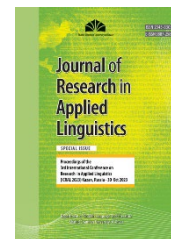




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Functional Literacy and New English Language Teaching Skills

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Abstract

The concept of functional literacy is reintroduced and discussed in this article. Since the term's inception on an international stage, we discuss several ways in which it has been interpreted in the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada. This ambiguity enables one to concentrate on professional endeavors while also explaining the term "functional literacy's" appeal to policymakers in the field of English language instruction. "Functional" is frequently interpreted in the context of assessing professional competencies and skills, among other, more recent developments. Assessment and comparison of texts and literacy levels through the use of reading aids and tests were motivated by the desire to associate literacy with employment prospects. In the framework of England's larger historical and political environment, we present a case study of the current state of literacy. The ambiguity of the term "functional literacy" explains its appeal to policymakers in the field of English language instruction in England, as it provides the historical and theoretical context that has been absent from recent policy announcements regarding adult literacy. We also identify correlations with broader policy contexts in the United Kingdom and Europe.

Keywords: Functional Literacy; English Language; Teaching Skills.

1. Introduction

Kenneth Levine wrote an article in 1982 about the dominance of the concept of functional literacy in adult basic education. We provide the historical and theoretical context that has been missing from recent adult literacy policy announcements. The term's ambiguity explains its popularity among policymakers in the field of English language teaching in England since World War II. The term "functional" almost vanished from policy discourse in the UK in the years following the publication of Levine's article. However, in 2007, the UK government announced a policy to introduce new Functional Skills qualifications for learners over the age of 14 in England. These qualifications, which cover English, Mathematics, and ICT, are available to both adults and children and may eventually replace the Skills for Life qualifications, which are designed for adult literacy learners. Thus, the term functional reappeared in the context of adult literacy with the 2007 policy announcement. We provide the historical and theoretical context that has been missing from recent adult literacy policy announcements. The term's ambiguity explains its appeal to policymakers in the field of English language teaching in England. However, there was no acknowledgment of the term's history or contrasting definitions, which shape contemporary understandings - albeit often subtly.

Despite the term's widespread popularity in a number of Anglophone countries at the time Levine was writing, he described it as "characterized by a systematic and insidious ambiguity that permits incongruent interpretations while simultaneously promoting a comfortable illusory consensus" (Blum et al., 2001). Originally, it was intended to signal real-life contexts and purposes. It was, however, appropriated by those who required cost-benefit analyses and a vocational and human resource model of literacy as a commodity. Despite widespread adoption, the concept lacked an operational definition. It was, however, based on the implicit assumption that literacy was concerned with reading rather than writing - a viewpoint that sees literacy primarily as a means of bringing people under the control of bureaucrats and state authority and control.

2. Literature Review

Many individuals fail to attain literacy, either due to insufficient education or in spite of receiving an adequate education. The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) established the broadest definition of literacy in 1949. It was believed that the ability to read and write was a fundamental right: individuals ought to be capable of attaining functional literacy within their cultural context (Bhola, 1995). The necessity arose for a practical and universally accepted definition that could not only distinguish literate individuals from illiterate individuals but also various intermediate levels. Literates possess the ability to read and write even a single word, whereas illiterates have never attended school and are, therefore, incapable of doing so (Reis and Castro-Caldas, 1997). When juxtaposed with literacy and illiteracy, the distinction between functional illiteracy and the conditions above lacks sufficient clarity.

Functionality, which constitutes the fundamental distinction between these terms, has never been defined operationally. Recent estimates place the number of functionally illiterate in Europe at approximately 80 million; Sweden has the lowest proportion at 8 percent, while Portugal has the highest at 40 percent. Nevertheless, functional illiteracy is not implied in the original International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) report, which is widely cited. Epidemiological estimates of functional illiteracy rates may be deemed unreliable due to the fact that estimates derived from distinct diagnostic assessment standards and definitions may diverge substantially.

The distinction between functional illiteracy, literacy, and illiteracy is not as clear as it is between literacy and illiteracy. The essence of the distinction between these terms, functionality, was never operationally defined. The number of functional illiterates in Europe was recently estimated to be around 80 million; their proportion is lowest in Sweden, at 8%, and highest in Portugal, at 40% (Grotlüschen and Riekmann, 2011). The original International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) report, on the other hand, does not imply functional illiteracy. Different definitions and diagnostic assessment standards can result in fundamentally different epidemiological estimates, making any estimates of functional illiteracy rates unreliable (Vágvölgyi et al., 2016).

3. Methodology

Our research involved collecting and conducting close critical reading as well as some linguistic analysis of how literacy is defined in a variety of policy documents. "We provide the historical and theoretical context missing from recent adult literacy policy announcements in order to consider how the changing policy environment of Skills for Life was framing the nature and goals of adult literacy. All documents chosen for analysis or reference came from a corpus" Rakhilina (2007) of texts that included the following:

- 1) An assortment of historical documents that refer to the notion of functional literacy;
- 2) Recent policy announcements regarding adult literacy lack the historical and theoretical context that is provided by documents on the official website of the European Union. The term "functional literacy" is favored by policymakers in the realm of English language instruction and training in England due to its ambiguity, which also facilitates the formulation of policies resulting from the Lisbon Strategy.
- 3) English political leaders' policy declarations and speeches that sought to reconcile the objectives of the Lisbon Strategy with domestic issues and signaled the transition to functional skills;
- 4) Excerpts from the website of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) that provide practitioners with an explanation of the new policy;
- 5) Excerpts from the recently established standards for English language instruction in adult literacy that provide practitioners with comprehensive guidance on how to teach functional skills;
- 6) A government report titled Skills for Life, Changing Lives, which examines the skills of adults;
- 7) A booklet titled Functional Skills: the Facts (DCSF/BIS 2010) that aims to furnish various audiences with a concise overview of the novel policy.

4. Results

Complementing our analysis of critical sections of this document is a discourse on Functional Skills: the Facts, an additional document that serves as an illustration of numerous characteristics that we have identified in previously examined documents. Moreover, it is of notable importance due to its appearance at a critical juncture, supposedly signifying the conclusion of the policy's development phase and its apparent intention of facilitating its nationwide execution. In addition, we cite three additional documents in support of the arguments we present regarding Changing Lives. The initial document referenced is the Functional Skills Standards, which were officially released by the QCA in 2007. An important early source of official information for practitioners, this was one of the earliest documents to provide detailed information regarding the proposed structure and content of Functional Skills. The second document to

which we refer, a Green Paper that was released in 1998, a number of months after the Labour government assumed power, outlined the objectives of the nascent administration regarding lifelong learning. It was of the utmost importance for adult literacy English language instruction because it declared the government's intention to form a working group (the Moser group) to provide basic skills provision after school. A considerable number of the suggestions put forth in the report authored by Bonch-Osmolovskaya et al. (2017) were subsequently integrated into the Skills for Life initiative. In addition, a concise allusion is made to Gee's (1990) original Skills for Life strategy in order to draw parallels with *Changing Lives*.

In *Changing Lives*, we focus on the representation of social actors and their actions for two reasons: first, we see the shaping of learners' and practitioners' identities as an important aspect of the policy process in and of itself Nicholls (2003), and second, we believe that such representations constitute a critical mechanism through which policy shapes the possibilities for teaching and learning. Although we thoroughly examined the entire *Changing Lives* document, the majority of the examples we discuss here are drawn from the Foreword and the Introduction. The main body, as one might expect from a document of this type, repeats and expands on the information provided in the first two sections (Semino, 2010).

However, as Levin points out, the term "functional literacy" quickly became associated with ideas and English language teaching practices associated with the human resource model that took over English language teaching and training in the United Kingdom and other countries in the 1980s. Literacy is directly linked to economic development, individual prosperity, and professional success in this model. Attempts to measure and compare literacy levels and texts using tests and reading aids were made in order to link literacy with job opportunities. Still, when Levin wrote in the early 1980s, there were few attempts to operationalize the measure of adult literacy. He concludes his historical overview with the Adult Activity Survey (APS), the first major attempt to create a tool for adult literacy research. The adult literacy operationalization project has grown rapidly since then. We see the emergence of a performative language of skills and competencies characteristic of the human capital approach in the definition adopted by APS (Blunt, 2004).

4.1. Consider the Reasons for the Necessary Changes

Urgent action is required to address the VUCA environment of fluctuating instability, uncertainty, complexity, and originality. Scientific knowledge generates not only novel prospects for problem resolution but also disruptive transformations across all sectors of the economy. Scientific and technological advancements: The development of artificial intelligence prompts fundamental inquiries into the nature of humanity and ethical considerations. As a result of the emergence of the global economy, there are now additional concerns regarding cyber security and privacy protection. Migration and urbanization continue to expand globally, resulting in social change. Diversity on a national and cultural level transforms nations, communities, and their cultures. A rise in inequality is observed.

3. Vladimir Putin, president of the Russian Federation, defined it unequivocally: "... in order to equip children for a dynamic and swiftly evolving life, instruct them in the acquisition of novel knowledge and abilities, and foster uninhibited, innovative thinking..." 4. Functional Literacy: The capacity to apply the entirety of one's lifelong acquired knowledge, skills, and abilities to solve the most diverse array of daily challenges in communication, social interactions, and human endeavors; 5. The primary characteristics of a functionally literate individual are the following: independence, knowledge, the ability to navigate interpersonal relationships in alignment with societal norms and specific qualities that are considered key competencies, self-determination, self-improvement, and a drive to achieve desired outcomes; problem-solving capabilities; independent discovery of novel concepts; discernment of what is significant and engaging; capacity to engage in relationships with the external environment (Yarullin et al., 2017). 6. Metrics for assessing functional literacy; 7. The significance of the instructor's role in fostering functional literacy; 8. The contemporary function of the English language Approximately 600 million individuals (native speakers) exclusively speak English as their first language. The population of individuals proficient in the English language exceeds 1.5 billion. Approximately 300 million individuals in China are English language learners.

5. Discussion

In order to succeed in a labor market that is constantly evolving, education for global competence can increase employability. In many professions, success is contingent on the ability to communicate effectively and conduct oneself appropriately within diverse teams. As long as technology continues to facilitate global communication, it will continue to be so. An increasing number of employers are interested in candidates who can readily adapt, apply, and transfer their

knowledge and skills to novel situations. In order to be globally competitive in the workforce of the twenty-first century, youth must comprehend the intricate dynamics of globalization, be receptive to individuals of various cultures, establish trust within diverse teams, and exhibit mutual respect (Nurutdinova, 2022).

Our discussion also draws attention to similarities in recent policy developments in these countries. We would argue that while the term "functional literacy" may not be used universally, the specific assumptions and approaches it signals are a common feature of such developments. We've shown how the concept of 'functionality' is appealing to policymakers because its ambiguity allows it to bring together social actors with disparate, if not conflicting, interests. It does, however, tend to narrow the discourse and limit opportunities to promote alternative visions for literacy English language teaching that acknowledge the diversity of literacy learners. We contend that the implementation of Functional Skills represents a significant depletion of the discourse that has underpinned adult literacy English language teaching in the UK for the last 30 years (Shakirova & Ismagilova, 2020).

6. Conclusion

Why, given the contentious history of functional literacy, is it regaining prominence in English policy? Part of the answer could be that it never truly went away or was replaced by a more acceptable definition; it simply went underground, coexisting in a contradictory way with other visions for literacy English language teaching. Barton observes a chasm between rhetoric and practice. "In such statements, international bodies are attempting to incorporate new approaches while maintaining a rigid functional approach," he says of the current discourses used by UNESCO, the OECD, and the European Union. This is one of several areas in literacy research where I see attempts to fit new ideas into the creaking framework of outworn theories that can no longer withstand the strain. UNESCO and other international organizations must reconsider the ideas and theories that underpin the goals and methods. The liberal goals of emancipation and the practical programs that are funded are at odds. The concept of competing definitions of literacy underlying the various approaches allows us to see things more clearly."

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