described as 'critical applied linguistics' and 'critical discourse analysis' in the educational research literature. This new direction in Critical theory looks at, "*linking our professional practice with social, political and cultural concerns, including the exploration of the ways in which our work supports the increasingly sophisticated ways of physical, social and above all ideological coercion*" (Lynch, p356). This transition in Critical theory is still interested in domains such as gender, race, culture, identity and class amongst others but it is more resistant to "*normative responses to questions relevant to these domains*" (Lynch, 2001, p356). This redefined paradigm of which CLT is part, is still viewed as a transformative pedagogy and it is also self-reflexive in nature for all participants. This constantly self-reflexive stance is necessary because,

*"A critical approach that claims only to emancipate people through a greater awareness of their conditions is both arrogant and doomed to failure. As the discussion of engagement suggests, a more plausible way forward is through a critical engagement with people's wishes, desires, and*

*histories, that is a way of thinking which pushes one constantly to question rather than to pontificate.*" (Pennycook, 1999, p334)

### **Critical Language Testing**

In attempting to define Critical Language Testing I will refer to Lynch's articulation of the characteristics which underlie a critical approach to language testing. The first characteristic is that this type of language testing "*is interested in particular domains such as gender, class, ethnicity and the ways that language is connected with them*"(Lynch, 2001, p357). This recognizes that language testing is not neutral and it is shaped by the various domains which use language, so one must recognize political, social, cultural and ideological agendas which are present and can influence the testing or use of language testing for other purposes besides the ones which the assessor intended. The second characteristic is, "*the notion that our research needs to consider paradigms beyond the dominant, postpositivist-influenced one.*" This allows for more 'interpretive' approaches to assessment, with alternative assessment being a feature and the negotiation of meaning between participants being recognised as a valid aspect of the process of assessing. The distinction between assessment and testing must be noted, with testing, in the context of this paper, implying the more formal written kind of assessment whose purpose is to achieve a quantifiable view of the learner's achievement. But even in this formal view there must be a questioning of the nature of the knowledge, on which the test is based, with the idea of truth not being fixed in a rigid and unassailable way and CLT allows assessors to be more inclusive and to acknowledge that other knowledge systems are valid in response to testing.

Another characteristic which Lynch articulates is "*a concern for changing the human and social world, not just describing it: the transformative agenda, with the related and motivational concern for social justice and equality.*"(Lynch, p363) This aspect requires assessors to be more critical when testing, because they must understand what it is they are testing; they must understand themselves and why they are testing in this particular way; they must understand the learners whom they are testing; as well as the context in which this testing takes place. This requires understanding and sensitivity on the part of

the assessor to recognize at-risk and marginalized groups when testing, to employ democratic principles so that other types of knowledge and forms of expression from the learners are treated equally when marking or assessing. The last of Lynch's characteristics requires that CLT is "*self-reflexive*", this requires constant interrogation of the "*nature of knowledge that tests are based upon*" and the idea of truth is negotiated and challenged when necessary. In these characteristics, Lynch recognizes that the idea of forming a "*grand theory of rationality*" is problematic and it is necessary to maintain a sense of scepticism when approaching language testing which will allow for "*a thoughtful engagement with the complex and crucial issues of our time*". It also calls for greater ethical responsibility in testing and that testing should include the idea of transformation in its aims, as well as requiring a degree of self-reflexivity from the assessor, so as to always question and interrogate our beliefs when testing.

Another important feature of Bruce Lynch's paper is that it refers a great deal to the work of Elana Shohamy and her work in critical language testing. It is Shohamy's fifteen principles of CLT which form the theoretical framework which this study employs in analyzing the data. In an early paper "Critical Language Testing and Beyond" (Shohamy, 1998), this researcher links a number of studies which she conducted in the Israeli education system and in other international contexts, into a framework which considers the necessity of a shift in the paradigm of language testing, it calls for a new validity of language tests in the modern world and how this necessitates a change in how assessment is viewed and conducted. One of the issues which Shohamy's paper highlights is the consequences of language testing, it looks at tests which were used for 'surveillance' as learners who failed the test, were monitored and sanctioned in some way, which was not the stated purpose of the test, also a test which provided a "*façade of action... and with an excuse for not undertaking meaningful pedagogical action.*" (Shohamy, 1998, p335). Tests which did not test what they claimed to test, but in fact were used as a means of discriminating against certain groups. These types of tests can be used for political and bureaucratic agendas far removed from their original intentions. Thus CLT engages with issues around the interpretation of test and test scores and the ethics of testing and the use of data from testing. In my opinion, what this paper does is to interrogate perceptions



around assessment and testing, for me it raises the idea that tests are often viewed in a particular way and this view is so deeply ingrained into our belief systems, or we feel so unqualified to question the validity of tests which are presented to us as a numerical and quantifiable expression of a learner's ability that we unquestioningly accept the view or a perception which that test provides,

*“Tests use the language of numbers and numbers enable quantification, classification, normalization and the standardization of people according to a common yardstick. Numbers are symbols of objectivity, scientificity and rationality, all features which those feed into illusions of truth, trust, legitimacy, status and authority.”* (Shohamy, 1998, p338)

This paper highlights a new philosophical attitude which must be engaged with when considering language testing in today's world. It questions the idea of the knowledge which can be created through tests, that this type of knowledge is often 'narrow' and 'simplistic' and the authority of the test often prevents the consideration of different 'types' of knowledge and ultimately different 'types' of truth. It also challenges the assumed nature of knowledge and truth by asking the questions of whose knowledge and what truth? eg. independent or negotiated and challengeable truth and we must begin to recognize that the increasingly more democratic world in which we find ourselves requires dialogue with more and different groups if we hope to achieve greater validity for language testing.

In Shohamy's paper "Language Policy and Language Assessment: The Relationship" (Shohamy, 2008) she refers to her work around "Critical Language Testing" in a more expanded way and looks at specifics around language testing and the impact which this has on determining language policy, in both an overt and covert way. This paper introduces the idea of "the power which language test have" for shaping policy, initially it makes reference to large scale tests on a regional or national scale which can determine policy from the level of a classroom all the way to national government policy. Shohamy makes reference to how language testing, (and she looks specifically at English language testing), can be used to shape policies around immigration and access to education and social access. This aspect of large scale language testing is not really the focus of my

research but it highlights the idea that, “*strong ideologies about hegemonic languages [result] in perpetuating language homogeneity*”(Shohamy, p367) and this creates an idea of ‘uniformity’ and ‘standardization’ that teachers of these languages believe should be followed when using these languages. This concept has relevance to my study because I hope to understand if teachers believe that they should teach and assess English in a certain way and also, if possible, why they believe this? In other words, do hegemonic ideas about language influence assessors, and is it happening in the context which I am studying? This paper on Language policy and language assessment introduces the idea that this influencing of policy occurs in explicit and implicit ways. Thus the stated aims of a language policy usually occur at a national level but policy can also occur at the school level and this policy can be stated and unstated. These policies might be, but are not necessarily, discriminatory, but as Shohamy points out, they arise from ideologies and they influence the practice in classrooms. Tests are also a very good mechanism to, “*serve as a tool to create, enforce and perpetuate de facto language policies that interact between ideology and practice. In that way tests are considered ‘hidden’ or ‘covert’ (i.e. implicit) as their effects on de facto language policies are not made explicitly, but rather implicitly.*” (Shohamy, p365). This raises interesting questions for my study, like trying to determine which ideologies are included and which ideologies are excluded in tests and does this occur wittingly or unwittingly, when teachers are setting tests? This is where the element of being reflexive, which CLT encourages, becomes an important aspect of language testing. Shohamy in her paper also highlights the often unrecognized power of language tests and the unintended consequences which language tests sometimes have. Here reference is made to the belief in ‘Hierarchies of development’ in language learning, that learning follows a particular format and that teacher and others can believe that proficiency in a certain aspect of a test implies that the learner is at a certain level of development and conversely, that failing to achieve in a particular aspect of language implies that a learners at some sort of lower level, “*These scales view language learning in homogenous terms that can be generalisable from one domain to another*” (Shohamy. p368). This ‘false truth’ has consequences for the individuals taking the test but it also shows that ideas on which tests and testing are based are sometimes false and it is sometimes necessary to ask what we are testing and if we understand why

we are testing it? The paper recognizes that diverse contexts influence language and thus should influence how we test language. The paper also recognizes that tests can be based on false ideas but it is not arguing for the scrapping of all forms of language tests, but rather a recognition that critical thought is necessary to appreciate the diversity in contexts in which testing occurs and if we hope to have some validity in the test then we must be more aware when testing, *“It is clear that language testing is not occurring in homogenous, uniform and isolated contexts, but rather in diverse multilingual and multicultural societies”* and effort is required if we hope to understand, *“what does it mean to know a language in these new societies?”* (Shohamy, p369)

This clear understanding of language testing, which is an aspect of CLT, is important when attempting to achieve construct validity in assessment. In a modern, more cosmopolitan world with greater dialogue, travel and trade between diverse cultures, ignoring the different contexts of our learners has implications for the validity of our assessment and thus of our teaching. Shohamy in her paper on “Assessing Multilingual Competencies: Adopting construct valid assessment policies” (Shohamy, 2011) describes how tests should be open, democratic and negotiable, not used to support unjust ideologies, and this can occur when, *“Language tests violate diversity, when a false view of language development is dictated through tests, when language is viewed in isolated ways detached from actual use of multilingual codes in communities”* (Shohamy, 2011, p421). Her work in this paper looks at the assessment of a language, more especially English and how it is taught and assessed as a second or foreign language and the implications for the learners. It looks more at assessment of a language amongst bilingual or multilingual learners and it considers how dogmatic and inflexible assessment, which is reflective of teaching the language in monolingual and homogeneous communities, is doing the test takers a disservice and may actually be doing language testing as a discipline a disservice. In a personal capacity, I recognize how ideology affects personal views because my background is as a monolingual English speaker as well as a teacher of English. The idea of adapting English and accepting various forms of English runs afoul of a once held belief that the English which I taught was the ‘correct’ version. However the framework of Critical Language Testing requires

that a teacher, and especially in my situation as a researcher, must be reflexive and I must engage with this idea of accepting that mine is not the only way to view and consequently to test language. Shohamy explains this with the example that if we use subtractive research designs of identifying a problem in language teaching from a monolingual and hegemonic language perspective and then try to ‘fix’ the perceived problem without understanding the individual as a complex entity with academic knowledge which might be inaccessible then the assessment of that individual is in some ways invalid and the attempted ‘fix’ will often be ineffective. The assessment of language and the understanding of language teaching is constantly evolving and the requirements for assessments to be more authentic and representative of learners abilities requires that “*current understandings and theories of language*” (Shohamy, 2011, p420) play a part in shaping our teaching and assessment in the classroom. The critical focus of this article was to look at how other approaches to language testing may advance the discipline and this has relevance for my study.

### **Assessment**

In considering the educational research literature on Critical Language Assessment, it becomes necessary to consider assessment itself and the various issues and schools of thought which arise around assessment in schools. There are many definitions of what assessment is and how it should be undertaken. A description of what assessment is, which I have found useful, is put forward by Marcia Mentkowski in her paper entitled, ‘Creating a context where Institutional Assessment yields educational improvement.’ (Mentkowski, 1991). Assessment is described as a means to an end; it is not the end in itself, so it is not only to establish accountability but also to be part of the educational process and to be beneficial in that process. Also that the purposes, goals and methods of the assessment must emerge from the setting, such that if one has a very good assessment but it is unrelated to the teaching process then that assessment has no value. This is particularly pertinent to my enquiry, because it is my opinion that often teachers have assessments which they produce and really like and they then reproduce these assessments year after year without ever trying to adapt them to the needs of the particular class which they are teaching at that time. Or it may happen that teachers for

various reasons, which may include time constraints, workload or feelings of inadequacy, may copy aspects of previous tests or certain tests in their entirety. Mentkowski goes on to point out that assessment should encourage multiplicity and coherence. Thus assessment in complex and changing educational contexts must be shaped in order to be relevant to that particular context and it must provide purposeful and connected education within that educational context. Teachers and learners must be aware of what they are teaching and learning and how their educational efforts are linked to and supported within that educational context; this is so that we do not get the situation where assessment is undertaken merely for the sake of the class being seen to be doing some form of assessment. Mentkowski also points out that, *“Feedback is the essence of assessment”*, (Mentkowski, p278) because it benefits both the teacher and the learner. The learner because they can judge performance and thus the assessment should also be part of the learning process, but it is also important to the teacher because they must use feedback to judge the relevance of the teaching and learning process and if necessary adapt and improve their teaching program. Mentkowski also provides some general guidelines to developing effective assessment which I believe are useful to my research. Firstly, that an educator should construct a conceptual base for assessment, so that the assessment is purposeful and is connected to the educational process taking place. Also that the assessment should, *“evoke understanding of the individual student’s performance and perspective... the beliefs, goals and motivations of students, as well as to see their personal growth, abilities and learning”* (Mentkowski, 1991, p272). Feedback should also encourage the broadest possible thinking and that we should recognize that learning is a complex process which involves previous learning, motivation, values and beliefs. It is not a simple linear process and as teachers we must be aware of this.

These ideas on assessment argue for a more coherent and defined approach to assessment which Critical Language Testing appears to respond to because CLT foregrounds the tester and the test-taker, it encourages greater ethicality in testing and it requires a reflexive assessor who is aware of all the domains which impinge on testing or assessment. We must however be cognizant of the fact that assessment has evolved over time and continues to evolve thus we must be aware of the theories which underpin

assessment. Lorrie Shepard in her article on 'The role of assessment in a learning culture' (2000), highlights the idea that, "*dominant theories of the past continue to operate as the default framework affecting and driving current practices and perspectives.*" and that "*belief systems of teachers, parents and policymakers derive from these old theories*" (Shepard, 2000, p4). This idea is important for my study, because it is my belief that assessors are resistant to new theories of teaching and assessment and that in situations where they feel unqualified to adapt their teaching or assessment, they revert to older theories, often without even realizing that they are doing so. These theories like the Positivist paradigm are often viewed as having greater validity as they call for a 'scientific' measurement of learners' abilities and achievements.

Shepard traces the evolution of assessment from the behaviourist theories of the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which coupled with "*social efficiency theory*", viewed teaching as the transfer of knowledge in individual bits, in a specific sequence and a hierarchical manner with each objective being specifically taught. And testing was used frequently to, "*ensure mastery before moving on to the next objective*". All of this was tied into the behaviourist beliefs that motivation was external and achieved through positive reinforcement. The evolution of educational theories away from Behaviourism to more cognitive theories allows for a recognition of the individual in learning and assessment, "*In contrast to past, mechanistic theories of knowledge acquisition, we now understand that learning is an active process of mental construction and sense making.*" (Shepard, p6). Learning is recognized as more than just an accumulation of information but it involves thinking and self-awareness in order to use the information in a cognitive and directed way. It also refutes the idea that education is for an elite few and believes that all are able to be educated if we take into account their particular circumstances, this view embraces the diversity of learners and teachers and schools, such that it requires learning to be authentic and connected to real-life situations in order to have some validity. In current thinking on assessment, it appears from the literature that assessment is more recognized as being tied to learning, in that it assists in learning and it is not merely a numerical representation of our beliefs around an individual's ability. Thus modern theories on assessment also recognizes that there needs to be a range of assessments and assessments

of greater validity to our current contexts if we hope to improve learning and our understanding of learning, *“The most obvious reforms has been to devise more open-ended tasks to ensure that students are able to reason critically, to solve complex problems and to apply their knowledge in real-world contexts.”* (Shepard, p8). This evolution in the theories around assessment also recognizes the pitfalls around testing, that high accountability testing can negatively influence critical thinking in classroom practices and that no test is immune to corrupting influences when the stakes become high enough. Shepard makes the comment that, *“Under intense political pressure, tests are likely to go up without a corresponding improvement in student learning. In fact, distortions in what and how students are taught may actually decrease students’ conceptual understanding.”* (Shepard, p9). In the South African context, this is a very telling idea when we consider the amount of emphasis placed on the Matriculation examination, exam results are published in national newspapers and political pressure is brought to bear on the National and Regional Education departments to improve results. These negative aspects are not limited to students; teachers are also affected by such high-stakes testing, with the negative performance of their students having implications for themselves which they may take into consideration when planning to teach and to assess. Undue pressure can then be exerted on individuals, departments within schools, schools themselves or even whole schooling districts and this has impact all through the education system. In my opinion, the stakes are highest in the final phase of basic education and I believe that this pressure is experienced most strongly in the F.E.T. phase and partly for that reason, this is the area in which I focus my research for this paper.

If we are going to make a call for more ‘formative assessment’ as opposed to a large scale high stakes assessment at the end of the teaching phase, then we need to look at teaching and assessment which develops cognitive abilities and creates a participatory classroom environment which has learners feeling more empowered and more willing to engage in independent critical thinking. Assessment which cultivates these dispositions is termed *“good assessment tasks”* by Shepard. I will not interrogate this idea of ‘good’ but I will assume it to mean tasks which elicit higher order thinking and not merely memorization of information or procedures or concepts. And from my point of view, these include

assessments which accord with the principles of C.L.T. i.e. assessment that is transformative, ethical, self-reflexive and sensitive to discourses around social, political, religious, cultural, class and gender domains and how these are all interconnected. In order to achieve this, it is necessary to recognize that all aspects of teaching are interconnected and to merely adapt one area of teaching like assessment without considering other areas is likely to yield few results. Shepard makes reference to a “*shift in the culture of classrooms*”, so that learners are unable to “*feign competence*” (Shepard, 2000) or perform well on phase ending summative assessments and thus be viewed as being competent. Rather that we should “*change our cultural practice so that students and teachers look to assessment as a source of insight and help instead of an occasion for meting out rewards and punishments*” (Shepard, p10). Shepard makes some recommendations as to what might be useful in achieving more formative assessment which benefits the learners more educationally. She notes that the content of assessment must improve, but there must also be changes in classroom practice. Assessment should be in the middle of the teaching and learning process, instead of merely at the end of it. Dialogue and “*instructional conversations*” should occur between learners and teachers. Feedback is an important part of the assessment process and that learning must be “*true understanding [which] is flexible, connected and generalizable*” so that this knowledge is not merely static information but rather skills which the learners can use in new situations. The criteria for evaluation must be made explicit to the learners and it must be fair, so that learners are able understand how they can go about improving their performance. Teachers also need to re-examine their teaching practices and improve them in ways that allow them to motivate learners to be more critical in their thinking. The author acknowledges that these views of classroom assessment are idealistic and that there are real practical issues, like negative attitudes, lack of resources that promote this type of teaching and learning, along with bureaucratic and logistical obstacles. However these recommendations are valuable to my research in that it gives me a direction when interviewing my participants as to how they go about assessing as part of their teaching program. Ideologically I am in agreement with these ideals for practice in the classroom. In my opinion, an effective teacher is able to enter into dialogue with the learners and reflect on their classroom practice and assessment, as well as always maintaining



transparency of the teaching process and should not be afraid to allow others to critique their work.

In the current literature on assessment which I have examined, more emphasis is being placed on the value of formative assessment in the teaching process and questions are being raised about how summative assessment may actually retard the learning process if used inappropriately.

*“Formative assessment determines the progress of learners towards achieving the outcomes and the appropriateness of learning required. It takes place during the learning process and it informs planning of future learning activities”* while *“Summative assessment determines the overall achievement of learners and learning success. It takes place at the end of a learning cycle, programme or phase”* (Dreyer, 2008)

Summative assessment is often high-stakes testing and it is desirable to those who might have an agenda other than education, those for whom an easily quantifiable idea of learner achievement is desirable as they can use it to support their particular political, social or ideological views. Formative assessment however, *“has been recognized as a critical element in teaching for conceptual development”* (Offerdahl & Tomanek, 2011, p781). The paper by Erika Offerdahl and Debra Tomanek entitled, ‘Changes in instructors’ assessment thinking related to experimentation with new strategies.’ looks at this idea of how teachers view assessment, because one of the premises of their paper is that in order to revise teaching practices, it is necessary to change how teachers think about teaching and that assessment practices are an integral part of this process. These authors highlight the need for a change from ‘assessment of learning’ to ‘assessment for learning’; they recognize that the concept of ‘assessment for learning’ is a complex concept. It therefore requires an engagement on the part of the teacher in order to effectively assess so as to promote learning among students. They also recognize that this process can go too far if not implemented properly, in that a too narrow interpretation of assessment where achieving specific outcomes so dominates the process of learning that the assessment then becomes ‘assessment as learning’. Thus it is necessary to always maintain a critical disposition when teaching and assessing.

The paper by Offerdahl and Tomanek has relevance for my study because it seeks to understand the nature of teachers' thinking about assessment. The research follows an experimental format, and one of the claims made is that initially the instructors used assessments which were teacher-focused, but as they experimented with formative assessment strategies, their thinking took on more of a learner-centered approach, "*the finding that instructor's assessment thinking moved away from teaching and towards student learning.*" (Offerdahl & Tomanek, p792). In this context however the researchers also found that even with the move to more formative assessment strategies, there wasn't actually much change in their teaching practice. Findings like these are important in the area of educational research as teachers seem to have opinions about what constitutes 'good assessment' but these opinions are sometimes not valid in different contexts.

More research like that of Harry Torrance in the area of formative assessment seems to suggest that when a course of study becomes very well defined and teachers attempt to assist learners by making explicit learning objectives and achievement is determined by criteria-referencing then there is a danger of teaching becoming rather instrumental. Meaning that the feedback of formative assessment is merely a way of providing the criteria for achievement and allowing the student to achieve it in a narrow and 'convergent' manner where little real learning outside of those criteria occurs. What is to be hoped for is for learning to occur in a more 'divergent' way which allows students to learn in an open-ended and exploratory fashion, which would promote more critical thought and provide the students with more skills to deal with educational issues outside of the ones which they have experienced in their studies. This is an aspect which I bear in mind when exploring the assessments which teachers produce, is the assessment an example of 'assessment for learning' or is it an example of 'assessment as learning'? Has the work done before the assessment been broad based work which promotes critical thinking or is it narrowly focused 'exam cramming' in order to do well on the assessment?

In conjunction with journal articles which form a large part of the educational literature which I consider, there is also a large amount of information which I have been able to

gather from Masters and Doctoral Theses in Education. The common idea behind these readings is that they all in some way deal with Critical literacy theories and practices in the teaching environment. The earliest one is Ruveena Singh's Masters dissertation entitled, *"Investigating and developing an approach to critical literacy by using the South African short story"* (Singh, 2003). In this study, Singh explores the possibility of using a Critical Literacy approach to transform teaching and learning in the English Language classroom. Notwithstanding the similarities to my study in terms of social context, this research has value for my study because it looks at how critical literacy is engaged with in the classroom situation. The motivations for this research was partially based on Singh's view that, *"there are limitations associated with the current classroom practice as regards English primary language at most former House of Delegate schools"*. (Singh, piii) The reasons for this were based, in Singh's opinion, on hegemonic beliefs around the teaching of English, more specifically the teaching of English by home language speakers to an increasing number of English second language speakers as occurred after the integration of schools in South Africa, post apartheid, as well as a lack of knowledge and experience on the part of educators, to implement transformative education in the South African schooling context.

The research looks at how the short story is taught in the FET phase of a secondary school, where commercial study guides were used to teach according to a Cultural Heritage approach and the content-thematic approach. The Cultural Heritage approach, according to Singh, teaches the text as *"neutral spaces that are value free and [] separated from their socio-cultural and historical contexts"* (Singh, p1) and in this way avoids having the learners interrogating post-colonial and narrative discourses which are essential in appreciating the text. Also a critical reading of the text is considered to be of benefit to the learner as, *"a content-thematic understanding of texts [ ] neglects to deal with issues of power conveyed by discourses that undergird texts"* (Singh, p4). The research looks specifically at the domains around patriarchy, class, ethnicity and race. This has value for my research as these are the domains which CLT has particular interest in and which I will hopefully find evidence, in my research, of educators including in their assessments as part of a critical approach to teaching.

Singh also highlights concerns around the implementation of Critical literacy in the classroom, “*One of the concerns of this researcher is that educators do not possess sufficient theoretical and conceptual knowledge to implement Critical literacy and transformative education*” (Singh, p3). This has significance for my study as one of my units of analysis is the educator and the variable that I am seeking to understand is the educator’s awareness of critical thought. This dissertation however does not engage with the teacher, but looks at a study guide which was used widely at that time and to my knowledge is still easily available. Singh argues that these types of study guides, “*ascribe to a hegemonic approach inscribed by the grade twelve or Senior Certificate examination*” (Singh. p44) as their aim is to provide the learner with the type of questions and responses which will occur in the final examination. By implication the widespread use of these guides in the classroom means that teachers were not being very critical or reflexive when teaching English in their classrooms. My research intends to build on this by trying to understand, from the teachers, if this view of teachers being uncritical and non-reflexive practitioners is a valid one.

Singh makes use of post-structuralist perspectives to investigate relations that underpin texts and also makes use of discourse analysis to analyse the selected short stories. Aside from the insights which this work gave me as to conducting educational research in a context very similar to the context of my study, it also introduced the idea of document analysis. Singh’s document analysis is picked up in the Doctoral thesis by Emmanuel Mgqwashu; this thesis is entitled, “*English studies and language teaching: Epistemological access and discursive critique in South Africa* (Mgqwashu, 2007). Mgqwashu’s study is of much greater extent than my own in that it looks at how English departments in four universities respond to the linguistic and literary needs of entry level students; however there is commonality in that both studies look at how teachers and learners engage with the teaching and learning of literacy. In Mgqwashu’s case it is the academic literacy of new university students and in my case it is critical literacy of F.E.T. phase school students. Mgqwashu’s view is that not many entry level university students “*possess relevant cultural capital to negotiate meanings successfully within this discourse.*” (Mgqwashu, pii) and the study examines the strategies that different English

departments adopt, to *“negotiate the challenge of enabling students to access the discourse of the Discipline”* (Mgqwashu, pii) and this in my opinion speaks to the type of research my study is undertaking. Mgqwashu adapts the document analysis from Singh’s study as he claims to recognise that data from document analysis plays an important role in research. This use of document analysis is part of a mixed method where he employs quantitative data obtained from the document analysis in conjunction with qualitative data obtained from surveys and interviews with participants. Part of the reason for this is as Mgqwashu states that, *“often interviewees may make generalizations or claims that need corroboration to documents relevant to their [responses]”* (Mgqwashu, p116). The use of mixed methods research also has relevance for my study as it too makes use of quantitative and qualitative data. Mgqwashu uses these two types of data both to increase validity in his study and also as part of grounded theory, as the data give rise to the theories which emerge in this work. The quantitative document analysis guides the qualitative surveys and interviews, and vice versa, and this way both methods work jointly to achieve the objectives of the study, *“Mixed method research enables the researcher to simultaneously address a range of confirmatory and exploratory questions with both the qualitative and quantitative approaches and therefore verify and generate theory in the same study.”* (de Vos et al, 2011).

The broader concerns of Magqwashu’s study had to do with the extent to which the various English modules produced logical thinkers who based their thinking on fact and could respond to an intellectual argument in their context or in other contexts. Mgqwashu also draws on the work of J. Cummins among others, whose work in bilingual education posits the theory that learners can function at two different levels with interpersonal communication developing discretely from academic language proficiency and being able to converse fluently in a language does not presuppose that the learner is able to handle academic texts in an equally proficient manner. This has implications for my work in considering what the learners are achieving in the classroom, which is reflected in the assessments which I review. Are the learners achieving the critical skills of interrogating texts and concepts and ideologies or is the intellectual engagement occurring at a much simpler level? My study is different from Mgqwashu’s in that it deals with assessments

and the teachers who create these assessments, but like Magqwashu's work an important consideration which must be borne in mind is the learners who learn from these teachers and engage with these assessments. The considerations in Magqwashu's work are much more detailed than the scope of my work, but they provide many interesting aspects which help to guide my thinking in the research.

A third Masters Dissertation which I looked at was that of Saloshini Pather's entitled, *"The use of critical literacy theories as an approach to teaching English as a home language to learners at a Durban secondary school utilizing community newspapers."* (Pather, 2009). This study, which took the form of an Action Research case study, has strong parallels with my work because it looked at school learners' newspaper reading habits and attempted to *"allow learners to become active and critical participants in the media culture which is omnipresent in their lives"* (Pather, piii). The study also focused on issues around identity, ethnicity and gender in the deconstruction of community newspapers with a particular focus being the *"ideologies, hegemonies and issues of power found in the language of these community newspapers"* (Pather, piii). Pather's intention was to work with the newly introduced National Curriculum Statement (NCS) at that time, in attempting to help learners to achieve some of the critical and developmental outcomes listed in that document. These included critical outcomes such as, *"collect, analyse, organise and critically evaluate information"* (NCS Grades 10-12, p12) and developmental outcomes like, *"be culturally and aesthetically sensitive across a range of social contexts"* (NCS Grades 10-12, p21). These outcomes were an attempt to change English teaching in South African schools and had as a basis the transformative pedagogies of Critical literacy. Pather went on to produce English lessons which integrated critical theories such as Reader Response theory, Critical Discourse analysis and Critical language awareness into the design of the lessons. This research project attempted to introduce Critical literacy practices in a classroom, initially as a pilot project but with the hope of determining their efficacy for more widespread use whereas my study intends only to attempt to observe Critical literacy practices in the classroom. Pather's work deals specifically with community newspapers, but the intention is to give *"critically literate learners [] the skills to avoid the pitfalls, for example, of specious*

*advertising; get-rich quick schemes, time share scams; political rhetoric; indoctrination ;media bias; twisted statistics and other ills prevalent in a information- driven society.”*

(Pather, p3) These concrete examples of how a critically literate individual can understand how texts can be used to manipulate them and thus can decide to accept or reject them, tie in with the principles of CLT. In my study I am looking for particular domains such as race, ethnicity, gender, class etc. but the idea is ultimately for learners not merely to recognise that these areas are represented in texts and language but also as critical readers, we cannot accept stereotypical, biased or unthinking representations of them.

Pather’s research involved firstly a quantitative data gathering instrument, namely a questionnaire which was put to learners, with the newspaper editors taking part in semi-structured interviews. Then data was gathered in a qualitative manner with lessons based on Critical literacy from which field notes were taken. Ultimately the Action research aspect of this study involved a reworking of the lessons in order to achieve an effective teaching strategy. This mixed method design, as in other work which I have read, speaks to how I will set up and engage with the methodology in my research. Ultimately on a very basic level Pather’s work had relevance for me because Pather’s belief that *“learners must come to view newspaper texts not as windows on reality, but as discursive constructs open to challenge and radical renewal”* (Pather, p75) in many ways echoes my own beliefs that it is necessary to have dialogue in the classroom and around assessments if we hope to develop learners who actively create their reality and do not merely accept a naïve and controlled view of the world.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter outlines the methodological choices which were made when considering this area for research. This chapter will explain how both quantitative and qualitative data is elicited in order to better achieve the objectives of the study as well as how the data produced from one method helps to give direction when seeking data with the other method. It will outline the methodology which was followed in order to gain the data and will look at the methods and the instruments which were used in this research. This research looks at a particular case and the features of case study are discussed so as to show *“fitness of purpose” of this particular method*. There is also an attempt to engage with some of the assumptions which underpin the thesis of this research. This chapter will go on to consider the constraints to this kind of research and it will then look at the sample and the context of this study, touching on the ethical considerations as well. The study described in this chapter is an attempt to understand if and possibly how teachers approach assessment in a particular school and if their conceptualisation of assessment is of a critical nature, thus there is no attempt to draw inferences for a larger population from this small scale research. The generalisability of this study is very limited as is usually the situation with case study research, however in my opinion this type of research does have a purpose, and *“Case study can be particularly useful for producing theory and new knowledge, which may inform policy development. Since casing involves a detailed investigation of a complex entity or process, it can generate theoretical insight closely grounded in real experience”* (de Vos et al, 2011).

#### **Objectives of this study**

One way to state the objective of this research would be to claim that it attempts to determine the level of critical thought in the teaching and assessment of English in a particular school. Figure 1 below shows the hoped for outcomes of this research.



Table 2.

Purposes /Objectives of the study	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To understand the composition of Language assessment tests in a selected High School.</li> <li>• To understand the assessors’ intentions and or motivations when producing these assessments.</li> <li>• To understand the relationship between the assessors’ intentions and the resulting assessments which they produce.</li> </ul>
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In order to achieve these objectives, data was sought as part of a case study of this particular school. Case studies, as described by Cohen and Manion (2011), “*can blend numerical and qualitative data and they are the prototypical instance of mixed method research*” and “*provides a unique example of real people in real situations, enabling readers to understand more clearly than simply by presenting them with abstract theories or principles*” (Cohen & Manion, 2011). This definition of case study also has validity for the methodological choices made in this research as quantitative data was sought from Document analysis of the assessments which the teacher participants had produced. This quantitative data was to help examine the working hypothesis which I had for this research, that there is a deficit in the encouraging of critical thought in school, “*A quantitative study tests specific hypotheses, usually stated in advance, and incorporates measures which can be analysed statistically.*” (Newton Suter, 2006). The data and the analysis which arise from this will hopefully give some direction as to looking for reasons for this situation, if it is occurring. This would then lead to qualitative methods being used, specifically semi-structured interviews with the teachers who produced these assessments. The qualitative methods do not work from any specific hypothesis but seek contextualized data with the unit of analysis being the teachers themselves. From here the intention is to see if relationships occur between the teachers’ understandings of critical paradigms, or lack of them, and the assessments which they produce. “*Qualitative studies by contrast, frequently allow a hypothesis to emerge after careful exploration, observation or interaction.*” (Newton Suter, 2006)

In attempting to determine whether Critical thought is a concept which is considered and possibly taught in schools, the assumption is made that teachers are themselves capable of critical thought and they then attempt to teach this skill to the learners. This is an assumption, because one does not know that teachers are capable of critical thought. Possibly this assumption is made because teachers form a section of society which has historically been accorded a certain amount of respect. It was common in the past to find teachers as commissioners of oaths, members of civic and political organisations and the fact that teachers were and still are asked by students to furnish them with some form of testimonial attesting to the student's work ethic and character, which is then presented to future employers when seeking employment, suggests that teachers and their opinions are held in some esteem by some sections in society. However the question of whether teachers are capable of independent critical thought is a contentious one. Henry Giroux, a proponent of critical pedagogy in school and a critical literacy theorist raises this issue. He describes a crisis in education, which has resulted in schools "*failing to prepare students to think critically and creatively with regard to developing the sophisticated literacy skills necessary to make informed and effective choices about the worlds of work, politics, culture, personal relationships and the economy.*" (Giroux, 1985). His reasoning for this is that there is an increasingly accepted social view of schools as factories dedicated to the production of individuals able to function in a more technical and specialised society and job market. As a result, there is a move towards 'deskilling teachers' through the production of curricula and 'teacher proof materials' which only require a trainer to implement these materials in a classroom. Thus, "*Teachers decisions about what should be taught, how it might meet the intellectual and cultural needs of students... have been rendered unimportant.*" (Giroux, 1985) The intellectual engagement of teachers and their consequent ability to think intellectually and critically is in my opinion a prerequisite for teachers being able to teach from a Critical Language perspective. I thus explore this idea of teachers as critical thinkers in my research, in a minor way but I always bear in mind how the personal intellectual framework of the individual impacts on how they perform in the classroom and in how they assess. This is not to say that teachers are necessarily intellectual beings or that they make considered critical choices in their own lives. In fact an impromptu discussion around levels of

critical thinking and decision making by teachers, which I instigated in the staffroom at the school under study, resulted in many teachers voicing the opinion that ‘other’ teachers often do not make considered intellectual decisions in their own lives. This anecdotal information is by no means valid, planned and reproducible educational research but it was an attempt to ‘test the waters’ if you will, of how teachers in this school understood and thought about critical paradigms. The discussion was based generally around reading media critically and how this can influence our actions. I introduced the topics of gambling, short term loans and alcohol usage, which are aspects of our culture which can impact negatively on people but individuals are still drawn to them even though they are aware of the negative consequences. In my opinion a very general consensus which arose from this discussion was that ‘other’ teachers were aware of these ‘social ills’ but many of them fall prey to these evils nevertheless. It was also interesting to note the ‘othering’ response which the participants of this discussion invoked when discussing teachers.

### **A Case Study**

The choice to use Case Study was one of the early decisions made when planning this research. When considering my contemporaries involved in educational research, it did appear as if case study was the most popular choice. I will admit that this research method does appear logistically and financially more ‘do-able’ for individuals in contexts similar to my own, I am referring to mature fulltime educators with social and family commitments who are studying for a post-graduate degree part-time, as most of students in my Master of Education class are. The case which is favoured by researchers from this context is often located in the school in which we work or one which is more easily accessible to us as part of our work life. However in my opinion the reasons for this are not merely convenience at the expense of valuable educational research. Some reasons for the choice of the popularity of case study are because of the unique position of the aforementioned individuals i.e. that we are often insiders in the institutions and organisations which are chosen for research. I would argue that we see these institutions and the groups or individuals holistically and our research is an attempt to understand and report on the dynamism and interconnectedness of the particular case in its natural setting, in a way that produces better educational research, “*contexts are unique and*

*dynamic, hence case studies investigate and report the real-life, complex dynamic and unfolding interactions of events, human relationships and other factors in a unique instance.*” (Cohen et al, 2011, p292)

The weaknesses of case study, that the results are not easily generalisable and that the research is prone to observer bias are valid due to the close and particular relationship between the researcher and the researched; however it is this close relationship which also has much strength for the research. The narrative nature of case study recommends itself to the aforementioned group and educational research as a whole, as it is “*immediately intelligible*” and “*easily understood by a wide audience (including non-academics)* as case study, “*catches unique features that may otherwise be lost in larger scale data (e.g. surveys)*” and “*these unique features might hold the key to understanding the situation.*” (Cohen et al, p293) With my particular study it is the units of analysis, i.e. the teacher for the qualitative part of the research and the assessments which the teachers produce for the quantitative part of the research, which recommended case study. This data is largely reliant on the context in which it occurs and it is hopefully this ‘thick description’ of the data which provides some element of validity to this research. It is the recognition of the individuals in this research i.e. the participants and their particular context which hopefully allows for greater understanding of the data and better analysis as well, “*the case study researcher typically observes the characteristics of an individual unit- a child, a clique, a class, a school or a community. The purpose of such observation is to probe deeply and to analyse intensively the multifarious phenomena that constitute the life cycle of the unit with a view to establishing generalisations about the wider population to which that unit belongs.*” (Cohen et al, p296)

### **The Research Questions, Methods and Instruments**

The first research question: “*Does the assessment I am examining show evidence of Critical Language Analysis?*” will use Document analysis to generate data. The Document analysis will provide the numerical data around the level of CLA used in these assessments, if it is used at all. This will support and guide the qualitative side of the research as the information it provides will guide me in how to approach the interviews

with the teachers who produced these assessments. The documents which will be used for analysis are English language tests which my participants have produced and used in their classrooms, these classes being grades 10 and 11 i.e. classes in the F.E.T. phase at this particular school. The instrument used, analysis worksheets (see attached) were produced specifically for this research, but owe their genesis to the work of Emmanuel Mgwashu in, *“Exploring Epistemological access for first year university students”* and Ruveena Singh in her work on *“Investigating and developing an approach to Critical literacy using the South African short story”* because both of these studies make use of documentary analysis related to language pedagogy. These two studies clearly show how data analysis can be used as an effective research tool to provide quantifiable easily understood data which can then be used to ‘illuminate’ the data which then comes from the qualitative part of the study. To that end, the document analysis work sheets allow for the identification and quantification of CLA type questions in the assessment under study. The number, frequency and mark allocation given to CLA type questions is determined by this instrument, allowing for later analysis of these assessments in conjunction with the semi-structured interviews of the participants.

The interview with the participants is guided by twenty interview schedule questions which touch on the various aspects around assessment and the individual teachers’ understanding of and orientation towards the teaching of critical thought in the classroom. This use of qualitative data in my study has relevance because of views such as *“researchers use semi-structured interviews in order to gain a detailed picture of a participant’s beliefs about or perceptions or accounts of, a particular topic.”* (de Vos et al, 2011) The teachers interviewed will be the same teachers who produced the assessments analysed with the document analysis worksheets. The qualitative data produced by the interviews will provide a richer more nuanced understanding of the teachers as individuals and will give me more insight into their thinking when teaching and producing assessments. The method of data gathering used here is not an attempt to measure the competence of educators, but rather an attempt to gain some understanding of why the teachers have made the choices which they have when producing these assessments. This relates to my second research questions of, *“Why (or conversely why*

*not) has the assessor included elements of critical thought in the assessment?"* The interviews also allow me to explore my third research question of, *"How have the assessors' stated intentions, influenced the production of the assessment?"* with the understanding that this research question will probably best be answered in the analysis phase of this study.

The choice of a semi-structured interview is multi-fold. Firstly it is an attempt to understand how and why teachers assess learners, and then it attempts to understand if the teachers have a particular mindset or paradigm which impacts on their assessing in the classroom situation. It then probes the idea of critical thought, both in the teachers' personal contexts as well as in their pedagogical practice. The consideration of these aims resulted in a 'funneling' of the questions in the interview schedule (see attached), moving from the conceptually simple to the complex and the broader general questions around teaching practice, to the more specific questions around my participants' own particular practices in teaching and assessment. I again considered this type of data gathering as most relevant to my study as I sought the individual's understanding of conceptual knowledge around Critical language assessment, critical thinking and any other conceptual framework which the teacher knowingly or unknowingly subscribe to in their teaching practice.

### **The Sample**

The sample that I make use of in this study comprises four English Home Language teachers who work along with others including myself, in the language department of the particular high school under study. In my opinion this is an appropriate sample as the size of the sample is not a major consideration in case study as *"the concern is not so much for a representative sample (indeed the strength of the case study approach is that the case only represents itself)* (Cohen et al, p294). More of a consideration for this sample is that it is able to contribute to understanding the features of CLT in the assessments which these teachers produce. All the participants selected work in the FET phase (i.e. grades 10,11 &12) of English Home Language tuition at this school. It is at this phase where the NCS document states clearly that the learner must be able to, *"evaluate critically and*

*respond to a wide range of texts*” (NCS Grades 10 -12, p13) and it is this ‘critical engagement’ which recommends these particular individuals as suitable participants for this study. The ease of access to this sample is a bonus in that it allows for an easier research process, but it was not a primary consideration when planning this research. More of a consideration was that larger amounts of data generated by a larger sample would, *“by implication be difficult to process, analyse and interpret.”* (de Vos et al, 2011). Being a case study of the FET phase of home language instruction within the school to which I had access implies that I am well situated to understand and represent this case so as to *“separate the significant few from the insignificant many instances of behaviour. Significance rather than frequency being one of the hallmarks of case study* (Cohen et al, p294). One might describe the sample as more a convenient sample than a purposive sample but we must acknowledge that all the participants fulfil the requirements of working in the required educational field. I would also describe it as a case study as it is an attempt to enquire into, reflect on and describe as completely as possible the particular case in this school, *“Case study strives to portray what it is like to be in a particular situation, to catch the close-up reality and ‘thick description’ of participants lived experiences of, thoughts about and feelings for, a situation.”* (Cohen & Manion, 2011)

An interesting aspect of this research is that all of the teachers selected are qualified high school teachers of English and work in the FET phase of schooling. However they have acquired their teaching qualifications through a variety of ways and there is amongst them a diversity of experience in teaching English. Two of them are university graduates however one of these two is a novice teacher and the other has more Business Studies as part of his teaching package. Of the other two participants, one has a three year teaching diploma and the majority of her teaching experience is in the Primary school having only been in the High school for the last three years. The final participant reskilled herself, after working in the private sector, and has about five years of teaching experience. This educationally and experientially diverse group is socially and culturally very homogenous as they all belong to the same racial grouping, they all have lived, and most still do live, within the community in which this school is located, and except for one of them, all

were previous students at this school. They are responsible for setting and marking assessments in this school and are thus in this researcher's opinion relevant and reliable participants in this study. To my mind, recognition of the context and experience of the individual is important in this type of research, as a limitation of a critical literacy or critical testing approach is that it often requires a high skilled and 'conscientised' individual and teaching cohort in order to better achieve its aims.

### **Constraints**

One must however acknowledge that the extent of the sample does impact on the data obtained and consequently the analyses of this data and any findings which might emerge from this. This is not really the case with reference to the qualitative data as, "*there are no rules for sample size in qualitative enquiry. Sample size depends on what we want to know [] what will be useful, what will have credibility, and what can be done with the available time and resources.*" (de Vos et al, 2011) With regards to the quantitative data, the limited number of participant's means that the number of assessments analysed as part of the documentary analysis is consequently limited. Each participant produced one assessment for analysis, once I had explained the type of assessment which I required. However as these assessments are intended to give insight to the teachers' theoretical knowledge, intentions and decision making when producing these assessments, one considers the number of assessments analysed as sufficient for the purposes of this study.

A more fundamental constraint to this research is around the concept of Critical thought and Critical Language. CLA is a construct i.e. "*It is an abstract trait or ability that is only presumed to exist as it cannot be measured directly.*" (Terre Blanche, Durrhiem & Painter, 2008) and this study is attempting to investigate if and to what extent this construct influences the teaching and assessing of language. Further to that, it is acknowledged that Critical literacy discourses are not the dominant discourses in the classroom, *Critical literacy can be termed 'emergent' because it is not generally viewed as what counts as commonsense about literacy. In other words, it has not yet attained the status of orthodoxy.*" (Newton-Suter, 2006) In attempting to identify these discourses as being part of the teachers' thought processes when they are planning to assess, it is



recognised that discourses around being Critical may not be acknowledged by the teachers as being part of their thought processes and decision making. However every attempt will be made to relate the teachers' responses to the characteristics underlying CLA as defined by Brian Lynch in his paper on "*Rethinking assessment from a Critical Perspective*" (Lynch, 2001) i.e. being related to domains such as gender, class, ethnicity etc. and that the teachers consider various paradigms when assessing besides the positivist. As well as whether the teachers engage with transformative pedagogy and are self reflexive in their practice. In this way it is hoped to have the data reflect what is actually being studied.

### **Ethical Issues**

My study does not include participants below the age of consent and it does not involve any at risk individuals. The participants are high school teachers and their participation is purely voluntary. I initially met with and got the informed consent of all the participants before the research began, by presenting them with a letter which detailed my intended study and assured them of complete confidentiality and privacy during and after the process (see attached). All the transcripts which I generated were given to the relevant participants to read before I used them and at all phases of the research, they were made aware of their rights to withdraw from the process if they wished. For the Documentary analysis I first sought the participants' permission before using any of the assessments which they had produced, they in fact chose the particular assessment which I analysed, after I had explained to them what I required. Each participant will be given a copy of the completed thesis and they will have access to my notes and drafts on request. Complete confidentiality was maintained through out the process of data gathering analyses and the writing of this report.

I do however recognise that I am part of this school which I am studying thus I have dual roles as a colleague to the participants and researcher who is studying and interviewing these individuals. There will be no 'covert' observation which will take place and I will go to great pains to make clear that the purposes of the research in no way impact on our working relationship. However I recognise that these participants will naturally be wary of how they respond to my interview questions as they might perceive this as an

opportunity for criticism of their teaching. These participants are people whom I work with and it is in my best interests to treat them with respect to maintain a working relationship which I value. I will at all times attempt to make clear to them that if they feel coerced or threatened by myself or the research process, they have a number of options available to them, not least of which to withdraw from the study. My study will at all times attempt to accord to the principles of Non-maleficence, beneficence and human dignity.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **THE DATA PRODUCED BY THE STUDY**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter engages with the fair amount of data which was generated during the data gathering period of this study. This data comprises quantitative data which was generated by the document analysis worksheets and which reflects in a statistical fashion the composition of the assessments which the teachers in this study produced. Further qualitative data was generated from the interviews which were conducted with the teachers who participated in this study. This mixed method, as alluded to in the methodology section of this thesis, was a conscious decision to gain data which attempts to best understand the situation surrounding the composition and production of assessments in the school understudy. The quantitative data tests the hypothesis that there is a deficit in the encouraging of critical thought in schools whereas the qualitative data attempts to better understand the analysis which is derived from the statistics. The qualitative data also addresses, among other things, the remaining two research question which sought to find out how and why the assessors' personal paradigms around teaching and critical thinking influenced their production and marking of the assessments.

#### **Data from the Documentary Analysis**

In the document analysis worksheet, the first five questions provide general information about assessments which the assessors produced and this is used to understand the overt similarities and differences between all the assessments analysed in this study. All the assessments used, were end of term, language assessments, produced in the years 2011 and 2012, essentially they were English Home Language Paper 1's which comprise a comprehension, a visual literacy section (adverts and cartoons) and a language section (editing, drafting and correct language usage). They were used in grades 10 and 11, which with grade 12, constitutes the Final Education and Training phase (FET) in South African schools, and which is also the area focused on in this study. All the assessments comprise about 20% of the term ending mark, which is the norm in this phase.

The focus of the documentary analysis was to attempt to find evidence of CLT in the assessments being analysed. Of the four assessments, three of them showed evidence of CLT, to varying degrees. One assessment, that which was produced by teacher C, did not show any evidence of what Lynch describes as offering the characteristics of a critical approach i.e. *“is interested in particular domains such as gender, class, ethnicity and the ways that language is connected with them”* or which showed *“a concern for changing the human and social world, not just describing it: the transformative agenda, with the related and motivational concern for social justice and equality.”* (Lynch, p357). Thus only from the perspective provided by this assessment, it was considered to show no evidence of CLT in its composition. This however did not prevent the interviewing of teacher C as the intention was to see if the teacher was aware of Critical paradigms in the teaching of language and if the lack of CLT type questions in the assessment was a conscious decision or if there were some reason for this occurring.

The assessment produced by teacher G had three questions which showed evidence of CLT totaling 5 marks which equated to 7% of the total mark for that assessment. The questions in this assessment touched on the domains of political power and gender issues. The assessment produced by teacher L had only one question which interrogated the domain of economic power and this question was worth 5 marks, thus the percentage of CLT type questioning in this assessment also totaled 7% of the mark. The assessment produced by teacher T had four questions which showed evidence of awareness of CLT and these domains included class, culture, economics, gender and political power. The total mark here was 11 which equated to 16% of the total mark for this assessment. Thus it would appear that the first research question **“Does the assessment examined show evidence of Critical Language Testing?”** has been answered. There does appear to be evidence of CLT type questions present in assessments which some of the teachers produced, albeit rather a small percentage, ranging from 0% to 16%. However there are other considerations which must be taken into account. Due to the fact that teachers routinely include questions from previous assessments which they themselves have not set, I thought it pertinent to include a further question which looked at the percentage of questions coming from previous assessments.

In the case of teacher T whose assessment appeared to show 16% of questions reflecting principles of CLT, the percentage of questions coming from previous assessments amounted to 67%, meaning that two thirds of the assessment was taken from previous assessments. These were most notably a previous term ending examination from 2006 and a Department of Education senior certificate examination from 2002, the standard grade paper. All the questions which seemed to show evidence of CLT were not set by the teacher who had prepared this assessment. With teacher L a similar situation occurred with 63% of the questions in that assessment coming from a previous term ending assessment, specifically the 2006 Department of Education senior certificate examination. Here too the CLT type question was not set by this teacher. With teacher G, no questions were taken from previous examination papers but extensive use was made of textbooks and questions were used as they appeared in the textbook with the teacher not being responsible for setting the CLT type questions in that assessment. This situation in my opinion did not detract from the objective which I had in mind, which was, **“To understand the composition of Language assessment tests in a selected High School.”** but it did provide more focus in the qualitative data gathering aspect of this study. It piqued my interest as to why teachers choose to use questions from previous assessments and if they were choosing these questions with a specific intention in mind? The final question in the document analysis was related to this idea of how questions are chosen and produced; it asked if there was any evidence of a theme in the assessment i.e. if the different questions in the assessment were somehow related with regard to content. None of the assessments showed any evidence of a theme or relationship between the questions used. All the questions were disparate and unrelated with regards to content. In itself, the data from this question is inconclusive as there might be many reasons why questions in an assessment might be unrelated, but it can be interpreted that questions in an assessment are chosen for convenience or mark allocation and the level of critical thought applied to the production of these assessments might be limited.

### **Data from the Interviews**

The interviews with the four participants were guided by questions on an interview schedule, the interviews were recorded and the recordings were transcribed for analysis.

In this way it was possible to compare the responses to specific questions, amongst the four participants. This made it easier to look for similarities and differences among the responses and to identify themes which emerged from the data. The transcripts also allowed for the participants to review their interview with ease, this helped to fulfil the ethical requirement of informed consent, *“The researcher remains obligated at all times to give a complete explanation of the total investigation without pressure or unnecessary interference, in clear and intelligible language.”* (de Vos et al, p118). To this end the first four questions were general information questions around the teachers’ personal context in relation to their job and were questions around their age, experience and qualifications. These are also rather personal questions, but in this way I wanted to introduce the idea that they should not feel threatened and could skip a question if they wished. All the participants appeared to accept these questions graciously and only one participant refused to answer the question around age but did this with good humour and volunteered all the other information.

In the analysis of the data it is recognised that Critical thought is a construct which is not easily observable, thus a number of themes guided the analysis. These were posed as questions which were asked around the teachers’ responses in the interviews. These themes are:

- |  |
|--|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What knowledge, attitude and beliefs do teachers possess when setting an assessment?</li> <li>2. Is the teacher self-reflexive when assessing and actively questions what and why they are assessing?</li> <li>3. Does a teacher consider paradigms of assessment other than the positivist paradigm when assessing?</li> <li>4. Is language assessment tied to other domains, especially those concerned with power differentials in society?</li> <li>5. Is the teacher able to engage with other forms of language knowledge from learners when marking?</li> <li>6. Does the teacher source work from previous assessments and why?</li> </ol> |
|--|

Table 3

These themes were generated from the educational readings, specifically the work done by Elana Shohamy in defining CLT in the educational literature and the work done by Brian Lynch on defining the characteristics of a critical perspective in CLT. Each of the substantive questions in the interview schedule i.e. other than the first four general information questions, refer to at least one of the themes but sometimes as many as 5 individual themes are touched on by the individual questions.

The next three questions were attempting to interrogate the theme of ‘the knowledge, attitudes and beliefs that a teacher possesses in relation to assessment’. This theme was a constant point of reference through out the interviews and is represented in more than half the questions, as it related to the second objective of this research, **“To understand the assessors’ intentions and or motivations when producing these assessments.”** Question 5 related specifically to how the teachers view the classes which they teach and the question gave some guidance by offering the words, socially, educationally, composition. The responses varied here as the teachers referred to a number of classes, but an interesting similarity here was that two teachers used the word ‘battle’ as in *“they absolutely battle”* and *“they battle along”*. This analysis is not taking the form of discourse analysis, but it is interesting that two participants have the same conceptual view of two different class groups and the word ‘battle’ does not suggest that it is a positive view. In response to the following question i.e. question 6, the participants seemed to have the same intentions when assessing learners, this being assessment of a summative nature, in fact all the participants responded with the same words, *“To see”* for some it was to see what the pupils had learnt and for others to see how much the pupils had learnt.

Question six also tied in with a second theme which I had hoped to explore, that of ‘whether teachers are self reflexive when assessing and actively question what they are assessing’, this theme arising from Lynch’s fourth critical perspective characteristic of CLT (Lynch, p363). Two participants showed some evidence of this when they responded that one of their goals in assessment was to learn as well. Teacher C wanted to *“know what they know”* and found the idea of competition in her class exciting, even

going as far as encouraging competition amongst her more interested performers in class. This shows a degree of reflexivity on the part of the teacher who attempted to provide assessment material which would challenge and stimulate learners in order to get them to compete for the highest mark, which she then shared with them to encourage more competition. Teacher G responded more simply that, “[assessment] is mainly to see if whether I’ve achieved the content and in the same way I learn from it myself.” However the other two participants showed little evidence of being reflexive in their practice and their explanation of why they assess was either unrelated to my intention of the question or reflected a more functional view of doing “what needs to be done [] to get them to pass to the next grade.” Their level of reflexivity is probed in later questions.

The third theme which was investigated was ‘whether or not teachers considered paradigms of assessment other than the positivist paradigm when assessing’. This theme is a major theme in this study and is reflected in half of the questions asked in the interviews. This was touched on in question 7 which asked how teachers went about planning an assessment. Possibly this question could have been phrased better as all the responses dealt with the mechanics of producing assessments and did not engage with the conceptual thought processes involved in assessment. This theme is dealt with better in question 9 which asked how the participants would change the assessment of English if they could. Teacher T had no response to this, saying only that, “I think for me it’s fine”. Teacher G had a similar response, saying that “It’s not that I am happy, it’s just that there too many ways that it can go wrong. So at the moment it works but it is not ideal”. These responses hint at the idea that teachers have opinions about the nature of assessments but possibly do not feel qualified to speak their opinions. This idea of language policies, “where tests serve as tools which are used extensively by educational authorities to create de facto policies” (Shohamy, p365) is expanded upon in the paper on “Language Policy and Language Assessment” (Shohamy, 2008). Shohamy contends that ideologies are perpetuated in tests and sometimes the assessors feel disempowered to change how they assess. Oftentimes assessors merely replicate the format and content of standardised tests which, “deliver messages as to the uniformity and standard that should be followed in using these languages” and that in pursuit of language hegemony, “language tests



*allow only for standardised answers in terms of grammar and lexicon and do not usually attempt to measure these more subtle but important aspects of language ability.”*

(Shohamy, p367). Teacher L reinforced this idea of unreflexive pedagogy which the first two participants hinted at, by stating categorically that she would, *“Go back to the way that I was assessed in High School...because we did the rote learning back then”*.

Teacher C’s responses do show evidence of considering other paradigms in assessment, this participant’s view of changes in assessment relate to making assessment more relevant to the individual in the class. Reference was made to, *“language tests that are more for real life”* this was explained to mean that language testing should look at texts and artefacts in the world of the learner, like signs that learners would see in their community and getting the learners to write their own comprehensions. In this way the text and the questions in the assessment would reflect the world of the individual and not merely be a duplication of texts and concepts which are deemed as suitable by language policy makers. In this way divergent ideologies which are representative of the learners language experiences would be included in assessments.

The following question i.e. question 10 raises a major aspect of CLT, i.e. how language assessment is tied to domains in society, this was put to the participants as the domains of gender, class, ethnicity, economic, human right and social justice issues and for them to choose that which they considered relevant to language assessment. This is reflective of the fourth theme I use in this analysis that of ‘domains in society concerned with issues of power’. This is an important aspect of the Critical Literacy paradigm, that readers recognise unequal power relations in society and how dominant ideologies seek to maintain their privileged position in society often through the use of texts, so the fact that the participants agreed that the recognition and understanding of certain power relations in society are important in the assessment of language seems to reflect some element of critical thinking. However there was no common ground for the participants on this question they all highlighted various domains for various reasons. Ethnicity and Culture as well as Social Justice were highlighted by three of the participants as important to them when assessing language but outside of that there was very little commonality in the choices. Teacher T chose only the domain of economic power as being important in

language assessment and then said little else. In order to gain greater clarity on this I had planned the following question to get the participants to explain why they had chosen those particular domains in the previous question. The reasons given for the choice of Ethnicity and Culture by three of the participants was related to the social and racial composition of the school. The participants referred to the need for sensitivity in discussing and assessing issues of race and culture, this is possibly as a result of the fact that none of the teachers are from the same racial grouping as the majority of the learners in the school. The responses around Social justice elicited responses about rights, for teacher L it was important to respect individual rights and for teacher G the idea was more a situation of responsibility, *“you do wrong you should pay for it”*. The two questions discussed i.e. questions 10 and 11 also touch significantly on the second theme, that of reflexivity when assessing, and the responses do show educators who think to a certain degree about their practice and adapt their ideas and actions when assessing, this is then some evidence of reflexive practitioners.

The data elicited in the first half of the interview dealt with the participants' intentions and motivations in the production of the assessments which were analysed. The questions moved from probing conceptually simple thinking on the production of assessments such as why did the participants assess, to the conceptually complex ideas of which domains or power relations in society were considered important when assessing? In this way an attempt was made to engage with the second research question which asks, **“Why (or conversely why not) has the assessor included elements of critical thought in the assessment?”** In this first part of the interviews, there does seem to be some elements of critical thought on the part of some of the participants when assessing, the reasons however for them including these elements are not clear. Possibly these elements are included accidentally as a result of using questions from previous assessments. It is also possible that these assessments are being included intentionally because some of these teachers might aspire to include some aspects of Critical literacy in their teaching of language and thus choose questions which reflect this, or it might be completely inadvertent as the participant might be completely oblivious to critical paradigms. What is clear from the data is that teachers are assessing according to what is highlighted to

them as being important for passing the final examination in matric, *“Teachers are concerned with the objectives which will be developed and thus match their assessments to this.”* (Giroux, 1985) To better understand this situation, the focus of the questions in the latter part of the interview then shifted a little, it focused less on the production of assessments and looked more closely at the participants and how they marked these assessments. In this way it hoped to better understand how teachers responded to the learners’ answers in the assessments.

This shift in the focus of the questions in the schedule was an attempt to probe the participants thinking and cognitive influences when marking. Simply put, how strictly to the memo do the participants mark? Would they only award a mark to an answer which closely follows that outlined in the memo; would they accept an answer which is conceptually similar to the memo answer but differs in how it is phrased or would they accept an answer which differs from the memo answer but which still appears to answer the question in a relevant manner and how would they determine if it was relevant? The theme which is being investigated here is the idea of whether or not ‘the teacher is willing to engage with other forms of language knowledge from learners when marking?’

*“It is being recognised that language testing is not occurring in homogenous, uniform and isolated contexts but rather in diverse, multilingual and multicultural societies, a reality that poses new challenges and questions to testers with regard to what it means to know language(s) in education and society. (Shohamy, 2011)*

To probe this theme the question was simply put as to how the participant would mark a response which did not accord with the memo (i.e. is not the expected answer)? All the participants showed sensitivity towards accepting divergent responses to language questions. Responses such as *“if the child has captured the essence”* to *“If I understand it and it ties into the question”* and *“if it is an opinion and they are asked to give their own opinion, then I can’t penalise a learner”* showed that the participants were willing to consider responses outside of the expected responses. To probe this further, the following question was more challenging in that it asked how the participant would mark a question which conflicted with a personal belief system and I included examples of political,

religious and social beliefs. All the responses here were what a researcher investigating Critical Language testing would hope for. Responses like *“It shouldn’t factor”*, *“It doesn’t really phase me what the child believes”*, *“I wouldn’t penalise them”* and *“We have been encouraged to allow diversity”* show that the participants claim to act in an ethical and accepting manner towards all understandings of language in their classrooms.

A third question sought to refine this line of thought even more by asking if the participants would set or use a question which conflicted with a personal belief. The responses here began to show a little bit of ambivalence with two participants appearing to relish the idea of challenging learners and possibly even themselves when assessing. Teacher C responded that she would, as she *“love[d] seeing what other people think. It brings a nice debate later.”* This response appears to be consistent with teacher C’s previous responses as she admitted previously to actively encouraging competition in her class as she found it *“exciting”*. This teacher appears to enjoy hearing and engaging with divergent views in her language class and in the assessments which she sets. Teacher L also admitted to finding it, *“nice to have a little bit of controversy in the lesson. [As it] makes it better.”* This apparent enjoyment of divergent thought appears to be consistent with the theme of being ‘willing to engage with other forms of language knowledge from learners’. Teacher G however appeared to be less prepared to use controversial material in setting assessments, the domains which he tended to avoid were, *“political and religious type questions.”* Teacher T also showed a reluctance to include controversial material in assessments, with the reason being that assessors should respect the beliefs of the learners who they are assessing. It seems likely that even though these two teachers are able to engage with domains in society which may be controversial, thus agreeing with some aspects of CLT, they are reluctant to take the responsibility for presenting these domains in assessments. Teacher T made telling comment on self censorship when she said, *“You can put any question, but as the examiner, you should know better than the learner.”*

The theme above of ‘whether or not the teacher is willing to engage with other forms of language knowledge is closely allied to the theme of a ‘self reflexive teacher who

actively questions what and why they are assessing' because if one is to decide to engage with other forms of language knowledge it does appear to be a conscious decision. It does not seem likely that one would accept alternative answers in an assessment without first reflecting on and interrogating the validity of these responses. Thus a teacher willing to accept alternative answers seems to require a reflective nature, someone who is willing and able to enter into dialogue with the learners on a verbal level and an internal dialogue with themselves about the validity of the alternative answers on a cognitive level. This dialogue suggests teachers who have a dynamic understanding of language. To better understand how the participants handle this idea of dialogue, both with learners and themselves, a question was asked about giving feedback to assessments, or as some would term it 'corrections' of the work produced. The responses here are telling when viewed in conjunction with the previous question. The participants' responses followed the same pattern, teacher C and teacher L who were previously happy to set controversial questions were also happy to give feedback on assessments. Teacher L viewing it as, "*why we do assessment.*" and teacher C seeing it as necessary for "*every single assessment*". While teacher G and teacher T who previously voiced some ambivalence in setting controversial questions seemed a little more reluctant to give feedback. With teacher G, feedback was only given when there was time and for long written pieces this only took the form of a two line comment at the end. For teacher T feedback was merely an invitation for those who didn't understand, to come to her and she would explain.

At this point in the planning of the interview, I was of the opinion that I had alluded sufficiently to the idea of critical thought in planning assessments and felt that this would be a suitable juncture in which to introduce a direct question to the participants as to whether or not they had any conceptions of what it meant to be Critical and if they considered themselves Critical. In planning this question due recognition was given to the fact that the terms Critical and Critical Literacy may not have been understood by the participants or the terms might be interpreted differently by the participant than how it is interpreted in this study. Two of the participants had in my opinion a better grasp on an understanding of being Critical. Teacher C described it as 'analysing' and 'unpacking' whilst teacher G described it as "*not just accepting*", he did not specify what one should

be sceptical of but he did go on to say that it also meant to *'come up with options.'*

However neither of them described themselves as being Critical thinkers. This question was broadly phrased and it did not specify in which areas they considered themselves to be critical thinkers so there is some room for confusion as to what the question was actually looking for. The assumption was that since the interview was about assessment and teaching they would interpret that as being the area which was being asked about. Teacher T viewed the word as having many different meanings and did not answer the question, claiming that being Critical depended on the situation. Teacher L seemed to have difficulty interpreting the word in an acceptable way and eventually responded with, *"I don't know."* Later, at the end of the interview, I came back to this idea by asking the question, *"Do you consider yourself to be an intellectual and if so could you please explain what that means to you?"*, in this way I was re-asking the question on being Critical and hopefully accessing the participants view of themselves as cognitive reflexive workers, this being one of the characteristics of the CLT paradigm. Three of the participants responded affirmatively to this question, teacher T asked for her response to be 'off the record' and it is thus not included in this analysis. Ambivalence about stating that they were intellectuals was noted in all the participants, both in their verbal response and in body language which communicated to me uneasiness with the question. Teacher G initially said no but then changed the response to, *"I'd like to consider myself intelligent, but intellectual I am not too sure."* whilst the other two responded affirmatively but never said the word yes, their words were, *"I suppose I am."* and *"I think I am."* This line of questioning was an attempt to understand the participants' personal paradigms and views of themselves so as to better understand their views of themselves as teachers and assessors. It is acknowledged that internal views and personal paradigms are very complex ideas and concepts and these very simplistic and limited questions can only achieve a very simplified understanding of how the participants view themselves, but for the purposes of this study, the responses were adequate in providing a more rounded view of the participants as individuals.

A final theme which was explored in the interviews was the idea of 'whether or not the teacher uses previous assessments in developing their own assessments'. Earlier in this

chapter reference was made to teachers routinely including questions from previous assessments in the assessments which they produced for their classes. The document analysis of the assessments produced by the participants of this study showed that up to two thirds of the assessment was taken from previous assessments which they did not set. This idea of using previous assessments forms the final theme used in this analysis, because it appears valid to wonder at the critical attitude which is fostered but using a question which did not seem to require much thought in producing.

The first question was already answered by the document analysis i.e. “Do you use questions from previous exams and if so, what percentage would you say is from previous exams?” It was asked to so as to check that the participants were aware of their practices. All of the participants responded positively, even teacher C whose assessment showed no evidence of previous questions, thus showing that this practice doesn’t always occur but it is very prevalent and most teachers do it at some point. Three of the participants all guessed the same percentage, 50% with teacher L admitting to using an entire assessment on occasion. Teacher T was evasive on this question, never openly admitting to using other assessments to produce an assessment, but referring instead to ‘other teachers’ who did this and then saying “*maybe for literature exams*” in reference to herself. To get some clarity on this practice, the following question asked why the participants did this. The responses were of two types, the first response used by three of the participants was that the previous assessments guided them in setting assessments, this is a curious response as they did not only follow the format of the previous assessments but they also used the exact questions. The format for language assessments in the FET phase of schooling is available in the SAG document so one wonders how the questions guided them. The second response that came from teacher T was that the particular questions chosen were of a “*high standard*”, this then begs the question of what would be the standard of a question set by the teacher and would a reflexive practitioner not hope to achieve this ‘high standard’ in their own work at some point. Obviously issues around available time and work load make the use of previous questions an easier option for teachers, but it does raise the issue of the critical attitude of a person who uses questions merely for their convenience. Further reasons were provided by the

participants, such as being a new teacher who was aware of the theories around setting assessments but who had difficulty ‘pitching’ assessments to the necessary level for the learners in the class. The most telling admission however, which was referred to by three of the participants was that these types of questions prepared the learners for, *“how they are going to set in the matric exam”*. Besides this activity seeming to preclude a critical attitude from the assessor, it also highlights how this activity can encourage ‘instrumentalism’ in assessment. This practice is defined by Harry Torrance in his paper, *“Assessment as learning? How the use of explicit learning objectives, assessment criteria and feedback in post secondary education and training can come to dominate learning.”* (Torrance, 2007) and it describes how formative assessment practices which were used to help learners to achieve specific objectives, like in language assessments could sometimes be interpreted so narrowly that it, *“probably help[ed] to produce student who are more dependant on their tutors and assessors rather than less dependant.”* that the, *“transparency of objectives coupled with extensive use of coaching and practice to help learners meet them is in danger of removing the challenge of learning and reducing the quality and validity of outcomes achieved.”* (Torrance, p282). In the context of this study, the reliance on questions which resemble that which is most likely to occur in the matric examination seems likely to engender an attitude which is far from critical in the assessor. Torrance describes this as having moved from ‘assessment of learning’ which is the more positivist view of assessment, through the idea of ‘assessment for learning’ ultimately to a situation where it has now become ‘assessment as learning’. This is a situation where a particular format to answering questions or writing texts is valued over a critical approach which seeks to develop the individual to being open-minded when setting and answering language assessments. In this way to have assessments reflect the lived experience of those being assessed with the assessment being a dynamic representation of the real world.

This chapter has presented the data which was produced in the documentary analysis and the interviews which were conducted. The quantitative data is of a statistical nature and is an attempt to answer the first research question. The answer simply put is, yes, that language assessments in the FET phase of schooling do show evidence of considering



domains related to power relations in society and they show a concern for the human and social world and not merely describing it but also relating it to the ideas of social justice and equality. The intention was for the quantitative data to lead on to the qualitative data and the second research question which would be then read as, **‘Why have the assessors included elements of Critical thought in the assessment?’** However the issue of teachers including questions from previous assessments has resulted in the situation of these elements of Critical thought not being the work of the assessor. The qualitative data also interrogated the assessors’ intentions and motivations on a cognitive and conceptual level thus the data attempted to probe the thought processes of the participants and this gave some understanding of the participants level of critical thought and their motivation when producing assessments even if the elements of Critical thought in the assessment were not their own work. The second research question is more complex than the first and the discussion around this question which explains what the data reveals about the participants’ reasons for including Critical thought is to be found in the following chapter i.e. the findings section of this study.

The qualitative data was analysed according to a number of themes and the individual responses were viewed in relation to these themes. There is no single or uniform response to the questions in the interview, the participants are individuals and they approach conceptual and theoretical ideas from different perspectives. Their ideas and beliefs around Critical thought are different and this is evident in how they approach assessment and teaching. The objective here was to understand the relationship between the assessors’ intentions and the resulting assessments which they produced. In the context of this study it can be claimed that this objective was achieved as one does then come to an understanding of **‘How the assessors’ stated intentions influenced the production and marking of assessments’**, which is essentially the third research question. The data reveals that the ability as well as the desire to think critically has an impact on how the participants of this study produce and mark assessments. This impact is to produce assessors who show differing levels of reflexivity in the production and marking of assessments. From the data it would appear that the more capable the assessor of Critical thought, the more likely they are to include CLT in the teaching and assessment in their classroom, however this is not a direct relationship.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **THE FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter considers all the data which were gathered in both the quantitative and qualitative phases of this research. After due reflection of this, through the lens of the theoretical framework which guided this research and with the consideration of the research questions and the motivations for this research, a number of findings were arrived at. These findings are outlined in this chapter. This chapter reflects on language learning and social change as well as the relationship between power relations within our society. With this in mind, the study sought to understand the composition of Language assessments produced in a high school, in terms of their adherence to the principles of Critical Language Testing and then to understand the intentions and motivations which the assessors had when producing these assessments. The final objective was to determine the relationship between the assessors' intentions and the assessments which they produced. An underlying premise here was that if assessors had awareness of paradigms such as Critical literacy and Critical Language Awareness, this would influence the assessors so that they would include questions such as those around the domains of power relations in society; they would consider paradigms other than the positivist when producing and marking assessments; they would be concerned with issues around equality and social justice in the human and social world and they would be self reflexive practitioners in their classrooms. This premise is interrogated throughout this chapter in a self reflexive manner so as to be aware of my own personal ideological frame when conceptualising this research

#### **Power and Knowledge (Truth)**

In my referencing of Critical theory in the planning and execution of this research I have hopefully made clear a major part of my own ideological views with regards to education. Peter McLaren points out in his book, *“Life in Schools”* (McLaren, 1989) that, *“Critical educational theorists argue that teachers must understand the role that schooling plays in joining knowledge and power in order to use that role for the development of critical and*

*active citizens.*” (McLaren, p160) It is my opinion that language is not merely an instrument for communication but that it is a socially constructed practice which can transmit more than just simple information and meaning and thus the teaching and assessment of language in our schools is one of the ways in which we produce a reflective and hopefully more responsible citizenry, and if this is not done effectively

*“schools, often seen as socializing agencies that help society produce intelligent responsible, committed and skilled citizens – turn out to be strange and disturbing institutions that not only teach subjects but also produce unreflective human subjects, who in their day-to-day activities, play out the ideologies of the dominant culture.”* (McLaren, p164)

Issues of power are often obscured in investigations into language learning and education practice and the people who are central to the teaching and learning process i.e. the teachers, can become the ones who wittingly or unwittingly perpetuate the unequal power relations within society. Teachers can do this through hegemonic practices of which they are unaware, and they themselves sometimes fall prey to,

*“Hegemony refers to the moral and intellectual leadership of a dominant class over a subordinate class achieved not through coercion or the wilful construction of rules and regulations (as in a dictatorship or fascist regime) but rather through the general winning of consent of the subordinate class to the authority of the dominant class.”* (McLaren, p174)

Without getting the learners to appreciate that they live in a world where access to facilities and privilege is unequal and that this imbalance is due to the control of power within society, is to create a naïve view of the world for the learner. I believe that it is a teacher’s responsibility to make their learners aware of the subordinate roles in society, roles to which these learners are often assigned, when they do not perceive and understand how their ignorance of the power of language and discourses in society influence them negatively. *“The purpose of dialectical educational theory, then is to provide students with a model that permits them to examine the underlying political, social and economic foundations of the larger society.”* (McLaren, p169)

## **Findings**

In response to the first research question, **“Does the assessment examined show evidence of Critical Language Testing?”** the assessments produced by the participants in this study did show evidence of CLT in their composition. The levels of CLT type questions was low, 0% – 16% but these questions interrogated the domains of Class, Ethnicity and Human rights as well as Social Justice and Economic power thus these assessments can be said to reflect the principles of Critical Language Testing in their composition. However these assessments could be viewed as being partially compromised as many questions in the assessments were taken from previous assessments. It is appreciated that it is possible for the assessors to perceive elements of CLT in other assessments and chose to use them in their own assessments. The use of previous assessments instead of producing new and unique ones was a concern which was part of the motivation of this study. Does the use of previous assessments by teachers suggest an uncritical approach to language assessment? The analysis of the data seems to suggest that the answer to this question is that it does sometimes seem a valid assumption. This finding is supported by the data gained from the interviews which supports the idea that some of the participants produce assessments in a manner which speaks more to the form and the look of assessments being similar to what they see in other assessments which are highly regarded, but the assessment does not necessarily contain element of critical thinking which perform a specific function. It seems likely that some of the assessments produced, serve more the function of providing evidence that the learner can progress to the next grade rather than attempting to get the learners to engage in a cognitive way with a text i.e. *“assessment of learning”* rather than *“assessment for learning”* (Offerdahl & Tomanek, 2011)

The interviews with the participants was aimed more at answering the second research question, that of **Why (or conversely why not) has the assessor included elements of critical thought in the assessment?** The findings here are multi-fold as this question worked on the premise that the assessors were necessarily critical thinkers themselves in order to produce this type of assessment. It is recognised that the idea of Critical thought is difficult to prove as occurring, but for the purposes of this study, answers which

showed evidence of deeper reflective thought and sensitivity to ideas beyond the superficial were considered to be evidence of possible Critical thought occurring. The interviews appeared to show that all the participants were capable of critical thought but they were not all sensitive to the various domains in society which affected power relations. In my opinion, one of the factors which needs to be recognised is the issue of choice, whether or not teachers choose to be critical thinkers in their teaching, *“Some teachers may simply be unwilling to function as critical educators. Critical pedagogy does not guarantee that resistance will not take place.”*(McLaren, p190)

The participants showed differing levels of reflexivity and they incorporated very many paradigms in their thinking around assessment and these often included early behaviourist theories on learning as this seemed to make the most sense to some of them, often ignoring newer thinking on teaching, *“In contrast to past, mechanistic theories of knowledge acquisition, we now understand that learning is an active process of mental construction and sense making.”* (Shepard, 2000) The interviews also seemed to show that the participants are capable of different levels of critical thought but this did not necessarily imply that they all used these paradigms when assessing language in the classroom. It appeared, both in the quantitative data and in the qualitative data, that CLT type questions were included because it looked like a suitable type of question to include in the assessment but the assessor did not often appreciate why this was so. Some participants actively avoided questions which they considered controversial, thus disregarding particular aspects of social discourse which are rich in issues of power relations and in this way they also avoided entering into dialogue with their learners and engaging in the philosophical idea of “Praxis” the idea of more than merely doing but consciously engaging with the world in a cognitive sense as well as a physical sense, or as Freire phrased it, *“praxis is to transform the world, to humanise it”* (Freire, 1970). Thus the participants are capable of critical thought but for some the inclusion of it in their assessment appears to be often merely for the look of it and not as a conscious decision to teach in a critical way.

From the data it emerged that the assessments produced by the teachers were influenced by their intentions for the assessment. This partially answered the third research question, that of “**How have the assessors’ stated intentions, influenced the production of the assessment?**” by recognising that teacher’ intentions, both conscious and unconscious, have an impact on the assessments which they produce. However the data appeared to refute the premise that teachers capable of critical thought would necessarily assess in a critical manner. The intention for assessing amongst the participants was varied, for some it seemed to be so that they were seen to be assessing, or to fulfil what they perceived as requirements in order for the learners to progress within the schooling system. This idea of “*assessment as learning*” (Offerdahl & Tomanek, p782) has been termed ‘instrumentalism’ and this does appear to be a feature of how some assessment is conducted in the school under study. For some participants the intention was to determine how much the learner could remember or interpret of the text and the assessment which they produced reflected this limited educational goal. This is not true for all the participants all of the time, some of the teachers show a sense of ethical responsibility and a level of reflexivity which shows a sensitivity for and an understanding of how language testing can and in my view must be practised in an ethical and professional manner. These participants want the learners to engage with critical enquiry around the text and to challenge what is taken for granted. The assessments which these participants produced do not necessarily accord fully with this goal but their marking of assessments appears to be accepting of learners who do this. It must be acknowledged that all the participants of this study would agree with this view that in assessments the pupils’ responses must be interrogated for any relevant response to the question, however it is not my opinion that all of the participants behave in this manner when setting and marking assessments.

Many of the aspects of this study do not provide definitive answers to these questions; rather they raise more questions about why teachers act in this manner. All of which is rich ground for further study in this area. I do not doubt that teachers can be reflexive and critical individuals in their teaching and assessment; however in the context of this study they only exhibit this in a limited way. This study sought to understand the relationship

between the teachers and their learners, between the test takers and the test makers, or as Peter McLaren asks, “*What is the relationship between what we do in the classroom and our effort to build a better society?*” (McLaren, 1989) In my opinion, replication of this study in other contexts has some merit. Are other teachers in other classroom as capable of reflexive and critical thought as the teachers in this study and are others teachers also more interested in the ‘mechanics’ of language teaching, choosing to largely gloss over looking at aspects of power and control in language teaching?

### **Conclusion**

This study was motivated by a perception of what was happening in the classroom, that assessments had possibly become ‘instrumental’ in some language classes and this was affecting the quality of the assessments produced. Possibly this was occurring because of the emphasis placed on the matriculation examination at the end of the FET phase or possibly teachers could not or would not produce quality assessments. In any event if this situation was occurring, it would be negatively affecting the teaching and learning of English in the school. With the emphasis placed on English in South Africa and internationally it seemed fitting that the purpose of this study was to gain some understanding of how English was being assessed in this school, recognising that this study is not generalisable to other contexts but that it was relevant to this particular context and would allow for a better understanding of our own particular situation. Using the framework of CLT it was determined that this idea of quality assessments would encompass the teachers and learners developing a critical attitude towards texts such that they recognised that texts were constructed and thus had some ideological foundation. Also that the meaning of texts is found within themselves as members of this society and thus that they should be ‘conscientized’ to interpret texts in a way that gives them power in society and hopefully to produce reflexive individuals who have a goal to change their personal situation and also their society to a more equal and just one. These rather high ideal were a consideration in this study but the humbler ambitions were to see what the teachers thought and how this affect their production of assessments.

The teachers thought differently from each other. They too would agree with the higher ideals to varying degrees, but the day to day concerns of big classes and high workloads seemed to make idealism secondary. Their main concerns seemed to be to get assessment done in a manner which appeared suitable so that the learners could progress to the next grade or get a Matriculation certificate in English. This concern has an impact on how they teach and assess, and this in my opinion is, in a negative way. For some the intention could be summed up as the need for the learners to read and understand, with the additional requirement of appreciating how the things which they have read and understood function within society. This requirement however appeared to be a secondary consideration and this then affected the assessment which they produced and how they marked those assessments.

Further thought on the motivations of this study would then beg the question of whether or not the ideals of a reflexive populace which is able, *“to read and to write, to enter into equality of dialogue and so to name their world in order to transform it and thus to be makers of their own history”* (Freire, 1970) are achievable in our classrooms. That these ideal are necessary for an educated and responsible populace is a view that I maintain and as a result of this it would not be acceptable to me to believe that some of these ideals are unachievable in the classroom. However this is an ongoing discussion which occurs in the school which forms the case study for the basis of this research, as ideals have to be balanced with mundane everyday concerns of completing a syllabus in overcrowded classrooms with the very high marking load of language learning areas. My response to these very common teacher complaints is that they do not prevent us from adopting a more critical mindset in our personal and our teaching lives, in this way we will not disadvantage ourselves or our learners. *“Teachers need to encourage students to be self-reflexive about these questions and to provide students with a conceptual framework to begin to answer them.”* (McLaren, p189)



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## **Appendix B**

### **Letter of Request to Principal**

To \_\_\_\_\_

Dear Madam

This letter is a request to you, to allow me to conduct research in your school. The research which I hope to conduct will take the form of interviews with four teachers on your staff. The data from these interviews will be analysed as part of a thesis which I am writing in order for me to fulfill part of the requirements for my Degree of Master of Education.

My study looks at how Critical Language Testing plays a part in language assessment at your school. In addition to fulfilling my academic requirements, this study is also an attempt to examine language assessment at your school. It will hopefully serve in some small way to enlighten how we assess language. There is thus a hope that this study will be of some benefit to the process of teaching and learning. In this regard I will be very grateful for your permission to conduct my research

My request to you is to have access to my selected participants who are members of your staff. The interviews will take place on school premises after teaching and learning is complete for the day. My activities will in no way impinge on your staff's responsibilities duties in transmitting curriculum to their learners. I will in due course get the individual participants permission and I will always endeavor to treat my participants and to represent your school in an accurate, honest and fair manner. Strict confidentiality will be maintained at all times and my conduct will always be guided by strict ethical considerations. If you have any query about any aspect of this study, which you do not want to share with me, then you can contact my supervisor, Professor Sheik at the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal (Edgewood Campus) ph: 074 584 5221 OR e-mail sheika@ukzn.ac.za

Yours faithfully

R. Mahomet

**Appendix C**

**Consent from Principal**

I \_\_\_\_\_ being the Principal of the selected School, do hereby agree/ not agree to allow Robin Mahomet to conduct research at my school. The purpose and the nature of this study has been explained to me and I am willing to allow Mr. Mahomet access to my staff on school premises.

\

Mr. Mahomet undertakes to liaise directly with the identified staff members who form the participants of his study. He will get their individual permission to conduct his research with them.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signed

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## **Appendix D**

### **Letter of Consent to Participant**

To \_\_\_\_\_

This letter is a request for you to take part in an educational study. This study forms the basis of my research, which I am undertaking in order to fulfill the requirements for my Degree of Master of Education which I am working towards at the University of Kwa-Natal (Edgewood Campus)

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may choose not to participate. You are free to withdraw from this study at anytime with no penalty to you. Your responses will be confidential. If the results of this study were to be written for publication, no identifying information will be used.

My study looks at how Critical Language Testing plays a part in English language assessments. My interaction with you will take the form of semi-structured interview of no more than one hour. This interview will be recorded and transcribed. The transcripts will be available to you to read and you have the right not to answer certain questions or to remove any or all of your responses if you choose. In my analysis of the data, I will strive to maintain confidentiality by not identifying your name or any other personal information which you do not want revealed. If necessary, I may request a follow up interview at your convenience.

I must say that this study in addition to fulfilling my study requirements is also an attempt to examine language assessment at your school. It will hopefully serve in some small way to enlighten how we assess language. There is thus a hope that this study will be of some benefit to the process of teaching and learning. In this regard I will be very grateful for your participation and I will make every effort to conduct my research in an accurate honest and fair manner. If you have any complaint about any aspect of this study, which you do not want to share with me, then you can contact my supervisor, Professor Sheik at the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal (Edgewood Campus) ph: 074 584 5221 OR e-mail sheika@ukzn.ac.za

## **Appendix E**

### **CONSENT**

I hereby agree to participate in this research project on Critical Language Awareness in assessment. I understand that I am participating freely. I also understand that I can stop the interview at any point should I not want to continue and this decision will not affect me negatively. I agree to provide a sample of an assessment which I have produced, to the researcher for analysis.

The purpose of this study has been explained to me and I understand what is expected of my participation. I recognize that this study does not necessarily benefit me personally. I have received the telephone number of a person to contact should I want to speak another person other than the researcher about my participation and responses. I understand that every effort will be made to keep my personal information confidential. I understand that an effort will be made to feedback the results of the completed research to me.

---

Signature of Participant

---

Date

Additional consent to audio recording:

In addition to the above, I hereby agree to the audio recording of this interview for the purposes of data capture. I understand that no personally identifying information or recordings concerning me will be released in any form. I understand that these recordings and transcriptions will be kept securely in a locked environment and will be destroyed or erased once data capture and analysis are complete

---

Signature of Participant

---

Date

## **Appendix F**

### **Interview Schedule Questions**

(These interviews will be recorded and transcribed, but the actual physical note pages could serve as field notes, to aid in remembering the responses when analyzing)

1. How old are you?

2. How many years of experience do you have in teaching in the FET phase?  
(include any other relevant teaching experience)

3. What educational qualifications do you hold?

4. What specific grades do you teach and assess?  
(include any relevant details)

5. Describe the classes which you teach.  
(Socially, educationally, composition etc.)

6. Explain why you assess learners i.e. what are your goals in creating and implementing assessment?

7. Briefly explain how you go about planning an English Language assessment.



<p>8. In your opinion, what are the things that you are looking for when you mark assessments?</p>
<p>9. If you could, how would you change the assessment of English in a) your school b) this community c) South Africa</p>
<p>10. Which areas of knowledge do you consider important (if at all) when assessing learners' knowledge of your subject?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gender issues</li> <li>• Class issues</li> <li>• Ethnicity and/or culture</li> <li>• Economic issues such as capitalism/ socialism etc</li> <li>• Human rights and social justice</li> <li>• Other (Specify.....)</li> </ul>
<p>11. Can you explain why you choose those specific areas in the previous question as being important when assessing?</p>
<p>12. How would you mark a question which does not accord with the memo (i.e. is not the expected answer) but which you believe may be answering the question in a different but still possibly valid way?</p>
<p>13. How would you mark a question which conflicts with a personal belief system e.g. your political, religious, social beliefs etc (Please explain fully, use an example if necessary)</p>

14. Would you set or use a question which conflicts with a personal belief? e.g. a political, religious, cultural, social belief etc. Could you elaborate on your answer?

15. Do you give feedback to an assessment and if so, what form does it take?

16. What do you think it means to be Critical? And are you Critical?

17. Do you use questions from previous exams? If so, what exams and what percentage of questions would you say are from previous exams?

18. Why do you use previous exam questions?

19. Are you working with CAPS this year? If so, how would you describe your experience with this new style of assessment?

20. Do you consider yourself to be an intellectual and if so could you please explain what that means to you?

**Appendix G**

<b><u>Document Analysis Worksheet</u></b>	
<u>General Information</u>	
1.	Type of Language Assessment
2.	When was the Assessment produced
3.	Name of the author
4.	Grade for which the assessment was produced
5.	How does this assessment fit into the assessment program for that grade?
<u>Document information</u>	
1.	Which questions do you think show evidence of CLA?
2.	Do these CLA type questions touch on the domains of race, gender, economics, cultural or political power or some other related domain (specify.....)
3.	What is the frequency of these CLA type questions in this document?
4.	What is the mark allocation to these CLA type questions in this document?
5.	What is the percentage of marks given to these CLA type questions in the document as a whole?
6.	Is there evidence of questions coming from previous exam papers?
7.	Is there a theme to the exam paper and its questions?

