

## RaPAL article 2016

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### *Why the use of terminology in adult literacy is important*

#### Introduction

This paper stems from the work of an ELINET seminar held in Hamburg in January 2015. The seminar participants recognised the vital importance of ensuring that in our research and practice around adult literacy we are mindful of the impact our use of language can have in shaping impressions of the needs and capabilities of adult literacy learners. We considered the range of terminology used to talk about adult literacy and adult literacy learners and agreed upon seven guiding principles that should inform our choices of language when writing or speaking about adult literacy.

This short paper explores the reasons why we need principles for our use of adult literacy terminology and examines the thinking behind the particular principles we have chosen. The full version can be found on the ELINET website <http://www.eli-net.eu/about-us/news/detail/article/detail/News/elinet-guiding-principles-for-the-use-of-terminology-in-adult-literacy/>

## Why do we need guiding principles?

### Precision

Much of the language that is commonly used to talk about adult literacy lacks precision and it is not always clear what is intended by certain terms. For example, what does 'low literacy' mean? What should we understand when we hear that someone 'lacks the literacy to function in daily life'? We will each interpret such an expression in different ways, with the danger that the issues which we so much want to discuss and explore become clouded, lost, confused, and conflated. One problem, then, is that the language we use is often not sufficiently precise. If an advocacy or policy organisation refers to the 'problem' of 'the low-skilled population,' and if by 'low-skilled' what is actually meant is adults with literacy skills below a certain level or expectation, this is an example of language lacking precision. If we mean literacy skills, we should specify literacy skills.

### Respect

Another problem is that the language we use can be offensive. If we use the term 'low-skilled' to mean 'low literacy' we are equating a lack of literacy skills with a lack of other skills, with a lack of *any* skills. This is not just imprecise, but also offensive to adults struggling with literacy, because it is communicating that they have no other skills.

### About whom are we actually talking?

Another challenge is the way we talk about 'people with low literacy skills' without distinguishing who these people are and how they may relate to our advocacy or policy point. We may be talking about adult literacy learners, or we may be talking about the wider population of adults with a variety of literacy skills. We may be referring to adults who have joined provision (either voluntarily or otherwise)

or to adults who may be judged as having adult literacy needs by the expectations of others. One group have made a decision (or had it made for them) to set about improving their literacy skills; the other group includes those who have made a conscious decision not to join a class because they feel that they are already able to meet the demands placed on their literacy; those who might want to join a class but for one reason or another have not yet done so, and those who have never considered, or had the opportunity to consider, formally improving their literacy. These people are clearly in different positions vis à vis their literacy and have different attitudes towards literacy use and learning.

### Different traditions, different expertise

A further challenge is posed by the fact that adult literacy experts come from such a range of disciplinary or professional backgrounds. This richness makes us stronger, but it does present the challenge that we cannot assume that we share common understandings. We need to be more explicit about what we mean. To take a specific example, one of the seven principles reiterates a phrase well-known to those who worked in adult literacy teaching in England in the 1980s, 'a beginner reader is not a beginner thinker.' Those from this tradition may feel the phrase does not need repeating, that we have 'moved on' or that it is just too obvious. Yet to others from different traditions, this phrase has a new and important contribution to make in shaping the way we think about, and work with, adult literacy learners.

### Working across many languages

Within ELINET we have the additional challenge of our inter-language working. We are working across many languages, with most people translating to and from other languages into our common working language of English. There is ample opportunity for slippages in what we think we mean and, if we are to collaborate effectively to argue for the importance of adult literacy in public policy, we should ensure that our linguistic differences do not mask conceptual differences.

## The tension between the complexity of literacy and the desire for precision

The fact that literacy is complex is at the heart of our terminology problem. Here we will try to examine the different ways in which literacy or adult literacy is complex.

### What is literacy?

The term literacy is used in different ways. The dominant contemporary UK English-language understanding of 'literacy' (in both every day and educational usage) is *reading and writing* (EU High Level group of Experts on Literacy, 2012) although some argue that the term 'literacy' should include spoken communication (see, for example, the English Adult Literacy Core Curriculum, (DfES, 2001a) Defining literacy as reading and writing does not imply, however, a narrow, or 'utilitarian' vision of literacy, providing we acknowledge that reading and writing are both themselves immensely broad, and include a range of purposes, pleasures and meanings, closely bound up with issues of personal identity, community belonging, culture, power and desire (Duncan, 2012; Hughes and Schwab, 2010; Pahl, 2014).

### The Literate-Illiterate Binary

The word 'literate' always carries with it the word 'illiterate'; these terms are bound together in a binary relationship, with the implication that one is either literate or illiterate. Today, the term 'illiterate' with its associations of 'ignorance' or 'stupidity', is rightly shunned for being offensive. But it is also inaccurate; anyone living in a literate society uses literacy to a certain degree and so is not 'illiterate'.

'Illiteracy', like 'literacy', is always relative, based on often ill-defined expectations. As Freire (1985) pointed out, the term 'illiterate' is usually used when we *expect* that someone should be doing something with written language and yet we feel they are not. We should reject the idea of literacy as a binary concept, focusing instead on a spectrum of literacy uses, where individuals engage with literacy to different degrees, with different levels of confidence, for different purposes and with different meanings.

### The spectrum and its invisible dividing lines

Replacing a view of literacy as a binary concept with a view of literacy as a spectrum may make more sense in many ways, but it still presents challenges, particularly in the world of education. If we are all on a spectrum of literacy, and our literacy is always developing, how can we talk about particular literacy needs along that spectrum? Indeed, by definition a spectrum is not limited to a specific set of values but can vary infinitely. It is not possible precisely to define the spectrum of literacy practices in which adults engage. However, education provision usually requires the establishment of large and small distinctions – levels, items, teaching points, grades - and a spectrum, by nature makes this hard.

We could try to divide up the spectrum by talking in levels. PIAAC and the English Adult Literacy Core Curriculum each use levels but in different ways. In the English Adult Literacy Core Curriculum levels are used to describe and organise adult literacy provision and assessment, whereas in PIAAC reading levels are used to classify a population. They both provide valuable precision; they allow us to organise and standardise our educational offer and to draw attention to levels of need within the population. But they also present challenges. For example, we need to be cautious of imagining that these levels describe a person, rather than what someone can do at a particular time. We also need to remember that when we label someone as being at a certain literacy level, this is based on a specific assessment process, which may or may not relate to the kinds of literacy practices which an individual is required to, or desires to, perform in her life.

### Literacy as contextual

One of the arguments for not using binary terms such as 'literate' and 'illiterate' is that everyone living in a literate society uses literacy in some ways and in some contexts. We recognise that literacy is complex because it is culturally and socially bound; it is contextual. This has been theorised in different ways, for example through Street's distinction between autonomous and ideological models of literacy (Street, 1984; Street, 2003); through the New Literacy Studies and its view of literacy as social practice; through the idea of dominant and invisible literacies, where Baynham has argued that existing social and cultural power relations make some practices 'invisible' while others are dominant; and through the concept of multiliteracies which takes into account the multilingual, multipurpose, multimodal realities of contemporary literacies (Cope and Kalantzis, 2000).

These practices run across the life course: they are 'lifelong', as is our literacy development (Duncan, 2014). Literacy is also life-wide, enacted differently for the various domains of our lives. We carry out multiple literacy practices, in multiple life domains and for multiple purposes. Our literacy use is multimodal, including digital modes and, often, multilingual (remembering also language variety). This means literacy is complex and evolving, and literacy development is therefore continuous and varied (Gregory and Williams, 2000).

It is clear from the above that perfect terminology is impossible. It means that we cannot aim for a list of 'good' and 'bad' terms to use. What we can do, instead, is agree on a list of principles to guide our decisions around terminology use, to make us more aware of the consequences, or advantages and disadvantages of different choices, so that we can come a little closer to communicating what we want to communicate, and so that we can stake our claim as literacy experts and work against uses of language which are disrespectful and discriminatory (because if we don't, who will?).

## **The seven principles**

We propose that when we write or talk about literacy we aim for terminology that:

1. provides precision appropriate to communicative purpose
2. communicates transparently and simply, as appropriate to audience, purpose and context
3. is respectful
4. is positive (where possible avoids contributing to a deficit model)
5. recognises that people are not at levels, skills are
6. recognises that 'a beginner reader [or writer] is not a beginner thinker'
7. is appropriate to linguistic and cultural context, as well as to audience and purpose

### **1. Provides precision appropriate to communicative purpose**

As noted above, the language we use to describe aspects of literacy use or literacy learning is often imprecise. How do we know when someone has moved from having 'poor' literacy to having 'good' or even 'adequate' literacy? Adequate literacy is often called 'functional' literacy, but what would adequate or functional literacy look like? What we may consider 'functioning' in terms of society, home, school and work is a moveable feast depending on your home, your school, your work and your wider life interests and endeavours. What might be the norm in urban areas of Western Europe is not necessarily the norm everywhere.

To describe the complex nature of what literacy is and how it can be applied to people, we need to have the terminology to match. Each time we have to use a term, we need to think about the purpose for which it is needed and the degree of precision that is needed to fulfil that purpose. For some purposes we need less precision, but for others, a lack of precision could be misleading or dangerous, leading to statements, even policy, being made on assumptions and media hyperbole rather than evidence. The use of precise terminology is a key element in our repertoire of tools for being able to communicate exactly what we mean to say.

## 2. Communicates transparently and simply, as appropriate to audience, purpose and context

Everyone involved in the world of literacy has an interest in communication. One of the aims of literacy practitioners is to make text accessible to everyone. Problems accessing texts are only partly to do with the reader; it is also incumbent on the writer to make their words readable. Bureaucratic organisations are often accused of producing ‘inconsiderate texts’: those that have characteristics that adversely affect comprehension. The National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) in Ireland supports ‘peoples’ rights to understand text and the spoken word’ (NALA). As a way of respecting our readers, it is important that our message is clear and unambiguous.

This does not necessarily mean that we should not use specialist terminology. Sometimes a specialist term is important in conveying a precise concept and other similar terms will not do. For example, the term *literacies* as opposed to *literacy* conveys the multifaceted nature of literacy practices. We can choose to use an imprecise term that everyone knows but which might not convey exactly what we want it to or we can decide to use a precise term and ensure that we explain it so that readers are aware of its meaning and its use becomes increasingly more common and more accepted by a wide range of people. In this way we can influence terminology use for the benefit of our adult literacy work.

We need to model what we see as best practice in putting our ideas across to a range of specialists, the wider media-reading public and, most importantly, the people we are talking about, who are working to improve their own literacy (and those not yet working on it but who might do so in the future).

## 3. Is respectful

Everyone wants and deserves to be treated with dignity and respect. Literacy practitioners are often working with people who have been told that they are failures - unintelligent or incapable of learning with nothing to offer society. Some adults hide the fact that they find reading and writing difficult to avoid negative comments and many have talked about how difficult it is to take the first steps back into education where they feel they were stigmatised and humiliated earlier in their lives. Literacy practitioners know that avoiding a deficit model and building self-respect is an important pre-requisite for building cultural capital and enabling learning to take place.

Some current uses of terminology stand out because their lack of precision makes them deeply disrespectful. It is not respectful, for example, to refer to ‘the low-skilled population’ when what we mean is people who might have many other life skills, but who have literacy skills below an arbitrary level. The people we are referring to might have a great many skills and accomplishments. If someone cannot drive, they would feel it was offensive to call them ‘low-skilled’, so it is equally offensive to call someone low-skilled because they are limited in aspects of literacy. We must always consider the effects of our words on those who are listening to them or reading them.

## 4. Is positive, where possible avoiding contributing to a deficit model

A deficit model of literacy sees people with limited literacy only in terms of the skills they lack or what

they cannot do. It offers a view that implies they need something that only others can give them. It also implies that literacy is a matter of a matter of individual cognition and that individuals with limited literacy have something wrong with their brains or lack intelligence.

An alternative view, such as that espoused by New Literacy Studies, argues that literacy is a social practice, something that people do in particular ways, in particular contexts and for particular reasons. From this viewpoint, the importance is what people do with literacies, not what they cannot do. Adult literacy teaching approaches based on a social practice theory would work from what someone can do, and from this, extend and develop individuals' skills and practices.

### 5. Recognises that *people are not at levels, skills are*

For a teacher in a class, levels are a useful shorthand for what a learner can do and what they might want to work on. It is a way of grouping learners who might want to develop similar skills. For those researching wider populations, levels can be useful to try to understand and communicate what members of that wider population can and cannot do in terms of reading and writing. However, we need to remember that they are only a descriptor of someone's literacy skill and that levels do not and cannot describe a whole person or their literacy practices beyond what is assessed on a particular test. Even as a label to attach to a literacy skill, a level can only characterise a sub-skill or element of learning. For example, someone might be able to read at one level but find writing more difficult and place themselves in a different level for that; or even more specifically they might be able to read some texts more easily than others, for example, computer games more than newspapers. A level can only be determined by assessment via a particular text, at a particular time, in a particular context and says little about other times, other texts in other contexts.

Literacy use is lifelong and life-wide, and literacy development is lifelong and life-wide. Just as individual literacy skills and practices change over time and across contexts, cultural literacy expectations and conventions change too.

### 6. Recognises that 'a beginner reader is not a beginner thinker'

This quote from a literacy learner (Goode, 1985) takes up the banner for adults who might not have facility with reading and writing, but who live full and successful lives which incorporate many other skills, ideas and achievements. People learn from a variety of sources besides the written word: friends, family and colleagues; TV, radio and online media; experience of doing and watching others do things are all tried and tested methods. Literacy skills are not congruent with cognitive skills or with the potential for developing all sorts of other skills. Without literacy, one can still be outstanding as a musician, visual artist, oral poet, craftsperson, sportsperson, a community or faith leader. One does not need literacy to take part in meetings, discussions and debates; to have opinions and to take actions in support of these. We could rephrase 'A beginner reader is not a beginner thinker' as 'someone with a limited command of literacy is not necessarily someone with limited thinking or other skills'. This is a point which underpins the other principles, and should be repeated again and again.

## 7. Appropriate to linguistic context

Every language has its own lexicon which is used by practitioners, researchers and policy makers to refer to literacy. These terms may or may not have direct translations into English. Some languages will offer more precision than English for particular concepts.

What 'literate' means in one language is different from what it might mean in another. The term 'literacies' to indicate plurality is preferred by some to the singular 'literacy'. Those who use the term need to make a decision on when and where to use it depending on the context in which it is to be used. In some cases this might mean using it without definition; in others it would need to be explained and, on occasion, the writer might feel it was inappropriate to use at all. If we are conscious of our purpose and audience, we will be more likely to use language that is appropriate. Being aware of our linguistic and social context will also help us to adhere to some of the other guiding principles; it will help us to be precise in what we are saying (principle 1) and to communicate clearly (principle 2).

### **What next? How can we use these principles?**

We have argued above that we need some guiding principles for use when we talk about adult literacy and we are suggesting seven particular principles to use. These should not be seen as 'rules' but rather as an attempt to lead the discussion about how we define what we are doing and why we believe that certain ways of doing this are clearer and more positive than others. Starting with our key criteria of precision and respect, they could be seen as a checklist to apply to any talking/writing about literacy.

As experts in the field, we should be leading the way rather than just following others. We also need to challenge terms used by politicians and the media which we feel do not meet our guidelines. The guidelines can support us in encouraging others to use more appropriate and less offensive terms.

In our various roles as policy makers, researchers, teachers, advocates we all have to discuss literacy with a variety of others within a large range of contexts. Our audiences might be large or small; expert or non-expert; and we might be talking to those who think like ourselves or we may have to vigorously argue our case. The words we choose to use, as always, should be selected according to our particular communicative contexts and purposes.

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