Functional Literacy: Analysis of Literacy Practices of Female Attendants in Pakistani Context

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Abstract
William S.Gray (1956) initially defined the term functional literacy for UNESCO. He associated it with the approaches which also covers the successful acquisition of verb, cognitive and computational skills to fulfill not only the practical ends but also the culturally specific ways. So, A person is functionally literate who can engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning of his group and community, and also for enabling him to continue reading, writing and calculating for his own and the community development. (A.M.Thomas, 1983).Functional literacy includes the possession of skills perceived as necessary by a particular individual or group to fulfill their self-determined objective as a family or community member, citizen, consumer, job-holder, or member of religious, social or other associations of their choosing (Haramn, 1984).Self-perceived need and self-determined objectives forms the basis of learning. The reason to review functional literacy through literacy practices of female attendants is that usually attendants are assumed to be devoid of formal education hence apparently lacking in skills (functional literacy) but the ground reality is they perform tasks which involves linguistic competence. So, the current study is an attempt to review the concept of functional literacy and functional literacy competence by analyzing specific literacy practices of female attendants at Fatima Jinnah Women University, Rawalpindi (FJWU). A qualitative approach was used to evaluate and analyses the literacy practices of female attendants. Population of the study comprised of five female attendants at FJWU chosen through random sampling method. Data was collected through semi structured interviews to probe deep in the literacy practices of female attendants. Findings of the study revealed that the literacy practices (dispatching documents, presenting refreshment, receiving keys etc.) of female attendants at FJWU are culture specific and performed through functional skills (verbal, cognitive and computational) by practitioner's self-determined objects (support family, perform the task accurately, get HODs approval, job benefits) formulated under practitioner's perception (precision and accuracy will result in reward). The study would pave the way for adult education policy makers to comprehend the literary practices of working adults and accordingly to design courses and policies to enhance their capabilities which would ultimately increase their productivity.
 Key words: functional literacy, self-perception, self-determined objectives, functional competency

1. Introduction

Philosophies are mostly articulated through definitions (a.draper, 1989). Same is the case with concept of literacy which has undergone evolution after being mooted over its definitions. Basically literacy is defined as a person's ability to read and write. But this definition becomes insufficient when underlying values and assumptions are considered for shaping literacy practices (Thomas, 1989). Now a refined definition of literacy by UNESCO (1978) in revised recommendation concerning international standardizations of educational statistics is, "a person is literate who can with understanding both read and write a short simple statement of his/her everyday life". In modern world the meaning of literacy is expanded to encompass the ability to use language, images, numbers, computers and other fundamental means to understand, communicate and gain useful knowledge, solve mathematical problems and use dominant symbol system of a culture.

So, the concept of literacy is not just limited to reading and writing only and it is also free from the four walls of schools. Whenever human beings use their cognitive abilities to function well in their respective culture they are practicing literacy. Literacy practices involve attitudes, values, feelings and social relationship of people in particular cultural context to construct literacy, to talk about literacy and make sense of it.

"Literacy practices are general cultural ways of utilizing written language which people draw upon their lives. In simplest sense literacy practices are what people do with literacy." (Hamiltion, 1998)

As the concern of this study is analysis of literacy practices of female attendants at Fatima Jinah Women University, Rawalpindi, it is important to discuss the concept of adult literacy. According to national assessment of adult literacy (NAAL) an adult is defined as literate depending on his/her ability to perform activities which are both task based and skill based. Task based literacy is the ability to use printed and written information to achieve one's goal, function in a society and to develop one's knowledge and potential. The skill based definition of literacy includes an adult's ability to read a text which includes both word level recognition as well as higher level literacy skills. Skill based and task based orientations of literacy gave birth to the concept of functional literacy.

The term functional literacy was initially defined for UNESO by William S.Gray (1956). According to him the term refers to approaches which include the successful acquisition of verbal, cognitive and computational skills to accomplish practical ends in culturally specific ways. So, A person is functionally literate who can engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning of his group and community and also for enabling him to continue

reading, writing and calculating for his own and the community development. (A.M.Thomas, 1983)

Initially functional literacy was measured through grade level completion, reading tests or person specific tests alone. But after the invention of Adult performance level study by United States office of Education (USOE) the concept of functional competency emerged. Functional competency refers to skills and set of five content areas in which these skills are applied. These skills include communication, computation, problem solving and interpersonal relations. The content areas where these skills could be applied are occupational knowledge, consumer economics, community resources, health, government and law. There is an unstated threshold of competency upon the attainment of which a person would become capable of functioning reasonably in particular field.

Now we can define functional literacy as: the possession of skills perceived as necessary by a particular individual or group to fulfill their self-determined objective as a family or community member, citizen, consumer, job-holder, or member of religious, social or other associations of their choosing (Haramn, 1984).Self-perceived need and self-determined objectives forms the basis of learning.

1.1 Rationale Behind the study

The reason to review functional literacy through literacy practices of female attendants is that usually attendants are assumed to be devoid of formal education hence apparently lacking in skills (functional literacy) but the ground reality is they perform tasks which involves linguistic competence. So, the current work is an attempt to review the concept of functional literacy and functional literacy competence by analyzing specific literacy practices of female attendants at FJWU.

2. Literature Review

This section presents a brief review of literature in order to devise a suitable research methodology to conduct this study.

Clair (2008) emphasized in his study that certain aspects of adult literacy numeracy education could benefit from research resources. He highlighted that limited research capacity and lack of shared international forum are affecting literacy research. He then focused on four aspects in more detail: model of literacy, benefits of literacy education, instructional practices and the effects of diverse setting for practice. In all these areas it is important to consider the distinction between research in and about literacy numeracy education because these two types of research serve different purpose using different strategies. He closed his study with call for more reliable research based information in order to inform and enrich the professional judgment (CLAIR, 2008).

The study entitled "Measurement of Adult literacy in theory and in practice" reviewed International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) designed to measure functional literacy skills across countries. The study found that theoretical frame work of IALS was based on solid base of research and statistical theory. Proven statistical methods like Item Response Theory and Plausible Values Methodology were used in the development and analysis of the literacy tests. So on practical grounds IALS could be successfully administered in household survey setting. Several quality assurance steps of the survey (IALS) have proven in this regard (Darcovich, 2000) .

"Impact of authentic adult literacy instruction on adult literacy practice" evaluated the authenticity of formal adult literacy instructions on actual practices of the target population. Instead of measuring the effectiveness of instructions through achievement the study focused on actualization of literacy: playing out in practice what has been focused in formal instructions. Findings of the study revealed that there was no significant co-relation between formal adult literacy instructions and actual outcomes in practical life (Victoria Purcell-Gates, 2002) .

"Rethinking Adult Literacy Training: An Analysis through a Third World Feminist Perspective", provoked academics and practitioners in the field of adult literacy education in an international arena, to rethink adult literacy training for women in the Third Worlds. In this essay the writer explored how existing practices in adult literacy training restrict participants' dynamic subjectivities and thereby restrict both their and practitioner's possible futures. Purpose of this essay was to analyze perspectives which will help to unveil and engage the master (s), be they development academics/ experts/practitioners, male family measures or masculinist ideologies, such as patriarchy and nationalism, on explicitly negotiated terms (Sato, 20004).

National Literacy Secretariat, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada funded a study to evaluate literacy practices of adults with limited formal literacy skills. The data were drawn from 20 countries over three cycles of data collection and provide the world's first reliable and comparable estimates of the levels and distributions of literacy skills in the adult population. The study included the activities of learners at work, home and community domains. Activities were evaluated through IALS grades 1 and 2.purpose of evaluating informal literacy practices was to incorporate these activities in formal adult literacy programs and reconsider the policy of adult literacy and numeracy education (Taylor, 2000).

3. Research Methodology

This chapter presents aims and objectives, research questions, data collection tools, population of the study and research parameters.

3.1 Aims and Objectives

Aim of this study is to analyze specific literacies of female attendants at FJWU. Objectives of the study are to unpattern "functional literacies" and "functional competencies "of grade fourth female employees at Fatima Jinnah Women University, Rawalpindi.

3.2 Research Questions

1. What is their literacy continuum?

2. What is their attitude (self-perception and self-determined objectives) towards their literacy practices?

3.3 Population of the study

In order to answer the aforementioned research questions the researcher selected five female attendants from Fatima Jinnah Women University, Rawalpindi through random sampling method. Demographic variables of the attendants were not emphasized in this study.

3.4 Data Collection Tools

The research used semi structured interviews and observations as data collection tools to analyze specific literacy practices of female attendants.

3.5 Research Parameters

After reviewing pertinent literature and the concept of functional literacy researcher fixed parameters of this study in order to analyse the data and answer research question. According to the definition of functional literacy by William S.Gray (1956) approaches used to acquire verbal, cognitive and computational skills to accomplish practical ends in culturally specific ways is called functional literacy. So, the researcher analyzed literacy continuum of her target population by applying the filter of aforementioned skills. A pictorial representation of research parameters is shown below.
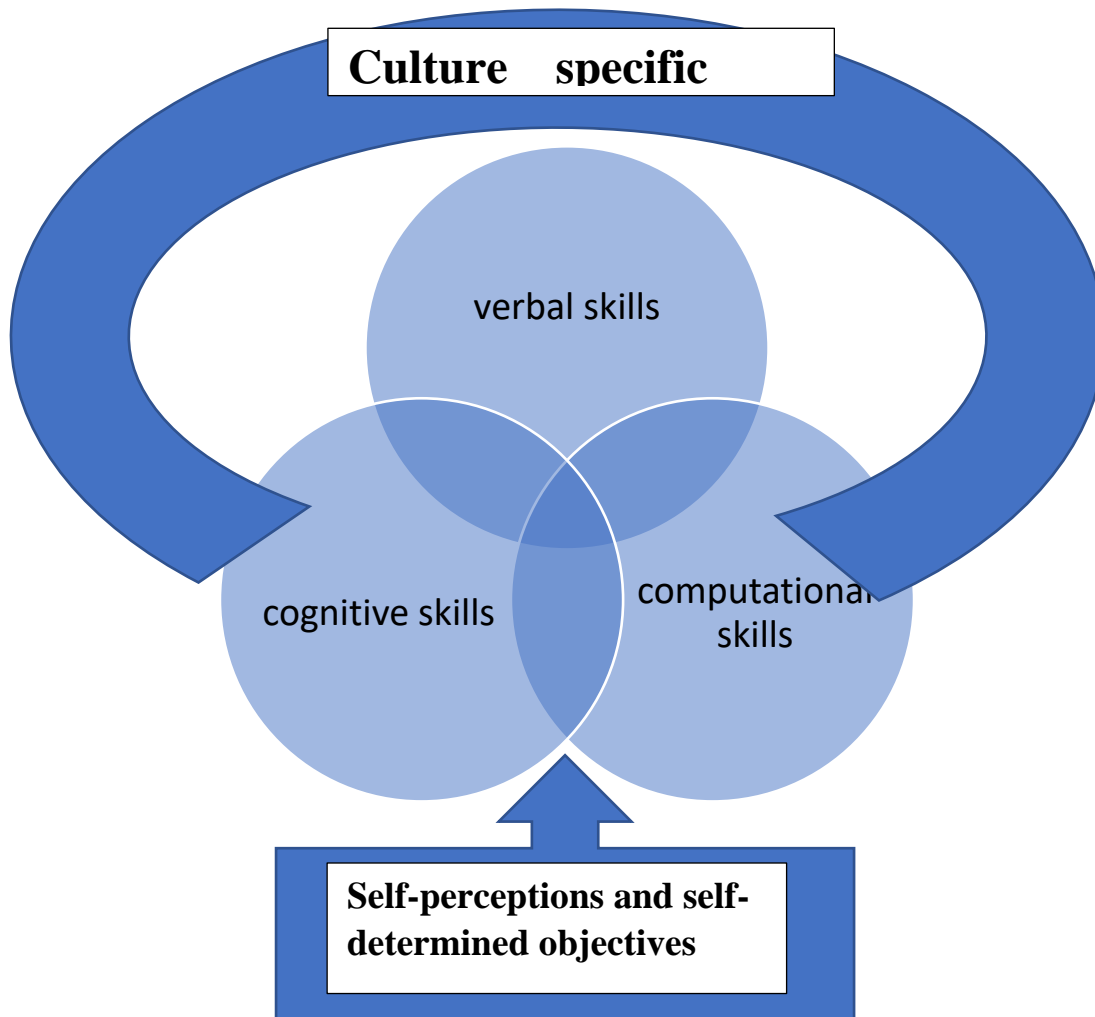
Fig 3.1 Research Parameters

Self-perceptions and self-determined objectives of the participants determine utilization of their verbal cognitive and computational skills in cultural specific way. It is important to note that all the skills overlap with each other. To perform a task, participant use more than one skills simultaneously, but it is not necessary that all the skills may be used simultaneously.

So, in the next chapter data will be analyzed by applying these parameters on the practices of participants.

4. Data Analysis

This chapter presents analysis of the data. All the data was analyzed manually. Interviews were recorded and transcribed for analyses. Researcher also took notes as observation while conducting

interviews. Finally transcribed texts and notes were coded according to research parameters presented in chapter No.3. Following literacy practices of female attendants at FJWU were observed by the researcher.

Official Practices	Personal Practices at Work
Receiving keys	Mostly maintain record of their leaves
Opening offices	Can operate non-android cell phones
Providing refreshment	Mostly use cheque books (aware of ATM cards but don't prefer them)
Taking collection for refreshment	Mark their attendance
Purchasing refreshment	
Dispatching documents with in the university	

Table 4.1 Literacy Practices of female attendants at FJWU

Self-perceptions and self-determined objectives of the attendants to perform aforementioned literacy practices are given below.
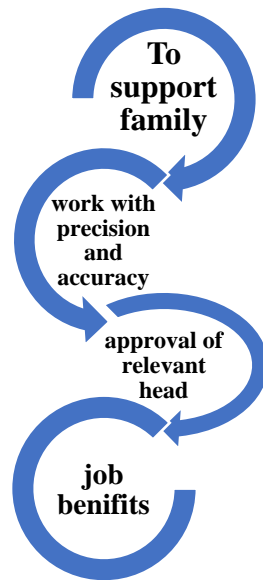
It is important to note that self-determined objectives are embedded in one another. Same is the case with self-perceptions of the participants about their literacy practices which are shown below.

Fig 4.2 Self-Perceptions of attendants about their literacy practices.

4.1 Interview Glimpses

R:ap yhan kaam karti hein?

A: g?

R:ap kay kaam karti hein?

A: mein yhan runner hoon?

R: ap ka kam kay hy? Matlb kay duties hein?

A: g pahly tu mein attendance lgati hoon, register hota hy humari head k pass wo sara hisab kitab rkhty hein,phr meinn keys leti hoon whi se ,phr aa k officesice kholti hoon sb offices mein pani rkhti hoon.

R: ap keys kesy leti hein? Kay un pe nam likha hota hy?

A: g un pe number hota hy hum chek kr k lety hein humin jwab dena hota hy.

kay ap number parh k leti hein?

A: g mein parh skti hoon or bakaida chek krti hoon….

From this short glimpse of conversation we realize that in order to assign prestige to her work she referred the job title "runner" while in Pakistani context they are called *naib qasida.* But as English connotes honor and dignity being the language of elite class so she use the term runner to sound honorable. **(Self-Perception, cognitive skill, cultural awareness, verbal skill)**

 Marking attendance with high priority knowing the record is maintained**. (Verbal skills, cultural awareness, computational skills)**

Receiving keys by checking numbers on keys**. (Computational skills, verbal skills**). The very notion of being answerable for keys reception and opening offices clips their practice of using their skills with in specific culture of FJWU.

5. Findings and Discussion

Multiple skills are simultaneously utilized to practice literacy. For example in order to provide refreshment the casual practice of tea is apparently very simple but very rich to elaborate the point.

An attendant from gender studies department gets contribution from faculty members to buy tea ingredients. She keeps record of their contributions like how much amount they were supposed to pay and how much they actually paid. Who's return is left with her. She is able to go on the shop and check the relevant items there. She mentioned she could decipher different flavors and now can recognize them through her experience. She knows how many of the faculty members use green tea and which flavors of green tea and for whom she can change flavors. She also knows who wants black tea and who wants green tea and when. She could decipher through a miss bell only that its tea time and which tea time. She could handle the electric kettle and all this tea management because she had observed all this.
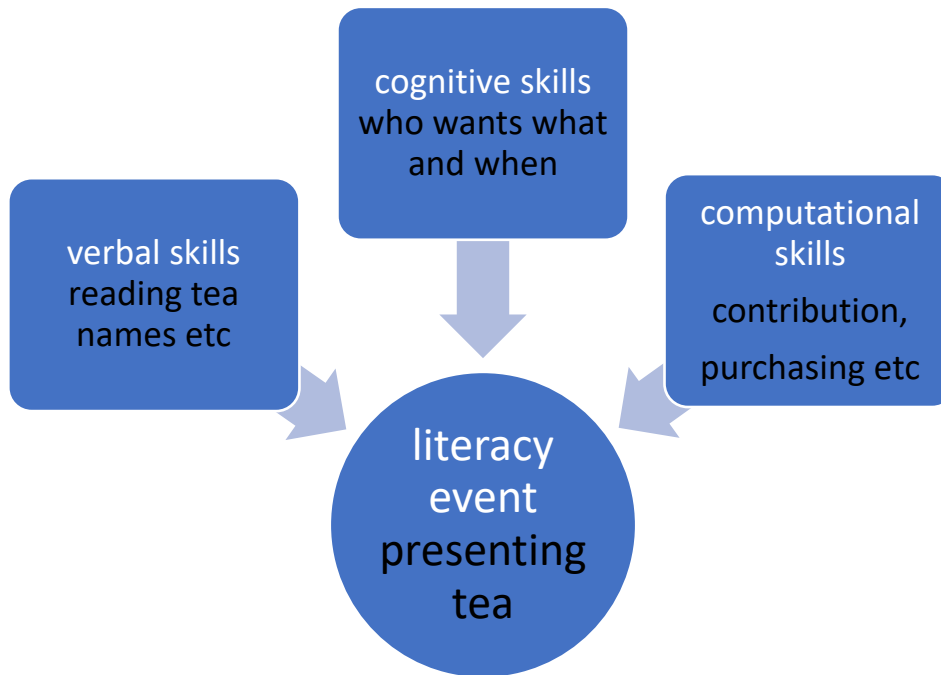
Fig 5.1 literacy practice (presenting tea)

After this analysis researcher realized that social practice approach of literacy given by street (1999) and functional skill approach are linked. Social practices approach of literacy focus on literacy practices in specific culture, and according to the definition of functional literacy individual use cognitive verbal and computational skills to accomplish tasks in their specific context. Social practice approaches of literacy directly focus on accomplished task instead of referring to skills.

Functional skill approach of literacy is criticized for being text specific only. Text specification here refers to utilization of verbal, cognitive and computational skills to accomplish a task. However, analysis of the literacy practices of female attendants revealed that they don't use any skill in isolation. To perform a single task (tea example) almost all the skills or skills in combination are used, which is literacy practice in itself. So we may say excluding skills from literacy practice and focusing on single skill in literacy practice both are extreme ends which don't occur in reality.

It was also observed during interviews that participant's code mixed most of the time. They were using English words most of the time. If they knew any English word they used it in conversation with emphasis and prestige. They all pronounced their job title in English. And for so many questions about handling of electrical kitchen equipment's and grocery shops they replied we know through experience. So, we may say with in the specific culture of FJWU their literacy practices

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were not just according to the self-determined objectives but enhancing as well(elevation in existing skills).

5.1 Research Questions Answered

Q1. Their literacy continuum involves utilization of verbal skills, cognitive skills and computational skills to practice their specific literacies (documents dispatching, serving refreshment, maintaining service record etc.) in order to perform assigned task. This continuum occurs so repeatedly and frequently that all the participants have developed their literacy competence in it. For example when the attendants have to dispatch the documents with in university they could differentiate which document is for which department and if it is confidential then they have to hand it over to the concerned person only (mostly head of the department).

Q2. As far as the attitude of participants is concerned they are working basically to support their family. Although they referred their work as source of *rizk e hilal* but except one participant all of them defined their job in English. Referring their work as a source of *rizk e hilal* is also a way of boosting self-esteem with the help of religion. However, all the participants have very positive and cautious attitude toward assigned tasks. The concept of being answerable and job benefits are basic perceptions which shape their objectives to carry their tasks.

6. Conclusion

The study revealed that literacy practices(dispatching documents, presenting refreshment, receiving keys etc.) of female attendants at FJWU are culture specific and performed through functional skills (verbal, cognitive and computational) by practitioner's self-determined objects(support family, perform the task accurately, get HODs approval, job benefits) formulated under practitioner's perception(precision and accuracy will result in reward).

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