

International Adult Literacy Survey

The following articles on the International Adult Literacy Survey are reprinted from the *Literacy BC Newsletter*. The first article presents detailed data on the literacy skills of Canadians; the rest give an international perspective.

Reading the Future: A Portrait of Literacy in Canada

Literacy is important: it rewards those who are proficient and penalizes those who are not. For the individual, literacy affects employment success, income and life chances.

Those are some of the conclusions of a report on the literacy skills of Canadians, released by Statistics Canada and the National Literacy Secretariat on September 12. *Reading the Future: A Portrait of Literacy in Canada* provides a detailed analysis of the Canadian data collected during the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) in 1994.

Internationally, IALS was designed to measure and compare adult literacy skills in seven industrialized countries: Canada, the United States, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, Sweden, and Switzerland. A report of the international results, *Literacy, Economy and Society*, was released in December 1995.

In Canada, IALS was also designed to expand on the Survey of Literacy Skills Used in Daily Activities (LSUDA) conducted by Statistics Canada in 1989. *Reading the Future* addresses some of the policy issues raised by LSUDA by exploring the relationship between literacy and factors such as education, income, occupation, and the use and practice of skills at work and at home. The report also includes an analysis of literacy levels in Canada by region and official language.

Data from IALS indicate that literacy levels in Canada have not substantially changed in the five years since LSUDA. *Reading the Future* is intended to demonstrate the importance of literacy to individuals, the economy, and society, and to identify signposts for the development of policies that will support literacy in Canada.

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"Reading the Future" from page 1

IALS defined literacy as: *Using printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential.*

This definition reflects the fact that literacy means more than the basic ability to read and write. Literacy requires different skills to understand and use information in a variety of reading material.

IALS developed three broad categories to measure these different skills:

- ◆ **Prose literacy:** the ability to understand and use information from texts such as newspaper articles, instructional manuals, poems and fiction.
- ◆ **Document literacy:** the ability to locate and use information found in formats such as job applications, transportation schedules, maps, tables, and graphs.
- ◆ **Quantitative literacy:** the ability to use arithmetic to perform tasks such as balancing a chequebook, verifying an invoice, or determining the amount of interest on a loan from an advertisement.

Over 5,600 Canadians aged 16 and over voluntarily participated in the survey and were tested in their choice of English or French. Respondents completed specific tasks which focused on literacy skills used in daily life such as:

- ◆ reading instructions on how to use a new piece of equipment at work
- ◆ decoding labels on hazardous waste containers
- ◆ reading software manuals or following the instructions on a bottle of medicine

- ◆ scanning a computer screen while using an automatic teller machine

Respondents were then grouped into five levels in each category. Level 1 represents the lowest level of literacy and Level 5 the highest.

Some of the key findings are:

Literacy and the education connection

- ◆ There is a clear and strong connection between literacy and education. Education typically increases people's literacy skills in all three categories.
- ◆ The majority of recent school graduates have strong literacy skills. Those who left school without a diploma clearly have lower skills, especially on the quantitative scale.
- ◆ Education does not "fix" literacy forever. Many Canadian adults (about one-third) do not fit the general pattern: they have higher or lower skills than their education suggests.

Use it or lose it

- ◆ Literacy is not a skill that is learned in school and then remains consistent over a lifetime.
- ◆ Practice and life experience are as important as education in developing literacy: "Literacy can be influenced by what people choose to do after leaving school . . . Individuals can lose skills after the end of schooling through lack of use, or they can gain skills through practice and additional training, even with minimal formal education."

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The literacy skills of Canadians and British Columbians

		Level			
		1	2	3	4/5*
		%			
Prose Literacy	Canada	22	26	33	20
	B.C.	19	24	35	22
		Level			
		1	2	3	4/5
		%			
Document Literacy	Canada	23	24	30	22
	B.C.	20	29	27	25
		Level			
		1	2	3	4/5
		%			
Quantitative Literacy	Canada	22	26	32	20
	B.C.	21	23	34	23

* Levels 4 and 5 are combined because so few people tested at Level 5 that the distinction between the two levels could not be supported with the available sample size.

How to interpret the levels

Level 1 - Most Canadians at this level can read but have serious difficulty dealing with printed materials. They most likely identify themselves as people who have problems reading. Almost 50% of Canadians at Level 1 have some books at home and nearly all have a dictionary.

Level 2 - Canadians at this level can deal with material that is simple and clearly laid out when the tasks involved are not too complex. They read, but not well. Their literacy skills may be adequate for the present, but they would find it

difficult to learn new job skills requiring a higher level.

Level 3 - Canadians at this level have reading skills effective for many situations and jobs. Clerical workers, for example, may have adequate skills for their jobs at Level 3, but some jobs require higher skills. Level 3 is considered the minimum desired level of literacy for Canadians.

Level 4/5 - Canadians at this level have a wide range of reading skills and can easily deal with a variety of complex material.

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Literacy and the work connection

- ◆ Literacy contributes to individual economic success. Individuals with higher skills earn more money, work more weeks per year, and are unemployed less than those with low skills.
- ◆ Jobs cause literacy as much as they require it. The majority of Canadians do most of their reading at work. The unemployed, and workers in jobs where they lack the opportunity to use their literacy skills, end up with lower levels of literacy.
- ◆ Unemployed people are three times more likely to be at Level 1 than people who are working.
- ◆ Industries that have experienced growth employ workers with relatively high skills. Workers in declining industries have lower skills.
- ◆ The unemployed, and workers in declining industries who face unemployment, need further education and training because low-skilled jobs are disappearing. Without it, they will find it difficult to meet the high skill demands of growing occupations and industries.
- ◆ Social assistance recipients will also find it increasingly difficult to enter the workforce because they have markedly lower skills than other Canadians: over one-third of people who receive social assistance are at Level 1 and less than 10% are at Level 4/5.

◆ Adult education and training are primarily directed at, and accessed by, the already skilled.

Literacy and the global economy

- ◆ Compared with some countries, Canadians test at lower levels in both document and quantitative literacy. These skills are particularly important to success in an information economy.
- ◆ Canadian skilled craft workers and machine operators have lower literacy levels than their counterparts in Germany and the Netherlands. They also read less on the job.
- ◆ Evidence from Canada suggests that literacy is not sufficiently developed "to unlock the benefits of globalization."

Literacy from region to region

◆ Generally, there are large numbers of adults with high literacy skills in the western provinces and large numbers with low skills in the east. Much of this regional difference in literacy levels simply reflects differences in educational attainment.

Literacy from generation to generation

- ◆ Canadians educated before World War II generally have lower literacy skills than those educated after the war. In large part, this is explained by a lower level of educational attainment among older Canadians.
- ◆ There are more than 1.6 million seniors in Canada at Level 1.

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"Reading the Future" from page 4

◆ Only 15% of adults between the ages of 56 and 65 reported that they had participated in adult education and training. Yet, 38% of this group have Level 1 skills and another 25% are at Level 2.

Literacy and immigration

◆ Canada is characterized by large numbers of immigrants with both high and low levels of skill. This makes us unique among all the countries which participated in the international survey. In every country, including Canada, there are significant numbers of immigrants at Levels 1 and 2. Only in Canada, however, is the proportion of immigrants with Level 4/5 skills (in English or French) higher than the proportion of non-immigrants.

Literacy and society

◆ 22% of adults at Level 1 reported that they have excellent reading skills. Without a realistic sense of the adequacy of their skills, Canadians may not make sound choices about participation in adult education or training or realize the extent to which they are at risk if they lose their current jobs.

◆ Literacy is not just an economic issue. It also affects social issues such as health, justice and safety.

◆ Literacy helps people maintain their independence and quality of life and enhances their ability to actively take part in society. 📖

Where can you get more information on IALS?

Literacy BC has copies of these four IALS reports available on loan

Canadian data:

Reading the Future: A Portrait of Literacy in Canada (1996)

International data:

Literacy, Economy and Society (1995)

Literacy Skills for the Knowledge Society (1977)

Literacy in the Information Age (2000)

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An International Perspective

Literacy, Economy and Society

The First International Report (1995)

The results of the first international survey to describe and compare the literacy skills of people from different countries were released in Paris on December 6.

The International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) measured adult literacy skills across the cultures and languages of seven industrialized countries: Canada, the United States, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, Sweden, and Switzerland. The survey also collected data to explore the relationship between literacy and factors such as educational experience, income, occupation, and the use and practice of skills at work and at home.

The IALS was a collaborative effort by the seven national governments and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development. Canada played a leading role by designing and managing the survey which builds on the Survey of Literacy Skills Used in Daily Activities (LSUDA) by Statistics Canada in 1989.

Detailed information on the Canadian data from the IALS will be released in March 1996. The Canadian report will analyse the results by province and by mother tongue and will compare the IALS results to LSUDA.

For the purposes of the IALS survey, literacy was defined as: *Using printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential.*

The IALS tested between 2000 and 3000+ adults in each country by asking them to complete specific tasks which focussed on literacy skills used in daily life. Skills were measured in three domains:

- ◆ **Prose literacy:** the ability to understand and use information from texts such as editorials, news stories, poems and fiction.
- ◆ **Document literacy:** the ability to locate and use information found in job applications, payroll forms, transportation schedules, maps, tables, and graphics.
- ◆ **Quantitative literacy:** the ability to use arithmetic skills to perform tasks such as balancing a chequebook, figuring out a tip, or completing an order form.

In each domain, survey respondents were grouped into five levels. Level 1 represents the lowest level of literacy, and Level 5 the highest.

Some of the survey's conclusions are:

- ◆ Important differences in literacy skills exist among and within the seven countries. In some countries, most of the population clusters into relatively narrow levels of skill. In other countries, such as Canada, there is a wide range of difference between adults with low and high levels of literacy.

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Prose Literacy - Sample Questions

◆ Low literacy skills are found not just among marginalized groups, but affect large proportions of the entire adult population. Over half of the adults in some countries do not move beyond the two basic levels of literacy.

◆ Sweden outperforms the other countries by a wide margin.

◆ Literacy skills benefit from continuous practice. Using the library and reading daily effectively reinforce strong individual skills at work and at home. Literacy skills are fragile and can erode through neglect or misuse.

◆ Employment is positively related to literacy. Those who are employed are more likely to be at a higher skill level than those who are unemployed or outside the workforce.

◆ Literacy is not synonymous with educational attainment. In every country there are many cases of poorly educated people who perform well and a smaller but still significant number of highly educated people who perform poorly.

◆ Adults with low literacy levels do not usually acknowledge or recognize they have a problem. Survey participants at all literacy levels, when asked whether their reading skills were sufficient to meet their everyday needs, overwhelmingly replied that they were.

Level 1 Look at a medicine label to determine the maximum number of days you should take this medicine.

Level 2 Identify a short piece of information about a garden plant, from a written article.

Level 3 State which of a set of four movie reviews was the least favourable.

Level 4 Answer a brief question on how to conduct a job interview. The reader is required to read a pamphlet on recruitment interviews and integrate two pieces of information into a single statement.

Level 5 Use an announcement from a personnel department to answer a question that uses different phrasing from that used in the announcement.



Literacy Skills for the Knowledge Society

The Second International Report (1997)

Raising the level of a nation's literacy competence demands more than just policies focused on literacy as a single issue. It is also important that the goal of increased literacy skill be supported across a broad range of other policy areas such as youth, seniors, employment, human resource development, health, social welfare and crime prevention.

The above is from **Literacy Skills for the Knowledge Society**, the latest report from the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), released in Canada on November 7, 1997.

This new report builds on the data presented in the first IALS publication, **Literacy Economy and Society**, released in December 1995. IALS was the first ever international, comparative report on literacy performance. Seven countries took part -- Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, Sweden, Switzerland, the United States and Canada.

The new report continues the IALS story with data collected from five more countries -- Australia, Belgium (Flanders), Ireland, New Zealand and the United Kingdom.

Literacy Skills for the Knowledge Society

tells us more about the impact of low literacy on individuals and economies, and about the benefits of high literacy levels to societies.

The report is jointly published by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD); Statistics Canada; and the National Literacy Secretariat (NLS), Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC).

The report was released in Canada at last month's OECD international conference in Vancouver. The aim of the conference, called Policy Strategies for Improving Literacy Skills, was to explore the policy implications of the survey and share information on national responses. Participants included literacy specialists and senior government officials from 20 countries.

In a joint press release, the OECD and HRDC said that, in Canada, 42 per cent of adults aged 16 to 65 years are below the level of literacy considered appropriate in order to function effectively in today's society.

The key finding of the new survey is that there are significant literacy skill gaps in every country surveyed. The myth that low skills are a problem only for developing countries is exposed in every country where data were collected.

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- ❑ At least 25 per cent of adults in all the countries surveyed fail to reach level 3 of the five literacy skill levels. Level 3 is considered the minimum desired level in many countries.
- ❑ From 15 to over 50 per cent of the adult population in the countries surveyed face tremendous difficulties in coping with the

literacy and numeracy demands placed on them in today's complex and changing economy and society.

- ❑ Of Canadians at Level 1, 26% were unemployed; at level 2, 10% were unemployed. At levels 4/5, only 4% of Canadians were unemployed.

Literacy In The Information Age

The Third International Report (2000)

The final report of the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) "Literacy in the Information Age" was released on June 14, 2000. It is a joint publication of Statistics Canada and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The report compares the literacy skills of adults (age 16-65) in 20 countries: Australia, Belgium (Flanders), Canada, Chile, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and the United States. The Study provides the world's first comparable estimates of the level and distribution of literacy skills in adult populations and offers new insights in the factors that influence the development of skills at home and at work .

Key Findings:

- ❑ Overall, Canada ranks amongst the top countries on the prose literacy scale, but ranks in the middle on the quantitative and document literacy scales. Sweden, and the other Nordic countries were consistently at the top while the United States and the U.K. rank lower than Canada. Chile is the lowest ranked.

- ❑ In Canada the discrepancy between people with low and high literacy skills is far larger than many European countries such as Germany and the Nordic countries.

- ❑ While the scores between countries differ considerably, no country does so well that it can be said to have no literacy problems. Even in Sweden 28% of adults are at the lowest levels (1 & 2) while in Canada 42% of adults are at levels 1 & 2 (prose scale).

- ❑ Canada has the second largest number of adult (23%) at the highest level of prose literacy (levels 4/5). Sweden is the only country with a higher number at this level (32%).

- ❑ In all countries, young secondary school graduates (age 20-25) have higher literacy skills than non-graduates, but in some countries the gains to literacy from education are greater than in others. In Canada, the gains are substantial.



About Literacy BC

Our mission is to support literacy learners, to develop community partnerships, and to present a united voice on literacy. We are supported by the B.C. Ministry of Advanced Education; The National Literacy Secretariat, Human Resources Development Canada; memberships; and donations.

Here's how you can reach us:

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