

FUNCTIONAL LITERACY LEARNING IN THE SYSTEM OF ADULT EDUCATION IN BELGIUM

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In the article, the problem of functional literacy training organisation in the system of adult education in Belgium has been studied. The authors analyse the scientific and pedagogical literature which highlights different aspects of the problem under research; characterise the research methodology which comprises theoretical and applied methods. They present the theoretical and methodological framework (humanistic, pluralistic, andragogy concepts) of functional literacy learning; different approaches (standard, context, social and cultural) to the term “functional literacy” treatment; concretise the definition of “functional literacy”. The scholars study prerequisites (historical, political, social and cultural, social and economic, linguistic) of adults’ functional illiteracy development in the modern Belgian society. The researchers characterise the system of adult education according to the structural and functional approach, especially, its legislative, managerial, organisational, and academic levels. They present the systematised and generalised specificities of learning organisation for adults’ functional literacy development in formal education of Flemish Community (Centres for adult education), German-speaking Community (public schools), in non-formal education of French Community (network of volunteer organisations). The scientists analyse the content (knowledge, skills of basic and professional education, social and personal skills, skills for self-education) and operational (organisational forms and methods; methods for learning motivation) components of functional literacy learning. The authors present the research conclusions and perspectives for further research.

Keywords: Belgium; adult education and learning; adult education system; functional literacy; content and operational components of functional literacy learning.

Introduction

The key task of the education is defined as preparing citizens to functioning in the society. At the beginning of the 21st century in the international educational space, this task not only keeps its actuality, but acquires a new meaning. In the knowledge society, there is a trend to the gradual elimination of low-qualified workers. Modern labour markets of highly developed countries pose immensely high requirements to the specialists in any branch of economy. So, full-scale functioning in the society requires a certain level of acquired knowledge and developed skills, that is, possessing functional literacy. Accordingly, the lack of such skills or the low level of acquired knowledge causes the phenomenon of functional illiteracy. Adult functional illiteracy can be accompanied by the lack of certificates of accomplishing certain levels of education, and as a result, the impossibility to gain further education and acquire professional skills meeting the requirements of the modern labour market. Consequently, to overcome the problem of functional illiteracy means to solve the problem of unemployment. At the same time, every country has its own peculiarities of historical development, social progress, forming the people’s attitude towards learning in general and literacy in particular. This situation requires investigating the phenomenon of functional literacy in the context of historical, political, social and economic settings of every country. The development of Belgium being a developed country located in the central part of Europe possesses the distinctive features of European society as a whole. But in this country consisting of three language communities (Flemish, French and German-speaking), the problems occur due to peculiarities of its federal system and, accordingly, the language diversity of its population. The similarity of some characteristics of Ukrainian and Belgian societies (historical development, language misunderstandings) determines the choice of the latter as the object of comparative studies.

In the chorus, the globalisation of international economic space causes the mutual penetration of educational tendencies of different countries all over the world. Naturally, these tendencies could be positive as well as negative. Ukraine along with other European countries is an active participant in this process. Therefore, studies and analysis of the phenomena causing functional illiteracy of adults in modern Belgium and its experience in arranging the process of teaching functional literacy within the frames of the adult

education system as the part of lifelong learning in this country is important for forming strategies for preventing the expansion of the phenomenon of functional illiteracy in Ukraine.

The analysis of scientific and pedagogical literature reveals that scientists all over the world research various aspects of this problem. Goffinet & Van Damme (1990) conducted theoretical analysis of the functional illiteracy of adults in Belgium, Maroun (2007) studied professional development of teachers of adult basic education, Vermeersch (2008) researched the problem of adult literacy assessment, Van Haecht (1985) analysed the social preconditions of adult illiteracy development in Belgium, Manço (2006), Bousetta (2005) described the problem of immigrants' linguistic integration in the country under research. Ukrainian scientists Biduk (2006), Busko (2014), Havrylyuk (2012), Lukyanova (2010), Mahdach (2013), Ohiyenko (2008), Folvarochnyi (2016), Fuchyla (2011) conducted comparative pedagogical researches; Zyazyun (2005), Polyak (2011) studied some aspects of the researched problem, but adults' functional literacy learning in the modern Belgium society needs further study.

The importance of the research is also caused by the necessity of overcoming the discrepancies between: the challenges of the modern knowledge society and the level of adult functional literacy, necessary to full-scale functioning in the society; the needs for the development of adult functional literacy and disparity between them and the mechanisms for satisfying them in the Ukrainian system of adult education; the dynamic development of the Ukrainian system of adult education and the lack of normative legal, organisational, scientific and methodological support; the necessity of the thorough analysis of efficient ideas and foreign experience referring to teaching functional literacy and the lack of its systematic research and generalisation in the Ukrainian pedagogical studies.

Therefore, the aim of the article is to analyse the theory and practice of adults' functional literacy learning organisation in Belgium.

The theoretical and methodological framework of our research are based on the andragogy principles (Andryushchenko, 2010; Banit, 2010; Burenko, 2005; Lukyanova, 2010; Knowles, 1990); assumptions about learning process and personality's psychical development interdependency (Kostyuk, 2010; Ridkodubaska, 2012); personality oriented education (Bekh, 2013; Yevdokymov, 2009; Tyurina, 2010); pedagogy and andragogy development in the 21st century (Yankovych, 2014; Yarmachenko, 2011); modernization of Ukrainian educational system in the context of European integration (Dubasenyuk, 2013; Pidlasyi, 2012); lifelong learning and education (Barabash, 2014; Mukan, 2016; Morenko, 2013).

The authors used the complex of theoretical and applied methods applicable to the research aim and objectives. We used analysis and synthesis to study and distinguish cause-and-effect relations in the process of adult functional illiteracy development as well as the means for its rejection; induction and deduction to determine the directions and specificity of functional literacy learning in the system of adult education in Belgium; comparison to revise the legislative fundamentals of the three Belgian communities and to outline common and different features; comparative and historical method to parallel social and educational phenomena in historical retrospective. We used the methods of generalisation and concretization to highlight the learning process in the system of adult education in Belgium. Throughout our research, we used empirical methods, particularly, the discussions, questionnaires, and communication with educators of Belgian Centres for adult education.

Functional literacy as the scientific and pedagogical problem

The analysis of scientific and pedagogical researches shows that they describe different aspects of the functional illiteracy: adults illiteracy and adult education development (Fisher, 1927; Giere, 1987; Keppel, 1926; Maroun, 2007); fundamentals of andragogy (Caffarella, 2006; Knowles, 1990; Poonwassie, 2001) and its expansion in the international educational space (Cranton, 2006; Shor & Freire, 1987); specificity of historical and political development of Belgium which forms the prerequisites of functional illiteracy development (Blom, 2006; Daugherty, 1998; Desjardins, Milana & Rubenson, 2006; Goffinet, 1990; Manço, 2006; Witte, 2001); adults' functional illiteracy development and means to overwhelm the problem (Alam, 2004; Corcoran, 2008; Druine & Wildemeersch, 2000; Mezirow, 1991; Wlodkowski, 2008); the content, forms and methods of functional literacy learning (Brown, 1996; Van Damme, 1990; English, 2006; Kerka, 2002; Kluzer, 2009; McGuirk, 2001; Lukin, 1997; Peoples, 2000); the learning environment peculiarities in the system adult education (Merriam, 2006; de Meyer, 2006; Mukan, 2016; Ohiyenko, 2008; Rosen, 2008; Zyazyun, 1997).

According to Halus & Shaposhnikova (2006), "the aim of functioning of the system of adult education is to exercise the person's right to lifelong learning" (p. 209). Therefore, the literacy in the 21st century is not interpreted as the set of basic skills developed by children during their first years of studying at school. It is a set of skills, knowledge and strategies of personal development, which a person develops during his or her

life in different contexts (political, market, cultural, social etc.) in the cooperation with other representatives of the community, to which he or she belongs, and other communities, in whose activities he or she participates. As Zakaulova (2008) declared, “the main factor of the development of European society is, undoubtedly, a well-educated European community, whose integration will help to unite and enrich its citizens, prepare them to strong challenges which new century prepares for them, teach them how to realize real values and pass them to further generations” (p. 161).

Thus, there are different definitions of functional literacy and functional illiteracy (Mukan & Fuchyla, 2014). Chudinova (1994) found, that “functionally illiterate persons to a large extent lost their reading and writing skills, and are not able to apprehend short and simple texts which reflect everyday life situations and, therefore, cannot effectively function in the modern society” (p. 98). Contrariwise, it is clear that literacy means using printed or written information for functioning in the society, for achieving personal goals and developing personal knowledge and potential. A thorough analysis of the definition can show that the phrase “using printed or written information” characterises literacy not as a set of isolated skills necessary for reading and writing, but what is more important, as applying its incorporation for achieving goals in the certain context. Initially, individuals use literacy for different purposes, which are altering according to the changes of context and the person in it (Mikulecky, 1982). This usage variability leads to interaction with the wide range of materials having different linguistic forms. In addition, different kinds of tasks in teaching literacy require using different cognitive strategies for the development of necessary skills. The phrase “for functioning in the society” implies including all possible contexts of the adults’ life, in which literacy is crucial: from private to public, from school learning to professional activities, to lifelong learning and active citizenship (Scribner & Cole, 1981). It emphasizes that literacy makes it possible for adults to benefit from society as well as contribute to its functioning, namely, maintain or improve the living standards of the society in general and of a person in particular; to become competitive in the labour market under the conditions of globalisation; participate in the life activities of the society undergoing the persistent technical development. Therefore, as Nikolayenko (2006) states, “[i]n the democratic state, education must create a free citizen not only as the carrier of achievements of the previous generations, but also as an active self-reliant participant of social development ” (p. 7).

Consequently, we may conclude that functional literacy being part and parcel of modern society is a versatile phenomenon which is much broader than the notion “literacy”. The latter means that an adult person has some skills enabling him or her to read, write and count. But functional literacy of an adult reflects the ability to fully participate in the society activities, accommodate himself/herself to the changes in the labour market using modern technologies (for example, information technology) for accomplishing this goal.

In fact, in accordance with the context of applying this notion, functional literacy can be considered from educational, social or political viewpoints (Groenestijn, 2003). We distinguish various types of functional literacy. Actually, the phenomenon of functional literacy encompasses such types of literacy as: autonomous literacy (literacy separated from its social, cultural and historical context perceived as a set of technical basic skills); critical literacy (skills in critical attitude to a text and the analysis of its covert meanings); ideological literacy (skills facilitating the development of a person in the social context and his/her full and conscious participation in society life); dysfunctional literacy (person’s negative perception of social and political conditions leading to his/her self-distrust, non-participation in a country life and, then, to marginalisation); document literacy (skills enabling a person to find and pass the information arranged in forms, tables, graphs, timetables etc.); narrative literacy / prose literacy (skills enabling a person to extract information from belles-lettres, periodicals, advertisement and information leaflets, manuals etc. and apply it to everyday life situations); numeracy or quantitative literacy (skills enabling a person to do arithmetical operations which are necessary in everyday life (measuring out the amount of a medicine that a person should take at one time, counting a percentage, a square etc.); integral literacy (a set of skills of autonomous literacy (reading, writing, counting), social skills and knowledge of modern technologies enabling a person to thoroughly function in the modern knowledge society) is the synonym for functional literacy, and comprises interior (mental and cultural) and exterior (behavioural and social) dimensions (Bhola, 2008).

These types of functional literacy correspond to the context of the modern definition of functional literacy and enable individuals to develop intellectual abilities, abstract thinking and critical attitude towards reality, as well as ability to make decisions and solve problems independently.

Social and historical prerequisites of adult functional illiteracy development in Belgium

After analysing the history of Belgium and its development, the main causes of the phenomenon of functional illiteracy occurring in this country have been revealed. The analysis has shown that in this country the development of education in general and literacy of its population, in particular, has taken place under the

conditions of continuous political changes. Since the territories of modern Belgium got into the reign of different European countries, the population living there underwent language and religious oppression. Education was also affected by these events. Syllabi and language were changing. Students learned in the hostile environment, and this created their negative attitude to education altogether. Even after proclaiming the independence of Belgium, its government could not form an integrated system of education in the country due to continuous confrontations between the representatives of two language and cultural communities (Dutch-speaking and French-speaking). The representatives of a small German-speaking population did not participate in these confrontations. This territory was connected to Belgium as a result of annexation after World War I and then after World War II. For a long time, this community even did not have a right to its own broadcasting.

Actually, the situation in the Belgian education was complicated by the phenomenon of immigration occurring due to poor economic situation and losses in manpower after World War II. At first, citizens of other European countries moved to Belgium. Being representatives of European culture, they quickly adapted themselves to a new language and cultural environment. Next waves of immigrants arrived in Belgium from Muslim countries and caused the appreciable degradation of a population literacy level.

On the other hand, technical progress posed new tasks before the population of the whole European area. So, the illiteracy of some social strata did not disappear, but assumed a new form called “functional illiteracy”.

Social and economic aspects of functional illiteracy in the modern society of Belgium have been revealed. In this regard, we should mention that persons who quit learning prematurely and without gaining a certificate of certain educational level cannot continue their education in any European country. The phenomenon of leaving education prematurely (especially secondary school education) is considered to be common in all developed countries all over the world. There are some social factors which strongly affect this situation. One of them, as our analysis has shown, is the parents’ occupation, that is, their belonging to some social stratum. This social position determines to a large degree the further education and occupation of their children and, thereby, the direction of professional tendencies in the educational system of Belgium. We can notice the destructive influence of pupils or students discrimination (by social status and origin) by teachers and its effect on the further education of adults.

Thus, the complicated historical process of Belgium development as an independent democratic state has affected its system of education as well as the citizens’ attitude to learning, so that language and religious discrepancies and conflicts deepened an educational crisis. Having solved the problem of coexistence of language communities by delegating the responsibility to develop their culture and education, Belgian federal government still did not solve the number of social problems: the lack of equal possibilities of the access to education concerning adults as well as children; relationship between the educational level, achieved by children and a social status of their parents. It has been revealed that “labeling” the representatives of certain social strata begins at the pre-school level and causes poor performance, backwardness and educational failure in primary school and becomes particularly drastic during the distribution of secondary school students into four different education forms: General secondary education, Technical secondary education, Vocational secondary education and Secondary arts education. As Goffinet & Van Damme (1990) declared, “[o]bviously, there is a social selection process in secondary and higher education, as it can be seen, for example, in the fact that certain social classes are over-represented in technical and vocational education, that social background determines the various paths taken during educational life and that the children of working-class backgrounds are under-represented in higher education” (p. 44). The early choice of future occupation, in our opinion, has also a negative aspect: it does not take into account the peculiarities of puberty age (12 – 14 years old), which, evidently, can affect taking adequate decisions about further education and development.

The problems of the social integration of the immigrants (low level of basic skills and influence of cultural differences on the process of their involving into learning) deepen the social differentiation of Belgian society at the beginning of the 21st century and affect the increase in the amount of functionally illiterate citizens.

Realisation of functional literacy learning in the system of adult education in Belgium

The government pays special attention to adult education which is the constituent part of the Belgian system of education and is based on the principles of lifelong education. Nevertheless, approaches to adult education organisation in language communities of Belgium are different. Such situation can be justified with the fact that federal government has transferred the entire responsibility for educational, cultural and language questions to the governments of the Communities.

The government of Flanders (Dutch-speaking community) created the elaborate and effective system, which enables students to obtain the education in the range from basic to vocational education.

In this context, the special position in the system of adult education belongs to vocational education directed towards acquiring an occupation, professional development and retraining of the unemployed. In the Walloon (French-speaking community) the activities of public educational establishments are directed towards the vocational training and retraining of specialists aiming at their professional and career development as well as working possibilities for the unemployed. The system of training for the representatives of small and medium size enterprises (SME) is also available there. In the German-speaking community, the main tasks of adult education consist in creating the conditions for acquiring secondary education, and vocational education in the field of agriculture or SME.

In Flanders, the functional literacy training is provided by Centres for Adult Basic Education, and conducted according to the framework of the "Strategic Literacy Plan". In the French-speaking community teaching literacy is provided by volunteer organisations, and the German-speaking community arranges teaching literacy on the basis of public schools.

It should be emphasised, that in Belgium, functional literacy learning is based on the principles of andragogy that is, on applying an individual approach to every adult student, considering and developing his or her motivation to acquire knowledge. For fulfilling this task, the complex of methods including theoretical, practical, communicative and social ones is used. These methods are directed not only towards the development of basic literacy skills (reading, writing and counting) but also arouse students' interest in studying the surrounding world and seeking for further education.

In Flanders, the modular system has been introduced in the system of basic adult education. This system guarantees that the end goals of one module coincide with the entrance requirements of the next one and, therefore, facilitate the functional literacy learning in any educational establishment of the Community.

In the French-speaking community, the functional literacy learning, besides the development of the basic skills including writing, reading, and counting, is directed towards the formation of reality understanding, the practical application of acquired knowledge to everyday life, the integration of a person into the society. This learning is provided by volunteer organisations implementing the principles of lifelong learning, the programs against unemployment and towards social and professional integration of a person.

The analysis of the content, methods and forms of functional literacy teaching in the Belgian system of adult education enables us to state that this form of education is based on the principles of andragogy in the French-speaking and Dutch-speaking communities with the use of individual approach and in small groups. Complex teaching methods help to find a proper approach to students in accordance with their motivation and goals, to choose the lesson topics according to the students' interests and create the atmosphere of trust and optimism among the students and teachers. The main tasks of functional literacy teaching in the Belgian system of adult education are determined as the formation of basic skills, communicative skills, development of independent decisions making and applying acquired knowledge for solving everyday problems, development of interest in reading as an activity which develops creative thinking and imagination.

Conclusions

As the research results show, functional literacy learning is based on the complex integration of humanistic, pluralistic and andragogical theories, concepts, approaches. Functional literacy is the ability to create and use printed and written materials connected with different contexts which is mastered by the individuals in the process of permanent learning for gaining the possibility of achieving goals and realizing personal potential as a personality, specialist in some field of economy or social sphere and apply the acquired skills in the everyday activities of the modern knowledge society.

As the result of the conducted analysis, such forms of adult functional literacy as autonomous, critical, ideological, dysfunctional, document, narrative / prose, numeracy or quantitative, integral literacy have been determined.

According to the policy of the governments of language communities, the structural-functional scheme of the organisation of the Belgian system of adult education has been created. Federal ministers remain responsible for providing and financing educational leave for the employees of the private sector of the economy.

The Flemish system of adult education consists of: public educational institutions providing formal basic and vocational adult education; non-formal educational establishments realising the learning facilities in the network of non-governmental organisations which enable all-round personal development of adults; and informational service coordinating the activities of different providers of adult education.

Adult vocational education in the French-speaking community is realised by the means of formal education. The main task of this sector consists in promoting the professional advancement, employment and retraining of specialists. Only a few educational establishments of this community provide the possibility for acquiring adult functional literacy skills. Non-formal adult education in the French-speaking community provides teaching of functional literacy for autochthons as well as for immigrants.

The system of adult education in the German-speaking community provides vocational education for the employees of small and medium-sized enterprises, in the field of agriculture, as well as adult learning according to the primary and secondary school syllabi for gaining a relevant certificate.

The specific features of the practical implementation of functional literacy teaching in the Belgian system of adult education have been determined. It has been found out that its content component covers knowledge and skills of basic education (speaking, reading, writing, numerical and informational literacy) as well as vocational education, the use of social experience (job seeking, solving domestic problems), thorough functioning in society life, personal development and self-education. It has been concluded that functional literacy supports such skills and abilities as ideas and information exchange, use of numbers, use of informational technologies, work with people and in teams, decision-making and problem-solving.

It has been revealed that teaching functional literacy in Belgium is based on the use of three main approaches: analytical approach (from a simple to more complex notion); global structural approach (learning words as significant values with further developing usage); reader's approach (determination of the text meaning with the help of formulating the hypotheses about its content).

In the French-speaking community of Belgium, the teaching materials are created with the use of global structural and reader's approaches. These are materials accommodated to functionally illiterate adults intended for helping them solve the problems of their everyday life through the development of basic skills and encouraging to reading for information about the world and the development of abstract thinking. In the Dutch-speaking community of Belgium, such main methods as experience teaching and theme tasks are used. The aim of teaching adult literacy in Flanders is the promotion of students' development in everyday life.

The prospects for further research consist in studying the possibilities of professional training of specialists for working in the system of adult education (andragogues), the compatibility of vocational and general (or cultural) education, the features of the development of the phenomenon of functional illiteracy of adults in the conditions of poly-cultural society and united European educational space.

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