

Learning Literacy from the Lifelong Perspective, with Special Attention to Chinese Literacy Learners

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ABSTRACT

In a rapidly developing and highly inequitable society, people are at a risk of being excluded from new information technology and social activities. The content of literacy is also changing correspondingly. Within the lifelong learning theory, people of all ages, generations and backgrounds can use many opportunities and occasions, including families, schools, communities and even the world to upgrade and broaden their literacy ability. This paper sets to find out how to operate literacy from the perspective of lifelong learning. It will begin with an overview of the concepts of literacy. Then, it discusses the unequal and diverse problems existing in literacy education, with special attention to literacy education in China. Also, it will fully explain how we can improve literacy ability from a lifelong learning perspective.

Key Words: *Literacy; Lifelong Learning; Diversity*

1. Introduction

The rapid development of current technology, the form of work, the function of media and digitization, and other aspects of society all reinforce the role of literacy. Therefore, the literacy of the 21st century presents a series of new concepts, characteristics, and methods that are completely different from traditional literacy, and must be fully and deeply understood. Besides, literacy learning is also unequally distributed in society. The increasing amount of information and different form of information require higher literacy ability. All of these present challenges for people with low literacy ability. Some groups that are excluded from information and communication technology (ICT) and other social media have become disadvantaged groups (Hanemann, 2015).

In order to adapt to changing technologies and to address increasingly complicated tasks and conditions, the world is placing greater demands on proficiency in literacy and

other relevant skills. Hence, living and learning is very important, especially for disadvantaged people and groups.

China has a long history and rich experience of illiteracy eradication, and eliminating illiteracy was the basic national policy in the late 20th century (Chen & Liu, 2022). In 1949, there were 540 million illiterates. 80% of the population was illiterate, and the rate of illiteracy in rural areas was as high as 95% (Zhang, 2017). Now, China has successfully achieved the goal of basically eliminating illiteracy among young and middle-aged workers and has started to a higher stage (Li et al., 2021). Nowadays, Learning literacy becomes lifelong goal and this goal is set in the post-2015 Chinese sustainability agenda. This will help China improve the quality of labor, ensure national security and stability, and gain an advantageous position in international economic competition. Therefore, the great achievement and special situation of China can provide valuable research perspectives in this topic.

2. Literature Review

Literacy was first defined by UNESCO in 1958 as people who can read and write short and simple statements in daily life, mostly through fundamental and elementary schooling. The widely-recognized concept of literacy is that it is simply writing and reading skills combined and developed to a set of tangible skills which enables one to acquire and express information to meet a variety of demands (UNESCO, 2006). 'functional illiteracy' was firstly created in that year to describe people unable to recognize modern information symbols and use computers for information exchange and management.

Due to the diversity of practical uses and the developments in computer and digitization, functional literacy is not confined to computer information processing. Literacy is becoming a complex and dynamic phenomenon. According to different demands, contexts and hierarchies of knowledge, literacy is divided into different competencies, including media literacy, computer literacy, social literacy, scientific literacy and visual literacy. For instance, media literacy refers to the ability to get access to, process and deliver messages conveyed onscreen or even discern misleading information (Jones-Jang, 2021). Some scholars propose a more concise and more useful concept--multiple literacy--"reading the world" in specific contexts (Street, 2003; Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). However, the disadvantage of this view is that literacy is often regarded as a universal set of skills and it is applicable everywhere. In recent years, Artificial Intelligence (AI) is the hottest topic in research and AI literacy has proposed by some educational scholars. While AI literacy is still under-discussed in primary education field because the relevant curriculum and classes have just been designed and applied for young children (Su et al., 2023).

Some countries distinguish illiteracy by the number of words that people can master or whether they have received primary education. For example, In China, "illiteracy people" are who cannot master 1000 words in 1950 and the standards increased to 2000 words in 1956 (Zhang, 2017). While many researches disagree with these standards. Lyons (2022) pointed out that "universal literacy" is achieved before primary schooling in Europe. The

literacy ability is not immutable and people can develop it in their daily life and work (Chen & Liu, 2022). According to functional illiteracy, many governments provide literacy acquisition through work-oriented training programs. “Eradication of illiteracy program” through vocational education in China from 1950 provides the most convincing evidence. However, some academics argued that this definition limits literacy to social function while ignore human capital development.

Therefore, because of the vagueness of the concept of literacy, the simple dichotomy of “literate” and “non-literate” is not applicable and it is also difficult to quantify the standards of illiteracy. Literacy could be gain at a given moment while insufficient, outdated or lost in another moment. Thus, literacy is an active and broad-based learning activity (Hanemann, 2015). In this situation, lifelong learning theory is profoundly important, particularly for disadvantaged individuals and groups. From the perspective of lifelong learning, literacy learning is a continuous activity of upgrading skills.

3. Inequality and Diversity in Literacy

Educational inequality in elementary and secondary schooling is apparent, while equivalent programs beyond formal education can reduce the gap. However, most international agencies abandoned their support for literacy campaigns from the 1960s as the human capital model of education appeared as a vital condition for economic growth. Then during the 1980s to 1990s, international organizations continued to decline funding of literacy programs since education transferred its focus to primary education. Therefore, non-formal education and adult literacy programs faced financial problems all over the world (Torres, 2004). Correspondingly, it is hard for groups who cannot afford the tuition for formal education or equivalent programs to master literacy skill.

Besides, governments usually ignore the huge gap between the implementation of literacy learning policies and the diversity of learners. Walker (2005) argues that human diversity is not the secondary element to be addressed or to be discussed later on; it is a basic aspect of our interest in equality. People differ in gender, background, health and ability. Thus, we cannot use the level of boys or able-bodied people as the norm for our expectations (Walker, 2006). There was a social experiment conducted by a lawyer in Hong Kong in 2013. Although it is a personal trial and no individual can represent a whole group, this research reflects some aspects of the current situation of this group. The lawyer believed that people stayed in the lower class mostly because they were lazy and refused to gain new skills and knowledge even if there were sufficient learning resources provided. However, after she pretended to live and work as a sanitation worker, she acknowledged that it was extremely difficult for the poor to upgrade their capabilities because of limited budget, energy and time although they had a desperate desire for learning. Besides, Freire emphasizes the importance of bringing the learner’s socio-cultural realities into the learning process and then using the learning process to challenge these social processes. Compared with adults, kids lack experience and have different preferences of learning methods. Therefore, inequity in gender, race, age, background and disability affect the

possibilities for learning (Walker, 2006). Besides, literacy is indispensable for many further learning and training opportunities. These excluded people who are in a disadvantageous literacy condition should work harder and prepare for long-term learning. As a result, it is crucial to recognize learner diversity and integrate the close relationship between lifelong learning and literacy.

The requirement of literacy is changing, as I mentioned above. While the literacy program in China is more limited. Firstly, literacy programs are usually provided at the lowest levels, and their duration is too short to help participants to get a sustainable and proficient level (Hu & Hou, 2023). Secondly, literacy education prefers vocational training. The Chinese Ministry of Education implemented “the decision on reform and development of Adult Literacy Education” in 1987. It clearly defined that adult literacy education was mainly the education of the employees who have gone to various production or work positions can directly and effectively improve the quality of the operators, so the economic and working efficiency can be improved directly. In this case, education is divided to basic education, higher education and vocational education. It also means that the target of Chinese literacy education is the employee and excludes retired people and teenagers who drop out of formal schooling (Wu, 2013). Besides, in the terms of function, it is limited to training rather than all the educational and cultural activities that have educational significance to the individual. This point reminds me of my learning experience in the language center of the University of Manchester in 2018. I registered for the A1.1 (Basic) German Language class and 4 of my (10 in total) classmates were retired female over 65 years old. To be honest, I was surprised since it was a definitely rare phenomenon in China. And they had better achievement on German than me as they practiced German through related activities with their grandchildren every day. I have to say, compared with UK, the promotion of lifelong literacy education in China still has a long way to go. Thus, it's essential to formulate age-specific curricula that allow learners to gradually develop literacy and numeracy skills beyond the original step of primary literacy. As the range of courses expands, enough funding and teacher arrangements are also needed to offer sustainability of these courses and the flexibility of self-directed learning for adult learners in different life environments.

When I searched “literacy learning” in the CNKI database, there are 647 relevant publications after 2020. While 662 of them investigate literacy learning in elementary education or nine-year compulsory education area. It shows that China still holds traditional attitudes toward literacy learning. Also, together with many other countries, it considers the national literacy rate through whether people successfully graduate from elementary education (UNESCO, 2000). However, there is a huge gap between the expectation of basic education program and reality of the implementation. One in three children leave primary school and are still unable to read and write properly. It means that graduation from compulsory schools does not provide any guarantee that students are equipped with sufficient skills in reading and writing (Zhang, 2017). Obviously, it is useful to improve the quality of primary education as well as teachers and decline the drop-off rate to spread literacy to the next generation, but it cannot solve this problem from the origin. For example,

obtaining literacy skill for the nomadic cannot be easily achieved by improving the quality of education because of geographic, climatic and financial factors. It should be a long-term progress.

4. Learning Literacy from a Lifelong Perspective

In a complicated and changing environment, lifelong learning has become the organizing principle for all forms of education (UIL, 2020). The idea of lifelong learning obtained support since the 1996 report of the International Commission on Education (UNESCO, 1997, 2004b). Following the development, UNESCO (2020) declared that fostering a worldwide culture of lifelong learning will be essential to addressing the challenges facing human society as a whole. Based on liberating, humanistic and democratic values, lifelong learning integrates learning with life and reaches people of overall ages and backgrounds through a wide range of forms of learning. This stands for that it is designed to take advantage of learning chances in diverse situations. It also bridges the various portions, institutions, procedures, learning spaces and periods to make a learning system designed as a whole (Wals & Benavot, 2017).

4.1 Literacy as a lifelong Process

The lifelong learning theory regards literacy learning as a learning continuum that runs through a person's whole life. On one hand, it means the dichotomy of literacy – “literate” or “illiterate” – should be abandoned and the “eradication of illiteracy” programs are no longer suitable since literacy is a continuous process of learning (Laal et al., 2014). Although passing on literacy to the next generation has historically been regarded as the central purpose of basic education (Hannon, 1999), there is no guarantee that pupils can master basic literacy skills after they graduate from elementary schools. As a result, it is necessary to test the proficiency of literacy regularly. On the other hand, the acquisition of literacy is an age-independent behavior because it is never too early nor too late to begin or to continue learning (Hanemann, 2015). For example, although formal primary education has the task of imparting basic literacy, pupils' literacy learning, in fact, starts before school, mainly at home (Lyons, 2022). There are ample researches in the 21st century providing convincing evidence that the period of children between birth to two years old is vital for laying the foundation of learning. Parents are usually encouraged to develop their kids' “pre-literacy” skills as early as possible (e.g., Pakarinen et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2021; Vehkavuori et al., 2021).

At the same time, literacy learning goes after graduation from school education (Billett, 2018). That is to say, in addition to formal schooling, people can learn literacy across all kinds of education, such as adult education and vocational education. Vocational education is available for workers whether or not they have received formal education. Vocational education has made great contributions to the early literacy campaign in China (Guo, 2019). Stevenson (2020) suggested to develop a blended learning model in vocational education

to improve different literacy skills for workers. Besides, some researchers think it is important to foster media literacy among older people who are easily disjointed from the society (e.g., Rasi, 2019; Hu, 2023). Adult education and university for the old are the main way for older people to improve their literacy ability (Rasi et al., 2021). China has entered the aging society since 1996, the cultivation of adult education not only helps the old to actively participate social activities, but also alleviate the negative impact of the population aging (Huang, 2023).

4.2 Literacy as a life-wide learning process

Understanding literacy in a life-wide process also recognizes that literacy is rooted in wide and specific settings (Barton, 2007). Rogers (2018) supported this opinion and argued that the fastest and most effective approach to develop literacy is to incorporate it in work. Also, as literacy is the essential factor of social practice, it is unavoidable to communicate and collaborate with different persons or groups which have different demands for literacy (Street, 2005). Therefore, learners should continuously focus on improving and broadening literacy skills rather than exclusively develop one kind of literacy.

On the other side, literacy as a lifelong learning procedure recognizes that it is not just obtained in schools or classrooms. Learners could ultimately develop and apply literacy skills in diverse methods and a wide range of life areas, for example, in the work, on the Internet, in the library, in the theatre or in the museum. These casual studying places, to some extent, can reinforce the achievement of schools. Hence, it is vital to create a fertile and vibrant cultural environment -- which also includes the use of local languages. From "literate family", "literate school" to "literate community", from individuals to teams, it is essential to connect literacy to the activities of people's everyday life.

5. Conclusion

In this 21st century, literacy is no longer exclusively reading and writing skills, increasingly becoming a prerequisite for human to upgrade knowledge continuously and actively participate in social activities. In response to the ever-changing society and diversity of people, it is imperative to provide lifelong learning opportunities for all and in all forms of education. The vision of lifelong literacy learning recognizes that it is a life-long and life-wide process across all ages, generations and conditions (Tageo, 2022). Although the achievements or methods may be different between individuals, this idea contributes to educational equity and reduces the influence of the diversity of learners.

In conclusion, solving literacy problem from the lifelong learning theory suggests to build close relationship between different institutions, components and processes to expend learning spheres and phases. It is essential to create a "literate environment" which links learning with life activities and different cultures. The government is supposed to develop holistically-designed learning systems, not only formal education, but also all kinds

of informal learning opportunities. Most importantly, individuals should keep lifelong literacy learning belief in mind and never give up on learning and development.

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