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Study: Literacy and the official language minorities

2003

The literacy situation of Canada's francophones has improved since the mid-1990s. However, individuals with English as their mother tongue still did much better than their francophone counterparts in literacy tests in 2003, according to a new study of literacy among the nation's official language minorities.

The study analyzed data from the 2003 International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey, which tested more than 23,000 Canadians on their proficiency in four domains: prose literacy, document literacy, numeracy and problem-solving. Proficiency was rated on the basis of levels one to five, that is, lowest to highest.

In all three provinces where people with French as their mother tongue are a minority (Ontario, New Brunswick and Manitoba) francophones scored lower on prose literacy tests than their anglophone counterparts. (Francophones in these three provinces, which account for almost 75% of the total francophone population outside Quebec, were oversampled in the survey to better understand their situation.)

Nationally, 42% of the adult population (16 to 65 years old) scored below Level 3 in prose literacy. Among anglophones nationally, the proportion was 39%, but among francophones, it was 56%. The gap was widest in New Brunswick.

Level 3 is the desired threshold for coping with the increasing skill demands of a knowledge society. People who score at the lowest levels, 1 and 2, would have difficulty reading or understanding difficult texts.

Note to readers

This release summarizes the findings of a monograph based on results of the 2003 International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALSS), the Canadian component of the Adult Literacy and Life Skills study.

The IALSS built on its predecessor, the 1994 International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), which was the world's first internationally comparative survey of adult literacy. Like the IALS, the IALSS

conceptualized proficiency along a continuum that denoted how well adults use information to function in society and the economy.

The IALSS tested more than 23,000 Canadians, measuring their proficiency in four domains. Two of them, prose (continuous text such as the type found in books and newspaper articles) and document literacy (such as graphs, charts and other written information of a discontinuous nature), were defined and measured in the same manner as in the IALS survey.

The IALSS added two new domains. The first was numeracy, which expanded the quantitative measure of the IALS by adding mathematical concepts and, in some instances, removing the textual aspect of the measure. The second was problem-solving, or analytical reasoning.

In all four domains, Level 1 contains respondents displaying the lowest level of ability. Level 4/5 (or Level 4 for problem solving) contains those with the highest level of ability.

Literacy levels among francophones improved between 1994, the date of the previous literacy survey, and 2003. But this was due mainly to higher scores among the francophone population in Ontario. In New Brunswick, there was no statistically significant increase.

The study found that the lower results among francophones relative to anglophones in 2003 were largely the result of socio-historical and cultural factors.

Most of the gap in the literacy levels of the two language groups was due to a gap in levels of schooling, especially among older individuals. For this reason, there were few differences among individuals aged 16 to 24 in both language groups, but there were still significant problems.

The results also revealed an important phenomenon with respect to reading and writing habits. At the same levels of education and income, francophones were less likely than anglophones to have developed frequent reading and writing habits in their daily life.

Provincial variations: Gap widest in New Brunswick

The performance of the different language groups varied from one province to another. However, the gap between francophones and anglophones was particularly wide in New Brunswick.

There, two-thirds (66%) of francophones scored below Level 3 in prose literacy in 2003, compared with 51% of anglophones.

In Ontario, more than one-half (55%) of francophones scored below level 3, compared with 42% of anglophones. And in Manitoba, 53% of francophones did so, as opposed to 37% of anglophones.

Among the anglophone minority in Quebec, the study found a statistically significant increase in literacy scores between 1994 and 2003. In 2003, 43% of Quebec anglophones scored below level 3 in prose, compared with 55% of francophones.

The literacy situation of francophones has improved as a result of major social and political changes providing better access to education and compulsory school attendance to the age of 16. This does not mean, however, that problems of low literacy were non-existent among younger age groups.

Both in Quebec and outside Quebec, results show no significant gap between anglophones and francophones aged 16 to 24.

However, in both Ontario and New Brunswick, nearly 45% of the people in this age group scored below level 3 on the combined prose and document scale. This represents nearly 13,000 young people in New Brunswick and about 19,000 in Ontario.

In comparison, about one-third (34%) of anglo-Quebeckers in this age group were in this situation, which was comparable to the proportion among francophone Quebeckers.

The older the age group, the wider the gap between the two language groups, according to the study.

Importance of daily reading and writing practices

The study revealed an important phenomenon with respect to reading and writing habits. At the same education and income levels, francophones are less likely than anglophones to have developed frequent reading and writing habits in their daily life.

As a result, they are also less inclined to visit a library or bookstore or to have a large number of books in the household.

This finding is reflected in the lower literacy levels among francophones outside Quebec in comparison to their anglophone counterparts. It reflects possible cultural differences as much as economic differences, characterized notably by the fact that francophones do not place as much importance on reading and books as anglophones.

Both in Quebec and in the other provinces as a group, nearly one anglophone in two reported reading books at least once a week. Among francophones, the proportion was only 35%.

Reading was least widespread in New Brunswick, where just under one-third (33%) of francophones reported that they read a book at least once a week. Nearly 60% of francophones in New Brunswick reported that they never, or rarely, read a book.

Challenge for francophone minorities: literacy in French

The survey results indicate a challenge for francophone minorities outside Quebec and New Brunswick: literacy in French. Outside Quebec, two-thirds of francophones did the literacy test in English, compared with only 2% of their counterparts inside Quebec.

In New Brunswick, 35% of francophones took the test in English. However, 63% in Ontario did, and 85% in Manitoba. The large proportions in Ontario and Manitoba are indicative of a demographic reality faced by these communities.

Even though a large proportion of them stated that they had a very good or good ability to speak or read French, English was nevertheless their preferred language in the written word.

Among francophones outside Quebec who did the test in English, 61% stated that they spoke English most often at home.

Their performance on the test proved to be significantly higher than that of francophones for whom

French was the language most often spoken at home. Just under half (48%) of francophones outside Quebec who did the test in English ranked at least at Level 3, compared to 38% of those who did the test in French. This is partly explained by the fact that better educated francophones live in urban areas where English is more prevalent in their everyday life.

Despite definite progress in the education of francophones, such a finding clearly points to the major challenge of developing and maintaining awareness of the written word in French for the survival of francophone communities in a minority situation.

Definitions, data sources and methods: survey number [4406](#).

The monograph *The Canadian Component of the 2003 International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey: The Situation of Official Language Minorities* ([89-552-MIE2006015](#), free) is now available from the *Publications* module of our website.

For more information, or to enquire about concepts, methods or data quality of this release, contact Jean-Pierre Corbeil (613-951-2315), Demography Division.

| Proficiency level on prose scale by mother tongue and region, IALSS, 2003 | | | | |
|--|----------------|----------------|----------------|------------------|
| | Level 1 | Level 2 | Level 3 | Level 4/5 |
| Canada | | | | |
| English | 13 | 26 | 40 | 21 |
| French | 22 | 34 | 32 | 13 |
| New Brunswick | | | | |
| English | 17 | 34 | 33 | 16 |
| French | 33 | 33 | 26 | 9 |
| Quebec | | | | |
| English | 17 | 26 | 37 | 20 |
| French | 21 | 34 | 32 | 13 |
| Ontario | | | | |
| English | 14 | 28 | 40 | 19 |
| French | 25 | 30 | 32 | 13 |
| Manitoba | | | | |
| English | 11 | 26 | 43 | 20 |
| French | 19 | 34 | 32 | 16 |
| Canada less Quebec | | | | |
| English | 13 | 26 | 40 | 21 |
| French | 25 | 31 | 32 | 12 |

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