

The interpretation of ABET placement tests in the recognition of prior learning.

Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Arts

of Rhodes University

by

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January 2000

(i)

Declaration

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this thesis is my own original work, and has not previously been submitted, in whole or in part, to any university for a degree.

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Signature

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Date

(ii)

Acknowledgements

I thank my supervisor, Sarah Murray, for the comments and criticisms that helped to make this research more objective, and for introducing perspectives that were challenging and proved to be exciting and rewarding.

I thank my husband, Bill, for his encouragement to continue with my education.

I thank my daughters, Jean and Monica, for their support of each other and of their siblings, Jessica and Phillip, which in turn supported me and enabled me to complete this project. I thank my daughter, Clare, for her faith in me, and my son, Andrew, for his faith which he demonstrates by following my example.

Abstract

This thesis analyses the way in which placement testing is being interpreted in Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET). The thesis examines whether the placement tests used in the case study were valid in terms of whether their contents were relevant and authentic with regard to what English second language speakers could reasonably be expected to know. Adult learners have differing English second language knowledge depending on the different contexts in which they have learned their second language. This thesis investigates the implications of the different contexts and different language needs of adult learners for the testing of English as a second language for placement purposes in ABET programmes.

The thesis examined two placement tests to determine how the recognition of prior second language learning was being interpreted and how the interpretation affected the validity of the tests. Learners' perceptions of the assessment process and test content were elicited in order to determine whether a policy of transparency had been followed in the implementation of the assessment. It was also established what the goals of the organisation were in implementing an ABET programme. This research suggests that placement testing should be viewed holistically; in other words, the goals of the organisation and the level of transparency affect the validity of the placement test.

The conclusions were that the placement tests were inauthentic since their contents excluded certain vital aspects of real life performance, namely, that related to the work context. The research revealed that if the placement testing process and the ABET programme are integrated into the culture of the organisation and if employees are remunerated when they have passed the different levels in the programme, the programme is likely to achieve a fair measure of success. Recommendations are that literacy should be viewed as based on a variety of contexts and uses and that therefore tests should be tailored to suit each particular organisation and should contain work-related content. Furthermore, multiple methods of assessment should be considered.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

This research examines the way in which placement tests are interpreted in two Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) programmes and how this affects their validity. The research is placed with the aid of the diagram (Figure 1) on the following page. It looks specifically at the recognition of prior learning (RPL) in English second language (ESL) at the level of Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) literacy programmes for adults with particular focus on the test used to place learners at the correct levels in ABET.

1.1 Background to the research

RPL is an area needing substantial further research and development (National Training Board, 1994), since illiteracy remains deeply intertwined with the social, political and economic problems of South Africa. ABET subsumes adult literacy, yet to date no national policy and legislation for ABET exists. The ABET policy of 1997 is regarded as the policy of the Department of Education and not the ABET sector (Baatjes, John & Aitchison, 1999: 7). A new process was started in January 1999 to develop national policy through the green paper route, but no green paper has yet been made available for public scrutiny (*ibid.*). Cooper (1998: 9) believes that very few experiences of education and training initiatives in the workplace have been rigorously documented and that there is a need for extensive primary research in this area. Research of this nature is necessary since Kader Asmal (cited in Baatjes et al, 1999: 28), the Minister of Education, wishes to encourage all employers to run or support ABET programmes for their employees. However, there is an inadequacy of available information and of feedback structures in order to assist management to do so (French, 1997: 25). A further reason for research of this nature is the widespread demand from donors, managements, unions and learners to enter the Independent

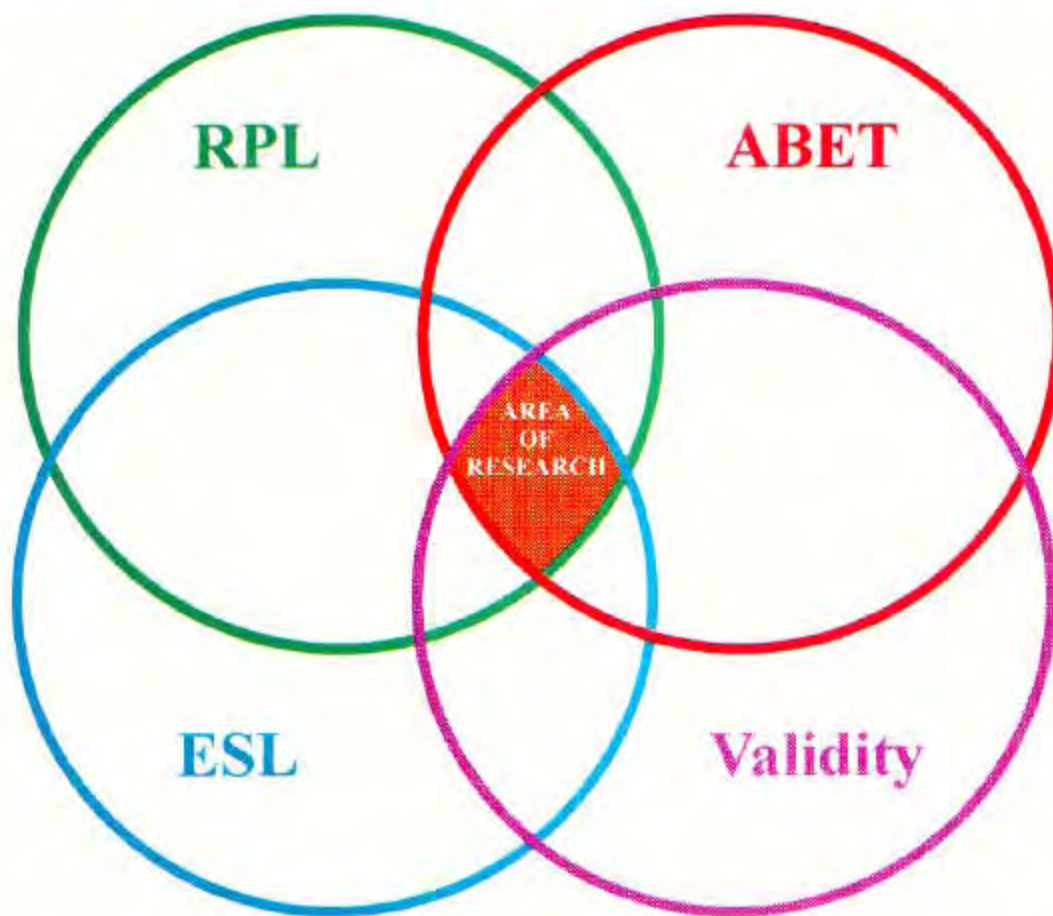


FIGURE 1: DIAGRAM SHOWING AREA OF RESEARCH

Examination Board=s (IEB) ABET examinations (French, 1997: 30). The IEB is the non-governmental organisation that followed in the wake of the Joint Matriculation Board. Its functions are to conduct examinations across the eight levels of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF)(see 2.4.1.1, p.10), to develop and authenticate curricula and to issue certificates in order to meet present and future needs of the IEB constituencies (EPU Project Team, 1989: 68). The IEB adult examinations for ABET were conceived in the spirit of APL (accreditation of prior learning) which was intended to recognise learning regardless of the origins or sources of that learning (French & King, 1998: 1). In investigating how ABET placement tests are being interpreted in RPL this research attempts to shed some light on the above issues.

1.2 Aims of the research

- * to establish the organisation=s goals in implementing an ABET programme
- * to establish whether the placement test accurately assesses prior knowledge of English
- * to establish whether a policy of transparency is followed when administering placement tests and implementing an ABET programme
- * to gain an understanding of and critical insight into workers= perceptions of the assessment process and test content
- * to determine how learners in ABET programmes perceive knowledge and literacy

1.3 Structure of the thesis

This thesis examines the way in which the interpretation of prior second language learning affects the validity of an ABET placement test. In Chapter 2 the literature is reviewed in order to establish a framework against which to examine the data.

Chapter 3 explains why a qualitative research paradigm was chosen to investigate the validity of the assessment of prior second language learning. Thereafter the procedure used to collect data is discussed.

Chapter 4 presents the findings of the interviews and questionnaires and the evaluations of the placement tests.

In Chapter 5 the findings are analysed.

Chapter 6 discusses the limitations of the research and outlines the conclusions. It also makes recommendations for the assessment of prior second language learning and the implementation of ABET programmes.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This chapter explains the background to RPL. It briefly discusses RPL (or PLA; see Table 1 on p.5) in the USA, before addressing it in South Africa. The interests of certain stakeholders in the RPL process will be shown and the concepts of language, knowledge and literacy will be explored and linked together. Lastly, the issue of validity with regard to RPL will be discussed.

2.2 Background of RPL

People, especially mature adults, learn many things non-formally, that is, outside formal education and training structures. Non-formal learning occurs, for example, during on-the-job training and training programmes run by employers; or education through a union or a professional association that is not a part of the formal education establishment (Fehnel, 1994: 25). Learning is also acquired informally while involved in everyday living experiences, whether at work, at leisure or during community exercises (Dale and Iles, 1992 cited in Hodgkinson, 1998: 24). In seeking to provide access to employment and further learning opportunities to adults internationally, the types of non-formal and informal learning mentioned above are being assessed and accredited. The terminology used to refer to the process varies between countries (as shown in Table 1 on page 5), but essentially RPL recognises what a person has learned in the past by what s/he can do now, and it is quite immaterial how s/he got there (Spady, 1999). Contrary to Spady, this research argues that when it comes to the assessment of prior language learning it is not immaterial, but important to establish how the individual got there (Brier, 1998: 121) in order to ensure that the language which is being assessed is relevant to that individual's past experience. A brief look at PLA in the USA will help to elucidate the concept of RPL.

2.3 The USA context

In the USA the concept of prior learning was introduced in the early 1970s in collaboration with employers and unions. It was recognized that tests were often an inappropriate way to assess prior learning because tests can fall short of the real range of options that exist in the world and adults who have been away from the test culture may have forgotten the skills needed to survive in that culture, may never have learned them, or may be reluctant to demonstrate learning in this manner (Fehnel, 1994:26). The movement therefore transformed the processes by which learning outcomes (knowledge and skills) are judged by fostering alternative methods of assessing prior learning. Because these methods focused on quality assurance (credibility, flexibility and cost-

Table 1: Terminology related to the assessment and accreditation of informal learning

Country	Concept/terminology	Abbreviation
USA and Canada	Prior learning assessment	PLA
United Kingdom	Accreditation of prior learning Accreditation of prior experiential learning Accreditation of prior achievement Assessment of prior learning Assessment of prior achievement Assessment of prior learning and achievement	APL APEL APA APL APA APL/A
Australia	Recognition of prior learning	RPL
South Africa	Recognition of prior learning Recognition of current competence	RPL ROCC

(Crossland, 1991; National Training Board (NTB), 1994; Phillips, 1997; Simosko, 1991; Walkin, 1991; cited in Korpel, 1998: 8)

effectiveness) they gained acceptance by the educational accrediting organisations in the United States (Fehnel, 1994: 26). They were also open to experimentation, within certain guidelines. Fehnel (1994: 26) is convinced that ~~A~~had the movement been fostered as a top-down initiative... [by the] state, industry or accrediting structures, it would never have gained success.@

RPL in other countries has served to affirm the individual and provide a new sense of self-confidence and empowerment. It is hoped that it will have the same positive effect in South Africa.

2.4 RPL in South Africa

RPL has been informally incorporated into the training and certification practices for artisans for many years, where industries such as the Building Industries Federation of South Africa (BIFSA) have put human resources development and skills development frameworks into place for the recognition of prior learning (NTB, 1994; Muller, 1997:10). However, before the formal introduction of the concept of prior learning in South Africa, individuals wishing to gain an educational qualification from the formal system received no recognition for the informal and/or non-formal learning they had acquired, but had to start all over again if they wished to obtain an educational qualification or credential (Fehnel, 1994:25). Although some companies have informally recognised employees=skills and experience by relying on their uncertified knowledge, this knowledge has not been recognized in the labour market, nor in the education xmarket=(NTB, 1994).

In South Africa the driving force behind RPL has been the move away from an Apartheid system which left millions of South Africans undereducated, unskilled and often unemployed (Ralphs,

1998:10). Table 2 (below) shows statistics from the national profile which elucidate the above statement.

Table 2: Statistics from the National Profile, June 1999

Total Population	43 054 000
Proportion African	76,7%
Proportion white	10,9%
Proportion coloured	8,9%
Proportion Indian/Asian	2,6%
Total Unemployed females	99 545
Total Unemployed males	217 098
Proportion under 15 years of age	33,9%
Proportion adults with no schooling	18,4%
Proportion adults with Grade 12 - 15	6%
Proportion adults with higher education	5,8%
Proportion earning R500 a month or less	25,0%
Proportion earning R4 500 a month or more	10,3%

Fast Facts January 1999, South African Institute of Race Relations
Bulletin of Statistics 3 (1 & 2), Department of Labour

To be sure, included in the thousands of disadvantaged South Africans are those teachers in rural areas with years of teaching experience who previously could not have their experience recognised in order to upgrade their qualifications. It also includes thousands of artisans who in many cases had to train their white supervisors, so demonstrating their competence to hold the very positions they were debarred from because of apartheid laws (Fehnel, 1994: 28). The African National Congress (ANC) wishes to redress the inequities of the past through an

assessment system which aims to recognise all learning undertaken formally, non-formally and informally, as well as learning from experience (NTB, 1994; Breier, 1998: 119-20).

The NTB views RPL as ~~A~~an encouragement to people of all ages to return to education and training~~@~~ and as benefiting learners because it ~~A~~socialises people into the prevailing discourses of education and training which can also be empowering; increases self-esteem, self-confidence and motivation; and provides a foundation for further development~~@~~ (1994: 27). The NTB understands assessment as ~~A~~a process by which a judgement is made about the quality and level of learning attained by a student~~@~~ (1994: 25). Accreditation, by contrast, refers to the granting of formal recognition or approval (ibid.). Recognition can therefore be seen as a useful generic term to encompass assessment and potential accreditation (ibid.).

Although the NTB (1994) sees RPL firstly, as assisting, mainly adults, to gain the recognition they are entitled to on the basis of their achievements to date, and secondly, to inform what they need to learn, RPL is to a large extent being interpreted only for the purpose of giving people **access to education** and/or to further studies. ABET programmes give people access, but no real recognition of prior learning in all its complexity is taking place until after ABET. This also has to do with the narrow, functional way in which literacy is viewed, that is, as ~~A~~the ability to participate in the reading and writing demands of everyday living in modern society~~@~~ (Langer, 1987: 1), rather than seeing it from a sociocognitive, holistic perspective as being based on a variety of contexts and uses (Langer, 1987: 2).

In using the umbrella term RPL, one tends to lose sight of specifically what it is that learners are being tested for that they may have learned prior to the point at which they are being tested. Is

the prior knowledge being assessed in terms of the curriculum, or in relation to needs in the workplace? In literacy programmes, it is interlanguage which is being tested; that is, the knowledge of the second language (L2) in the speakers's mind (Cook, 1999: 190). It is also communicative competence (language performance, or ability) that is tested. Carroll (1982: 5-6) sees the relationship between the testing system and the language programme as interactive; as both being derived from an analysis of the learner's communicative needs. He therefore advocates assessing communicative competence in terms of the learner's needs (1982: 5). Another way of understanding what these needs might be, is to ascertain what the communicative aims (1982: 6) of the learner are. Therefore, if one uses this criterion, the placement test would be valid if learners' needs were first ascertained/evaluated and they were then assessed to find out whether according to their own needs criteria they were communicatively competent. However, it would be difficult to fashion a test to suit every individual's needs. If learners were shown not to be communicatively competent, it could then be established what the outcomes of the programme should be to meet their needs/satisfy their aims. This would be in addition to the common needs which a curriculum has to encompass.

Hull (1993: 21) believes it is important to discover the incentives and disincentives of workers for acquiring and exercising literate skills. Besides the very real justification that learners are individuals with different communicative aims, there is further justification for ascertaining a learner's communicative needs according to the communicative aims of the individual learner: this is because communicative competence is context dependent. In other words, how an individual uses language will depend on the context in which s/he finds him/herself as well as on the context in which s/he learned the language (Bernstein 1994 in Breier, 1998: 121; Carroll, 1982: 7; Fairclough, 1989: 21; Langer, 1987: 5; Street, 1984, 1995). In saying this, I am aware of Street's

(1995: 134) caution against viewing literacy as a one culture one literacy= issue. What I am referring to is the way in which culture affects the process of learning (Vygotsky, 1962, 1978; Langer, 1987; Fairclough, 1989; Bruner, 1966)(see also 2.6.2). Dochy (cited in Birenbaum & Dochy, 1996: 227) argues that new learning is difficult when prior formal, as well as informal knowledge is not used as a springboard for future learning (see also Vygotsky, 1962, 1978; Glaser & De Corte cited in Dochy, 1992).

A criterion to gauge whether learners have mastered the language could thus be whether they are effective in the settings in which they find themselves (Carroll, 1982: 7). The context will determine the effectiveness. In one context very little language will need to be mastered in order to be effective and in another a greater complexity of language will be required. Communicative ability is, after all, only a part of any context. How then to determine the communicative ability of an individual who is very effective in one context, yet not in another? Given my previous argument it would depend on the learner's needs as to which contexts have relevance.

In summary, the concept of RPL has been explained and an attempt has been made to elucidate its interpretation in South Africa. It has been shown that literacy is being interpreted narrowly with regard to prior second language learning given that learners are individuals with different communicative needs. Different stakeholders in the RPL process influence its interpretation. These influences will now be discussed.

2.4.1 Different stakeholders

2.4.1.1 The NTB

At this point it is necessary to understand how and why the NQF was conceived. In 1993

negotiations were begun between the NTB, a tri-partite statutory body established in terms of the Manpower Training Act (1981/1991), and four national stakeholder groupings - employers, trade unions, education and training providers and representatives from the Department of National Education and the Department of Manpower (as the Department of Labour Affairs was then known). The process of negotiation resulted in the National Training Strategy Initiative (NTSI). The NTSI proposed the development and establishment of a South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) and a National Qualifications Framework (NQF).

The NQF is based on the premise that all **necessary learning** (my emphasis) can be organised into units of learning which will have two mutually dependent elements: outcome statements and their associated assessment criteria (NTB, 1994: 16).

These two are taken to embody a national standard, and standardized examinations Aattempt to keep content, format, scoring, standards and conditions of administration as comparable as possible from one test candidate to another@ (NTB, 1994: 36).

The NQF is seen as the Astrategic and procedural foundation to accomplish major changes and improvements in educational training in SA@ (Muller, 1997: 10) and as such is viewed as an enabling factor for RPL. However, at this stage the NQF is a Anotion@ (ibid.), an idea which will require planning and time. Furthermore, its pace and scope of implementation will depend on cost, as extensive development of resources and materials/courses needs to take place (ibid.).

The NTB supports a number of options to assess prior learning. Learners can >challenge= a course by asserting that they have already learned its content; in which case they must demonstrate their proficiency through special tests, oral exams/interviews, assignments, projects, or essays with a view to earning credit for or towards a specific course without enrolling on it (NTB, 1994: 34

cited in Muller, 1997: 5). Other options to assess prior learning are standardized examinations, portfolio development; and programme and course evaluation or credit transfer. However, the NTB has not yet arrived at a practical way to implement the assessment of prior learning because it is being constrained by the fact that all prior learning will have to be matched against the competency standards and outcomes statements of the NQF. The NQF wishes to ensure commonality of standards and assessment (NTB, 1994: 93) while the NTB (1994: 92) hopes that RPL national policy guidelines, statements and standards will be developed to serve as a guide to provider institutions and industries to develop their own statements and policies for practically implementing RPL, but it does not take into account the fact that these guidelines, statements and standards are vague and idealistic (French & King, 1998) and therefore impractical. Evaluation practices and procedures do not yet exist and experienced staff and customized services are not yet available to deal with this form of learning (Muller, 1997: 5), so misinterpretation is likely. Organisations and institutions wishing to implement RPL could interpret policy documents in any way which suits them, from a desire to seem politically correct to a desire to maintain standards at all costs. This point will be expanded on with specific reference to ABET programmes.

2.4.1.2 COSATU's role

The introduction of RPL in South Africa was largely the result of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU's) efforts in the 1980s to negotiate with business the provision of adult basic education (ABE) (Ralphs & Buchler, 1998: 11). COSATU saw RPL as being reconstructive and developmental. To this end it became necessary for the NTB, in close association with COSATU (Fehnel, 1994), to develop a framework, with all the accompanying procedures and mechanisms, to recognise experiential learning (NTB, 1994).

COSATU hoped that RPL would recognise the knowledge that workers had acquired through work experience and in organised union activity which would then lead to improvement in workers' wages, grading and working conditions (Lugg et al, 1997 cited in Ralphs & Buchler, 1998: 12). ABET programmes are seen as a means to achieve these goals, but not, as mentioned earlier, without formal recognition by the NQF. Formally recognising prior experiential work-based learning against standards defined in the NQF may well be incompatible.

According to Fehnel (1994) the NQF outlines a philosophy of prior learning assessment that has been contextualised to South African needs, and represents what the workers want and need. This research suggests that this might not be the case: perhaps the NQF is not adequately translating the means by which COSATU wishes to ensure improved wages, grading and working conditions for the workers. Furthermore, employers may not realise the importance 'career pathing': of linking the achievement of qualifications to improved wages to provide an incentive for workers to embark on RPL processes (Luckett, 1999: 68). Implementing the RPL process has certainly proved to be a lot more complex than anticipated as the following examples will illustrate.

2.4.1.3 Two research projects

In 1997 the Cosatu Participatory Research Unit (PRU) researched two projects which demonstrate that RPL is part of a contested terrain (Cooper 1998; Ralphs & Buchler, 1998). The National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) and the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) participated in a retrospective study of two RPL processes. In the case of NUMSA, the automotive industry assessed workers against Australian unit standards that bore little resemblance to South African units (Ralphs & Buchler, 1998: 12). In South Africa unit

standards are the building blocks of the NQF and are defined as nationally agreed and internationally comparable statements of specific outcomes and their associated performance/assessment criteria (Breier, 1998: 126). Breier is of the opinion that they are one of the most contentious aspects of the NQF because of the way in which they break down knowledge and skills into discrete units. A unit standard is the written framework into which accredited education and training material must fit (Alder, 1998: 73). It therefore generates a pattern of uniformity and the concept of uniformity of assessment is problematic for RPL if one advocates using context-specific tests based on workplace learning.

Added to the unit standard discrepancy, in the automotive industry management wanted a skills audit, whereas NUMSA saw the RPL process as a move towards improved wages and job grading for workers (Ralphs & Buchler, 1998: 12). In the case of NUM and the mining industry, the RPL process advantaged those workers who had more advanced levels of numeracy and literacy. Management saw RPL as facilitating work reorganisation and career pathing, while NUM saw it as increasing access to further training (ibid.). These opposing views could not be reconciled and workers felt that the process had been deliberately designed as an exclusionary mechanism (ibid.).

2.4.1.4 RPL and ABET

RPL and placement in ABET programmes are related, in that RPL should take place when placement tests are administered, but it should be noted that RPL and placement are not the same. Placement tests used in ABET programmes are concerned with assessing the fundamental subjects: reading, writing and arithmetic (COSATU, 1996). The level of reading, reading comprehension and writing in the mother-tongue and in English (as a second language) is assessed

in order to place learners at the correct levels in ABET programmes, so that they can acquire enough language and achieve the intended outcomes for those levels. The idea behind the fundamental subjects in ABET is to ensure that learners have access to broad educational opportunities. In this regard, NUM (ibid.) notes that adult learning is still based on patterns of childhood learning and believes that on the mines, for example, this is to make it easier for the majority to accommodate to the needs of the dominant minority. Table 3 (below) illustrates how the ABET levels correspond to the formal schooling system.

Table 3: Correspondence between ABET levels and school system

<u>ABET</u>	<u>School system</u>
Level 1	Std 1 / Grd 3 + Foundation
Level 2	Std 3 / Grd 5
Level 3	Std 5 / Grd 7
Level 4	Std 7 / Grd 9

Government Gazette, 393 (18787) 28 March 1998

In the field of ABET, the IEB is not yet dealing with a composite certificate or qualification for education or training (French & King, 1998: 6). In other words, the IEB is not involved in RPL in the sense of giving some sort of formal credit on the basis of learning or experience which **exempts** a person from doing a required course within a qualification (ibid.).

Although the NTB (1994: 3-4) states the necessity for a framework for the recognition of experiential/prior learning to open up further learning experiences outside of the clearly defined and demarcated systems of education and training, as things stand at present, prior experience

cannot be recognised in order to certify individuals unless they continue their learning and acquire a formal qualification recognized by the, as yet, hypothetical NQF.

The next section discusses the National Interim Guidelines for ABET and gives NUM's comments on them. The NIG was the first national policy developed for adult education in 1995 and although it was replaced by a new policy in 1997, the new policy is not regarded as national policy but Department of Education policy (Baatjes et al, 1999: 7). To date no replacement policy has yet been made available although a new policy development process was begun in January 1999 (ibid).

2.5 The National Interim Guidelines for ABET

The NIG for ABET were developed out of previous policy development processes which were grounded in the reconstruction and development of education and training systems. They drew on the experience and expertise of many role players and therefore reflect the current understanding of ABET held by many people (COSATU, 1996). NUM evaluated the NIG and submitted its comments to COSATU (1996).

2.5.1 NUM's evaluation of the NIG

NUM believes that because the NIG were developed in a very short time-frame there are gaps and inconsistencies in the document. The NIG emphasises an accreditation framework in order to monitor the performance of providers and maintain good quality ABET. In this way it seeks to maintain the standard and credibility of ABET qualifications. However, the NIG do not explain how assessment will be implemented to meet the purposes of assessment. Nor do they address the issue of how assessment will be prevented from having negative effects on teaching and

learning processes; that is, how it can be used as a tool in learner development.

NUM furthermore states that the NIG do not address the principles that should underpin assessment. NUM puts forward those taken from its Adult Learning Policy that include those which follow. NUM believes firstly, that assessment cannot be objective because there is not one ~~truth~~ about how people know and do things. Secondly, assessment must be transparent because it is a political process since it involves making judgements and therefore embodies particular values. It must be transparent about its purposes and the ways in which the information will be used, as well as about the value system that underpins it. The testees must be prepared to perform within those values for purposes of the assessment.

Thirdly, the information collected must be valid; that is, it must be an appropriate and genuine way to judge that particular aspect of the person. It must be relevant and not build in extra skills and knowledge that are unnecessary to the performance. For example, when the mining industry lifted the racial barrier to black workers being trained as blasters, they introduced the Standard 8 barrier. Standard 8 has since been recognised as not being relevant to the job of a blaster. Fourthly, assessment must test what it claims to be testing. If one wanted to test a blaster's skills one would watch how s/he set up charges, etc. This would be more valid than asking the person to read about blasting and then answer questions although one might want the testee to be able to answer questions as to why things are done in a certain way, that is, to show reflective understanding of what s/he is doing. This could be done orally and in any language.

The NIG model defines areas of learning as fundamental (language and mathematics); core/contextual (for example, health and safety, social science); and specialisation, or elective.

Fundamental subjects would ensure that learners had access to broad educational opportunities. Learners should have the chance to learn to read and write, to use numbers sufficiently well to manage the everyday literacy demands expected of adults and to be able to communicate in the language of the management's choice. One perspective of industry is that the above model is framed specifically to fill the gaps of basic reading, writing and numeric skills, left as an aftermath of the previous educational and training system (Alder, 1998: 80) (see also 2.4.1.4, p.14). This implies pre-determined norms for ABET with limited recognition of prior knowledge acquired informally through work experience, and non-formally, for example, through on-the-job training and union worker education; in other words, not recognising prior learning in all its complexity. Adult learning is still based on patterns of childhood learning which will do little to challenge existing social relations in the workplace. For example, on the mines having to acquire ABE Level 3 before attempting the blasting certificate is a major stumbling block to workers. Workers see the literacy demands being made by management as artificially high in relation to the demands of the workplace. In assessment, too, language and literacy demands are perceived as not corresponding closely to what is required on the job. Consequently, these two areas are often seen as irrelevant by workers which negatively affects their desire to learn. The desire for income-generating skills (for example, financial management skills and supervisory skills) goes very deep and none of the fundamental subjects meets this desire.

2.6 Validity

2.6.1 Introduction

Validation of methods of assessment is a huge and complex field and the methods themselves appear to be differently understood depending on the testing specialist. A test is said to be valid

to the extent that it assesses what it is supposed to assess (Henning, 1987: 89). Language testing is concerned with the assessment of language knowledge. This research seeks to isolate those aspects of validity that are applicable in the context of the testing of prior knowledge of a second language.

A distinction can be drawn between empirical and non-empirical validity. Empirical kinds of validity usually involve recourse to mathematical formulae for the computation of validity coefficients (Henning, 1987: 94). Examples of empirical validity are concurrent validity, predictive validity and some understandings of construct validity. Concurrent validity is empirical in the sense that data are collected and formulas are applied to generate an actual numerical validity coefficient (ibid.). Predictive validity requires a correlation coefficient with some measure of success in the field or subject of interest (Henning, 1987: 97). Construct validity involves the gathering of data and the testing of hypotheses. A basic difficulty in establishing construct validity consists in the fact that the construct itself cannot be measured directly (see 2.6.3, p.24), but requires an interpretation or judgement on the part of the assessor. This research will not be applying concurrent and predictive validity (briefly defined above) because it seeks to investigate whether a placement test accurately captures what a person already knows. It does this by applying different types of non-empirical validity.

Non-empirical validity includes face or content validity (see 2.6.5, p.27), and response validity. According to Henning (1987: 89), invalid tests are those that have undesirable content mixed in with the desirable content. Linked to content are relevance, authenticity and context (see 2.6.4, p.25). Response validity, on the other hand, is the extent to which testees respond in the manner expected by the test developers. If instructions are unclear and the test format unfamiliar to

candidates, their responses may not reflect their true ability and the test may then be said to lack response validity (Henning, 1987: 96).

The complexity of the language domain creates special needs when testing, for there is still no full understanding of what is involved in knowing a language (Shohamy, 1996: 143). This research looks at the domain of language knowledge (what one assesses) and the method of testing (how one goes about assessing) language knowledge. Since this research is concerned with the recognition of prior second language learning, it is appropriate at this stage to explore the place of language in the acquisition of knowledge.

2.6.2 Language and learning

Debate about what constitutes knowledge raises two questions: the first is whether language is a fundamental area of learning; something which is necessary in order for further learning in other areas to occur; and the second is what role a second language plays in learning. Certainly the development of learning in a second language takes place in a mind that already contains a first language. Various perspectives on language will be discussed below and an attempt will be made to elucidate the above two questions.

Bakhtin (1981, cited in Sarig, 1996: 167) conceptualizes language as a concrete, living, socio-ideological entity, placing it on the borderline between the self and the other. Bakhtin claims that half of the words we are exposed to belong to others and that we have to appropriate them; mould them to our own meaning and emphasis. Presumably this can be applied to either a first and/or a second language. Sarig (1996: 167) describes Bakhtin's dialogic concept of language as the literacy acts, that learners perform as they encounter other people's spoken and written texts. Sarig's description thus implies action on the part of the learner. The concept of action

being necessary for learning will be expanded on below and this concept will also be linked to a definition of literacy.

Sarig sees the learner as engaged in two dialogues: the first takes place within individuals who must reflect privately and rationally within themselves, and the second, within the *inter-subjective, rhetorical space where text producer and text receiver meet* (ibid.). Or, as Kolb (1984: 133) explains it, a transaction occurs between internal characteristics and external circumstances, between personal knowledge and social knowledge. From this point of view, learning is a social process which, from a Vygotskyian perspective, means that the individual's development is shaped by the cultural system of social knowledge.

This perspective can be contrasted with Piaget's theory that individuals progress through successive, identifiable, cognitive stages in their learning. However this is not to see the two perspectives as being mutually exclusive. Piaget studied children up to the age of adolescence, not mature adults. Research (Brown, 1987; Ellis, 1985; Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991) has shown that there are age-related differences in second language acquisition, but that explanations for these differences are tentative and often contradictory and confusing. Piaget's theory describes how intelligence is shaped by experience: the child explores and copes with the immediate concrete environment and *through action on the world* (Bruner, 1996: 141) learns abstract reasoning and the *power to manipulate symbols* (Kolb, 1984: 12). As did Sarig (see p.21), both Bruner and Kolb appear to view learning as requiring action.

Piaget's developmental theory raises the question of why some individuals do not appear to develop certain critical/reflective/imaginative (in the sense that a certain imaginative ability is

necessary to move between contexts) capacities. For example, French's (1997: 33) report on the IEB's year-end ABET examinations of 1996, shows that candidates experienced difficulty transferring information which required 'decontextualisation'. Freire believes that the process of learning 'implies a subjective stance' (1994: 104).

It is impossible that a person, not being the subject of his or her own curiosity, can truly grasp the object of his or her knowledge (ibid.)

This could be interpreted that in order to learn something, the learner must become curious about the effects of that learning on him/herself, or that one must become a reflective learner. One explanation why some learners may not adopt a subjective stance in relation to learning could be that one needs language to become reflective and critical, and in order to decontextualise. Freire (1973: p.ix, cited in Kolb, 1984: 134) also believes that dialogue stimulates reflection and subsequent action on the world in order to transform it. Reflection implies action on oneself and links up with Freire's belief (see above) that the learning process implies a subjective, reflective stance.

In other words, if one has not come into contact with the language needed in order to adopt a reflective, critical approach, then one will experience difficulty formulating those thoughts needed for that particular discourse because one does not yet have the necessary language to do so. This perspective is corroborated by Bruner's (1996: 132) belief that language 'not only transmits, it creates or constitutes knowledge'. Furthermore, the IEB sees language as one of the critical areas of competence for further learning (French & King, 1998: 4) which supports Bruner's belief. Another supporting perspective is that in learning a language one becomes part of a discourse community; or that in order to become part of a discourse community one must learn the language of that community (Angelil-Carter, 1995; Boughey, 1997). In order to be able to write a

dissertation, for example, one must acquire the particular discourse of the research community of a particular discipline. Without the language one would not understand the concept of research in all its complexity. The argument presented above would suggest that language is indeed a fundamental area of learning and also highly contextual (if it relates to discourse communities).

Vygotsky's (1962: 47-51) notion of verbalisation of thought also suggests that language is a fundamental area of learning. Vygotskyian theory explains that through the internalisation of language, individuals acquire the symbolic tools which enable them to deal with situations in life. Once again action is implied. Freire (1990/1987 cited in Sarig, 1996: 168) speaks of having to *Wrestle* with knowledge, and how else can this be done, but through the symbolic tools of language? Thus it is that the Bakhtinian notion of the dialogue between the *words* of the self and the *words* of the other, characterizing language in general (whether first or second), can be applied to knowledge processing in particular (Sarig, 1996: 167-68). Literacy involves knowledge processing.

2.6.2.1 Knowledge processing, language and literacy

Knowledge comes through experience, but one cannot *Wrestle* with it (process it; be active in acquiring it) unless one formulates it into words, into language. Langer's (1987: 4) expanded notion of literacy encompasses this way of thinking about language. Langer sees literacy as a purposeful activity based on a variety of contexts in which people read, write, talk, and think about ideas in order to extend what they know, to understand and be understood.

If one accepts the above definition, then literacy includes the ability to read and write: it is not only the ability to read and write. However, if testees perceive literacy as the ability to read and

write in a first or second language, and a placement test tests this ability, then from their perspective that test could be seen as authentic.

2.6.3 Construct validity

If one concurs with Shohamy's observation (already noted on p.20), then construct validity is one of the aspects of validity which appears to be applicable to the testing of prior second language knowledge. The term *construct* refers to a psychological construct, a theoretical conceptualisation about an aspect of human behaviour that cannot be judged, or observed directly. Examples are: intelligence, achievement, achievement motivation, anxiety, attitude, dominance, and reading comprehension. These abilities are therefore theoretical: we hypothesize about how they affect, for example, language use (Bachman, 1990: 256). Constructs can also refer to theories such as competencies, knowledge, and skills underlying performance/ability (Shohamy, 1996: 151).

Although Alderson et al (1996: 182-83) state that construct validity is used to conduct a study of the test itself, other researchers (for example, Messick, 1989: 13; Bachman, 1990: 236, 238) believe that it is the inferences derived from test scores that must be valid, that is, the way the information gathered through the test scores is used and/or interpreted must be valid. Content-related and criterion-related evidence contribute to score meaning/interpretation and are therefore recognized as aspects of construct-related evidence, or validity (Messick, 1989: 20). Construct validation is the process of gathering evidence to support the contention that a given test indeed measures the psychological/hypothetical constructs the makers intend it to measure. In other words, in construct validation one is testing the hypothesized relationship between a test score and an ability (Bachman, 1990: 256). Another consideration is that the method of testing be

appropriate to the learning outcome (the construct), or the test will be invalid. However, tests are imperfect measures of constructs because they either leave out something that should be included according to the construct theory (construct under-representation), or include something that should be left out (construct irrelevant), or both (Messick, 1989: 34). An awareness of this fallibility of tests with regard to the measurement of constructs leads one to apply other aspects of validity, namely, relevance and authenticity. Relevance and authenticity are directly related to context.

2.6.4 Relevance, authenticity and context

As stated above, in order to be valid, a test must also be relevant and authentic. Here 'authentic' means the way in which the test is related to real life performance. Furthermore, within the test context something is either relevant or not. If anything irrelevant is included, does it affect the authenticity of the test? In real life language is unpredictable and strongly dependent on the context in which it arises: 'Utterances are always coloured by their context' (Street 1984: 72-3). More often than not, a second language is learned in a different context from that of a first language, for example, in a school environment where skills are learned in isolation, rather than in the home environment like the mother tongue. Therefore, the context in which a second language was learned must be taken into consideration when testing for prior second language knowledge. Furthermore, there are different types of language knowledge and mastering one type is no guarantee for mastering another. Shohamy (1996: 153) believes that the complexity of language knowledge necessitates multiple assessment procedures. Testing learners for prior second language knowledge orally, for example, would show a different type of language proficiency from testing them by means of a written test. Performance testing, which requires candidates to perform in the assessment what it is they are required to know (Carroll, 1982), is another

alternative.

In performance testing, from an outcomes based perspective candidates must perform the outcome. Wesche (1992, cited in Shohamy, 1996: 148) distinguishes between performance testing in the work place and testing in the instructional context. In the work place performance tests are used for job certification and for prediction of post training behaviours, whereas in the instructional context tests are used to increase students' motivation, and for washback and diagnostic feedback. Performance tests are called for in the context where learners have shared second language needs which can be identified, described, and translated into test tasks and overall test design. A task analysis is conducted to provide information on the specific context and tasks that learners will need to perform, the specific conditions under which the task will be performed, how well the learners can perform the task and the criteria against which the performance can be judged. ABET placement tests, on the other hand, are diagnostic: they are assumed to reveal the strengths and weaknesses of the learners in order to provide a basis for guidance for further learning processes, not for job certification. Shohamy (1996: 150) believes that since performance testing consists of the interaction of linguistic skills and a specific domain it is no longer a pure language test, but rather depends heavily on the knowledge of the domain in which the language is exercised. However, this research argues that all language testing depends on knowledge of the domain in which the language is exercised.

Another way of understanding relevance within a context is to see knowledge as being specific to a certain domain (Glaser, 1984 cited in Dochy, 1996: 229). Both domain-specific and domain transcending knowledge exist in the knowledge base and although Bruner (1996: 149) disparagingly refers to domain specific theories as 'fulfilling the daily needs of technical societies',

both forms of knowledge are essential in human learning and development (Dochy, 1996: 229). Furthermore, there is evidence that concrete and practical situations seem to be better learning environments than highly abstract ones. Dochy (1996: 228) distinguishes between content and metacognitive prior knowledge while Nelson (1996 cited in Genishi, 1999: 288) views development as cognitive, not just linguistic, within a socio-cultural context.

2.6.5 Face validity

Many testing specialists make no distinction between content and face validity (Henning, 1987: 94) and for purposes of this research no clear distinction need be drawn. Content validity is concerned with whether or not the content of the test is sufficiently representative and comprehensive for the test to be a valid measure of what it is supposed to measure. Bachman (1990: 307) views face validity as the appearance of real life: *the extent to which test tasks replicate real-life language use tasks*. Both content and face validity, then, can be used as benchmarks for relevancy and authenticity. Validity, according to Bachman, is synonymous with authenticity. To ensure face validity the test must be acceptable to users (Alderson et al, 1996: 173) because tests that do not appear to be valid to users may not be taken seriously for their given purpose. Furthermore, students are more likely to perform to the best of their abilities if they consider the test to be valid (that is, relevant and authentic). As mentioned above (2.6.1, p. 19), face validity usually lacks an empirical base as it is often determined impressionistically. It is based on an intuitive judgement about the test's content by people whose judgement is not necessarily *expert*. Typically such people include *lay-people* - administrators, non-expert users, and students. Face validity can be applied to the test as a whole, or attention may be focused upon particular unclear items, or instructions (Alderson et al., 1996: 172).

There has been increased emphasis on face validity since the advent of communicative language testing (CLT), and many advocates of CLT (for example, Bachman, 1990; Morrow, 1979, 1986; Carroll, 1982: 37, and 1985, cited in Alderson et al, 1996: 172) argue that it is important that a communicative language test should look like something one might do in the real world with language. As previously argued (2.6.4), this perspective of validity needs to be considered when it comes to the recognition of prior second language learning because it takes place informally in the real world, so testing it without taking this real world context into consideration could make the test inauthentic and irrelevant. This is where content validity has a role to play.

In the matter of validity: What matters eventually is whether the test yields a score which can be shown to be a fair and accurate reflection of the candidate's ability (Alderson et al, 1996: 188).

2.6.6 Conclusion

This chapter has given the background to RPL and addressed some of the issues surrounding its implementation in South Africa. It has shown the interests of certain stakeholders in the RPL process and explained how RPL is viewed in ABET. The chapter explored the concepts of language, knowledge and literacy and linked them together. It also explained construct validity and showed how relevance, authenticity and context can affect the validity of a test. Lastly, it addressed the issue of face validity.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

A positivist research paradigm calls for an empiricist, scientific methodology. This means that facts must be measured systematically and objectively with proper reliability and validity, and independently of setting (Altheide & Johnson, 1994: 485; Connole, 1993: 8, 22). The assumption is that from these facts one can proceed to abstract, general theory and relate this theory to practice in other contexts. From this standpoint, research is objective in so far as it approximates to quantitative inquiry (Phillips, 1990: 34). However, objectivity can be viewed as a regulatory ideal (Lynch, 1996: 42) that must be striven for in order for **any** research to be valid.

This research examines two ABET placement tests and contrasts them with a third. Positivist research would tend to regard language tests as objects, focusing on their formal properties and/or their results. However, this research is not only concerned with results, but with analysing the relationship between the tests and the real world: whether the test content reflects the learner's real world experience and whether assessment is transparent. A qualitative approach is necessary to investigate the validity of the assessment of prior second language learning in this study. This chapter outlines the reasons why this is so and why, therefore, a qualitative research paradigm is appropriate.

3.2 Rationale

A qualitative research paradigm is appropriate firstly, because it is necessary to interpret rather than to measure the data arrived at in order to come to some understanding. This is because varying factors outside the test itself need to be taken into consideration since they impinge on

test methods and test content thus affecting results and, most importantly, validity. Factors include acknowledging that when assessing language there is still no full understanding of what is involved in knowing a language, and that reading comprehension (which is a method used by the placement tests to assess prior second language learning) is a theoretical conceptualisation about an aspect of human behaviour which cannot be directly measured, or observed. Other factors are determining the degree of transparency with regard to testing procedure and assessment criteria (2.5.1, p.17). This necessitates using certain perspectival methods and techniques - interviews and questionnaires - and this data must be interpreted.

Positivist research is rigorous: its philosophical assumptions continue to provide the rational basis for what counts as evidence in most scientific inquiry (Lynch, 1996: 41). Once data has been collected for research purposes, if the facts cannot be measured then the researcher must depend upon personal judgements when interpreting data. These interpretations would then be subjective (Eisner, 1992: 11-12). From an empiricist standpoint, subjective can carry negative connotations, since acquiring and measuring empirical facts implies objective detachment from issues of values, ethics and politics. In investigating the validity of the assessment of prior second language learning this research cannot be detached from such issues. This is the second reason a qualitative research paradigm is appropriate. In South Africa the recognition of prior learning cannot be separated from values, ethics and politics (Lugg et al, 1997 cited in Ralphs & Buchler, 1998). As noted above (2.4, p.7), the ANC wishes to redress the inequities of the past through the recognition of prior learning. Prior learning must therefore be assessed, but because tests serve many ends they are inherently embroiled with contending or conflicting social values and can therefore become politicized (Messick, 1989: 91).

3.2.1 Subjectivity

This research examines two ABET placement tests, and contrasts them with a third. In doing so the researcher has to bear in mind that frameworks of language knowledge are acquired in specific contexts; that researchers' and respondents' frameworks are not the same. The researcher must attempt to bracket her own ideas and assumptions, acknowledging that knowledge is constructed by each individual and dependent upon how that individual makes sense of the world-out-there (Phillips, 1990: 21). An interpretative research paradigm recognises that knowledge is relative to the person involved, and more importantly, that *how* knowledge is acquired, organised, and interpreted is relevant to *what* the claims are (Altheide & Johnson, 1994: 485). Therefore, a certain reflexivity is called for on the part of the researcher. One must have the conviction to distrust one's own mind while proceeding.

In my position as researcher I am in danger of wanting to decide what would be best for adults who have been disenfranchised. Along with NUM, COSATU and SAQA I am in danger of wanting to interpret (and to do so would be patronising) what adults need in terms of RPL and how it should be implemented. It is important to constantly keep this in mind while continuing with the research in order to avoid subjective interpretations of the data.

This research is interpretative because it looks for meaning. However, a researcher is a selective interpreter of meaning. Because *values...mediate our understandings of reality* (Lynch, 1996: 54), a researcher chooses whose *voice* will report the findings and whose point of view will be represented (Altheide & Johnson, 1994: 486). Fay (1977, cited in Lather, 1986: 265) feels strongly that these are issues researchers doing qualitative research cannot ignore. Phillips (1990: 30, 35) advocates that interpretations must be examined, challenged and analysed, and must have

withstood serious scrutiny as well as potential refutation. This is because the researcher is part of the setting and context which she is trying to understand and is thus implicated in that world (Altheide & Johnson, 1994: 486; Connole, 1993: 18; Muller, 1999: 45). A reflective, critical stance must be adopted to enable the researcher to interrogate the representation methodically. In positivistic research, feelings/emotions should not be implicated, but are willy nilly, especially in South Africa, given its political history. Researchers cannot but make judgements concerning participants= understandings of concepts and context; in other words, cannot but perceive respondents in relation to themselves. As a researcher it is easy to feel that one possesses Asuperior@knowledge. An example makes the point. Peter Godwin (1996: 283-84) relates his own experience while a member of the British South Africa Police (BSAP) in Matabeleland during the Rhodesian war. Godwin, a lieutenant at the time, had spent an hour briefing the new sergeant major, a Karanga from one of the most martial of the Shona tribes, on all the minutiae of war in the area. The sergeant remarked, AYou seem to know quite a lot about the area - for a white man.@

3.2.2 Knowledge

The knowledge that test takers have can also be called human experience, which Eisner (1992: 14) sees as a Aform of human achievement@. It is this achievement with which prior learning assessment, and for purposes of this research, prior second language learning assessment claims to concern itself. Knowledge also depends upon individuals=frames of reference, that is, upon their ages, personal histories and cultures. There is no single, legitimate way to make sense of the world (Eisner, 1992: 14). This view is in keeping with a constructivist theory of learning which sees individuals as selecting, accumulating and constructing their own knowledge (Biggs, 1996: 348 cited in Lockett, 1999: 137) through inherited social, cultural and linguistic frames of

reference. When viewed from this standpoint, knowledge can be described as pluralistic. In order for assessment to be valid (authentic), it must include the different types of knowledge which testees have acquired. As mentioned above (Breier, 1998: 121), different learning processes lead to different forms/types of knowledge. This is especially relevant to RPL, since prior learning is recognised as being context-specific.

3.2.3 Participation

This research was intended to be participatory, and an attempt was made to make it participatory by using semi-structured, informal interviews and encouraging respondents to express their opinions and views. However, in order to be truly participatory, participants should be fully active in the entire research process, including problem identification, data gathering, analysis and the application of results (Van Vlaenderen & Gilbert, 1992: 2). It is difficult to estimate to what extent one's research is participatory when one is not sure of the extent to which participants can relate to the context of the research and/or the questions. The researcher's ability to speak an African language would be a definite asset in such a situation (see 6.2 Limitations of the research, p.72). As a researcher, one should be aware that the categories and ideas used to understand a specific context are socially constructed (Altheide & Johnson, 1994: 489). Researcher and respondent use different social constructions to understand any given context because often they have learned in different contexts using different processes. In other words, the situational and experiential knowledge of researcher and respondent are not the same. This suggests that a researcher must not only encourage participation, but must also attempt to ensure that respondent and researcher understand, if not share, the social constructions which each hold for the specific context under discussion.

Proponents of the critical paradigm would see researcher and participants engaging in reciprocal reflexivity and critique (Lather, 1986: 265) so that the final interpretation of the research is negotiated between researcher and participants. In order for reciprocal reflexivity and critique to occur all participants must be in a position to engage in this type of dialogue. This research questions whether participants at ABET Levels 2 and 3, forced by the researcher's inadequacy to engage in the dialogue in their second language, are empowered to enter into a discourse of this nature. Muller (1999: 53) believes it is fallacious to expect interviewees to have access to the grounds for their actions. Linked to this is Ellsworth's (1989: 317) observation that participants are subjects split between the conscious and unconscious and among multiple social positionings. Norton Peirce (1995: 9) views social identity as multiple and a site of struggle. The above perspectives become particularly meaningful when respondents are required to use their second language when participating in research. Lather (1986: 268) states that researchers must provide an environment that invites participants' critical reaction to researcher accounts of their worlds. This injunction is idealistic when participants' and researcher's contexts are so disparate and discrete, and is also not always feasible especially if time is one of the constraints of the research, as it was in this study (see 3.3, p.37). Nor is it advisable to adopt a stance where the main concern is solidarity rather than careful research (Muller, 1999: 60). Researchers must ask questions about the status quo; about whose interests are served by having the system remain the way it is, rather than uncritically endorsing existing conditions (Fien & Hillcoat, 1996: 31). A more realistic expectation with regard to respondents is that after being involved in research, they gain some self-understanding and self-determination (Lather, 1986: 272).

3.2.4 The critical perspective

At a time when extensive critique is being directed at the concept of decontextualised skills or

knowledge (Breier, 1998: 120), research into assessment of prior second language learning must be critical if it is to take into account the social contexts in which language is acquired and tested, and the power relations within those contexts. In order to accept the responsibility implied in the above statement, this research must also proceed from a critical paradigm. Standardization of language and of assessment is imposed by those who have power (Fairclough, 1989: 22). Fairclough describes the type of power leading to an action like standardization, as ideological power: *the power to project one's practices as universal and 'common sense'* (1989: 33). For example, it may appear to be *'common sense'* to view the recognition of prior learning (RPL) as benefiting learners because it *'socialises people into the prevailing discourses of education and training'* (NTB, 1994: 27). However, this is the perspective of those with power: it may not be the perspective of the learners themselves and should thus be questioned (Fien & Hillcoat, 1996: 31).

As already noted in sections 2.4.1.3 and 2.5.1 (pp.14 and 17, respectively), the differences in how RPL is understood relate to power issues. Although RPL is seen as having potential for management, the other side is that workers, too, must benefit.

What the critical paradigm advocates is an awareness of feelings and judgements (see also 3.2.1, p. 32; not an omnipotent stance which assumes to be above such responses. As Myrdal (1969, cited in Phillips, 1990: 32) points out, the researcher's concealed valuations and personal biases can remain undefined and vague and, for this reason, go unchallenged. This is why the researcher's perspective must be specified. In addition, researchers must give a reflexive account of themselves and the processes of their research in order to substantiate their interpretations and findings (Altheide & Johnson, 1994: 489-90, 493).

3.3 Procedure

Initially one business in Port Elizabeth (Business 1) was identified for the project. This business was chosen because its ABET programme has been running since March 1995 and is therefore well established. Another reason for the choice is that it was easily accessible to the researcher. In October 1998 a pilot study was conducted by means of a questionnaire (Appendix B) with eight learners who were then undergoing instruction in ABET Levels 2 and 3. As a result of the findings from the pilot study and in order to accumulate contrastive data, the research was enlarged to include another business in Port Elizabeth (Business 2) with an ABET programme. For ethical reasons these businesses have not been identified by name. Written consent (see Appendix J) was obtained from the co-ordinators of the respective programmes to reflect the data obtained in the research in the thesis. Research participants and the facilitator at Business 2 also signed consent forms to this effect.

Data was collected by means of a questionnaire, through interviews, and by analysing the two placement tests used in the respective businesses and comparing them with a third. A third test was included because the researcher felt it would be useful to have another point of comparison. Case study strategies for ensuring internal validity include triangulation. Merriam (1988: 69) explains that, "Methodological triangulation combines dissimilar methods such as interviews and physical evidence to study the same unit". Consequently, in this study the researcher held interviews and analysed the tests. Analysis of the tests was done by people outside the research context to avoid wholly subjective interpretations. In order to obtain different perspectives, the co-ordinators of the two programmes were interviewed as well as learners in the programmes who had sat the placement tests.

The co-ordinators were interviewed to obtain information about the establishment of the ABET programmes in their respective organisations, to obtain copies of the placement tests used for assessment, and to determine what each organisation saw as its goals in implementing ABET. The learners were interviewed in order to find out how they experienced the placement testing process and their levels of satisfaction/dissatisfaction with the process; how they perceived knowledge and whether they felt that the test had, in fact, assessed that knowledge; and what they understood by the term Aliteracy@. The researcher asked learners for their perceptions of knowledge and literacy in order to establish whether the test content was relevant to learners= perceptions of these two concepts in the interests of validity. If testees do not know what they are being tested for then a policy of transparency is not being followed which can affect test validity as defined in this study.

The tests which had been used to assess those particular learners for ABET placement were evaluated with the assistance of two ABET facilitators from two ABET programmes, which were separate from each other and from the sites of the research. Although Lynch (1996: 67) advocates prolonged engagement with research participants to establish understanding and trust, time available for contact was a factor in this research because respondents were involved in attending the ABET programmes at their respective places of employment and the researcher interviewed them during classes. A contrasting perspective on the subject of prolonged engagement with research participants is that of Muller (1998: 60) who believes that prolonged engagement can result in the same Athings@becoming Ainvisible@to interviewer and respondents (see 3.2.3, p.34.

CHAPTER 4: PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents findings from the interviews and questionnaires, and from the evaluations of the placement tests. The placement tests are also described in this chapter. Altheide and Johnson (1994: 495) state that there must be a clear distinction between data and analysis and I have tried to follow this strategy. A discussion of the findings will follow in Chapter 5.

4.2 Business 1

Business 1 is a very large parastatal organisation and its ABET programme which has been running since March 1995, is well established. There are three learner intakes into the programme annually and classes are run full time for three-month periods during company time.

4.2.1 Interview with ABET Programme Co-ordinator at Business 1 (Appendix X)

The programme at Business 1 began as a Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) project, but was later reconceptualised as a skills development programme, then as a literacy programme and finally, as an ABET programme. Business 1 settled on ABET because employees had no certification and needed a portable certificate. This means taking one's credits into new, parallel or different programmes wherever the particular learning is relevant. Business 1 tested all likely candidates throughout the company for ABET (below Standard 7/Grade 9). Candidates were invited to volunteer to be evaluated. Prior to the commencement of each 3-month block of classes, the line manager for each section nominates as many candidates as requested from those who were initially evaluated. Preference is given to those who are >illiterate<. These candidates are then reassessed to ensure that they have been correctly placed using the same test.

Business 1 first used the placement test of an organisation called Lead the Field Africa. However, this placement test combined Zulu and Xhosa and this was found to be a barrier to candidates since there were many mistakes in the material and the way in which the test was presented made it inaccessible to candidates. Next BESA's (Basic Education and Skills for Adults) placement test was used. This test assessed learners in English and if they could not answer the Why? Who? How? questions they were then placed as Xhosa mother tongue speakers in ABET Level 1. It was subsequently shown that these learners had been incorrectly placed and were, in fact, more advanced than Level 1. Business 1 then decided to design its own placement test. This was done by the ABET trainers using ideas from the IEB. These tests proved not to be intensive enough to ensure correct placement because the compilers had had no training in the development of assessment materials. Business 1 thus resorted to PROLIT (Project Literacy) material for placement testing (Appendix A). This test assesses from Level 2 up to Level 5 inclusively. However, the IEB examination question papers are still also used.

At Business 1, as employees pass each level of ABET they are given a salary increase. This has led to the perception among employees that ABET is the vehicle for promotion, and consequently the number of candidates has doubled since the programme's inception. ABET is marketed to the line managers and to the various depots annually. The ABET facilitators address employees at the depots and make themselves available to answer all questions. The placement test is referred to as an assessment of reading and writing ability rather than as a *Atest*®. Employees are told that it is not something that they pass or fail, but rather a tool for placing them at the correct levels. It is also explained that if, for example, someone is placed at Level 1 as a result of the assessment, and after a week or two it is obvious to the facilitator that the person has been incorrectly placed and can go up to the next level, then the person will be moved up. This is, in fact, what sometimes

happens. The explanation given to the researcher for going through this checking process was that employees may not have been in a formal learning environment for some years, but once they find themselves in that type of environment again, the experiential learning which has taken place since then helps them to adjust and prove themselves afresh. This explanation is supported by learners' responses when asked whether the assessment tested what they knew. Learners responded that the test reminded them of things they had forgotten (see 4.2.2.1, p.41).

Some employees wish to attend ABET in order to fulfil personal goals, for example, to be able to write a letter and read the Bible, rather than for work-related purposes. However, Business 1 markets the programme to motivate employees to want to develop themselves further at work. The co-ordinator felt that the goals of the programme were to improve the quality of individuals by helping them to identify with the organisation so that they would have a sense of belonging and of being valued. This was in order to change the culture of the organisation and to improve the work ethic. The co-ordinator also stated that learners in the programme were treated as adults and not as children.

4.2.2 Pilot study at Business 1

In October 1998 a pilot study was conducted with eight learners who were then undergoing instruction in ABET Levels 2 and 3. The facilitator and I spent a great deal of time explaining to the participants what the questions were asking. At times the facilitator resorted to Afrikaans and also to asking learners to explain to one another in Xhosa, which meant that some learners worked in groups. As a result of learners' limited understanding of English, I decided not to use questionnaires, but rather semi-structured, informal interviews to collect further research data.

4.2.2.1 Pilot study questionnaire (Appendix B)

Only one of the 8 respondents was not satisfied with the testing process and it is unclear why he was dissatisfied (see question 6, page 5, Appendix B). In answer to the question the respondent stated.

No they sayd a most go to Room 5
To go the they say I am Level 2

All respondents stated that they were satisfied with the ABET course (question 7) including the respondent (quoted above) who was not satisfied with the testing process.

Participants' responses concerning their understandings of the purpose of the tests were various. Some thought that it was to place them in the correct level in the ABET programme, some thought that it was to find out what school standard they had reached, and some thought it was to find out what they knew. One respondent gave the following answer:

test for do you know job (Page 4)

Since nothing in the placement test was work-related, it is unclear why this respondent gave this answer.

In answer to the question that asked what Business 1 would use the tests for, the following responses were among those received:

- * It can help the Company to learn their employees, so that they can lift up their standards and then can have better jobs. (Page 2)
- * To get more knowledge, promotion and a better Job. (Page 3)
- * For better job (Page 4)
- * [Business 1] can give us better work (Page 6)

- * To up grade my school STD to up grade my grade at work (Page 7)

In answer to the question

5. What do you think they should test? (where they= refers to the tests)

the following responses were received:

- * Everytime when my teacher give a test she tells us a day or two before what the class will be written from. (Page 1)
- * The teacher tells the students today saying tomorrow we can write a test. then we write it at 100% (Page 2)
- * the teacher saying tomorrow we can write a test. (Page 4)

The fact that all three candidates gave inappropriate responses could mean that pronominal references were misidentified by all three of them, or perhaps learners were working on the questionnaire in a group (see 4.2.2, p.40) since all three gave the same inappropriate answer.

In answer to the same question (Question 5), two other respondents stated that the test should include something work-related:

- * At my work I am trade hand and I know my work very well (Page 3)
- * To my work I do. Track-worker, (Page 6)

and another respondent answered:

- * I can raiper [repair] broken things on a wagon. (Page 7).

One respondent's answer to question 4: **What did they fail to test?** (where they= also refers to the assessment tests), was

- * They didn't test me with things that know very well in my work. (Page 7)

Analysis of the placement test (see 4.4.2, p.50) confirms that nothing specifically work-related was included.

Question 2 asked, **Do you feel that the assessment tests which you have written tested what you know?** Responses were

- * Yes (Page 1)
- * The assessment test I was written before was reminding me about something I was forgotten. But now I'm understanding well about education. (Page 2)
- * I feel happy because all I learn at abet gave a good knowledge and better education (Page 3)
- * The assessment test I was written before was reminding me about Education (Page 4)
- * Yes. That test the some of the thing I did know (Page 5)
- * They test about things we forget (Page 6)
- * Know was diffical fore me becaue I was not know. (Page 8)

4.2.3 Interview with ABET learners at Business 1

A subsequent interview was conducted at Business 1 with a different group of 6 learners. There is no transcript of this interview included with this thesis because of a lack of clarity in the recording and because the interviewees spoke among themselves in Xhosa. However, I have noted down responses from learners that were audible and in English. Although I requested them to speak English, respondents discussed my questions among themselves in Xhosa and one learner then replied in English on behalf of the others.

When asked what they understood by Aliteracy®, respondents said that literacy was being able to

read and write English. When I asked them to clarify whether they meant only English, after some discussion they said that it was being able to read and write Xhosa as well.

I showed the learners copies of the PROLIT placement test which they had written prior to being placed in the ABET programme. I asked them if there was anything in the test that they felt should not have been included. The response was that there was nothing. The learners felt that the test was fair and reasonable. This included question 5.1 in Section 5 (Appendix A) which all respondents assured me they could complete (see 5.7.1, p.67).

One respondent volunteered that he would like to learn to speak and write English within a six-month period. He would not like to have to return the following year. Another felt that after being in the programme for three months it was too soon to be expected to write an examination. The other learners agreed with him.

4.3 Business 2

As a result of what I felt to be a lack of in-depth feedback from respondents at Business 1, and in order to accumulate contrastive data, the study was enlarged to include another organisation where an ABET programme had been implemented. This business was a large, listed manufacturer based in Port Elizabeth (referred to as Business 2).

4.3.1 Interview with ABET Programme Co-ordinator at Business 2 (Appendix Y)

Business 2 began its ABET programme in February 1998. To begin with, in 1996 an education profile and placement assessment (Appendix Q) was done of all two hundred and two floor level employees. This assessment used the Continuing Education Programme (CEP) in conjunction

with input from the union, to assess for life skills, educational standard and literacy, for programmes that Business 2 was intending to use on the floor. The same assessment was used to place learners in the different levels in ABET after it was decided to implement this programme. The assessment showed the courses employees had completed after leaving school: internal (in company) and external. Prior to beginning the ABET programme, no further assessment was done to ensure that learners had been placed correctly, for example, by means of a different placement test.

In addition to the ABET programme, Business 2 has its own paint college where employees complete a National Training Certificate (NTC)¹, specifically in paint technology. When marketing ABET, Business 2 informed employees that going to ABET classes and passing the examinations would eventually enable them to go to the paint college. The ABET programme was advertised through the use of notices and by having the shop stewards explain the advantages of education, and what Business 2 intended to do in this regard. Business 2 was hoping to encourage employees to attend the ABET programme in order to pass all the levels so that they would then be able to attend the paint college. However, at the time of the research Business 2 was offering instruction in only Levels 2 and 3. Another of the aims of introducing the programme was to equip employees to read the batch cards and the work instructions. Employees were also offered the incentive of being better equipped to apply for internal vacancies. However, no salary increase or promotion incentive was offered.

¹ NTC1 = Grade 10; NTC2 = Grade 11; NTC3 = Grade 12.

At Business 2, ABET classes run throughout the year from Monday to Thursday between 16:30 and 17:30; that is, they take place in the employees own time. At the time of the research learners had not written ABET examinations since the inception of the programme in February 1998, but were scheduled to write in June 1999. The delay in writing the IEB examinations was caused by a strike at the factory in August 1998 followed, in September 1998, by a high rate of absenteeism that further delayed the programme, preventing learners from writing the examination in December. Twenty-two employees joined the programme, but at the time of my interview there were only three remaining: two in Level 2 and one in Level 3. Business 2 had formed an Adult Education Committee whose function it was to motivate employees who stopped attending to return to the classroom, or to help in solving any problems experienced by learners that might be responsible for absenteeism. Business 2 was concerned at the high drop out rate among learners and had recently invited another organisation called Write Read and Progress (WRAP) Adult Education to come and help them to find solutions to the problem.

Two other learners at Level 3 (besides the three mentioned above) had not attended for the two weeks prior to my interview with the co-ordinator, although one of them was present when I interviewed the facilitator and the learners subsequent to my interview with the co-ordinator. The co-ordinator thought that these learners' lack of attendance might have been due to frustration that one of the tutors was leaving.

4.3.2 Interview with ABET learners at Business 2 (Appendix Z)

A semi-structured, informal interview (Appendix Z) was conducted with four learners and their facilitator at Business 2 (Appendix Z). Respondents said that they were satisfied with the explanation they had been given concerning the education and placement assessment (referred to

as the Assessment in Appendix Q) prior to its administration. However, respondents could not remember what was in the assessment other than a picture that they were asked to describe of a nurse, a doctor and a patient. Notwithstanding their memory lapse, they were all sure that there was nothing included in the assessment that was related to the actual work done by themselves in the factory. Analysis of the placement test (see 4.4.3, p.52) confirmed that the test did not include anything relating to the actual work done by employees in the factory. The facilitator corroborated learners' responses and stated that only communication was assessed. One respondent said that people came from outside and interviewed them. He did not know where the results came from, but employees were told which levels they were to begin the programme in.

When questioned, respondents did not appear to know what literacy meant. One respondent said that he did not know anything about the word and another wanted someone to explain the word to him. One respondent said it was people who cannot write...and they cannot even read. When asked what knowledge was, some of the responses included A brilliant person, AIt's something you learn, AKnowledge is something I understand. One respondent used the example of a colleague who knew what was in the drums at the factory by the smell of the contents although the drums may not have had codes to indicate their contents. This respondent felt that this was knowledge and the other respondents agreed.

Respondents felt that ABET had helped them to A talk to other people, to make [sic] research, to look for information. One respondent felt that ABET had encouraged him to speak English. In contrast to these positive perspectives, another respondent felt that he was wasting his time: he still could not understand the newspaper and he felt he could not speak English. At the end of the interview, this respondent stated that he would not be writing the IEB examinations.

Results of the research in Businesses 1 and 2 are summarised below (see Table 4) for comparison and contrast.

Table 4: Results for Businesses 1 and 2

Business 1	Business 2
Well established ABET programme (4 yrs) - 3 learner intakes annually - 3 month blocks - respondents satisfied with programme	Programme running for 1 year - 1 learner intake - classes after work - 3 out of 4 respondents satisfied with programme
<u>Goals</u> - improve quality of individuals - change culture of organisation - improve work ethic	<u>Goals</u> - equip employees for paint college - equip employees to read batch cards and work instructions
<u>Incentive</u> - salary increase	<u>Incentives</u> - paint college - internal vacancies
<u>Testing</u> - voluntary - reassessment - 13 out of 14 learners satisfied with process - no work context language tested	<u>Testing</u> - compulsory - single assessment - 3 out of 4 learners satisfied with process - no work context language tested
Perceptions of literacy - ability to read and write	Perception of literacy - unsure
Perceptions of knowledge - education - that which was forgotten	Perceptions of knowledge - learning - understanding
<u>Transparency</u> - partial	<u>Transparency</u> - questionable
<u>Validity</u> - check with facilitator	<u>Validity</u> - no check with facilitator
No. of candidates for programme doubled	3 out of 22 candidates remaining

4.4 Placement tests (Appendices A and Q)

The researcher has no experience in setting placement tests for ABET so two outside people were asked to give their opinions of the tests for purposes of triangulation and so that the researcher could get an idea of whether the tests were considered to be fair, reasonable, authentic and relevant for purposes of testing prior learning in a second language in order to place adults in

ABET programmes. The placement tests were evaluated by Ms Jacqui Dornbrack, Co-ordinator of the Teaching and Learning Literacy component in the Faculty of Communication Studies at the Port Elizabeth Technikon; and by Ms Wilma Horan, a facilitator of the ABET programme since its inception in 1993 at Delta Motor Corporation in Port Elizabeth. Alderson et al (1996: 176) warn against gathering together *experts* for purposes of triangulation, who are known to agree with each other, and Lynch (1996: 57) suggests discussing interpretations of research findings with a *disinterested peer*. Wholly subjective interpretations of the placement tests were avoided by selecting facilitators from different institutions who instruct at different levels. Ms Horan, who represents the *disinterested peer*, comes from a practical background, while Ms Dornbrack knows the theoretical background to ABET placement testing and has instructed ABET student teachers how to go about developing a placement test. A third placement test (Appendix E) was used for comparison.

Each placement test is described below and Ms Dornbrack's and Ms Horan's positive comments and criticisms of the tests are recorded, but without distinguishing which of them made what comments for ethical reasons. The researcher's observations are also noted without identifying which are hers. These comments/observations are presented as findings. They will be analysed in Chapter 5: Discussion of Findings.

4.4.1 Assessment criteria

Owing to reluctance on the part of both the co-ordinators of the two programmes to make assessment criteria used to mark the tests available, the researcher was unable to ascertain what criteria were used to mark the tests. The researcher did not insist upon being given the marking criteria since she wanted to maintain good relations between herself and the co-ordinators at both

research sites. However, she used the outcomes for ABET Levels 1, 2 and 3, respectively (Appendices F, G and C), to get an indication of the types of items which could (and should with the implementation of OBE) be included in a placement test to attempt to ensure that assessment is valid in the terms used in this research. Appendix F shows the core reading and writing performance outcomes for Level 1; Appendix G shows the core reading and writing performance outcomes for Level 2; and Appendix C shows the IEB examination requirements for reading and writing across different genres at Level 3.

4.4.2 The Prolit placement test used at Business 1 (Appendix A) is a written test. It does not attempt to test oral performance. It tests English as a second language.

Candidates for the Prolit test first fill in a form (Surname? First names? Date of birth? etc.) and then write five sentences about their families. (Level 1 outcomes, see Appendix F). They then fill in gaps using cloze procedure. At Level 1 this exercise is intended to show comprehension of a reading text. According to the evaluators, it is customary for a cloze passage to be accompanied by a reading text (as in a reading comprehension test) in order to provide testees with conceptual clues when they attempt the cloze passage. This particular cloze passage is not accompanied by a reading text. Therefore, the evaluators felt that contextual clues are minimal and candidates must resort to guessing. Furthermore, the cloze procedure under discussion extends to three pages, each page more demanding than the previous one. According to one of the evaluators, one page of cloze procedure in a test which comprised 10 pages would have been ample. Page 2 of the cloze procedure includes tenses such as *I have...had*, and the vocabulary tested includes words like *Abursary* and *Auniversity*. Page three demands specific prior knowledge of context since it refers to *Aretirement*, as well as requiring candidates to know what a supermarket *Achain* is. In

order to complete the cloze passage, candidates have to refer back to what they read (although they are not given instructions to do so), or they must remember what they read two pages previously.

In Section 4 candidates are required to write an essay on *The New South Africa*. Using the word *essay* relies on candidates being familiar with the concept which is a school based one. Testees may use ideas from the picture which shows women standing, holding placards outside some type of building. Examples of what the placards proclaim are: *One citizenship in one country*, *Just land allocation*, *Apartheid is dead. Its inequalities remain*. One evaluator commented that this section requires a great demand for referencing skills. This exercise may be intended to test the ABET Level 3 performance outcome which requires candidates to respond to an illustration using both textual and visual clues and to identify meanings not directly stated in the text. Other Level 3 outcomes which can be identified are the identification of words and phrases which influence the reader's feelings; and relating the text to prior knowledge and/or to personal experience. This exercise would also show how competent a candidate was to organise material.

Section 5 requires candidates to *choose* one of three drawings and *explain* how it operates. Candidates are given no guidelines, for example, steps or instructions, on how to go about answering. One drawing is of a train engine and coal tender, another is a longitudinal, cross-section of a flashlight, and the third is of a hot plate plugged into a wall socket. It is difficult to decide what outcome is being tested in this section. Evaluators described this section of the test as inappropriate and difficult.

When the tests are marked there are cut-off points for the different levels of ABET. For example, if a learner scores between zero and 29 s/he will be placed at Level 1; if between 30 and 39 at Level 2, etc. Nothing work-related was included in the test, unless one views being asked to describe a train engine and coal tender as work-related.

4.4.3 The CEP placement test used at Business 2 (Appendix Q) initially requires an oral response from candidates, either in their mother tongue, or in English. On page three (Appendix Q) candidates are told that they will be asked the next three questions in English and they are evaluated on whether they can answer *clearly*, *with difficulty*, or not at all. Thereafter the candidates' writing skills are assessed. If candidates can fill in Form A (see page 4 of Appendix Q) they are asked to attempt the entire writing evaluation in English. There is no time limit for the evaluation.

Candidates are asked to write a story about a picture (question 2) which shows a patient on a stretcher, a nurse and a doctor. This is the one item in the test that learners at Business 2 remembered. (see 4.3.2, p.46). Question 3 is a cloze passage. Candidates are given a text to read and then asked to fill in the missing words. This exercise tests whether they can use contextual clues (a Level 2 outcome). Question 4 requires candidates to give directions. This question is very generally work context based, since directions must be given *from the front gate to the workshop*. However, it is not specifically work related. This task falls under the outcomes for procedural texts (see Appendix C). Question 5 is based on a factual text and requires answering *Who? What? When? Where? How? and Why?* questions as well as using comparison in order to show comprehension. These criteria are part of the outcomes expected of Level 3 learners. Question 6 requires candidates to formulate questions to which they are given

the answers. This question is one which indicates Level 4 readiness/competency.

The CEP placement test assesses a wider variety of competencies than does the Prolit test. Contextual clues are adequate and instructions clear. However, besides Question 4, which requires candidates to give directions from the front gate to the workshop, nothing in the test related to the actual work done by employees in the company (see 4.3.2, p.46).

4.4.4 For comparison: English Assessment Test (Appendix E)

This test was designed for an ABE programme run by a very large parastatal organisation (Frost, 1996). It was accompanied by two needs analyses: one for management and one for employees. The test attempts to address issues of transparency since the skills tested and the methods used are set out on page 1 (type of test). The test then follows the layout given on page 1. Sections 1 to 6 appear to be testing Level 1 outcomes, sections 7 and 8 Level 2 outcomes, and section 9 Level 3 outcomes. Evaluators commented that it is difficult to decide what level section 10 aims at testing.

Section 1 consists in reading sight words (see Appendix E). It is assumed that these words must be read out aloud, or no score can be entered. In Section 2 physical co-ordination and the mechanics of drawing, prerequisites for writing, as well as comprehension of common words is evaluated. Section 3, »Match the Circle«, requires candidates to choose the word which matches the one which has been circled. Candidates know what is expected of them because the first example has been done to illustrate what is required. Section 4 asks candidates to »Match the sentence«, a progressively more demanding task than the previous one. Section 5 requires candidates to demonstrate their knowledge of simple English structures. The words that need to be formed into a sentence are accompanied by a picture to provide a context. The pictures show

everyday tasks like a woman washing a child and a man driving a vehicle. Section 6 tests the core writing outcome which shows comprehension of a reading text by answering questions. The answers are provided and the correct one must be selected. In Section 7 (which tests Level 2 outcomes) a second reading text requires candidates to answer Where? When? What? How? Why? and Who? questions. Section 8, in assessing writing for communication, asks candidates to write their own stories, but no guidelines are given concerning context, for example, whether it should be personal, or a narrative. Section 9 requires candidates to show their understanding of a Level 3 comprehension passage. Section 10 is headed »Dictation«. It might have been more appropriate to head it »Listen and write down what you hear« since »dictation« is a very school-based term and candidates might be unfamiliar with it. Furthermore, it is unclear what is meant by stating that the skill being tested is »Understanding« (page 1).

The English Assessment Test shows a logical progression from one task to another. It is also clearly laid out and, barring the last section (Dictation), should not pose a threat to candidates. However, this is obviously the researcher's perspective and not that of the candidates. The test does not include anything specifically work-related which is one of the contexts in which these testees had learned their second language.

4.4.5 The tests and face validity

Face validity can be applied to a test as a whole, or attention may be focused upon particular unclear items, or instructions (Alderson et al, 1996: 172). From the perspectives of Ms Dornbrack and Ms Horan (4.4), the ProLit test used at Business 1 lacked face validity since contextual clues were minimal in the cloze procedure (see 4.4.2, p.50) and candidates had to rely on guessing. Also in this test instructions were often unclear or non-existent (see 4.4.2, p.50),

and therefore confusing. Furthermore, the test did not include any work-related contexts in order to test the prior knowledge of candidates= second language.

Ms Horan and Ms Dornbrack concurred that the CEP test used at Business 2 included adequate contextual clues and clear instructions (see 4.4.3, p.52), so from these perspectives it could be said to have face validity. However, it lacked face validity from the perspective of containing work-related content, since it contained only one question that was very generally work-related.

The English Assessment (comparison) test was considered to have face validity since contextual clues were adequate and there was logical progression from one task to another (see 4.4.4, p.53). Barring one question, instructions were considered to be clear, but there was no work-related content, so from this perspective the test lacked face validity. Table 5 (below) summarises the findings for the three placement tests.

Table 5: Summary of findings for placement tests

Prolit Test	CEP Test	English Assessment Test
Written test	Oral and written test	Oral and written test - specifies skills tested
Contextual clues minimal - reliance on guessing	Contextual clues adequate	Contextual clues adequate
Instructions unclear, therefore confusing	Instructions clear No time limit	Instructions mostly clear Logical progression
Nothing work related	One question very generally work context based	Nothing work related

4.5 Conclusion

In this chapter the findings from the interviews and questionnaires as well as from the evaluations of the placement tests have been presented. The findings from the interviews and questionnaires are based on the perspectives of the ABET programme co-ordinators and the learners who were tested. Bearing in mind that perspectival data may have a limited role to play in research (Muller, 1999: 58; and also 6.2 Limitations of the research), the findings from the questionnaires and interviews suggest that Businesses 1 and 2 have different goals in implementing an ABET programme. Furthermore, Business 1 has a well established programme which appears to have been integrated into the culture of the organisation. The programme at Business 2, on the other hand, is not well established: in fact, the drop off rate supports the observation that the attrition rate in ABET is very high (Baatjes et al, 1999: 14).

The interviews and questionnaires with testees show that no work-related content was included in the tests. Findings from the evaluations of the tests confirm this.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

5.1 Introduction

The findings are discussed in relation to the aims of the research (see section 1.2). They will therefore be discussed under the following headings:

- * Goals in implementing an ABET programme
- * Transparency
- * Assessment process and test content
- * Knowledge and literacy
- * Relevance of prior second language knowledge assessment

However, prior to this discussion the issue of test validity will be addressed.

5.2 Test Validity

5.2.1 Construct validity

As identified above (2.6.3, p.24), in construct validity one is testing the hypothesized relationship between a test score and an ability (Bachman, 1990: 56). However, if the test leaves out something which should be included then the ability which the test seeks to evaluate will not be authentically tested (see 2.6.3, p.24) and the test score will then be invalid. Since test candidates at Business 1 stated that the tests should test/evaluate work-related knowledge/learning (see 4.2.2.1, p.41), and test candidates at Business 2 stated that the test did not test work-related knowledge (4.3.2, p.46) and since analysis of the tests revealed that the one test included no work-related content (4.4.2, p.50) and the other only one question which could be viewed as very generally work-related (4.4.3, p.52), it would appear that from these perspectives the tests used at Businesses 1 and 2 lacked validity in terms of authenticity and relevance. However, the co-

ordinator at Business 1 reported a high rate of accuracy with regard to placement in the ABET programme, so from his perspective the test used at Business 1 was valid. The high rate of accuracy with regard to placement may also have been due to the fact that the IEB examination papers were also used for assessment and that facilitators were consulted to ensure correct placement (see 4.2.1, p.38).

5.2.2 Relevance and authenticity

As stated above (2.6.4, p.25) for a test to be authentic it must be related to real life performance. Real life performance is particularly relevant when one is testing prior second language knowledge, since a second language is often learned in a different context from a first language (2.6.4, p.25), for example, formal as opposed to informal. Therefore, the context in which a second language has been learned must be included when testing prior second language knowledge. It can be assumed that employees learn some second language in their working environments and that this language will be related to what it is that they specifically do in those environments. Since testees at Business 1 stated that the tests should evaluate work-related knowledge (4.2.2.1, p.41) and since testees at Business 2 stated that the test did not include work-related knowledge (4.3.2, p.46), and since analysis of the tests themselves revealed that no specifically work-related content was included in the tests (4.4.2, p.50 and 4.4.3, p.52, respectively), it would appear that from the above perspectives the tests can be described as inauthentic since they omitted relevant content.

5.2.3 Face or content validity

As mentioned above (2.6.5, p.27), face or content validity can be used as benchmarks for relevance and authenticity. Alderson et al (1996: 173; see also 2.6.5) believe that to ensure face

validity the test must be acceptable to users. In this study all the respondents from Business 1 who were interviewed (4.2.3, p.43) felt that the test was fair and reasonable. However, their responses cannot be entirely relied upon, since they were being interviewed retrospectively which would have affected their memories over time. Furthermore, they discussed the questions in a group and gave an agreed upon answer through the group spokesperson. This answer is less reliable than individually arrived at, uninfluenced responses would have been.

5.3 Goals in implementing an ABET programme

5.3.1 Business 1

Cooper (1998: 16) notes that historically worker education has placed strong emphasis on education serving the needs of the collective and achieving a collective purpose and vision, and Hull (1993: 21) believes that literacy programmes must be designed to speak to the needs and aspirations of workers. At Business 1 the goals of the programme are seen as improving the quality of individuals by helping them to identify with the organisation so that they will have a sense of belonging and of value. This in turn changes the culture of the organisation and improves the work ethic (see p.40). In trying to achieve these goals, Business 1 may be seen to be attempting to serve the needs of the collective and achieving a collective purpose and vision, as Cooper (above) notes worker education has emphasized. Business 1 uses salary increases as an incentive (see p.39) to workers to join the programme. Responses from the pilot study questionnaire (Appendix B) confirm that employees see ABET as the vehicle for promotion. The fact that the number of candidates for the programme has doubled since its inception (see p.39) suggests that Business 1 has identified a need (a wage increase) and has integrated the attainment of this need into its educational programme as Hull (above) suggests. From the above exposition it would appear that Business 1 has successfully integrated the programme so that it has become

part of the culture of the organisation. It also rewards its employees for their achievements in the ABET programme with salary increases. The above factors may explain why ABET appears to be successful at Business 1 notwithstanding the perceived inadequacy of the placement test used in its ABET programme (4.4.2, p.50). Besides using the placement test, the IEB examination papers are also used for assessment (see p.39), correctness of placement is checked (see pp.39-40) and evaluation occurs twice at Business 1 (see p.38). Multiple assessment therefore occurs and this may also explain the high rate of accuracy in placement.

5.3.2 Business 2

Business 2 uses the paint college and internal vacancies as incentives for employees to join the ABET programme. The National Training Certificate (NTC1) which employees can complete at the paint college is the equivalent of Grade 10 and ABET Level 2 is the equivalent of Grade 5 (see Table 3 on p.15), so it is a very long term incentive that employees are expected to wish to realise. Business 2 does not offer any immediate incentive such as a salary increase once employees have passed examinations at the different levels of ABET. As noted in section 2.5.1 (p.17; also COSATU, 1996: 10), the desire for income generating skills is profound. Workers are adults who are at a different stage in their development from children and therefore have different goals in furthering their education. They need a genuine reason in order to be motivated to do so. Furthermore, there are ideological and psychological barriers to commitment to adult learning (Baatjes et al, 1999: 15). For example, adults believe that it is difficult to learn as one gets older and see their opportunities as limited due to the fact that in the past their roles were defined and sustained by apartheid education policies (ibid.). As NUM (COSATU, 1996) points out, adults may see other forms of learning (other than the fundamental area defined by ABET) as more important.

Failure to take worker aspirations into consideration will not assist in creating frameworks for understanding literacy in relation to work, nor challenge the popular concept that literacy is only the ability to read and write as Hull (1993: 21) recommends. It is thus short-sighted of Business 2 not to have determined the incentives and disincentives of workers for acquiring literate skills (notwithstanding input from the union, see pp.44-45). Business 2 should have determined how workers viewed literacy and what their incentives and disincentives were for acquiring literacy from their own perspectives. Business 2 could then have set about helping to meet its workers' literacy goals.

Instead, Business 2 has its own literacy aims which are to equip employees to read the batch cards and work instructions. This, and the lack of any tangible reward offered to employees who pass examinations, suggests that the organisation may have seen ABET predominantly as serving its own interests. On the other hand, Business 2 evinced concern at the drop off in attendance in their ABET programme and solicited the services of WRAP Adult Education to assist in solving the problems seeing that the Adult Education Committee had not been instrumental in solving these problems although this was one of their intended functions (see 4.3.1, p.44).

The high drop out among learners in the ABET programme may be attributable to the factors noted above. However, drop out may have been due to strikes and absenteeism, and not to any inadequacy in the testing process, or the programme, or the incentives offered. French (1997:31) reports that poor results in the IEB examinations have in some cases been traced to structural problems in the centres/organisations and he cites strikes as one such problem.

5.4 Transparency

NUM (2.5.1) and the NTB (1994: 25) believe that assessment must be transparent because it is a political process since it involves making particular judgements and therefore embodies particular values. Assessment must be transparent about its purposes, the way in which the information will be used, and about the value system that underpins it. Testees must be prepared to perform within those values.

On the other hand, French and King (1998: 2) believe that transparency is of the greatest importance, but that it must be weighed up against feasibility and caring about people's feelings. For the same reason that researchers cannot always obtain participants' critical reactions to the researcher's account of their worlds (3.2.3, p.34, that is, because participants and researchers come from disparate and discrete contexts, so it is not always feasible to be transparent concerning the value system that underpins assessment.

5.4.1 Business 1

Business 1 appears to be striving for a certain amount of transparency with regard to the testing process as evidenced by facilitators' readiness to answer questions (see p.39). It also attempts to be transparent about the purposes of assessment in so far as informing candidates that the test will place them in the correct levels in the programme. However, by the same token transparency is lacking with regard to the purposes of assessment and with regard to the value system which underpins assessment since the test is referred to as 'an assessment of reading and writing ability' (perhaps this is Business 1's definition of literacy) and not as a test (p.39). This may be an attempt on the part of the facilitators to make the testing process appear less threatening to potential candidates. However, judgements will be made about candidates as a result of the test and

candidates should understand these judgements and how they are arrived at. In other words, they should be informed of the values underpinning these judgements. One of the values of importance here is what literacy means to the organisation and to testers, and to testees. Values themselves are subjective and it is unclear whose and what values underpin the ABET assessment process (2.4.1.1, p.10; and 2.5.1). Test makers and test theorists often do not share the same values and are often not aware of what values are held by others with regard to ABET assessment (2.4.1.1, p.10). For example, many advocates of communicative language teaching argue that it is important that a communicative language test should look like something one might do in the real world with language (2.6.5, p.27). This raises the question of whether NUM and the test makers hold the same values with regard to the test.

It does not appear that the testees held the view that a language test should look like something they might do in the real world with language, since they stated that they were satisfied with the test content, yet it did not include any work related language knowledge. Furthermore, they felt the test was fair and reasonable (4.2.3) although it included question 5.1 which was judged to be inappropriate and difficult and for which it was difficult to decide what outcomes were being tested (4.4.2). From the above, one might conclude that transparency was lacking with regard to the test content.

The fact that one respondent at Business 1 said that he would like to learn to speak and write English within three months points to the fact that he had unrealistic expectations of his own abilities and/or of the programme, and may indicate a lack of transparency concerning the outcomes of the programme on the part of facilitators. However, this is not conclusive evidence of a lack of transparency.

5.4.2 Business 2

Judging from the observation of the respondent who stated that he did not know where the results of the tests came from (4.3.2) there seems to be a lack of transparency concerning the testing process and assessment criteria at Business 2. However this is the response of one of four research participants and can thus not be regarded as conclusive. A link can be made between this particular respondent's observation and NUM's evaluation of the NIG (2.5.1) as not addressing the principles that should underpin assessment, nor the issue of how assessment will be prevented from having negative effects on teaching and learning processes, especially since this same respondent observed that he felt that he was wasting his time since he still could not understand the newspaper and he felt he could not speak English (see p.47). He also stated that he would not be writing the IEB examinations.

5.5 Assessment process and test content

5.5.1 Business 1

At Business 1 learners are informed that if they have been incorrectly placed, they can be moved to a higher or lower level at the discretion of the teacher within the first two weeks of being placed (4.2.1). Alderson et al (1996: 182) advocate asking teachers whether they think a learner is in the correct class during the first week of being placed before the learner has had time to improve for purposes of checking both concurrent and predictive validity. Going through the procedure of checking with the facilitator that placement is correct suggests that Business 1 is concerned with the accuracy of the placement test. Further evidence of this concern is the fact that learners are assessed twice (see p.38) before being placed, that multiple assessment occurs, as well as the initial efforts made by programme organisers to find what they considered to be a suitable placement test.

5.5.2 Business 2

At Business 2 the assessment was carried out for programmes other than ABET; that is, for programmes the organisation was intending to use on the floor. However, literacy was also tested. The fact that no further assessment was undertaken in order to place learners in the correct levels once the ABET programme was implemented, could be an indication that there was confusion about methods and purposes of testing for ABET. It also shows the arbitrariness of ABET placement testing procedures, and supports NUM's criticism that the NIG do not explain how assessment will be implemented (2.5.1). Since assessment was implemented in conjunction with the union (see pp.44-45), it is unclear why Business 2 was not more aware of the issues involved in implementing an ABET programme.

5.6 Knowledge and literacy

5.6.1 Business 1

The fact that at Business 1 during the pilot study (see p.40), the facilitator and I had to spend a fair amount of time explaining to the learners what the questions were asking, could be owing to the complicatedness of the questions, and/or because the learners were attempting to respond to them in a second language. It could also indicate that they were unfamiliar with a context that required them to adopt a distanced, objective perspective on their own experiences. Bourdieu (1998: 132 cited in Muller, 1998: 53) describes this process as asking interviewees to be their own sociologists. Muller (1998: 53) believes that it is a mistake to expect interviewees to have access to the grounds for their actions.

At Business 1, judging from learners' responses concerning their understandings of what literacy means, literacy is understood as the ability to read and write (4.2.3). This is the narrow,

functional way in which literacy is interpreted by the NIG model (2.5.1). These learners' understandings of literacy suggest that the ABET programme at Business 1 has adopted this limited view and is passing it on to learners. Business 1 referred to the placement test as 'an assessment of reading and writing ability' (see 4.2.1, p.38). On the other hand, learners at Business 1 may simply hold the average, commonsense view of literacy. As mentioned above, respondents are not sociologists or sociolinguists. Notwithstanding the fact that this may be the average, commonsense view of literacy, a more holistic view of literacy could be more empowering to workers (see 2.6.2.1 for the definition of literacy suggested by this research), since it would not marginalize them as those who lacked reading and writing skills, but would rather include them among those who had many skills in many different contexts.

The fact that learners viewed literacy as the ability to read and write also helps to explain why learners felt that the test evaluated their knowledge (4.2.2.1), notwithstanding the fact that certain individuals in this same group stated that they felt the test should include something work-related (see p.42) which was obviously perceived as part of their knowledge and which the test did not include.

5.6.2 Business 2

At Business 2 respondents did not have a clear understanding of what literacy meant to them (4.3.2, p.46). One could infer from this that the issue of literacy had not been discussed as part of the programme and/or that it was not an issue to learners. Learners perceived knowledge as learning and understanding. They viewed their colleague as possessing knowledge because he could identify the contents of drums on the factory floor by the smell (4.3.2). It can thus be inferred that they perceived their colleague as having knowledge because by their standards, he

had >learned= what the drums=contents were and >understood= what the drums contained.

Since this worker was not one of the interviewees, I have no way of determining whether he had second language knowledge of the contents of the drums. However, the >knowledge= which he had, was perceived of as knowledge by the research participants and this knowledge is crucial to the assessment of prior language learning because it is the contexts in which knowledge is acquired which give rise to language, and it is this language knowledge that ABET placement tests seek to evaluate. In attempting to implement outcomes based education, SAQA insists on a national standard which >attempts to keep content, format, scoring, standards and conditions of administration as comparable as possible from one test candidate to another@ (NTB, 1994: 36). This is excessively idealistic as well as being short-sighted if one considers the many different contexts in which second language learning has taken place, the work environment being not the least important of these for adult employees who are among the intended recipients of ABET. It is also debatable whether a very indirect test can really provide valid assessment of the skills it is intended to measure (Bailey, 1998 cited in Witthaus, 1999: 19).

5.7 Relevance

5.7.1 Business 1

Candidates at Business 1 thought Question 5.1 on page 9 (see Appendix A) fair, stating that they could >do@ it (4.2.3, p.43). Perhaps this is because the question is strongly context-based (according to one of the evaluators), whereas in other questions (for example, the cloze procedure on pages 4-6 of Appendix A) contextual clues were considered to be minimal. It is interesting to note that at the Port Elizabeth Technikon in the Engineering Faculty a drawing of this nature is referred to as a technical drawing and students are explicitly taught how to describe such a

drawing following specific steps. According to Altheide and Johnson (1994: 496), in order for assessment to be valid it is necessary to know how the respondent was situated to interpret the message. Not to do this is to make a gross error. One way of determining how respondents are situated is to conduct a needs analysis prior to testing.

As noted in section 4.4.2 (p.50) the cloze procedure in the Prolit test used for placement by Business 1 included words like retirement, supermarket chain, bursary and university. This suggests that it is assumed that candidates have prior second language knowledge of these types of contexts/discourses. Since test scores determine the level of placement in an ABET programme, candidates would be discriminated against if they did not know the language of these types of discourses/contexts. The fact that the words retirement and chain appear later in the cloze passages (on page 6), whereas bursary and university appear on page 5 (see Appendix A) indicates that they are considered to be more difficult since the test has cut-off scores for the different levels of ABET (4.4.2, p.50). The above observations raise the question of how the types of contexts in which these words occur were selected as being representative of learners' prior second language knowledge, and how it was decided that testees were more likely to know words like university and bursary than words like retirement and chain.

In summary, although the test does not include any work-related contexts which employees might be expected to have prior second language knowledge of, it includes contexts which learners for ABET Levels 2 and 3 would more than likely be unfamiliar with. In support of the above statement I wish to cite my own experience as a lecturer in English as a second language which has shown that matriculants are not familiar with words like supermarket chain, retirement, bursary and university when they first arrive at a tertiary institution. In further support of my

argument that ABET testees would not be familiar with the above language, I wish to refer my reader to Appendix B which contains examples of ABET Levels 2 and 3 learners' responses to the researcher's questions.

5.7.2 Business 2

In its evaluation, NUM (2.5.1) states that in assessment language and literacy demands are perceived as not corresponding closely to what is required on the job, and the fact that learners at Business 2 were sure there was nothing in the placement test which related to the actual work done by themselves in the factory supports NUM's statement. To be authentic the context in which a second language was learned must be taken into consideration when testing for prior second language learning and the CEP test (Appendix Z) used at Business 2 did not include the learners' work context within its parameters. This is what Messick (1989: 34, see p.24) refers to as construct under-representation. French (1997: 36), too, points to the need for keeping learning relevant to the learners and linked to their work situations, which is further motivation for including work context in an ABET placement test since language outcomes are related to work context. This research supports NUM's conclusion in its evaluation of the NIG (2.5.1) that limited recognition of prior knowledge acquired informally through work experience is taking place. In other words, prior second language learning in all its complexity is not being recognised.

* * *

The NQF wishes to ensure commonality of standards and assessment (NTB, 1994: 93; 2.4.1.1, p.10). In attempting to make the tests uniform, they [the tests] do not include work-related context, so are not valid instruments to assess prior second language learning which relies on context. However, in this regard it is worth bearing in mind Carroll's (1980: 37) observation: 'The demands of authenticity will often conflict with the need to produce a reliable testing

instrument@.

6. CONCLUSION

6.1 Introduction

This research has investigated the way in which placement testing is being interpreted in ABET. This chapter presents the limitations of the research and the conclusions arrived at. Although the conclusions are presented in relation to the aims of the research (see 2.1 and 5.1) and therefore appear under separate headings, they should not be seen as separate issues since they influence one another and are therefore linked. This research has suggested that placement testing should be viewed holistically. The goals of the organisation, conceptions of literacy and the level of transparency affect the validity of a placement test, in other words, assessment is more than the placement test.

6.2 Limitations of the research

This research has several limitations. Firstly, the research attempts to investigate a largely abstract concept, prior learning. Assessing prior learning makes different demands on the evaluation process from assessing learning within the formal education system. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, evaluation practices and procedures do not yet exist and experienced staff and customized services are not yet available to deal with prior learning (Muller, 1997:5) and secondly, unlike formal learning, this research has shown that informal learning is individualistic and context-dependent (Phillips, 1990; Breier, 1998; Street, 1984, 1995). Notwithstanding the different ways in which formal and informal learning are acquired, the NQF wishes to ensure commonality of standards and assessment for RPL (NTB, 1994: 36, 93). Literacy must of necessity be interpreted narrowly in order to achieve the NQF's goal. As a result, prior second language learning is being assessed at the two sites chosen for this research using the same testing

procedure used in the formal education sector, namely, by means of a written test. The researcher thus had to attempt to analyse validity of assessment of prior second language learning by means of a method which is recognised as being inappropriate to prior learning because tests can fall short of the real range of options that exist in the world (see 2.3, p.5). Furthermore, the method is recognised to have severe limitations for testees who have not been through uniform, standardized learning and assessment experiences (see 2.3, p.5).

A second limitation of the study is that the researcher chose validity criteria which appeared relevant to prior learning in order to evaluate the tests, namely, relevance, authenticity and content. Someone else may choose different criteria, for example, concurrent and predictive validity, and find the tests valid. The problem of determining validity was exacerbated by the fact that I did not have the learners' responses to the tests in order to obtain a clear picture of the standards used when the tests were marked. I compromised by asking two outside evaluators to comment on the tests in order to ascertain their validity. This was an inadequate method of attempting to check the tests' validity.

A third, and more serious limitation of the research, was that in seeking to determine how prior second language learning was being interpreted in ABET and how its interpretation might affect the validity of a placement test, I collected data from testees by means of questionnaires and interviews. I used questionnaires in order to determine workers' perceptions of the assessment process and test content. This proved problematic since I had either overestimated respondents' English ability, or had phrased the questions in such a way that they were difficult to follow (see 4.2.2.1), or both. On the other hand, the facilitator and I were available to clarify the questions and so to minimise misunderstanding. Although I decided to use interviews to collect further

data, they yielded less reliable data than did the questionnaires. For example, responses to the questionnaires showed that respondents felt that work-related content should be included in the test. These responses were arrived at individually. In contrast, the interview situation at Business 1 yielded responses that were arrived at collectively (see 4.2.3) and to a lesser extent, the interview situation at Business 2 (see 4.3.2) did the same. Therefore the response from the group of learners at Business 1, that there was nothing in the test which should not have been included, is less reliable than the responses from the questionnaires. This raises questions about the feasibility of the interview for collecting data of this nature.

One of the problems with the interview was that the researcher could not speak an African language. Had I been able to speak Xhosa, I might have been able to probe deeply into respondents' feelings and views concerning the assessment process and test content. I might also have been able to become more a part of the setting, thereby enabling respondents to relate better to me and so become more forthcoming. Speaking an African language might also encourage respondents to express their opinions and views and facilitate participation (see 3.2.3). The above argument suggests that all researchers in education would benefit from being able to speak an African language, thereby obviating the need for an interpreter and lessening the effects of findings being interpretations of an interpretation. Failing this, the researcher's role is severely limited, as shown by this research.

A fourth limitation that was obvious at Business 2 was that I interviewed only those learners who had remained in the ABET programme. Interviewing those workers who had dropped out of the programme would have given more representative data.

6.3 Validity

It was not possible to reliably determine whether the tests yielded scores which could be shown to be fair and accurate reflections of the candidates' abilities (Alderson et al, 1996: 188; see p.28). This was partly due to the limitations of the research, but also for the following reasons. Firstly, the tests were not sufficiently representative and comprehensive of what they were supposed to measure (2.6.5, p.27). They were not authentic because they did not test real world language use (2.6.5, p.27) with regard to working environment. One of the tests included items that should have been omitted (context irrelevant items) and omitted items which should have been included (construct under-representation) (Messick, 1989: 34; see p.28) thus disadvantaging testees.

The tests assessed prior second language knowledge (reading, comprehending and writing) for purposes of placing learners at the correct levels in the ABET programme. However, in so doing they did not test whether candidates knew any second language related to their work environments. According to Breir (1998: 12) the language being assessed must be relevant to the individual's past experience. If work context was to be included in placement tests, test scores may show different second language learning ability. Including work context would also assist in assessment becoming a tool in learner development (2.5.1, p.17).

6.4 Literacy and knowledge

What to include and/or omit in an ABET placement test will be a problem for all test makers who wish to assess prior second language learning in ABET until literacy is perceived of holistically. Ideally, adult literacy should be viewed as enabling learners to be creative agents in their destinies (French & King, 1998: 3). In this regard, the NTB (1994: 27) views the RPL process as encouraging self assessment and enabling individuals to gain a better understanding of themselves.

The process should begin prior to assessment. Literacy assessment should be perceived of as a learning process, as a creative act that encourages adult employees to generate conceptions of their own needs. Literacy programmes could then be viewed as empowering learners to actively engage in the learning process (2.6.2.1, p.23), rather than as simply giving them the chance to learn to read and write, to use numbers sufficiently well to manage the everyday literacy demands expected of adults and to be able to communicate in the language of the management's choice (2.5.1, p.17). Although the NTB (1994: 3-4) states the necessity for a framework for the recognition of experiential/prior learning to open up further learning experiences outside of the clearly defined and demarcated systems of education, this research has shown that placement tests are being used to assess the communicative competence of the learner in relation to the curriculum and in relation to the national, standardized, credit-based NQF (NTB, 1994: 25).

Adult basic education should be relevant to learners' present and emerging needs (French & King, 1998: 3). What these needs are should be decided on by learners themselves and not by other people on their behalves, no matter how well-intentioned. It is facile to expect adults who have been discriminated against for so long to want to embark on a programme of lifelong learning (see 5.3.2, p.60) with no short-term tangible recompense. This is in line with research conducted by Maslow that gave rise to his 'Hierarchy of Needs' (cited in Fielding, 1995: 37-38). Workers have a need to be recognised for what they have been doing, for the experience they have gained in their working environments. When that immediate need has been met they may be motivated to address other self-actualisation needs.

The above statements represent the ideal. There are many who believe that it is in the learners' best interests that ABET providers look to the curriculum. NGOs in ABET are agencies of great

innovation and expertise and they should be used to good ends.

6.5 Transparency

The issue of transparency can become a problem at the level of ABET. Although it is to be striven for (2.5.1; NTB, 1994: 25), perfect transparency is not always feasible (5.4.1, p.60). However, learners are more likely to perform to the best of their abilities if they perceive the placement test to be valid and if there is transparency about what learners can realistically expect once they have been assessed. There must be transparency about the programme and about the time involved in order for learners to realise their goals. Determining the incentives and disincentives of workers for acquiring and exercising literate skills (Hull, 1993: 21) would assist ABET programme organisers in becoming more transparent since they would have to build the realisation of workers' goals into the organisation's conceptions for implementing the programme. Transparency would then become more holistic as it would include learners' aspirations as well as the views of those responsible for wanting to implement an ABET programme.

6.6 Goals

Criticisms of ABET include COSATU's (1997: 39, cited in Cooper, 1998: 12-13) report which states that RPL is being used in the workplace *to prove and maintain the exclusion of those who were disadvantaged by the education and training systems of the past and to advantage the few who have the versions of knowledge and skill (and attitude) that the employers are prepared to recognise*, that is, it is being used to *maintain the status quo*. COSATU may have expressed this criticism because it hoped that the recognition of prior learning would lead to improvement in workers' wages, grading and work conditions (see p.13) and instead it is being narrowly interpreted at the level of ABET where the aforementioned issues need to be addressed the most

urgently.

Related to the above perspectives is one that fears that there are possible fundamental flaws in the construction of ABET, in that it does not pay sufficient attention to the gap between the multiple literacies of everyday life and the introduced literacies of formal provision. At both businesses which were part of the research project, the recognition of prior second language learning was assessed in relation to the curriculum. At Business 2, although the stated goals were to enable workers to read the batch cards and work instructions, the test did not assess either of these work requirements. This supports NUM's contention that language and literacy demands are perceived by workers as not corresponding closely to what is required on the job (2.5.1). Although language is perceived as one of the critical areas of competence for further learning and progress (French & King, 1998: 4), workers perceive language and literacy as irrelevant, which negatively affects their desire to learn (2.5.1). To begin with, this dichotomy between the fundamental areas of learning and work-related needs could be addressed by using both standardized and oral (interviews) or performance tests to assess authentically. If the goals of workers and the goals of provider organisations could be married, ABET could have a chance of success.

At Business 1 the goals in implementing an ABET programme were to improve the quality of individuals by helping them to identify with the organisation so that they would have a sense of belonging and of being valued, to change the culture of the organisation and to improve the work ethic (4.2.1, p.38). The above goals fit in with the goals of the NTB for RPL (1994: 27) which are to increase self-esteem, self-confidence and motivation and to provide a foundation for further learning (2.2, p.4). As documented in this thesis, the key to achieving these goals lay in Business 1 integrating the ABET programme into the organisation in such a way that it was seen as a

vehicle for promotion and salary increases. Although the placement test used at Business 1 was not valid when analysed against the specific criteria chosen to assess validity in this study, Business 1 managed to stay within the boundaries of the NQF - which wishes to ensure commonality of standards with regard to assessment (NTB, 1994: 36) - while simultaneously addressing workers' needs. Business 1's experience supports French and King's (1998: 3) contention that type of assessment is determined more by the ways in which the results are used (consequential validity) than by methods. My conclusion is thus that as long as the testing process, and the programmes which are the results of placement are integrated into the culture of the organisation and tangible remuneration is given to workers who become part of that programme, ABET has a chance of success.

I wish to qualify the above statement by recognising that assessment is a profoundly serious affair, requiring specialisation and responsibility. Assessment practices must be informed and thoughtful (NTB, 1994: 22), since a lot more work is demanded than is usually assumed (French & King, 1998: 2). Tests are often an inappropriate way to test prior learning because they can fall short of the real range of options that exist in the world. This is especially so when assessing prior language learning because of the complexity of language knowledge (Shohamy, 1996: 153). For this reason Shohamy advocates multiple assessment procedures as does the NTB (1994: 95). In saying this I am aware that it is facile to assume that observation of performance and authentic tasks are necessarily more revealing than a test (French & King, 1998: 2). However, there are severe limitations to generic ways of assessing (French & King, 1998: 2-3) and at the level of ABET, assessment needs to be sensitive to diversity and disparity. Assessing the ability to read and write may be an ideal, but it has limited outcomes. At present, provider institutions are simply following a system that they are familiar with. However, the recognition of prior learning

requires a different, specialised system and methodology.

I recommend that provider institutions develop their own policies for practically assessing prior second language learning. Tests must be tailored to suit the particular organisation and other methods of assessment must be investigated and considered. Computer assessment is one such option. Computer testing makes provision for adaptative testing since the programme can adjust according to how the learner responds. It is also empowering for learners to be able to operate a computer after basic instruction, and this fits in with the concept of literacy as comprising a variety of contexts and uses.

6.7 Reflections on the research process and suggestions for further research

What I have found interesting while involved in this research is that at the outset one is not aware of all the issues. The issues unfold as one progresses. In this way this research has been challenging and rewarding.

Although the study was modest it serves to reiterate what other researchers and stakeholders in ABET have stated in the past. ABET qualifications look too closely at school as a model and not closely enough at the transformatory requirements of an adult education. From the perspective of this research, if RPL is to have meaning it should have meaning in the ABET placement test. I therefore suggest that research be carried out to investigate multiple methods of assessment in order to adequately recognise prior second language learning, and to ascertain what the effects would be of including relevant work-related context in assessment.

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