

Could One Become Literate in Literacy Courses?

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to determine the literacy skill level of the adults who participated in the basic level literacy programs when they complete the program and to investigate the relation of the determined level of literacy skill with socio-economic features of adults. Research is a descriptive study using mixed-method design. Study is conducted in four different cities (i.e., Şanlıurfa, Ankara, İstanbul, Diyarbakır). As a result of the study, 85% of course participants cannot reach desired reading level. Moreover, while it is expected that course participants read 90-100 words in two minutes, it is seen that only 13.4% of them reached this level. The rate of writing sufficiency is only 26.4%. As a whole, the literacy skill level of younger adults is higher. The achievement of participants who are working in an income generating job about reading and writing skills is higher than the others. Adults who have attended primary education were also more successful than the others. Another differential feature of successful adults is that they are more linked with the urban life. Having more literate adult around them and the usage of written communication could be effective for the development of their literacy levels.

Key Words

Literacy, Adult Literacy, Adult Literacy Education.

According to the data provided by the National Ministry of Education (Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı [MEB], 2010), 385.356 adults had participated in 28.943 literacy courses in the academic year of 2008-2009. There are limited numbers of studies examining basic adult education. These programs have serious problems like shortage of time, lack of effective announcement, insufficient funds, teachers who do not have adequate knowledge on adult education, and high rates of dropouts (e.g. Bülbül, Kavak, & Gülbay, 1999; Güneş, 1990; Günlü, 2004; Nohl & Sayılan, 2004; Yıldız, 2006). None of these limited numbers of studies deal with the levels of literacy skills among participants of the literacy courses. In determining the levels of literacy skills, it would be more comprehensive to examine these levels of the learners related with the individual-cultural backgrounds and practices of everyday life. Since the literacy, as Sanders (1991, p. 11) told, is “a bunch of relations and structures, a dynamic system transferred to experiences by internaliza-

tion” is more than words written on the papers. Instead of the traditional approaches that reduce literacy to a “technical skill,” recently emerged approaches, namely “The New Literacy Studies,” suggest handling literacy as a social practice (Barton, 1994; Baynham, 1995; Papen, 2005).

Linguistic, social anthropological and psychological studies on the effects of literacy in different societies played a great role in the emergence of the *new literacy studies* in the 1980s (Papen, 2005). Most important of these studies are those by Heath in USA (1983), Scribner and Cole in Sierra Leone (1988), and Brian Street in Iran (1984). Furthermore, critical educators state that becoming literate is not only limited with how to learn to read and write; but also how to use literacy is related with socio-economic status, gender, educational history and the position of the individual in social life due to ethnicity (Auerbach, 1989; Freire, 1995; Freire & Macedo, 1998; Giroux & McLaren, 1992; Shore, 2003; Street, 1995).

However, including the widespread literacy campaigns, all the literacy practices in Turkey define literacy merely as a “skill” in accordance with the behavioral perspectives. Thus, literacy is reduced to a technical matter with no relation to individual social experience (Nohl-Sayılan, 2004; Yıldız, 2006).

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Although this kind of perspective which limits learning literacy to gaining a technical skill, paid less attention to the socio-cultural context of literacy than it deserves, marginal and poor illiterate peasants or urban citizens, would only spend time on literacy if they believe that it would contribute to a better life as stated by Lind and Johnston (1996).

Despite of all the efforts, literacy rates which was 10% in the early republic years, has been only increased to 67.2% in 1980, 80% in 1990, 86.5% in 2000 and 88.1% in 2006 (MEB, 2006; Türkiye İstatistik Enstitüsü (TÜİK) [Turkish Statistical Institute], 2006). These rates are still much lower than the contemporary societies. Beside these kinds of adult literacy statistics, considering the extraordinary vitality of the oral culture that bounds the currency of the writings in Turkey (Yıldız, 2006) and the low rates of reading habits, it could be argued that adult illiteracy is one of the most important educational problems of Turkey. The problem of illiteracy is becoming chronic and considering the rapid population growth, it could be estimated that it will continue being a structural problem unless special precautions and policies are put into action (Sayılan & Yıldız, 2009). As a matter of fact, according to the estimation of UNESCO, illiterate population will only be decreased to 5 million until the year 2015, and 80% of the illiterate will be women. Consequently, it is obvious the necessity to take in to consideration the adult literacy in recent days.

Considering aforementioned theoretical framework, this study is intended to determine the levels of literacy among the adult participants of first-level literacy courses in Public Education Centers [PTC] and to describe the relations between the literacy skill levels of adults and their socio-demographic features. Sub goals of the present study are as follows:

1. What are the socio-demographic features (age, sex, job, attendance in primary school) of the adults who will complete and had completed the literacy courses?
2. What are the levels of literacy skill of the adults who will complete and had completed the literacy courses?
3. What is the relationship between the socio-demographic features and the literacy levels of the adults who will complete the literacy courses?
4. What are the possible dynamics of progression or regression in literacy levels considering the experiences and socio-demographic features of the adults who had completed the literacy courses?

Method

Research Model

Required data for the study necessitates the usage of quantitative and qualitative designs together. Thus, the study is a descriptive research conducted by using mixed research designs.

Formation of the Study Group

Study group of the research is made up of adults who have attended to adult literacy courses in PTCs in Urfa, Istanbul, Diyarbakir and Ankara; and the adult residents of these cities who had completed any literacy course before. These four cities are the cities organizing most literacy courses according to the data provided by the NME. Thus, these four cities are chosen considering the rich potential of information they provide.

During the study, a survey developed by the researcher is administered in four cities to 690 participants in 72 literacy courses and to 60 adults who had completed a literacy course before. Then semi-structured interviews are made with 20 adults of the second group.

Bozova and Birecik in Urfa; Ergani and Bismil in Diyarbakir; and Çubuk and Akyurt in Ankara were chosen as the counties to conduct the research. The number of participants according to cities and counties are shown in Table 1.

Table 1.
Number of Participants According to Cities and Counties

City	City		County		Total	
	Center N	%	Center N	%	N	%
Istanbul	166	31.6	-	-	166	24.1
Urfa	114	21.7	58	35.4	172	24.9
Diyarbakir	159	30.2	74	45.1	233	33.8
Ankara	87	16.5	32	19.5	119	17.2
Total	526	100	164	100	690	100

Choosing a study group is preferred instead of choosing a sample presenting the universe of the adults who had completed the literacy courses: For this purpose, the survey was administered to 60 adults and semi-structured interviews were made with 20 of them.

Collection of the Data

Data for the first, second and third sub goals of the study are collected by the survey applied to adults

who would complete the selected literacy courses. The survey applied to the participants who are on the last week of the courses is intended to determine the participants' socio-demographic features and to measure their literacy skills.

Socio-demographic features of the participant adults which could be related with the literacy skill like age, sex, occupation, marital status, course attendance, and other courses participated before, primary school attendance were placed in the survey. Two different surveys were used to measure the literacy skills of the participants.

Measuring Reading Skills: Several approaches could be used measure the literacy skill in the international literature (Chan, 1988; Nell, 1988). In Turkey, Dökmen (1994) has developed an instrument with this purpose. However, including the one developed by Dökmen, none of these instruments are developed for new literates. "Reading" skill is measured by "understanding" in these scales. In order to measure the reading skill, subjects are firstly asked to read a text selected before and then they are told to explain the meaning of the text. This kind of measurement might, of course, be eligible for the ones who solved the mechanics of reading. But for the new literates, it is more important to measure whether reading as a decoding skill more than an "understanding" skill, is gained or not. Moreover, it is not possible for one to understand if he/she had not solved the mechanics of reading. In other words, "understanding" is only possible for the ones who can read. Thus, in this study, it could be said that levels of "reading mechanics" of the adults are implied to be measured.

During the application, adults are asked to read the text aloud. It is tried to determine (1) how many words adults could read in two minutes and (2) adults' reading levels (fluent/hesitant/spelling/poor spelling/not reading) by using the *Evaluation Form of Reading Skill*.

With the Evaluation Form of Reading Skill, first, reading speed is tried to be measured by the words read per minute. Average of reading speed is 40-50 words for adults and 50-60 words for children (Güneş, 1997). According to the averages, ones who read 80 words and more in two minutes are accepted as fluent reading, ones to read less than 80 words, namely slow but not spelling, are accepted as hesitant reading, ones to read spelling as spelling, ones to hardly spell or that could not link the syllables as poor spelling and finally ones that could not read or could not recognize the letters as not reading.

Measuring Writing Skills: While measuring the writing skill, it is taken into account that whether participants could write some basic sentences mechanically or not; more than writing according to the spelling rules,. In order to manage this kind of measure, participants are asked to write a text about themselves and what kind of changes they expect in their lives after becoming literate. After that participants are classified as *sufficient*, *insufficient* and *not writing*.

Without considering grammar rules such as punctuation, spelling rules etc, the ability of the one that could simply write what she thinks is called *sufficient*. The second category is made up of insufficient writing abilities. This group could write the letters - with or without missing - but has difficulties in writing meaningful sentences. Their writings do not provide a proper meaning and mostly there is no space between the sentences. Third category, namely not writing, is the ones to write meaningless marks and only single letters.

The same scales are applied to totally 60 adults (58 females, 2 males), which is made up of 15 adults from each cities. Afterwards, 20 adults were interviewed who are selected due to the results of the scale.

Data Analysis

Data of socio-demographic features and literacy levels that are collected from the adults participated a literacy course are analyzed by "percentage and frequency"; significance of the relationship between literacy levels and socio-demographic features such as sex, job, age, attendance to primary school are analyzed by "chi square" (X^2). Finally, the state of forgetting/regression/progression of the literacy levels of the adults who had completed the courses before are determined and the causes of these states are interpreted through narratives of the adults in the interviews.

Findings

Findings of the research are reported in the context of the themes expressed in the research problem.

Findings on Socio-Demographic Features

First, the distribution of the participants according to age is examined. In adult literacy courses, 15-35 years of age range is seen more than the others and there are significant differences in the age ranges

in different cities. Younger course participants are mostly found in Şanlıurfa, Diyarbakır, and İstanbul, respectively. For instance, considering the age range of 15-35 years, there are only 12 course participants attended in Ankara, whereas there are 159 in Diyarbakır. The number of older adults is majority in courses of Ankara, whereas the number of the adults "50 years and older" significantly declines in Diyarbakır and Şanlıurfa. In İstanbul, younger participants are in majority but a more balanced distribution of age range can be seen compared to Diyarbakır and Şanlıurfa.

One of the most significant socio-demographic features of the participants is gender. The vast majority of the participants are females (94.5 %). Due to the findings on the job factor of the participants it is determined that only 98 of the 690 (14.2 %) is working in an income generating job. Another dimension of the findings is about the primary school attendance of the participants. Approximately one fifth of the participants had attended primary school in past. Another interesting point is that a group of the participants had already attended a literacy course before the present one.

Findings on the Levels of Reading of the Participants

A participant is expected to read fluently at the end of the program. However, only 15.8 % of the participants reached the expected level of reading. Another point of the findings is the number of words that participants read in a given time. Only 13.4 % of the participants are able to read the expected number of words in the administration. It is important to state that one third of the participants cannot read any words.

Reading Skills According to Socio-Demographic Features

The starting point here is the age factor. Reading skill is getting higher when age decreases. For instance, in fluent reading category, the highest rate (30.5 %) is found in the 15-25 age range. Considering whether participants' literacy skills differ due to work status, it is found that participants who have an income generating job are more successful in reading skills. Another point of evaluation in the study is the relationship between the literacy skills of the participants and their primary school attendance in the past. Adults who had attended primary school are more successful than the ones who had

not, even if their period of school had been very short. According to that, fluent reading rates of the adults who had attended primary school are 43.8 %, whereas the others are 9.8 %. This study clearly underlines that the problem of illiteracy in Turkey has a gender dimension of women disadvantages. The number of male participants included in the study (38) is so much lower than the number of females (652).

Findings on the Levels of Writing of the Participants

73 % of the participants are at insufficient or not writing level. Sufficient writing level is found 26.4 %.

Writing Skill According To Socio-Demographic Features

Just as reading skills, the level of writing skills is getting higher when ages of the participants decline. For instance, the highest rates in the sufficient writing category are 15-25 age groups which are the youngest of the participants. Rates of the not writing category are getting higher when ages of the participants get higher. Generally, men face with practices of life in which writing is apparent more than women and thus male participants are expected to be more successful in writing skills when compared to females.

Findings on Adults Who Had Completed Literacy Programs in the Past

At first, it might be better to give basic demographic features of the 60 adults (15 adults for each four cities):

- 58 of the adults are women, 2 are men.
- Beside the gender dimension of the problem of illiteracy there is also another dimension of rurality (Yıldız, 2006). This could also be seen in the findings of this study; 54 of the adults were born in rural areas. Four of them were born in counties and two were born in cities.
- Marital status is closely related with age variable. 48 of this group are married, 7 of them are single and 5 of them are widows.

A prominent point in this study is the work experience. Generally, it is accepted that adults who work in cities need more literacy skills. A rate of women participation in working life is lower than men and this factor causes differences in terms of gender.

Work experience is an important factor to participate the courses. It is observed that working outside home means establishing relationship with people other than the close environment and this contributes to taking part in the courses. Narrations of an adult woman in Ankara explain the relation so well:

I was not going out because I was illiterate. I was in a kind of inferiority complex. But when I started to work outside home, meeting and talking to new people, I started to feel better. I mean I was not felling bad because of illiteracy. Everyone thought that I was literate. I studied too much and talked to many people developing myself. I started to feel better. Then I decided to participate to literacy course.

As stated in the narration, moving out of the close environment to a larger social scale of social surrounding is important to overcome the psychological factors such as “shyness” and “fear of learning” that negatively affect the participation in the literacy programs.

Adults who are successful in literacy skills are observed to be more linked to urban life. It is obvious that more literate people and more written communication around effects adults positively in developing literacy skills. Narrations below are examples of this finding:

I have not seen Kızılay but I went to Ulus. (...) I did not go alone of course. I do not go anywhere alone generally. (...) I spend time with my neighbors'. I do not go far away alone (...)

I had not gone for shopping alone before. I hadn't bought even a piece of bread myself. Sometimes my husband and sometime my children did shopping. The instructor in the course told me “you go for shopping today and buy some bread.” I did. I was very happy (...)

As stated in these narrations, most of the times using any kind of skill in daily life causes the development of skill. These kinds of practices happen more in urban life and require literacy skills.

It could be observed that reading skill is seen more important than the others:

Reading is very important. You read in the bus, hospital. I'm not a student so I do not have to write well. I can now read even a newspaper. Just after the course my writing was better but I suppose I have forgotten. I read every day but I do not ever write...

Just as stated above, lots of adults told that their writing skill had gone worse but reading skill had become better. It could be argued that they do not feel uncomfortable for forgetting how to write.

Discussion

Findings of the present study could be discussed in three dimensions. First are the socio-demographic features of the present participants of the literacy courses and of the adults who had completed a literacy course before. Second is the level of literacy of the adults in both groups and the relationship between literacy levels and the third one is experiences and socio-demographic features of the adults.

1. These points of discussion are prominent about the socio-demographic features such as age, sex and job of the adult participants of the literacy courses:

a. Distribution of participants differs due to cities. Younger adults participate in the courses in Diyarbakir, Şanlıurfa and Istanbul (15-30 years age range); whereas most of the participants in Ankara are in middle and older ages. This finding should be considered with “migration”. Recent history of Turkey tells that Istanbul, Diyarbakir and Şanlıurfa are three of the most migration receiving cities.

b. Vast majority of the participants are women (94.5 %). This finding coincides with the statement that problem of illiteracy is a problem of gender (Sayılan, Balta, & Şahin, 2002).

c. It is observed that only 14.2 % of the participants have an income generating job. Highest number of working participants is in Istanbul and as a general observation, most of the participant workers are working in textile sector in Istanbul. In other cities few of the participant workers work in unsecured and informal sector such as cleaning and child care. Considering that present and past participants of the literacy courses work in marginal jobs or not working at all, one can argue that there is a close relationship between illiteracy and poverty.

d. Similar findings are available for the adults who had completed the literacy courses in the past. It can be observed that interviewed adults are / were in deep poverty. It is found that there is a link between illiteracy and poverty. For instance, according to the data provided by TSI, poverty rate of college graduates has decreased from 2.66 % to 1.33 %, whereas it has increased to 9.66 % in 2003 and 10.22 % in 2004 between illiterates and thus these statistics show the relationship between illiteracy and poverty.

e. Approximately one fifth of the adult participants in literacy courses had attended primary school in their past and nearly half of these had left school in the first class.

f. Another point is that some of the participants in these courses had attended another literacy course before: Approximately one fifth of the participants had attended a literacy course before. The point that some of the participants of the present courses had attended another literacy courses before is an important matter to be investigated.

2. These findings has been prominent about the relationship between literacy skill levels of the adults and their socio-demographic features and experiences:

a. Approximately 85 % of the participants are away from the expected literacy level. Moreover, 61 % of the participants are at the very low levels or the no skill level. Moreover, only 13.4 % of the participants have reached the reading speed level of 90-100 words in two minutes. Only 6 % of the participants could obey the punctuation rules when read. Lastly, sufficient writing level is only 26.4 %. These findings demonstrate that literacy levels of the adult participants of literacy courses are dramatically low. Thus, today, it is a must to reflect on the literacy courses once again.

b. These points should be stated in order to make a profile of reading skill:

- Generally, literacy skill level is higher in younger adults.
- Reading skill level is higher in adults who work outside home.
- Adults who had attended primary school are more successful than the one who hadn't. Fluent reading level of adults who had attended primary school is 48.3 %, whereas it is 9.9 % in others.

c. Working experience is an important factor in attending the courses. It is observed that this kind of experience which means establishing relationship with people other than the close environment functions positively in deciding to participate in the courses. Since the socialization experiences of the individuals are important for one to get aware of the need to literacy. Adults who have limited links to urban life and continue the rural life habits in the ghettos have limited literacy practices.

Especially relations of the women in the ghettos are limited with their close neighborhood. For men who had migrated to the city from the village, it is possible to socialize in some kinds of "village associations", but women do not have any similar opportunity. As Kandiyoti stated (1997, p. 38) life of the women in the cities is limited with the close and present environment. Similarly, it could be observed that life of the unsuccessful adults in terms of literacy skills is limited with the close and present environment. Also, this kind of women mostly did not and doesn't work in an income generating work anyway. In this limited environment, literacy is not seen as an important skill.

d. In chi-square test, it is found that there is no significant relationship between literacy level and gender, but one can expect that literacy skill level of men is higher than women because they participate in everyday practices that writing is more needed more than women and their places of socialization have more written communication than women.

e. 54 of the adults were born in villages; four of them in counties and two of them in cities. Just because in rural areas, Turkish modernization has been less successful compared to urban areas; formal education cannot include all the school age population; oral culture is so vital and writing is not needed in the socio-economic environment. Thus, there is a serious gap in literacy levels between urban and rural areas in Turkey. In a study conducted in 1999, it is found that 60.1 % of the participants in adult literacy courses were born in villages, 5.3 % in small towns, 11 % in counties and 23 % in cities (Bülbül et al., 1999). In 2002, another study which is conducted only among women (Sayılan et al., 2002) it is found that more than half of the illiterate women (57.8 %) are born in villages and 34.3 % are born in counties. The rate of the illiterate in the ones who were born in cities is 6.8 %. Briefly, illiteracy is a more crucial problem for the ones who come from rural areas than the ones who are in urban life.

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