Strategies in cases of functional illiteracy

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Abstract

There is a stereotypical image of the target group of functionally illiterate adults, which is constantly portrayed in research and media reports (see Grotlüschen/Nienkemper/Bonna 2014). For example, based on biographical interviews with participants of reading and writing courses, it is accepted that adults who are functionally illiterate virtually hide themselves away because they "have become adept at trying to cover up their shortcomings, so that fellow human beings hardly suspect at all", (Egloff 1997, page 164). The interview based qualitative study described here offers an approach that focuses less on weaknesses by analysing the way those affected act. The underlying concept is based on Klaus Holzkamp's theory of individual learning (1995). It is used to explain human action by individual reasons instead of external conditions. As a result, a definition of test and exam situations and a model for coping with these situations are presented. Both of them are based on the logic of individual reasoning and relevant to further education and training. They allow the perspectives of individuals to be understood which lead to conclusions on how to create settings to assess learning progress in terms of illiteracy and basic education.

1. The issue

People who have problems with reading and writing will probably find it especially difficult to manage written tests. Tests to identify learning requirements as regards illiteracy and basic education should therefore be arranged in such a way that they do not cause feelings of anxiety or resistance (see Nienkemper/Bonner in this collection of articles). The underlying qualitative study asks what strategies adults developed who have difficulties with reading and/or writing based on their experiences in dealing with assessments of their learning outcomes.

Assessment of learning outcomes

This broad term of assessment of learning outcomes was chosen in order not to restrict the issue of subjective experience and subjective acting in test situations at an early stage. The term summarises a variety of tests in teaching and learning settings. The following dimensions are used for an approximate differentiation of selective and formative assessment procedures (see Dluzak/Grotlüschen/Heinemann 2009, see also Nienkemper/Bonna in this collection):

- Reference standard (social or individual)
- Data sovereignty (evaluating person/institution or evaluated person)
- Consequence (selection or changing the curricula)
- Entity (external-, peer-, or self-assessment)
- Perspective (state or process)
- Point of time in relation to the educational/training programme (beforehand or simultaneous or afterwards)

2. Theoretical framework

The goal of the study outlined here was not to show normatively the standard conditions of assessments accepted and to be accepted by the subject. It is rather to understand clearly the subjective actions taken in situations where assessment of learning outcomes occurs in a social context.

Therefore, to carry out research into individual action strategies a perspective based on the subject-scientific learning theory *(German: "subjektwissenschaftliche Lerntheorie")* of Klaus Holzkamp (1995) was developed. It provides an understanding of human acting in settings where learning outcomes are assessed as logically reasoned by the individual. Selected concepts of Holzkamp's theory of individual learning were applied to the research topic and used for the empirical analysis.

Holzkamp's research focuses on the "perspective of the subject in the factual-social meaningful world" *(German: „Standpunkt/die Perspektive des Subjekts in der sachlich-sozial bedeutungsvollen Welt")* (1995, page 23). The individuals' perspective only becomes transparent from an academic point of view when the experiences of the subjects are expressed as "subjectively reasoned actions" *(German: "subjektiven Handlungsbegründungen")* (ibid.). Holzkamp explains this underlying argument of his theory of individual learning by stating that reasons, in contrast to external causes or conditions, always contain a very personal component. These are not obvious to everybody, but are "always '*my own* reasons'" *(German: „stets ‚je meine Gründe'")* (ibid.). Holzkamp stresses that in terms of action taken, certain conditions relating to an external reality are only relevant if the subject actively attaches importance to them. Meanings are first of all "generalised, socially reified opportunities to act" *(German: „verallgemeinerte[r], gesellschaftlich vergegenständlichte[r] Handlungsmöglichkeiten")* (Holzkamp 1997, p. 261). Holzkamp calls these premises if subjects use them to give reasons for the way in which they act (ibid.). As a result, conclusions about individual interpretations of reality can be drawn and opportunities created by society to act at the same time (see Holzkamp 1995, p. 24). On the other hand, the premises make the individual intention or commitment to act obvious. Because another basic tenet of Holzkamp's theory is that in every action taken subjects aim to maintain their own personal interests and never to act purposely against their interests. The personal and situational action can therefore always be interpreted subjectively as "sensible" (Holzkamp 1997, pp. 24ff.). In this way, the phenomenon of "not learning" can also be explained using the terms of the theory of individual learning. Holzkamp perceives learning primarily as a reasoned act which stands apart from other acts, because while learning subjects aim to overcome obstacles which they come across normally by adding to their skills (see Holzkamp 2004, p. 29). This rough differentiation can only be maintained if incidental learning processes are neglected (see Holzkamp 1995, p. 182f.; Haug 2003, p. 21). In other words, subjects purposely separate any act of learning from the primary act. The purpose is to pause and improve the subjects' own ability to overcome problems. Holzkamp calls this process a "learning loop" (Holzkamp 1995, p. 183).

Consequently, the assessment of learning outcomes, which is the subject of research here, is considered a potential problem. To overcome this problem, subjects can either apply a learning loop or overcome it by taking action. Both the subject of the research on overcoming and experiencing functional illiteracy (see Egloff 1997; Wagner/Schneider 2008; Nienkemper/Bonna 2010; Zeuner/Pabst 2011; Müller 2012) and research on resistance to learning (see Grell 2006; Grotlüschen 2008; Faulstich/Bracker 2014) suggest that adults in assessment situations choose other strategies alongside learning too. Revising vocabulary can for example be applied as a strategy to pass a test in a foreign language, as well as copying from a neighbour.

Holzkamp emphases, that learning does not become necessary because it is required of subjects by others. When clarifying premises, subjects tend to start learning once they realise that problems that affect their lives can only be overcome by a process of learning (ibid., pp. 185, 214). Holzkamp talks about *resistance to learning* (1995, p. 193) if there is a desire to assess "have learning progress assessed by inspection bodies" (in this case by gaining certificates for example) or there are doubts as to whether learning is "necessary, in other words required, at all to cope with situations". He points out the incongruence between the reified social interests inherent in learning requirements and the subjective interests as regards learning or lifestyles. The quality of a process that resists learning is characterised by a contradictory relationship of defensive and expansive reasons for learning. The contradiction exists between a

> "justified interest in learning new skills on the one hand and equally justified anticipation of associated risks of the threat (conveyed in whatever form) of given options to take action on the other" (Holzkamp 1987, p. 25).

In turn this means that if the external learning conditions help overcome the subjectively perceived learning difficulties, subjects have reasons to accept them.

Transferred to the subject of the strategies when dealing with assessment settings the conclusion must be drawn that the strategies sought contain elements of resistance and acceptance. They indicate whether the conditions associated with learning progress assessments tally with subjective interests in terms of the lives the people lead.

Subjective interests can only be captured if the subject's perspective is adopted as the perspective of academic research (see Holzkamp 1997, p. 260). Holzkamp states that the subject's perspective only becomes clear as part of an inter-subjective discourse. Inter-subjective comprehension of subjects' intentions to act is however only possible (if it can be identified at all) based on which personal premises are chosen and considered sensible by the subject (Holzkamp 1995, p. 25).

3. Methodological approach

To achieve this goal, qualitative design of research is based on the grounded theory, as described in the pragmatic tradition of Strauss and Corbin (1996).

Because "assessment of learning outcomes" is unusual in everyday language, the terms "test" and "exam" are used. In the interview, the adults are asked about their experience with tests and exams during their lives. By using flexible questions, echoing theoretical sampling (Strübing 2011, p. 30 cf.) it was possible to take into account a variety of consolidated descriptions of various assessment settings to create the theory.

The analysis is based on 21 interviews, based on guidelines, with adults who have reading and/or writing difficulties. For the analysis the coding paradigm of the grounded theory from a research perspective based on the theory of individual learning was used as the reasoning logic.[1] Strauss and Corbin use the following method to analyse the relationship between the categories:

> "(A) Causal conditions → (B) Phenomenon→ (C) Context→ (D) Intervening conditions → (E) Strategies of action and interaction → (F) Consequences." (Strauss and Corbin 1996, p. 78)

To approximate the individuals' perspective, Holzkamp on the other hand suggests the following analysis method:

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[1] An action-theory-based adaptation of the coding paradigm in the grounded theory has already proved adequate in other research work (see Felden 2006; Grotlüschen 2010; Krämer 2014).

"Conditions/meanings → Premises for acting → Intentional links → Intentions for acting → Taking action." (see Holzkamp 1995, p. 35)

For the purpose of this research subject the phenomenon of *subjective reasons for action strategies*[2] was the focus of the coding method. Because the justification logic model assumes that objects in the outside world only become relevant in terms of action if the subjects actively attach importance to them, the *premises for action* category is used. In this study, the context can be compared with the subjectively perceived *range of meanings in assessment of learning outcomes* within which the subject identifies the options for action open to them. To identify the subjectively selected choice of a strategy of action, based on the approach from the individuals' perspective the underlying intentions to take action must be taken into account as intentional links in the chain. As no intentions to take actions, but only retrospectively justified action strategies were included in the study, the method also includes the *intended consequences* category:

Range of meanings in terms of assessment	→	Premises for action	→	Action strategy	→	Intended consequences
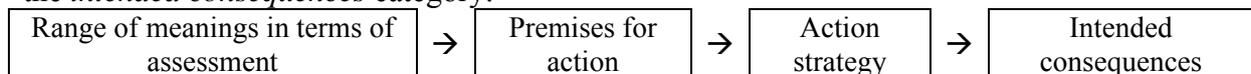
This coding paradigm is used to analyse and compare descriptions of test and exam situations experienced personally.

4. Results: Action strategies to cope with test situations in cases of functional illiteracy

The results of the analysis of the empirical data captured a variety of subjective descriptions of various test and exam situations and a wide variation of action strategies when dealing with these situations.

The spectrum of test and exam situations reported on primarily covers procedures used to assess learning outcomes, which occur in learning processes that take place institutionally. Furthermore, reports were issued on the test situations described by the adults asked, which can be classified in pedagogical-psychological and medical diagnoses. In Germany there is the psychological service at the employment agency or in vocational training institutes. Surprisingly there are still a number of day-to-day situations that become test situations from an individual perspective because of functional illiteracy. Examples include doctors asking patients to fill in questionnaires, or local authorities asking people to fill in forms. The people interviewed thought that these situations resembled tests too. By analysing and comparing descriptions of situations, characteristics were identified which feel like a test situation from an individual perspective. These were consolidated to form a definition that was logical to the subject:

From the logical perspective of the subject a **test situation** is all about demonstrating *ability*. A test is therefore defined as a situation where *performance* is required from the person. The performance required can entail reading, writing or other aspects. It *cannot be avoided or delegated* without an adverse effect. Performance is also characterised by the fact that is assessed personally, by a third party or peer *quantitatively* and/or by *social comparison.*

As a result of the coding process, action strategies subjectively justified in dealing with test situations (defined according to the subject's logic) where functional illiteracy occurs were described in seven main categories. The figure below contains seven definitions of categories.

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[2] I use the term "action strategies" because retrospective action was reported, not intended action.

Accepting action

Applied skills Before, during or after test situations, people fall back on their own skills and abilities. They revise or put their skills to the test during the test. Test-related thoughts are controlled by their own abilities to complete the tasks accordingly.
Used support Before, during or after test situations, people fall back on the support of other people, or institutional educational structures. They use the support of other people to prepare and use modifications provided in the test to increase their chances of success. While carrying out the test they ask for support.
Partial disclosure Directly before test situations, people disclose their strengths and weaknesses in an interview, either to illustrate their own learning status in the test as accurately as possible, or to request and sense support for passing the test procedure.
Ambitious offensive In the test situation people act contrary to expectations in order to assert their skills in parts of areas they subjectively consider relevant and claim success. For this purpose they deliberately choose tools permitted. They offer alternative testing methods, or cleverly present a solution known to be correct from another context.
Active deception People avoid the pressure to act that the test situation generates and which reveals reading and/or writing difficulties, by employing illegitimate means, or telling a white lie to escape from the situation and enabling them to continue to conceal their problems.
Silent resignation Because of the test situation, people resign themselves to failure as inevitable and anticipate it without attempting to prevent it.
Defiant refusal People escape the test situation either by being absent without a valid reason, or by exhibiting confrontational behaviour to underline that they will not be forced.

Practical level of active acceptance
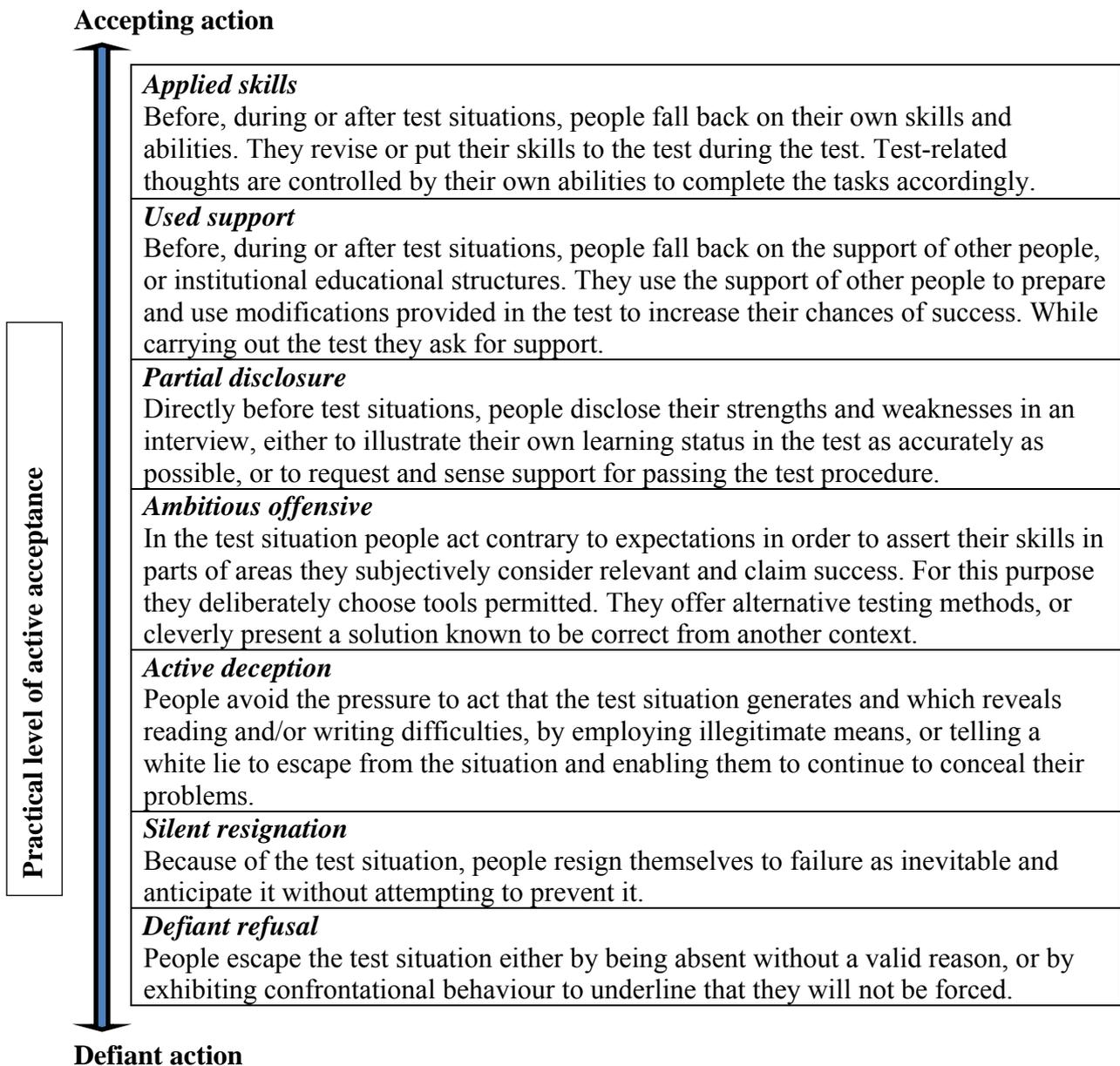
Defiant action

Figure 1: Category definitions

The action strategies span a scale of practical acceptance, tended towards acceptance or defiance. In each strategy, the scale showed to what extent the "current rules" of the test situation were accepted by the subject in the practical action taken, or to what extent they were deliberately and defiantly boycotted. When more defiant strategies are used, the subjective personal interests conflict more significantly with the implied intentions of the test situation. Where strategies of acceptance are applied, the subjective personal interests and the reified, situational and social interests in the setting where the test is carried out tend to tally.

The quality of the individual and situational premises on which the choice of strategy is based, are not reflected on the acceptance axis. It can only be shown on a second, horizontal axis between the forms of defensive or expansive action strategies. Because the subjective personal interests in each test situation are characterised by a specific ratio of averting threats and the wish to increase subjective opportunities to act. Therefore, each of the seven strategies can theoretically be justified in the one case defensively and in the other case expansively.

The compound defensive-expansive definition is used here differently than in the theory of individual learning. Holzkamp uses the terms to explain how subjective and sensible reasons

are given for learning, in other words action which, in a learning loop, is separated from normal action. Of the seven strategies illustrated in this study only two (applied competencies and support used) refer to the fact that the adults surveyed also applied learning loops when dealing with test situations. The purpose of the other five strategies is to overcome problems in the test situation in another way. The term defensive-expansive is used here to demonstrate whether, based on subjective premises, people anticipate an improvement in their ability to engage with the world, or whether they should combat an impairment in their quality of life.

The following figure shows how rationale identified empirically can be positioned in the fields on the double axis.[3] The strategy for preparing for Mr Walter's citizenship test is assessed as being more on the expansive side in this case. Passing the test will allow him to achieve his goal of obtaining German citizenship. On the horizontal axis of the model this reason for taking the action tends towards increasing his skills and abilities to engage with the world, although Holzkamp states that it is more a case of defensive and defiant learning where "it is doubtful to what extent the information learnt is 'essential' to achieving goals" (Holzkamp 1995, p. 193).

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[3] The rationale in bold is described in more detail in my dissertation (see Nienkemper 2015). The cases with dotted lines are further examples demonstrated which are subject however to more detailed, empirical analysis based on the data.
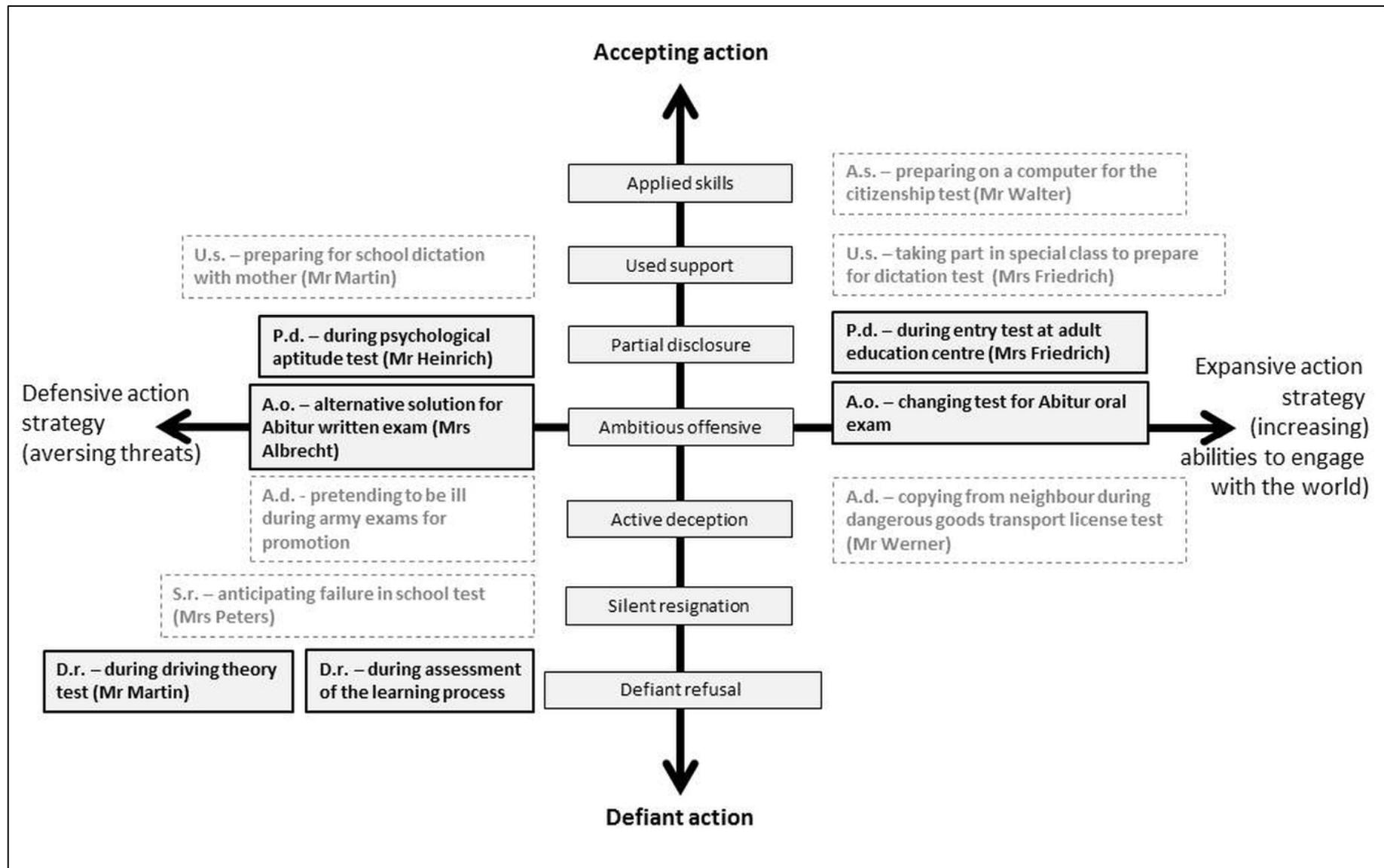
Figure 1: Action strategies to cope with testing situations in cases of functional illiteracy

After defining test situations according to the logic of the subject, selecting strategies to cope with the test must be considered as a process of weighing options in a subjectively restricted framework of alternatives. When the purpose of the research is based on the individual learning theory, the scope for action that the subjects situationally perceived is rooted in their premises.

In terms of the empirical material, estimating personal chances of success is very relevant to the action taken. It always becomes a premise for action if passing the test is considered necessary in order to uphold or increase personal interests.

On the other hand the social standardisation of the subject described by Foucault (1977) as a mechanism of power proves to be an important premise for strategies that tend to be defiant. Socially standardised tests bring people in one hierarchy together and therefore allow individuals to be segregated. The fear of social segregation is only used in selective test situations (theoretical driving test exam, psychological aptitude test) as a reason for taking action.

5. Conclusion and outlook

From the individual's perspective, the consequence of a test situation is that personal skills or lack of skills will be revealed at least partially. Therefore, any assessments of learning outcomes, as long as they are defined from the individual's perspective as test situations, are considered unreasonable as far as the subjects are concerned. The reason is that pedagogical intentions need to tally with the personal or transitional interests of the adults, so that these adults can accept the demands placed on them by others.

The empirical range of action strategies produced to cope with test situations shows that situations that resemble tests are not rejected outright or avoided by adults with reading and/or writing difficulties. The strategies of applied competence, used support and ambitious offensive tend to show that active access to resources is possible in certain circumstances, even when adults are functionally illiterate. This also applies when selective tests and exams have to be passed and certificates obtained.

As regards the procedures of entry tests and formative assessments during the learning process where performance is measured on an individual point of reference in order to ascertain special help in the context of adult basic education, the *prospects for success* and *social comparison* are not important categories. If the option to institutionalise tests that lead to a particular qualification is considered, it should be remembered that the factual-social meaning is changed. Because an enhanced logic of skills assessments does not necessarily correspond to the individual's learning interests. Therefore, in an assessment method which is selective and based on social comparisons, the expectation of failure could be anticipated which provides subjectively good reasons for action strategies of resistance. Therefore, to introduce an assessment of learning outcomes which leads to qualifications and focuses on the participants , sensitivity to the different strategies and an anticipatory and participatory approach are recommended. Consequently, from the perspective of the participants, a "right to a test-based certificate" instead of an "obligation to take the test" is absolutely vital.

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