



Viewing Literacy Development of Adult Learner Through the Lenses of a Widened Social Context

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Abstract

Adult learning is one of the major parts in literacy education. Previously, most of the academic researchers had been carried out on the basis of cognitive perspective. It is necessary to study adult learners' literacy and orality in social context. With the aim to investigate the relation between learning literacy and social context, it is found that adult learners are largely situated in the social context. Adults of 25-34, 35-44, and 45-54 age groups are more likely to study literacy, who, however, have few opportunities in writing practice.

Key words: Adult learning; Literacy; Social context; Cognitive perspective; Educational context; Communicative language teaching

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

With continuing evolvement of adult education, a number of scholars have done research based on the relationship between literacy and social context (Hendricks, 2004; Robinson, 2008; Siegel, 2010; Basu et al., 2008; Black et al., 2013). Through the investigation of the previous study, I found that most of the academic researchers had been carried out on the basis of cognitive perspective. It is until

recent years, that a number of researches have been done on the relationship between literacy and social context, from a theoretical and cross-cultural point of view. As far as a sociolinguist is concerned, however, the focal point of this relationship is difference between literacy and orality in educational context with the problems that may occur when learners read or write, rather than the influence to the literacy teaching and learning brought by certain social context.

Language is for communication. According to Street (1995), social and material conditions affect the significance of a given form of communication. There is a growing support for the claim that teaching reading or writing in certain social context may be beneficial to adult learners' better comprehension of literacy. Therefore, it is necessary for literacy teachers or adult learners to view literacy development through social context, and utilise it to achieve better teaching or learning results.

1.2 Aim of the Essay

With the aim to investigate the relation between learning literacy and social context, the essay is designed to answer the questions below:

- What are the definitions of adult learners and social context?
- What features do adult learners have that influence their learning process and outcome?
- How does social context affect their literacy learning?
- What suggestions can be made for the literacy development of adult learners?

Also, in this paper, I will put forward some suggestions based on the impact brought about by social context.

2. THEORIES AND PRACTICES

Teaching literacy to adults is not simply an unproblematic way. The theories and practices related to adult learners'

characteristics and the functions of using social context in learning literacy are needed to be considered.

2.1 Social Context

What do we mean by social context? Is it a classroom where students communicate with teachers? Is it a purchase action happening between customers and salesmen? Or is it a telephone call from families and friends? The above aspects may all be right. Social context has multiple meanings: Kardos et al. (2001) considered social context as culture and backgrounds which influenced students' behaviours and attitudes; Frank (2009) regarded social context as a collective concept, and added resources and social relations into its definition; Penuel et al (2009) also thought social context as a collective notion and used the goal of school as social context. In summary, social context refers to a collective concept of social background, relationship, and behaviours that are relevant to individuals' everyday life.

People live in the society, where they interact with each other. In other words, social context influences students' learning experiences and behaviours to some extent. In the area of teaching and learning, "social context plays an integral part within the teaching and learning domain" (Perlman, 2013, p.46). Moreover, in the study of Edmunds, Ntoumanis, & Duda (2006), social context was proved to be an efficient way to enhance students' learning results. It mainly consists of the participants, the culture that interrelates with them, and the environment where they interact (Vallerand & Losier, 1999). According to Hamilton (2010, p.11), there are five main features of social context in adult learners' literacy learning, namely, "participants, activities, settings, domains, and resources". These characteristics interact with each other and contribute to their positive learning results. Utilising these five features can document with learners "how literacy fits into their lives, what it means to them and where sources of difficulty or interest might lie" (Hamilton, 2010, p.12). Therefore, social context plays a significant role in adult learners situated social practice. In following sections, I will view adult learners and literacy in social context and analyse the relationship among these factors.

2.2 Adult Learner

What is an adult learner? A number of scholars have defined this terminology in the previous study. According to Jarvis (1995, p.43), "adulthood is reached when individuals are treated by others as if they are socially mature and when they consider themselves to achieve this status". With regard to age, it is difficult to define a concrete time for adulthood. "Learning policy tends to treat adults as people aged 19 or over" (Hillage et al., 2000, p.ix). Generally speaking, the age for early adult transition is from 17 to 22, when adolescences take their "first few steps in the adult world" (Corder, 2008, p.3). Therefore, in a border view, adult learner can be considered as post-16 learners. With reference to Huang and Nisbet (2014), adult learners can control their own learning. In other words, adult learners have a clear concept of what to learn and how to learn. Nevertheless, to define the maturity of a person is very "difficult" (Jarvis 1995, p.46) in that it is challenging to observe the brain development and insight thinking mode. What contributes to a more strenuous situation is that the human brain continues to "grow neurons" (TLRP, 2007, p.9) in adulthood. This phenomenon suggests that the human brain is designed to lifelong learning and to help human beings adapt to new environment, situations, and experiences. Under the complication of human physical development, a convenient way to comprehend adult learners is to analyse their "general characteristics" (Polson, 1993, p.29).

As a main body of the society, the learning process and outcome of adult learners are always modified by their social identity, previous learning experiences, family, work, and other factors relating to the society. According to Barton et al. (2006), adult learners have certain characteristics that influence their learning process and outcome, namely, the significance of personal histories, current life environments and events, current practices and identifies, and the imagined future, all of which will be analysed in the following sections.

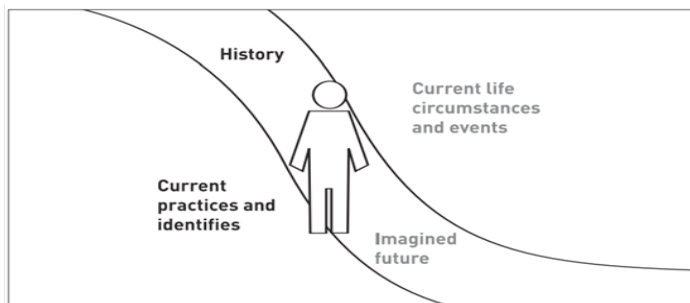


Figure A
Four aspects vital to the learning process and outcome of adult learners
Source: Barton et al., 2006, p.11

It can be seen from Figure A that the relationship of the four factors is complicated and complex and the learning process is not simply a direct line but waves with multiple movements.

Generally speaking, adult learners, in most cases, bring their personal history and education background with them when they start their lessons. Even though different people have distinct and individual previous experiences, they may have a common theme or follow an analogous pattern when they come from similar community settings (Knowles et al., 2005). For example, in the study of socially-organised inequalities, Bynner and Parsons (1997, 2001) explained that certain social exclusion resulted in the problems of learning literacy, such as unemployment, poverty, family struggle, health condition. Henderson et al. (2007) did research on the employment and learning, and found that the interaction between each influenced adult learners' transition of learning. These aspects may shape "the way they engage" (Barton et al. 2007, p.18).

The life events and conditions also influence their learning to a great extent. With regard to Smith (2010, p.3), "the life circumstances and experiences" can be an increasing resource for learning. However, in terms of Barton et al. (2006, p.11), the excruciating experiences and negative history of education and authority lead to some "pessimistic opinions" of their formal learning. A number of individuals may have lived with unsettled and changing family backgrounds. It is highly possible that these people experienced family violence and physical or mental abuse. Therefore, they are more likely to feel upset and passive about learning topics relating to family (Horsman, 2000). Another example is the misuse of drugs and alcohol that causes family issues and social problems. People with history of "trauma and aggression" (Barton et al., 2006, p.11) tend to meet with mental struggles when they engage in literacy study with related areas

The access to formal education is greatly influenced by people's current practices and identities. When adults start literacy learning, they not only reflect their previous learning experiences on their study, but also bring their competences and talents into the classes (Reay, 2004). Learners' capacities and aptitudes are essential and vital in their future development. "Learning can only have an impact on people's lives and futures if they perceive that it can do so" (Barton et al., 2007, p.23). Apart from their social identities, adult learners also have the need to face the difficulties in structuring everyday life. This situation puts great challenges on the literacy provision and its assumptions. An apparent lack of structure in people's lives is closely related to the life circumstances and events that they are dealing with on a daily basis Barton et al. (2006). In the "drug and alcohol support centre" (Barton et al., 2006, p.16), people are given guidance of a regular routine in their everyday life so as to deal with their addition.

On the one hand, the way in which people evaluate themselves and earn their living might restrict their motivations to learn. In contemporary society, numerous individuals have resentment towards the formal education and claim that it brings them pervasive physical and emotional maltreatment (Barton et al., 2006). The educators, as well, may have negative experiences on the formal education. This is partly because the school work or assignment sometimes is too complicated and not relevant to their social circumstances. Owing to this situation, adult learners may skip or even drop out the lessons. Policy without respect and understanding also declines learners' motivation to study (Rosenberg, 2007). On the other hand, the way in which learners imagine themselves in the future and their aspirations to achieve good outcomes motivate them to engage in the learning. What learners see as possible to themselves influences their imagined future. People build up internal motivation when they grow up (Knowles 1984). What they see in their inside "figured world" contributes to their learning practices and identities (Bartlett and Holland, 2002). However, the imagined future is not set in stone but changes with social context over time (Barton et al., 2007). As they accumulate confidence and self-esteem in their learning context, they may begin to think of alternatives for learning activities they participate in.

People may have "multiple roles" (Polson, 1993, p.29) and responsibilities in the society. These factors often influence their choice of learning because some of the responsibilities are considered as priorities over their learning opportunities, such as family issue, working conditions, and community roles. For instance, when children become sick, parents are needed to take good care of them, which is more important than their learning. The association between people in or out of the community settings also has a significant impact on learners' learning engagement. A sound and egalitarian relationship between teachers and students is likely to contribute to their successful learning outcomes. The relationship from outside the community sites may also play a part. Learners' enthusiasm to engage in the class is often shaped by other learners' presence or absence. Sharing experiences from outside the community settings is usually appreciated.

As to the theory of adult education, it is needed to emphasise a terminology, Andragogy, the synonym of adult education (Knowles, 2005). It was initially used in 1833, when Alexander Kapp developed this term to analyse Plato's educational theory (Smith, 2010). In 1921, in Rosenstock's report, he considered Andragogy as "collective requirements" (Nottingham Andragogy Group, 1983, p.v) for adult education, such as methods and teachers. "Eduard Lindeman was the first writer in English to pick up on Rosenstock's use of the term" (Smith, 2010, p.2). In contemporary UK, adult learners have long been

a concern of educators. A number of researches have been carried out on this area, especially after World War One, when plenty of refugees from “Germany and Spain” (Rosenberg, 2007, p.51) settled in the UK. “Andragogy (andr- meaning ‘man’) could be deviated from pedagogy (paid- meaning ‘child’ and agogos meaning ‘leading’)” (Davenport 1993, p.114). According to Knowles (2005), andragogy is premeditated and directed activity that assists adult learners to progress, which include five characteristics: self-concept, experience, readiness to learn, orientation to learn, and motivation to learn (Smith, 2010). It assumes that adult learners are “self-directed” (Blondy, 2007, p.118). “As individuals accomplish and fulfil the lower-level items of the hierarchy, they gradually become more self-actualized and wiser” (Huitt, 2004).

With reference to the current situation of adult learners, Department for Business Innovation & Skills (DBIS, 2013) made a survey of adult literacy problem, which demonstrated the current backgrounds of adult learners (age and ethnic backgrounds). There were slightly more learners in 25-34, 35-44, and 45-54 age groups (DBIS, 2013). Therefore, more emphasis should be given to these groups. On the aspect of ethnic background, DBIS (2013) analysed the major adult literacy learners’ ethnicity and average scores distribution. The White and Mixed race get the highest average scores in the literacy test, whereas the “Asian or Asian British” and “Black or Black British” receive the lowest. This score distribution implies educators to give special treatment to the Asian and Black, and to understand and utilise their social context and cultural background. Learners from other ethnic group also give challenges to teachers in that they may have complicated and complex social background. The literacy teachers, therefore, should make good use of the popular social context, which is commonly shared by different ethnic groups.

Through the analysis of adult learners’ characteristics and theories, it can be seen that adult learners are socially constructed in that their characteristics have a close connection to the social context that influence their learning process and outcomes. They have the ability to extend their learning from childhood and bring certain individual histories and everyday life circumstances into their learning process. The imagined future and self-evaluation influence their motivation to study. Scholars tend to use Andragogy to represent the study of adult education and include learners’ characteristics into the theory basis. Currently, more learners from 25 to 54 join the formal education

2.3 Literacy

Nowadays, the competence of reading and writing is viewed as a basic skill in people’s everyday life. Since 1948, without formal schooling systems, UNESCO (2012) has already promoted adult literacy in developing countries. In the early 1970s, the provision of adult

literacy in the UK stemmed from the Right to Read Campaign when adult literacy became a focus for social policy and was recognised as a human right (Hamilton, 2010). In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, literacy teaching developed and formulated a number of forms. As a result, the number of literacy class has increased gradually (Barton et al., 2007). The Further and Higher Education Act brought statutory position to adult literacy for the first time in 1992, which, then, became one subject with the control of colleges and universities. The provision of literacy was finally set with funding given from central government to create the Skills for Life strategy in 2001 (Hamilton, 2010).

It is widely accepted that literacy is the capability of reading and writing. With reference to Freire (1972, p.32), literacy involves “learners’ critical reflection” on their social context and the position they take with it. A literate person should have the knowledge and skills that qualified him in reading and writing, and enabled him to use those skills in his group and community (Titmus, 1989). In defining literacy, Baynham (1995, p.8) put forward “functional literacy” meaning that literacy provides functions for the participants of a society to achieve their goals. However, Rassool (1999, p.7) raised another term “basic literacy” as “the acquisition of technical skills involving the decoding of written texts and the writing of simple statements within the context of everyday life”. McCaffery (2007, p. 35) also defined this term as “a set of social and cultural practices linked by the use of the written word, and a tool for critical reflection and action for social change”.

“Literacy is the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts, which involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society.”

UNESCO (2012, p.5)

Through historical development of the definition of literacy, it can be summarised that literacy is the competence (knowledge and skills) of reading and writing in different social environments, which reflects the participants and contributes to achieve their goals in their community.

As stated in the definition of literacy, literacy is largely related to social context, especially its “activity, settings, domain, and resources” (Hughes and Schwab, 2010, p.). Activity (also called task) means what learners do with the text, which is not merely about reading and writing, but the literacy context and the learning strategy. As literacy is situated in the social context (Barton, 2009), the different places of social activities can influence adult learners’ learning outcome. Generally speaking, the most common place for learning literacy is the classroom, where teachers give lesson to adult learners. However, their aim of learning literacy is not merely studying in a classroom but

utilising the literacy skills in their everyday life (Barton, 2009). Domains include both values and purposes, not just place. Teachers should provide adult learners with suitable classroom atmosphere and multiple tasks.

The resources for literacy are social constructed. According to the survey of DBIS (2013, p.112), adult learners have preference to the text types. Adults in England were reported to use more frequent reading of almost all the different text types, apart from professional journals and scholarly publications and diagrams. The most popular reading text types were letters, memos or emails. Approximately 64% of the adults in England read letters, memos, or emails every day (DBIS, 2013). Similarly, articles in newspapers, magazines or newsletters and books, fiction, or non-fiction are also commonly read, occupying 49% and 31%, respectively (DBIS, 2013). Adults read a number of materials in their every life, which provide rich resources for their language acquisition. It can also be inferred that most reading of their every reading practice is related to the social context. The most frequent materials (letters, memos, or emails) are used to communicate with social members.

Unlike reading, adults have few opportunities to practice their writing skills after work. At the same time, they have few forms of writing. The chart shows that adults in England have few practices on writing apart from work, and they mostly use their writing skills on writing letters, memos, or emails. Except from the above activities, adults rarely write in their everyday life. Based on the above data, adults have few opportunities in writing. Therefore, the purpose of setting a social learning environment should be made for improving writing skills. Reading, on the other hand, is being practiced by adults every day. In spite of this situation, it is still necessary to offer guidance and situated setting to learners to improve their literacy level.

4. CONCLUSION

This essay has viewed adult learners and literacy in the Lense of a widened social context and discussed the theories of adult learners, literacy, and the impact of social context on both aspects.

It is found that adult learners are largely situated in the social context. The social characteristics of adult learners play a vital part in their learning process and outcomes. Class activities and learning materials should be prepared based on the investigation of learners' histories and everyday life circumstances. Teachers are supposed to help learners build up their confidence and form a sound and peaceful relationship with learners. Also, teachers should understand learners' absence because of their social responsibilities and offer opportunities for them to improve and accumulate self-esteem.

Social context also affects adult learners' literacy learning. Adults of 25-34, 35-44, and 45-54 age groups

are more likely to study literacy. Special attention should be paid to their context. Because learners may come from different ethnic background, it is necessary for teachers to make good use of the popular social context, which is commonly shared by different ethnic groups. Adults use a number of reading skills in their everyday life. They often read letters, memos, or emails, and articles in newspapers, magazines or newsletters as everyday practices. However, they have little opportunity to practice their writing. Teachers' ought to focus more on their writing skills improvement and provide rich resources and tasks related to their everyday life. Finally, the learning settings are supposed to fit learners' everyday circumstances. Teachers can build up proper and situated learning environment for adult learners.

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APPENDIX

Form A Age Band

Age band	IALS per cent
16-24	18
25-34	22
35-44	23
45-54	20
55-65	17
Total	100

Source: DBIS 2013

Form B Ethnicity and Average Literacy Scores

Test language same as native language	Literacy
White	276
Mixed race	277
Asian or Asian British	244
Black or Black British	242
Other ethnic group	254

Source: DBIS 2013

Form C Adult Learners' Everyday Writing Practice

Text Type	Percentage
Letters, memos, or emails	29%
Fill in form	1%
Write reports	1%
Write articles for newspapers, magazines or ewletters	1%

Source: DBIS 2013

Form D Adult Learners' Everyday Reading Practice

Text Type	Percentage
Letters, memos, or emails	64%
Articles in newspapers, magazines or newsletters	49%
Bills, invoices, bank statements, or other financial statements	16%
Books, fiction, or non-fiction	31%
Directions, or instructions	23%
Manuals or reference materials	5%
Articles, in professional journals or scholarly publications	5%
Diagrams, maps, or schematics	3%

Source: DBIS 2013