Adult Literacy in the Arab World: A Media Outreach Alternative

Victor Khachan, Ph.D.
Lebanese American University

Abstract: Adult illiteracy, for decades, has gained international focus and been placed on the literacy map of the international community. Despite this acknowledgement of adult illiteracy importance and its socio-economic repercussions, such focus has lost momentum and funding from governments, national as well as international NGOs ‘for some time’ (Archer, 2005). In light of the dwindling resources, the present study investigates the potential and scope of educational outreach initiatives via the broadcast media in the Arab World. Guided by its findings and strengthened by applied research trends in adult literacy TV programming, the present study highlights recommendations related to age, gender, diglossic/literacy needs, production format and viewing patterns, essential to the realization and success of future adult literacy TV programs in the Arab World.

Adult illiteracy, for decades, has gained international focus and been placed on the literacy map of the international community (UN Education for All, 1990; International Adult Literacy Survey, 1997; UN Literacy Decade, 2003-2012; UN Literacy Initiative for Empowerment (LIFE), 2005-2015). Despite this acknowledgement of adult illiteracy importance and its socio-economic repercussions, such focus has lost momentum and funding from governments, national as well as international NGOs ‘for some time’ (Archer, 2005). This reverse thrust in adult illiteracy has been mainly due to the misconception that large-scale adult literacy programs do not work. That is, as emphasized in ‘Writing the Wrongs, International Benchmarks on Adult Illiteracy’, funds have, instead, been channelled towards child literacy programs, specifically formal (mainstream schooling) and non-formal (out-of-school context leading to educational and vocational integration) education at the expense of non-traditional sectors such as informal adult literacy programs (Archer, 2005; Synergies between formal and non-formal education, 2006). In light of the dwindling resources, and regardless of the validity of the claims made, illiteracy crusaders have been rethinking literacy possibilities to minimize cost and optimize change in the landscape of adult illiteracy.

Accordingly, the present study investigates the potential and scope of educational outreach initiatives via the broadcast media in the Arab World and the viability of such initiatives in the fight against adult illiteracy. This study attempts to explore the characteristics of media outreach adult literacy programs mainly linguistic and production limitations and restraints. Guided by its findings and strengthened by applied research trends in adult literacy TV programs, the present study highlights recommendations concerning age, gender, linguistic/diglossic needs, production format and viewing/airing patterns, essential to the realization and success of future adult literacy TV programs in the Arab world.

The fight against adult illiteracy through media outreach initiatives dates back to the 1950’s. The U.S. was the first to use mass media adult literacy programs. Memphis and Alabama aired ‘Streamlined English’ in 1957 and 1960, respectively. Philadelphia and Florida followed with ‘Operation Alphabet’ diffused in the early 1960’s. Nonetheless, the first comprehensive national venture into adult literacy TV took place in the UK with the broadcasting of BBC ‘On the Move’ in 1975 (UNESCO, 1986).
The industrialized world has not ceased to embrace this trend in media literacy outreach. A case in point is the Irish media outreach initiative, Read Write Now TV series. The first of the series (RWN1) was broadcast in 2000 and the last of the series (RWN5) was produced in 2004 (Read Write Now 4 Literacy series Evaluation Report, September 2004).

On the U.S. front, TV411 adult literacy TV series, produced by the Adult Literacy Media Alliance, has been fighting adult illiteracy since 1999. TV411 series has been broadcast across the U.S. over 40,000 times and viewed over 21 million times on hundreds of public television and cable television stations (65% of all United States households) (TV411 Tune in). A similar attempt was made in Canada. The Literacy Partners of Manitoba, with the financial support of the Manitoba Lotteries, produced an adult literacy TV series, which was satellite-aired in 2004 (Longfield, 2003).

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has also embarked on media outreach initiatives to fight illiteracy. However, all initiatives have lacked continuity and have not survived their seasonal broadcast due to reasons ranging from inappropriate airing times and rigid teaching methodologies (the Egyptian literacy TV initiative: Ataalem Atnawar), production format (the Moroccan TV initiative: Alef Lam) (Khachan, 2007) to marginalized teaching/learning events (the Palestinian TV initiative: Ya..noon) (Development Studies Programme, 2003).

**Methodology**

The devised methodology for this study is Participatory Action Research, based on ‘Participatory Conceptualization’, used and highly recommended by the Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2006 and UNESCO (see Archer, 2005 and Tharappan and Ghotge, 2004). The success of this methodology is associated with the urge in people to support what they create, leading to the realization, materialization and adoption of self-processed strategies/solutions. This “process or tool seems to establish the fundamental principle of experiential education that accumulates different types of learning that will work both at the individual and the community level” (Tharappan and Ghotge, 2004). The participatory approach used in this study is conceptualized in group interviewing. This participatory interaction is systematically followed in all interviews according to a list of questions stressing the characteristics essential to the viability of a literacy TV program and ensuring high level of commitment and continuity in sustaining learning (i.e. reading and writing).

**Data Collection and Analysis**

**Subjects**

*Demography.* The present work reports on a study conducted in Egypt in 2006. A total of eleven adult literacy classes were surveyed. The demographic sampling of subjects is defined in terms of rural and urban population. Five classes (139 subjects) in Cairo (urban) and six classes (151 subjects) in Menia (Upper Egypt/rural) were group interviewed.

*Age and Gender.* The overwhelming majority of adult literacy learners in Cairo and Menia were females between the ages of 20 and 40. Seven adult male learners were part of the group interviewed (2.4%). This small number of male literacy learners was discounted from the total target population and accordingly their linguistic needs and motives will not be accounted for.
**Diglossic Needs**

*Diglossic Speaking Preference.* The overwhelming majority of the interviewed groups in Cairo saw colloquial Egyptian Arabic as the medium to get the literacy message across (87.7%). Only seven learners (5%) showed preference for standard Arabic. Mixed use of both colloquial and standard Arabic as the literacy TV program linguistic means to teach reading and writing was the choice of only 16 learners (11.5%). This preference for diglossic speaking was even more evident in rural Egypt. Menia adult female literacy learners unanimously defined colloquial Egyptian as the only means of teacher-student interaction.

*Diglossic Writing Preference.* The study reveals that the majority of the interviewed adult literacy learners in Cairo, 79.9%, had a defined bottom line understanding of the immediate rewards of colloquial Egyptian. Only 28 learners (20.1%) indicated their writing needs as formal (i.e. standard Arabic) whereas 55 learners (39%) preferred ‘mixed’ writing tasks, a combination of writing tasks in both colloquial and standard Arabic. The Cairo adult literacy learners’ diglossic writing preference repeated itself in the rural context of Menia. 82.1% of the learners defined their writing preference in its colloquial form. Writing tasks in standard Arabic were the choice of 27 learners (17.8%). Associated with almost the same level of immediacy, the use of ‘mixed’ writing tasks was the preference of 25 learners (16.5%).

**TV production Format**

The study consulted the interviewees on the production format of the literacy TV program (i.e. traditional classroom setting vs. family-based drama/comedy series related to themes such as touring Egypt; visiting the doctor/hospital; catching the Metro; visiting the museum; shopping; games; correspondence; indirect religious references etc.). For 70.5% of the Cairo interviewed population, family-based thematic format would be more enjoyable and more rewarding. For the rural population of Menia, the choice of production embodied the traditional classroom rather than TV integration of learning/teaching and drama/comedy (56.9%). It is important to note, however, that 24 learners (15.8%) were undecided.

**Air Timing**

According to the interviewed female adult literacy learners in Cairo and Menia, their most appropriate time to commit fully to a literacy TV program was as follows: For Cairo, the most appropriate timing was primarily from 5:00-6:00 p.m. and 7:00-8:00 p.m. Each time slot was the choice of 32.3% of the learners. In third place came the time slot ‘9:00- 10:00 p.m.’ (30.9%). The Menia time preferences did not resemble the ones of Cairo learners. The afternoon ‘12-2:00 p.m.’ time slot ranked first (81.4%) and the time slots ‘8:00- 9:00 p.m.’ and ‘6:00- 7:00 p.m.’ came second (19.2%) and third (15.2%), respectively.

**Discussion**

**Target Audience**

The present study indicates that adult illiterates in urban and rural Egypt were overwhelmingly female. This male absence from adult literacy classes was mostly due to the
timing and scheduling patterns of literacy classes that did not fit within the adult male’s work demands; another possible factor may be related to the socio-cultural framing of manhood in the Egyptian context, as revealed by the interviewed adult females.

**TV Production Format**

As revealed by follow up discussions on their preference for a TV production that is based on traditional classroom teaching, Menia’s rural females explained that their ‘relatively’ high preference for traditional teaching methods was due the authority figure and seriousness associated with teachers that may be endangered by family-based TV series manipulation of the teaching/learning process. In addition, if the number of Menia interviewees preferring the ‘family-based TV series’ (27.3%) is added to those who had no preference at all (‘uncertain/undecided’) (15.8%), then a ‘family-based production’ format may accommodate to Cairo and Menia learners as well.

**Diglossic Needs**

The diglossic needs of the interviewed adult female illiterate in Egypt were a clear indication of diglossic applicability and its potential in transforming the environment of the adult literacy learners into a freer and more interactional one. The diglossic mode/means of communication of the TV program, as stressed by the interviewees, was the colloquial Egyptian Arabic. As for the diglossic writing preferences, Cairo and Menia adult literacy learners perceived the immediacy of their learning efforts as literacy needs rather than literacy contexts (i.e. non-formal education). That is, learners recognized their literacy efforts as ‘informal’ in terms of managing daily interaction with minimal writing tasks with a diglossic preference of its closeness to their daily verbal interaction; Egyptians, rural and urban, straightforwardly pinpointed writing tasks in colloquial Egyptian.

**Air Timing**

One defining success factor of adult literacy TV is audience availability and thus airing time. The findings of this study uncovered that for Egyptian adult female literacy learners appropriation of viewing patterns (i.e. airing time) was closely defined by the specificity of the social context (i.e. urban vs. rural). The prime time for the target audience of rural Egypt fell between their end of duties in the field and the return of their children from school, specifically between 12:00 and 2:00 p.m. However, the time preference for urban Cairo happened to be after 7:00 p.m. That is, for maximum viewing by adult female illiterates, it is highly recommended that the most appropriate broadcast time be ‘after 7:00’ as primary broadcast (2.5 million adult illiterate in Cairo alone; UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2005) and the ‘12:00-2:00’ as secondary/rerun broadcast, accommodating to rural Menia’s agricultural lifestyle.

**Conclusion**

The success of adult literacy media outreach initiatives is conditioned upon the flexible response to the ‘unique local needs and circumstances’ in order to ensure ‘active engagement of learners and relevance to their lives’. ‘Participatory needs assessment with learners’ ranked first under ‘source of information for learning materials’ (Archer, 2005, pp.3, 24-25) and should accordingly be the primary source of information determining the criteria of the envisioned literacy TV program. TV initiatives to fight adult illiteracy are by no means capable of eradicating illiteracy alone. This is only an attempt to increase literacy awareness and thus initiate further efforts by adult illiterates to participate in literacy and post-literacy classes in the future.
It is clear that adult literacy TV initiatives in the industrialized world are planned with long-term vision and commitment whereas the unfortunate situation of adult literacy media outreach initiatives have eventually lacked substantial planning and funding. Nevertheless, now that the world has reaped the rewards of adult literacy media outreach initiatives, it is the responsibility of the MENA countries, which suffer from high rates of illiteracy, to revisit and redefine its conceptualization and perception of media outreach opportunities. The MENA countries have what it takes to break the spell of adult illiteracy through media outreach initiatives: availability of media resources (national TV and satellite stations) and Arab nations’ strong commitment to the fight against illiteracy. Accordingly, the present study calls loudly for ‘illiterate nations’ in the Arab world to contextualize available field and country-specific research for linguistic/diglossic and socio-cultural specificities and to further this research trend nationally and regionally.

References


