

Literacies and Migration: Challenges for the Field of Adult Education in Germany

Sabina Hussain, German Institute for Adult Education, Germany

Introduction

The importance of literacy for people of all ages and in all societies was confirmed through the launch of the United Nations Literacy Decade (2003-2012). The aim of the decade, which carries the slogan Literacy as Freedom, is to promote and increase literacy levels with its focus on marginalised social groups. This concerns both developing and industrialized countries. In connection with aspects of globalization and migration, the understanding of literacy concerns countries in an interrelated way.

Contrary to the internationally acknowledged conviction that literacy has become the indispensable requirement to communicate in a globalizing world, discussions on literacy and literacy levels in the local sphere are often geared towards a linguistically homogeneous culture, i.e. towards the dominance of one language above others within a specific cultural environment. This is especially true for the so-called industrialized countries. Despite the fact that these countries have a high influx of migration, the linguistic diversity does not influence the arrangement of literacy programs. The International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS)ⁱ, for example, used the dominant national language for the measurement of literacy levels and, therefore, 'presents only a partial view of the literacy rates and related issues in metropolitan countries' (Rassool 1999: 57-58).

In Germany, the issue of adult literacy has become increasingly important since the launch of the UN Literacy Decade and the results of the IALS. The survey revealed that 14.4% of the participants remained on the lowest level of the scale. In addition, the *German Federal Association for Literacy and Basic Education* (Bundesverband Alphabetisierung e.V.) estimates that about four million native German-speakers have very low literacy skills (www.alphabetisierung.de/infos/faq.html) and argues for the implementation of programs to address this problem.

Likewise, the subject of immigration has become increasingly important in Germany (Kalter 2008: 12). This was amplified when a new policy reform, the National Integration Plan, was passed by the German government in 2007. Part of the plan, which provides local and state officials with a federal framework for conducting immigrant integration programs, is that immigrants must pass a basic German-language test. However, the complex implications of migration, resulting in, for example, multilingualism and cultural diversity, are not seen as literacy-related issues that concern both immigrants and the residing population. Rather, they are considered as concerns related to the notion of *integration* into the mainstream German society.

This discussion paper will analyze the question of literacy in regard to issues of migration within the German context. It argues that the dominant ideological framework is based on a discourse that clearly distinguishes between those who are defined as 'literate' and those who are defined

as 'illiterate' in the German language. This binary carries another, implicitly embedded, binary of 'belonging' and 'non-belonging', with 'non-belonging' referring to those people who have none or a relatively low command of the German language. Furthermore, it infers that as long as in the German sphere everybody – irrespective of their cultural and social background – has to comply with a pre-defined dominant ideology that is based on the idea of a culturally and linguistically homogeneous spatial reality, the propagated slogan *literacy as freedom* cannot be realized. The awareness that the dominant ideological framework prevents the successful practical translation of the slogan, poses a challenge for the field of adult (literacy) education programs.

Understandings of Literacy

Internationally, literacy has been defined in different ways with no universal interpretation. The divergent understandings of literacy are closely related to economic, social, political, and cultural changes and 'each definition is a product of a particular, albeit often unacknowledged and recognized, world view' (Lonsdale and McCurry 2004: 13). However, since the 1980s the New Literacy Studies (Street 1995; Barton 1994; Gee 1996), a group of critical literacy educators, have been very influential in the conceptualization of literacy. In particular, the distinction between the *autonomous* and *ideological* model of literacy (Street 1984) has led to new understandings and more open definitions of literacy. The main characteristic of the autonomous model of literacy refers to a deficit-oriented approach in which an individual's intellectual abilities are seen as determinants for literacy levels. In contrast, the ideological model views literacy as a social, context-specific practice and accentuates a plural notion of literacy, i.e. there are multiple *literacies* including a range of skills in diverse areas. Reading, writing, and numeracy are some of the skills, whereby they are not regarded as mere technical abilities, but as involving the decoding of information, and of critical thinking. This notion implies a pluralistic concept, as well. In accordance with this, the United Nations has adopted the more open and pluralistic notion of *literacies* and, by linking it to citizenship, cultural identity, socio-economic development, human rights, and equity, stresses the claim 'for the context-sensitive and therewith learner-centred provision of literacy' (UNESCO 2004: 10). In line with a postmodern view, UNESCO emphasizes the individually determined acquisition and application of literacy. The shift 'from a *functional* literacy grounded in basic functioning and survival, to a *sociocultural* perspective based on personal and social empowerment' (Wickens and Sandlin 2007: 281) acknowledges that *literacies* are shaped by culture, history, language, religion, and socio-economic factors.

In Germany, debates on adult literacy were aimed at creating awareness that – despite compulsory schooling – there was a relatively large group of German speakers with low levels of literacy skills (Fuchs-Brüninghoff et al. 1986; Drecolll 1981; Kamper 1993). More recently, the results of both the *Programme for International Student Assessment* (PISA) and of the *International Adult Literacy Survey* (IALS) have intensified discussions on the importance of providing adult literacy courses (Baaden 2004; Döbert and Hubertus 2000; Schlutz 2004; Panagiotopoulou 2001). However, the plural conceptualization, which predominates in the international understanding of literacy, has hardly entered the local discourse in this field. There are publications relating to the work of the New Literacy Studies (Linde 2007; Kamper 2005; Panagiotopoulou 2001), which aim at displacing the commonly applied term 'Funktionaler Analphabetismus' (*functional illiteracy*) with the term 'Literalität' (*literacy*) in order to avoid a

deficit-oriented approach. Despite these attempts, ideas of the *functionality* of literacy still predominate in the field and, alongside this, the notion of socially determined and required standards in reading, writing, and numeracy.

Discursive practices play a crucial role for the understanding of literacy and reflect the broader ideological framework on which they are based. This becomes evident when discussions of adult literacy are linked to the subject of immigration. The uses of terminology reflect that the *local* discourse of literacy is based on the binaries of 'literate' and 'illiterate'. The binary implies that the acquisition of a certain level in literacy leads to social inclusion. Within this concept, notions of language and culture and their relationship play an important role. Through the processes of education, socialization, and training, 'individuals are initiated into the Discourse of their identity formations. (...). Initiation into Discourses is cultural activity, and the Discourses themselves are, simultaneously, means and outcomes of cultural process' (Lankshear 1997: 17).ⁱⁱ Consequently, the binary provokes silences 'amongst specific groups of people and also their levels of fluency in a variety of cultural *literacies* other than those defined within the dominant ideological framework' (Rassool 1999: 55). The monolingual approach in literacy classes in Germany and the introduction of compulsory so-called *Integration Courses* for immigrants illuminate an ideological framework that leads to a double marginalization for migrants.

Literacies and Migration

According to recent data, around 15.1 Million people with a background of immigration live in Germany (Statistisches Bundesamt 2008). This adds up to 19% of the population and includes all those people who have ties to at least one other country within or outside of Europe. Based on these findings, there is a consensus within the main German political parties that Germany is 'a country of immigration'. The notion of a linguistically and culturally diverse landscape is implicit in this statement as are the demands for adequately developed programs that address the divergent experiences and the manifold cultural backgrounds of the migrant population. In addition, the statement implies a shift from the perception of a homogeneous to a heterogeneous cultural landscape for the residing German population. However, in response to the immigration, the German government introduced the law on citizenship rights in 2000, followed by the *Immigration Act* that came into effect in July 2005. More recently, the *National Integration Plan* was inaugurated in July 2007. This plan provides local and state officials with a federal framework for conducting immigrant integration programs of which the passing of a German language test and an orientation course on German law, history, and culture are the compulsory components.

The learning of the German language and knowledge of the German culture and its principles is regarded as the most effective way to *integrate* migrants into the mainstream society. According to the Ministry of the Interior, 'integration' is understood as having equal rights in participating in cultural, social, and economic life. Furthermore, it is pointed out that the *integration* of migrants into the society can only be successful if it is understood as a two-way process of 'giving' and 'taking' (Bundesministerium des Inneren 2008). However, contrary to this understanding, the model of *Integration Courses* is based on mono-lingual approaches in which neither linguistic nor cultural varieties are considered (Nohl 2008: 17; Schillo 2008: 31). The courses are a combination of a language and literacy program with the main aim to teach the techniques of writing and reading in a foreign language. In a relatively short time (900 lesson periods)

migrants are supposed to utilize the language in order to proceed to the Orientation Course, which then imparts knowledge on Germany's legal system, culture, and history by using the German language.

The concept reflects an ideological framework that strives for a socially homogeneous society. The establishments of the reforms and new policies are meant to support 'this assimilatory "integration" and homogenization' (Skutnabb-Kangas 2002: 134). Individuals are expected to linguistically and culturally coincide and the burden of 'integration' is on them alone. Within this approach, Skutnabb-Kangas remarks, the

dominant group is presented as non-ethnic. Its values are presented as The Norm, or as Standard, and as somehow 'shared' and 'universal', rather than particularistic and changing. When the majority population is presented in this way as homogeneously sharing universal cultural values, this characteristic legitimates its access to most of the power and resources (2002: 134).

The discursive practices reveal an ideology that is based on the binary opposition of 'belonging' and 'non-belonging'. Returning to the notion of literacy and the national and international aims of providing courses for the enhancement of adult literacy skills, adult migrants face a double burden if they have both a low command of the German language and of literacy skills in any other language.

Shifting the responsibilities and the requirements onto individuals, discloses a contradiction in the theoretically formulated notion of UNESCO's slogan Literacy as Freedom and its realization in the local sphere. The introduction of the new policies within Germany show that the practical translation of this goal is subject to local interpretations. Freedom through literacy, within the German context, seems to be reached if all inhabitants follow pre-determined rules and regulations. Rather than acknowledging a linguistic and cultural diversity in Germany, integration is based on a monolingual and mono-cultural approach disregarding other values, identities, and cultures. Referring to language teaching in developing countries, Canagarajah points out, that

we shouldn't equate globalization with greater freedom. That identities are fluid doesn't mean that society and nations don't fix certain negative identities on minority students and discriminate against them accordingly. (...). That languages are hybrid doesn't mean that certain codes don't function as the linguistic capital (with a clear hierarchy of valued registers, dialects, and discourses) to obtain social and educational rewards. The global village is still stratified unequally according to differences in power and material resources (Canagarajah 2002: 135).

As much as this accounts for the relationship between cultures on a global scale, it accounts for the culturally diverse landscape in the local sphere. Because there is a dominant discourse on the 'Other', these conceptualizations are possible and possess the power to legitimate the introduction of policies to cope with these 'Others' (Mecheril 2008: 77).

In order to comply with the internationally acknowledged goal to provide 'learner-centred' literacy programs, a thorough analysis of discursive practices is a preliminary essential

requirement. Only a self-reflective scrutiny of the applied discursive practices and of the dominant ideological framework will lead to a more equal conceptualization of educational programs with immigrants. However, the acknowledgement and inclusion of plurality in literacy classes poses great challenges for the field of adult (literacy) education.

Challenges for the Field of Adult Education

In Germany, the discourse in the areas of literacy and migration is based on the binaries of 'literate' and 'illiterate' and 'belonging' and non-belonging', respectively. As discussed above, discursive practices are the constitutive component for the conceptualization of policies, which, consequently, dictate the design of specific programs and projects. In the field of adult literacy programs in Germany, the policies aim at providing mono-lingual courses in order to enable the evaluation of literacy levels based on pre-determined standards in reading, writing, and numeracy within one commonly shared language. German is regarded as the implicit prerequisite for the participants. The German language plays a crucial role for all inhabitants in Germany and must be considered as the commonly shared vehicle for communication. However, neglecting educational backgrounds that are based on linguistic and cultural experiences outside of Germany, lead to the permanent social exclusion of the immigrant population. Although the implementation of Integration Courses for immigrants is to counteract social exclusion and, on the contrary, is supposed to lead to social inclusion, the disregard of the diversity of cultural identities prevents just this.

Considering the UNESCO formulated goals in the area of literacy, which have been internationally acknowledged, the implementation of Integration Courses in Germany and the singular- and functional-oriented approach in defining literacy, run incongruous to the set goals. If the aim is genuinely that individual purposes for becoming literate should be taken into consideration, a re-conceptualization in the understanding of literacy and teaching practices must be introduced.

In the final declaration of CONFINTEA-V, the following was noted:

It is essential that approaches to adult learning be based on people's own heritage, culture, values and prior experiences and that the diverse ways in which these approaches are implemented enable and encourage every citizen to be actively involved and to have a voice (Wagner: 20).

Knowledge about the multiplication of life forms, Mecheril confirms, affects particularly education, because forms of exclusion become especially visible within the educational field (Mecheril 2008: 77). The introduction of more flexible teaching methods and the acknowledgment of diversity are steps towards a more inclusive teaching. However, they demand multi-perspective approaches, in which self-reflection plays a crucial role. Other steps include the demand that policies which aim at regulating and prescribing content and methodology of teaching practices have to be critically scrutinized. The same applies to independent educational programs and teaching methods. Concerning immigration, sensitivity, openness to other ideas, languages, and life forms, and continuing research will eventually lead to the implementation of the theoretically formulated ideas. Adult educators can play a leading role in the implementation of alternative programs and approaches:

Adult educators would do well to become expert in the meta-issues surrounding migration issues. We would do well to increase the importance of the topic at conferences, in research, and in graduate programs. As educators of adults, we might decide to educate policy makers, as well as migrants themselves, regarding tolerance, welcoming structures, and diversity. As professionals who influence policy, adult educators are in a position to expand notions of validation of careers, that a nurse from Turkey can validate knowledge and practice the craft in Denmark. And we can encourage partnerships with countries of origin, be futuristic, so that strides can be made ahead of time to clue in the migrants, to give them a running start. Mainly good research is needed so that we may better understand how the role can be made even stronger when it comes to the debates on migration throughout Europe and indeed the world (Ilsley: 140).

It has been indicated before that the meaning of literacies cannot be reduced to the technical understanding of reading and writing. Factors such as language, cultural background, values, and means of communication influence literacy learning and application. These factors are part of, and contribute to, a specific identity formation. The challenge for literacy teachers is to provide a framework that is both flexible and diverse in order to address questions and problems based on individual experiences. Language within this context plays an important role for the educational process and for the formation of identity. The acknowledgement of different languages within one cultural sphere will have positive effects, because, as Skutnabb-Kangas points out, 'we include and exclude people in society, we can suppress or nurture their self-esteem. We can ignore them. Or we can educate them into multi-language, multi-cultural people celebrating their own culture but also others' (Skutnabb-Kangas 2002: 133). This implies that teaching literacy must include aspects such as citizenship, democracy, and culturally determined issues in a multi-perspective way.

The challenge for adult educators in the field of literacy is to find a way to provide an environment in which discussion on the specificities of cultural identities belong as much to the teaching as does the learning of a new language. Only through mutual understanding is a sense of belonging created; and the sense 'of belonging to a community is essential for citizenship and the primary task of education is to enable learners to develop new identities to add to those that they bring to the learning process' (Starkey: 6). Until now the

physical and intellectual perception [is] that the cultural system in which migrants move and act and speak does not speak for them; rather, it treats them as 'nature,' raw material to be turned into objects (submissive citizens) whose worth can be calculated in terms of stability of the status quo (Carter: 119).

However, the analysis of definitions, of curricula, of teaching methods, and teaching practices are the first necessary steps to change this.

Conclusion

The aim of this discussion paper was to interlink the currently debated issues on literacies with the subject of migration within the German context. Contrary to international developments, in Germany definitions on literacies are still mostly regarded within a singular conceptualization. Therefore, acquisition of techniques for reading and writing are detached from socio-cultural factors. This becomes especially obvious in view of the recently introduced Integration Courses for immigrants. These courses counteract the internationally acknowledged goal of the UN Literacy Decade, which refers to the importance of individual demands as well as to the inclusion of linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds for a successful and sustainable literacy training of adults.

For the German context, a continuing research in the area of migration and literacy, the analysis of discourse and discursive practices and of the prevalent ideological framework are necessary in order to change current structures in teaching approaches for immigrants with low levels of literacy skills. Government policies have to take into account the fact that literacy needs and literacy application change over time. Aspects such as age, gender, and cultural backgrounds have to be considered in order to respond to the individually differing needs of adult literacy learners.

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ⁱ OECD; Statistics Canada (1995), *Literacy, Economy and Society: Results of the first International Adult Literacy Survey*.

ⁱⁱ Culture within this context is seen 'as a consequence and a function of the social dimension of human life' (Lankshear 1997: 13), and the organization of lives that is based on shared understandings, concepts, purposes, and values. Following Gee, Lankshear understands Discourses as 'forms of life' or 'ways of being in the world', which integrate such things as words, acts, attitudes, beliefs and identities, along with gestures, clothes, bodily expressions and positions, and so on' (Lankshear 1997: 17).