The correlation between education and literacy levels
by Zerelde Uys

Many a Human Resource practitioner receiving the Literacy measurement results have been faced with this problem; the Literacy levels measure so low - even for highly educated candidates. Can it be accurate?

Let us revisit the definition of Functional Literacy: Having the reading and writing skills necessary for everyday living, including work.

Theoretically this implies a skills level equivalent to eight years of formal schooling in the language in which assessed.

Functional literacy is a range of skills and competencies - cognitive, affective, and behavioural - which enables individuals to live and work as human beings, to develop their potentials, to make critical and informed decisions and to function effectively in society (including the workplace) in order to improve the quality of their lives and that of society.

Major indicators include: communication skills, critical thinking and problem-solving; the sustainable use of resources and productivity; the development of self and a sense of community within an expanded world view.

But it is also important to remember the dilemma of the language transferee. Theunis Horne defined the Transferee as a person who, in order to make a living, has to transfer daily from his/her natural language environment (and culture) to a different language environment (and culture) and is assumed/expected to cope like a mother-tongue user.

In South Africa more than 90% of the workers transfer to an English language environment every day. Some find the transition easy, some manage somehow but the vast majority don’t cope at all. Co-ordinate bilinguals are about 2 - 4% of Transferees (of the 90% of the SA workforce). A Transferee who has acquired English by natural assimilation will as a result, find the transition to “learning in and through” English relatively easy. They cope because of COPE - Cognition and Proficiency in English.

On the other hand, the Compound Bilingual is a Transferee who learned the symbols of English as mother-tongue equivalents - they apply their mother tongue as a mediator.

When highly motivated and exposed to good models - they can attain high levels of competence in the learning environment (+- 8% of all ALT’s). But, when poorly motivated and exposed to bad models - tend to be barely competent or even incompetent in learning environments. This person finds transition to and through English very difficult, which results in rote & meaningless learning - this is natural if you have very little to hang on to! (+- 90% all ALT’s).

ELSA (English Literacy Skills Assessment) measures an array of proficiencies across a continuum of skills, all critical indicators of the skill to think and speak in English. It measures:

- Phonic Skills: The candidate’s experience with the sound system of English,
- Dictation Skills: How well does the candidate ‘hear’ English, and is able to write it down correctly spelled and punctuated,
• **Basic and Quantitative Numeracy:** The ability to apply mathematical operations and using numbers embedded in printed material,

• **Understanding of Spatial Relations** and correct use of the vocabulary: An indication of the understanding of the world as a larger part is dependent on spatial conception,

• **Reading Comprehension:** How the candidate deals with narrative writing and is able to derive understanding from text.

• **Exposure to and familiarity with English:** The measure of the extent of exposure to English and if a ‘feel’ for the language was developed,

• **Vocabulary in Context:** The ability to process text at a particular level of reading, within a given time frame shows the development of vocabulary and understanding of grammar.

When therefore evaluating a candidate’s proficiency level, it is best not to only judge according to the reported level, but to also diagnose the various proficiencies in the evaluation. It is often excellent indication of the specific difficulty the candidate is experiencing, and should point to the interventions to fill the gaps. If vocabulary needs to be built, one should engage in more reading activities outside of the applied knowledge area. If spatial relations present a low measure, enrichment of such concepts would benefit.