Adult literacy

In a nutshell

- Literacy has the potential to enhance people's ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate, and compute using printed and written materials associated with various contexts.
- Literacy is also key to sustainable development improving child and family health and nutrition, reducing poverty, and expanding life opportunities.
- Children and adults learn in fundamentally different ways, influencing the way they should be taught.
- The planning of an adult literacy programme requires identifying stakeholders' and learners´ needs and motivations.
- There are at three scenarios for adult literacy learning programmes: 1. Non-formal literacy learning programmes (adult literacy classes) with or without other developmental material, 2. Informal literacy-learning embedded within development projects and taught by other specialists Literacy learning programmes embedded within other activities and Literacy within formal adult basic or non-formal education establishments and 3. Literacy learning programmes embedded within a wider curriculum.

Adult literacy drives were undertaken by many developing countries between 1950 and 1980[1]Abadzi, H. (1984) 'What We Know About Acquisition of Adult Literacy —is there Hope?', World Bank. Discussion Paper 245, Washington DC: World Bank.. The

drive for further promotion, the strengthening of individual countries, and international efforts came later, as a result of the Education for All (EFA) conference held in Jomtien, Thailand, in 1990. The Jomtien Declaration aimed at meeting the basic learning needs of children, youths, and adults. A decade later, another EFA conference was held, this time in Dakar, Senegal. It reaffirmed the Jomtien Declaration and issued the Dakar Framework for Action, which stipulated 6 EFA goals to be achieved by 2015. Goal number 4 clearly emphasized the need for countries to increase adult literacy levels by 50% (especially for women) by 2015 and also to promote equitable access to basic and continuing education for all adults. As a response to the setting of the goals, UNESCO initiated the *Education for All* (EFA) *Global Monitoring Report* to monitor the progress in implementing the goals. In 2015, UNESCO issued a report that showed that there were about 781 million illiterate adults and that the rate of illiteracy had dropped slightly, from 18% in 2000 to 14% in 2015. This meant the global drive for improving literacy among adults (particularly women) by 50% had not reached its goals.

Literacy varies in definition and distribution across cultures and historical periods with differing demands on differing socio-economic and cultural environments[2]Levine, R.A., Levine, S., Schnell-Anzola, B., Rowe, M.L., & Dexter, E. (2012). Literacy and Mothering: How Women's Schooling changes the Lives of the World's Children. Oxford: Oxford University Press.. That is to say, what counts as being literate differs from one social context to another. However, one constant across contexts is that literacy skills are associated with a range of valuable and desirable outcomes. For instance, UNESCO declares that literacy has the potential to enhance people's ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate, and compute using printed and written materials associated with various contexts[3]UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (2017). Integrated Community-Based Adult Education

(ICBAE). UNESCO.. In recognition of the value of literacy among adults, the *Belém Framework for Action* (UIL), in its section on adult literacy, states that literacy is an indispensable foundation that enables young people and adults to engage in learning opportunities at all stages of the learning continuum. [4]UIL (2010). CONFINTEA VI: Belém Framework for Action: Harnessing the power and potential of adult learning and education for a viable future. Hamburg, UIL. Furthermore, literacy enables individuals to achieve his or her goals, develop his or her knowledge and potential, and participate fully in his or her community and wider society[5]UNESCO (2003). Aspects of literacy assessment: Topics and issues from the UNESCO expert meeting. Paris: UNESCO..

The connection between literacy and development is illustrated by the fact that the least developed countries have the highest illiteracy rates, meaning that literacy liberates untapped human potential and leads to increased productivity and better living conditions[6]Bamgbose, A., (1991). Language and the nation: The Language Question in Sub-Saharan. Edinburgh. Edinburgh University Press.. Almost two-thirds of illiterate adults are women, a figure that has remained almost static since 1990; at this rate, the poorest young women in developing countries are not expected to achieve universal literacy until 2072[7]UNESCO (2014). Adult Literacy and Skills Training Programme (ALSTP), South Africa. UNESCO.. The Mid-Term Review of the Sixth International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA VI, 2017) emphasizes that if current trends continue, the wealthiest boys in sub-Saharan Africa will achieve universal primary completion in 2021, while the poorest girls will have to wait until 2086[8]UNESCO (2014). Adult Literacy and Skills Training Programme (ALSTP), South Africa. UNESCO..

How children and adults learn

Children and adults learn in fundamentally different ways. Listed below are some of the fundamental differences between how children and adults learn[9]TIME (Train Intercultural Mediators for a Multicultural Europe) (2016). Adult training methodology and techniques. Olympic Training & Consulting Ltd. www.mediation-time.eu..

Children	Adults
Rely on others to decide what is important to be learned	Decide for themselves what is important to be learned
Accept the information being presented at face value	Need to validate information based on their beliefs and experiences
Expect what they are learning to be useful in the future	Expect what they are learning to be immediately useful
Have little or no experience upon which to draw	Bring life experience and knowledge to the learning environment
Have little ability to serve as a knowledgeable resource	Have significant ability to serve as a knowledgeable resource to the facilitator and fellow learners
Dependent on educators/facilitators	Learn best through collaboration and reciprocity, i.e., in an environment where people learn with others while sharing what they already know
Learn in similar ways	Have preferences for the way in which they learn
Subject-centred	Goal-oriented, relevancy-oriented, and practical
Learn by rote	Prefer active learning

Children	Adults
Uniform by age level and curriculum	Curriculum develops from life tasks and problems
Motivated externally	Motivated to learn by a variety of factors such as personal aspirations, expectations, internal desire or interest, the need to escape from a situation, etc.

Adults use literacy for many purposes and acquire literacy in many ways. Usually, they recognise a need to improve their literacy skills to meet the challenges of the following situations: when they start a new job, when their children start school and want help with homework, when they lose their usual form(s) of employment, and during societal changes that include economic development, industrialisation, and the deepening of democracy[10]McCaffery, J., Merrifield, J., & Millican, J. (2007). Developing Adult Literacy: Approaches to Planning, Implementing, and Delivering Literacy Initiatives. Oxford: Oxfam GB, Oxfam House..

The differences in the ways that children and adults learn also impact the way they should be taught.

Teaching children	Teaching adults
Engage and keep children's interest. Children have a little bit different motivation for learning than adults because they are driven by curiosity.	Adults are motivated to learn and have much different expectations than children. Allow them to choose what they want to learn.

Children love to have fun. Therefore, engage them through age-appropriate games, play, songs, etc.	Lessons should be age-appropriate and relevant. Although adults also like games, dramas, and music in the classroom, understand what they expect before engaging them in such practices.
Maintain classroom management. Children can be sometimes difficult to manage. Therefore, establish classroom rules.	Respect adults, and keep them engaged in the learning process.
Children need to be strictly engaged in classes. Due to having different expectations than adult learners, children do not really think about what they are supposed to be getting out of their classes and require adult guidance.	Give adults the freedom to plan the timetable.
Create rapport with children to combat discipline issues.	Engage adults in everyday conversations while maintaining professional relationships.

Questions for reflection

What are your views about teaching adult learners?
Suggest teaching practices that could address the key differences between teaching children and adult learners.

The importance of literacy among adults

We understand that literacy is essential for sustainable development in that it enables greater participation in the labour market, improves child and family health and nutrition, reduces poverty, and expands life opportunities. Moreover, non-literate adults also have immeasurable skills and

extensive knowledge. For example, in rural areas they have complex knowledge about how to care for families, cultivate, plant, and harvest a wide range of crops, keep different animals, build houses, and make various crafts. They also have the knowledge necessary to survive in very harsh conditions like droughts and floods. A literate person can build on these skills and knowledge to additionally perform more advanced socioeconomic, cultural, and political activities and work more effectively to solve the problems surrounding him or her.

Improving life situations. Most learners feel that improving their literacy skills could lead to improvements in their life and income and help them become more competent at whatever work they are doing.

Addressing social issues. There are many ways teaching literacy can be combined with addressing social issues. For example, mothers can improve child survival by producing clearer descriptions of their children's illnesses. Literate adults can read about and understand the issues in political campaigns or local controversies in order to make their own reasoned decisions. They can also work more skilfully in their communities to influence or change the things they care about.

Improving home-school links. Literate adults, and especially mothers, read to their children or help them with homework. This additional teaching improves mother-child interactions, which eventually improve children's vocabulary. Moreover, literacy leads to adults keeping more reading materials in their home and engaging in more literacy practices themselves.

Rationale for adult literacy programmes

There are two general reasons to start an adult literacy programme:

i. *To meet community needs* after assessing what kinds of requirements resonate with its residents

- Economic concerns. Do local employers have difficulty finding qualified and competent workers? Is the unemployment rate high?
- Children's education. One significant literacy value is that mothers (i.e., primary caregivers) with low literacy levels have children with low literacy levels. If the community and its schools are concerned about children's literacy, one component of addressing the issue may be literacy services for parents.
- Health issues. Literacy is often a factor in health issues, particularly preventive health and health maintenance. Do parents understand the need for good prenatal and infant care? Does everyone follow prescribed instructions and medical advice? Concern for public health may be a motivator for literacy services.
- Quality of life. In many communities, raising the quality of life for all citizens is a priority. Thus, a community may decide that literacy services are important simply because there are community members who need them.

ii. *Literacy programmes as part of a larger initiative*

Literacy programmes may be seen as central to achieving the goals of a larger community initiative, e.g.:

- Substance abuse prevention
- Community health (either a general push toward a healthier community or a campaign aimed at a specific health problem or concern)
- Sociopolitical education
- Economic activities
- Health and hygiene

Scenarios for adult literacy learning programmes

Unlike primary education, most adult programmes consist of a

fixed-duration campaign model, a single-shot training programme in literacy skills designed to make illiterate people literate once and for all.

Three different scenarios can be detected[11]Oxenham J., Diallo, A.H., Katahoire, A. R., Petkova-Mwangi, A. Sall, O.A. (2002). Skills and Literacy Training for Better Livelihood. Review of Approaches and experiences. Africa Region Human Development Working Papers Series. The World Bank.:

i. Non-formal literacy learning programmes (adult literacy classes) with or without other developmental material

Literacy stand-alone courses: The primary function of these learning programmes is instruction in the skills of reading and writing through various teaching-learning texts. Such "literacy programs are normally regarded as single interventions by temporary staff to deal once and for all with what is termed 'the problem of illiteracy'"[12]Rogers, A. (2005). Adult Learning and Literacy Learning for Livelihoods. Available at: www.uea.ac.uk/care/Recent_Writing/COLLIT4.pdf (last accessed January 2020).. The success of the programme is measured in terms of the literacy level achieved.

Literacy programmes with other developmental messages: Such programmes usually include other developmental messages as part of the learning programme, especially messages related to health, income generation, skill-learning, or the environment.

ii. Informal literacy-learning embedded within development projects and taught by other specialists *Literacy learning programmes embedded within other activities*. Content covers knowledge and skills relevant to the acquisition of the literacy, life and vocational skills necessary for conducting the chosen income-generating activities.

iii. Literacy within formal adult basic or non-formal education establishments *Literacy learning programmes embedded*

within a wider curriculum. They can be part of adult basic education and training, continuing education, or non-formal adult education often located within adult education institutions.

 Planning an adult literacy programme

Needs-assessment activity

Educators need to think through the various possibilities before deciding which approach to adult literacy might work best in their area. Most questions and activities can only be answered in relation to the local context. Below are suggested phases in conducting a needs assessment. All the phases are interrelated, but looking at each element individually will make the possible choices clearer.

Stages	Explanation
Stage I: Identifying stakeholders and securing a group representative of the community	Stakeholders include not only the funders and potential participants but anyone who is likely to be affected either positively or negatively by a programme's impact. These might include ministries of education, NGOs, other community projects, adult learners, adult learners' families, community leaders, religious leaders, local council health services, the media, people who hold no specific position but who are well respected and who have influence in their community (e.g., village leaders women association leaders, youth leaders, etc.).

Stage II: Understanding learners' needs and motivations. This stage involves the following steps:	**Step I: Identification of priorities of local people in respect to literacy and numeracy** * Form needs-assessment committee. * Determine desired outcomes (What do the learners need literacy for?). * Determine what kind of information would be helpful to more clearly define needs and where to obtain the data (What kind of literacy do learners need?). * Set the priorities of each concern as a focus in the gathering of data.
	Step II: Data gathering * Determine target group and the scope of the needs assessment, e.g., all areas with eligible illiterate adults. * Collect data to determine the current state of the target group in relation to the desired outcome. * Formulate needs statements based on discrepancies between current literacy level and desired outcomes.
	Step III: Prioritization of needs based on data * Understand local context and local literacy needs before continuing with planning, ranking needs in order of importance. * Identify the different locations in which literacy is used in a local environment (schools, health centres, homes, markets, shops, government offices, tea houses, etc.).

	Step IV: Decision on scope, taking sustainability into consideration * Seek the best venue for classes to take place in (e.g., different buildings available or a convenient location in relation to participants' homes). * Establish learners' availability for the programme. * Address the issue of long-term sustainability at the outset and identify other avenues for individual adult learners to continue their learning (e.g., ongoing vocational or other school-based programmes).
	Step V: Summary of findings * Summarize and document findings by needs, with an explanation of the major causes. * Share the results with the needs-assessment committee and stakeholders.
Phase III: Design a programme to meet needs	Consider the following questions: * What literacy skills will the programme provide and to whom? * Is the community most in need of adult literacy skills? * What levels are most adult learners likely to need? * Who will run the programme? * What are the programme's assumptions, i.e., what will it actually look like, should it be staffed by professionals or volunteers, etc.? * How will the programme be planned and implemented? * How will the programme be funded?

Common literacy approaches used in adult literacy training

Learning literacy involves the same general processes people use for learning throughout their lives: observing and copying, listening to explanations from others, practicing and repeating, trial and error, working alongside others, and learning from experience[13]McCaffery, J., Merrifield, J., & Millican, J. (2007). Developing Adult Literacy: Approaches to Planning, Implementing, and Delivering Literacy Initiatives. Oxford: Oxfam GB, Oxfam House.. While some people learn to read and write on their own, most people learn in school or other educational settings. Literacy skills and knowledge develop further as adults take part in life activities that include reading and writing as well as speaking and listening. That is to say, people learn by doing.

Learning to read and write.

Generally, reading and writing require an understanding of the relationship between sound and symbol. Readers need to be able to 'decode': to turn a symbol into its equivalent sound (a phoneme, the smallest unit of spoken speech). Writers need to 'encode': to turn a sound (a phoneme) into a symbol. Alphabetic retrieval is the process through which people understand and manipulate the system in their language for linking letter or symbol with sound. It includes both phoneme awareness and phonics.

Regarding adult literacy programmes, reading has two practical applications: reading for understanding and the technical skills of reading[14]Besser, S., Brookes, G., Burton, M., Parisella, M., Spare, Y., Stratford, S., & Wainwright J. (2004). Adult Literacy – Learners' Difficulties in Reading: An Exploratory Study. London: National Research and Development. Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy.. Reading for understanding, or comprehension, is an active process of constructing meaning. There are three elements in any reading task: *the reader*, who brings a particular set of capacities, abilities, knowledge, and experiences to the act of reading;

the text, which may include any written, printed, or electronic text; and *the activity* of which reading is a part, which has its purposes, processes, and consequences[15]Snow, C. E. (2002). Reading for Understanding: Toward an R&D Program in Reading Comprehension. Santa Monica, CA: RAND.. It is well known that the reading task occurs within a larger socio-cultural context. Features of a text itself make it easier or harder to understand (including how familiar the form and vocabulary are to the reader — i.e., the language used). In this respect, comprehension is affected by all the elements of the task and varies over time as well as in different contexts. Equally important are the technical skills for reading in adult literacy training Three key elements that may be relevant to anyone learning to read for the first time, whether child or adult, have been identified: *alphabetic* — the correspondence between letter/symbol and sound that is the basis for text; *fluency* — the process of reading with speed and accuracy, necessary to remember what has been read and to relate to the reader's own knowledge and ideas; and *comprehension* — the active process of constructing and extracting meaning from text. Some approaches to adult literacy training are discussed in the next section.

Primer-based approaches

The word primer refers to a workbook especially designed to teach reading and writing that includes reading exercises and ruled lines with short words or sentences for students to copy. [16]Rogers, A. (2005). Training adult literacy educators in developing countries. A paper commissioned by the Education for All Global Monitoring Report as background information to assist in drafting the 2006 report. Primers are used where distribution networks are scarce, materials few, and teachers have limited education, preparation, or support for their teaching task. In many ways, the use of a primer provides a method for teaching rather than an approach. Primers can be based on a sound—letter association, the recognition of word

shapes, or a broader Freirean approach with images for discussion, key phrases, words, and syllabic pairs. Different primers approach literacy learning in different ways.

Many primers use an alphabetic approach (starting with individual letters) or ideographic approach (starting with ideograms, as in Chinese or Japanese).

Letter pairs

Some primer-based approaches may start by teaching syllabic pairs or phonemes, the smallest unit of sound (*be, bi, bo,* etc.). Early lessons will start by teaching vowels or vowel sounds (e.g., *a, e, i, o,* and *u* in Kiswahili), and later lessons work through the alphabet, attaching vowels to different consonants *(ba, be, bi, bo, bu,* etc.). In practice, this often leads to a lot of oral repetition as the trainer points to the syllable and the class sounds it out, repeating the new letter with each new vowel sound. Whole lessons might be spent echoing, for example, *na, ne, ni, no, nu, ta, te, ti, to, tu* with little sense of what these sounds mean.

Whole-word approach

Other primers start with a whole-word approach. Trainers or facilitators are shown how to introduce words through preprepared cards with the chosen words written on them. The class is taught to recognise word shapes before going on to recognise letter shapes. Individual words — generally common nouns — might be illustrated with pictures. Primers based around whole words build up vocabulary. One of the disadvantages of the whole-word approach is that it may take some time for learners to progress to writing sentences about things they need to communicate or to use literacy in any meaningful way.

Key sentences

Some primers are organised around a new sentence for each

lesson and start by presenting a whole phrase for learners to learn. The phrase is usually accompanied by a picture for discussion. The sentence might convey a short developmental message from topics learners want to learn. Sometimes the sentences are also accompanied by actions the learners will carry out in order for learning to take place. *Pregnant mothers should visit a clinic* is one example.

A psycho-social Approach

Regenerated Freirean Literacy through Empowering Community Techniques (REFLECT) is an approach developed by Brazilian educator Paolo Freire[17]Spener, D. (2018). The Freirean Approach to Adult Literacy Education. National Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education. It has the following characteristics:

- The approach is based on problem-solving; that is, it provides a framework for thinking and encourages participants to be creative and active. Participants are required to consider a common problem and find solutions.
- The approach focuses on participants themselves choosing the content of their education and not experts setting the curricula for them.
- Through dialogue in a session, a common generative theme is developed. Reading, writing, and counting activities are based on this theme.

Why REFLECT?

The UNESCO conference in 1990 raised serious concerns about a shortcoming in adult literacy programmes: that they had no link between literacy and issues that affected people's well-being, such as poverty alleviation, income and expenditure patterns, productivity of learners, and birth rates and infant mortality. REFLECT was, therefore, developed to provide a dynamic literacy approach that has development at its heart

and requires people to take action for their own development.

What is REFLECT approach as a literacy methodology?

REFLECT[18]Finnish Refugee Council (2016). Adult Literacy REFLECT Training Manual. Refugee Council, Sierra Leone Programme.:

- is a structured, participatory learning process.
- is a synthesis of planned and unplanned learning.
- helps people to read, write, and calculate in the language of tuition chosen by them.
- helps people to develop their capability to critically analyse their own environment and issues directly affecting them.
- helps people to write about their own lives and their world.

Example of the REFLECT approach in Tanzania

The REFLECT approach was adopted in 1998 as one of the main approaches for strengthening community empowerment through literacy and numeracy. It was used in the Integrated Community Based Adult Education (ICBAE) programme that was conducted across Tanzania[19]UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (2017). Integrated Community-Based Adult Education (ICBAE). UNESCO.:

Implementation of the programme

- The programme was implemented across all 25 regions of the Tanzanian mainland.
- Learning centres were located in primary schools, and the learning cycle lasted 18 months.
- Once learners enrolled, they were organized into literacy circles of about 30 learners led by one facilitator.
- The language of instruction was Kiswahili.
- Learners met three times per week, usually in the

evenings, once the children had finished school and gone home.

- Facilitators were given manuals containing relevant topics in agriculture and micro-economics, health and hygiene, and sociopolitics. However, the curriculum was very flexible, allowing learners to focus more on topics that were the most relevant to them or that interested them the most.

Programme content

Agriculture and micro-economics:
a. Crop production
b. Livestock-keeping
c. Environmental conservation
d. Agro-economics
e. Natural resources

Health and hygiene:
a. Food and nutrition
b. Clean water
c. Infectious diseases
d. HIV/AIDS
e. Reproductive health
f. Sex education

Sociopolitical education:
a. Household finance management
b. Law and human rights
c. Tanzania: Traditions and customs
d. Social services (Learners were taught about the social services provided in their community and how they could access them.)

Role plays (simulations)

Learners were provided with the opportunity to act and experience real situations in a protected learning environment

in which testing, mistakes, and practice were permitted.

Drama, dance, and music

Facilitators used drama, dance, or music to exemplify a scenario or practice in the society. They:

- selected appropriate drama, dance, or music.
- encouraged the application of, for example, a story and its characters.
- emphasized literacy skills (e.g., reading, comprehension) from the drama, dance, or music to enrich the learning process.

Storytelling

- The facilitator read the whole story to the adult class.
- The story acted as a stimulus to get the learners to think and talk. The story was also used to structure and focus the lesson.
- When a story was used to teach reading, it was important to use one that was relevant to the learners' lives so that it taught them to read and write while encouraging them to share useful and important information about themselves.

Group discussions

During learning sessions, learners were often divided into groups and encouraged to discuss issues relevant to their respective communities. The discussions were then used to nurture speaking, writing, reading comprehension, and word recognition skills.

Learners with very low literacy levels were offered some additional time, under the supervision of the facilitators, to learn and practice reading and writing skills.

Reflection: Mention and discuss other interactive and participatory teaching-learning methods that could be employed during a literacy class.

Digital literacy and adult learning

Adult learning has seen an increased use of information and communication technologies (ICT). According to Hylén [20]Hylén, J. (2015). Mobile learning and social media in adult learning. European Commission Directorate –General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion. Europe., the increase is due to several reasons. ICT has the capacity to enhance learning, since motivated learners are more engaged in the learning process and are likely to dedicate more time to their learning. ICT can also widen access to learning opportunities in that it makes learning possible from any location at any time, something which can encourage learners to take more responsibility in directing and managing their own education. While using ICT, adult learners also acquire digital skills that are essential for living and working in today's society. By using digital technologies in education, adult learners simultaneously develop digital skills as well as other skills that are relevant for the 21st century.

Mobile learning

Mobile learning (m-learning) can take place through the use of devices such as mobile phones, smartphones, tablets, and portable multimedia players.Mobile technologies have undergone enormous changes in the past decade. Mobile phones, for example, once simply enabled users to place voice calls. But this functionality is now of almost secondary importance. Owners of smartphones can check their email and access social media and popular online tools such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Google. These platforms have changed the way in which adult learners experience the internet by providing a platform for unlimited information and peer-to-peer sharing that is relevant to their needs. This new approach to

information exchange has not only affected the way learners communicate and conduct business but has also presented new opportunities within the context of teaching and learning. Social media is increasingly being used in an educational context.

In summary

- Adult literacy encompasses more than just reading and writing, and it is important to understand what the real literacy needs of a particular community are before starting to plan a programme [21]Grundtvig Learning Partnership (2013). New Teaching Methods for Adults. Education and culture lifelong learning Programme.[22]MALLA Guide for adult literacy practitioners (2014). Adult Learning and Literacy assessment.Manitoba Multiculturalism and Literacy. Winnipeg: Portage Avenue[23]University of South Africa (2016). Teaching literacy to adults department of adult basic: Education and youth development. UNISA..

- Planning of the programme should start after the demand as well as the community's needs have been assessed.
- Important also is the identification of services required and who – what entity or kind of entity – will run the programme, what the programme's educational assumptions are, and where funding might come from.

References

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Research briefs

[Neo-literate Adult Dyslexia and Literacy Policies: A Neurocognitive Research Review of a Curious Unexplored](#)

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