

The Relation between Language Skills and Functional Literacy in University Graduates

Nalan Büyükkantarçioğlu, Güray König, Firdevs Karahan

Abstract. This study is one of the consecutive stages of a macro project designed to identify the relation between language skills and functional literacy in Turkish adults with varying educational backgrounds. Within this framework, earlier stages investigated how elementary and high school graduates in the Turkish society could functionally use their language skills. The consideration is that one's level of functional literacy observed in his linguistic practices involves how successfully he expresses himself through written and oral language, as well as how successfully he comprehends and interprets written and oral discourse in line with the dynamics of the idealized social and linguistic norms in the information society (Baynham, 1995, Barton, 1987). Although schooling is assumed to be providing individuals with the basics of such linguistic skills, the development or maintenance of these skills to meet the demands of the modern society may present individual- or groupspecific characteristics. It is thought that the quality of social interactions, either during or after school, can create a potential for the development of functional language skills. Whatever is gained at school may or may not be long-lasting once the formal education is over. Depending on the level of education and the types of social networks, individuals are assumed to be displaying varying degrees of functional literacy performance.

In individuals with limited education, sometimes horizons are broadened through positive social networks, and functional literacy performance, especially in the language use, appears to be more successful than expected.

The results of the previous stages of the project presented supporting evidence for this consideration. This time focusing on a more educated group, the presented study aims to investigate the relations between the written and oral language skills and functional literacy in university graduates who have been working either at the state or private institutions. The subject group in this study consists of 240 university graduate Turkish males and females over 25 years of age. The subjects, grouped according to (a) their sexes, (b) their years of experience at work, (c) the type of institution they presently work at, and finally (d) their majors at university (independent variables), have been given a personal information questionnaire and have been tested on four language skills, i.e., reading, writing, speaking and listening through specially prepared materials. The oral performance of the subjects have been evaluated in terms of (a) standard pronunciation, (b) morphological, syntactic and semantic well-formedness of utterances, (c) use of discourse markers and idea organization, and (d) communicative competence. Their written performance has also been tested in terms of (a) use of Standard language, (b) idea organization and development, (c) syntactic and semantic well-formedness, (d) use of simple and complex sentence structures, and (e) punctuation and spelling. The data have been analyzed with the SPSS programme and the results have been evaluated in the light of linguistic and sociological theories to find out if the level of functional language skills is bound to the nature of independent variables under consideration. It was hypothesized that the level of functional literacy in university graduates would tend to be somewhat higher than that of the lower-level graduates. Results present supporting evidence; however, findings also reveal statistically significant differences among university-graduate subjects, particularly when independent variables are matched with the results of language skills tests.