

Literacy 2000

What do we understand by the terms 'literate' and 'illiterate'? Could the time ever come when there were no 'illiterates' left on earth?

DAVID CRYSTAL

The phrase 'something-or-other 2000' is already in danger of becoming a cliché, with organizations lining up to mark the passing of the millennium by launching a campaign that will reach a climax in that year. There are projects relating to food shortage, church disunity, social discrimination, various kinds of disease – and now, language. The year 2000 has been

As a result of literate society continually raising the ante the illiteracy figures rise, because it all depends on what you mean by illiteracy.

designated by UNESCO as the international year for the abolition of illiteracy. What are the chances?

The size of the problem

It proves surprisingly difficult to obtain accurate figures about how many people in a country (or in the world) are unable to read or write. In 1950, UNESCO estimated a world illiteracy total of 44.3%, predicting a fall to 25.7% by 1990. This is certainly an improvement on the situation in the 1850s, when over half of the adult world population was illiterate. But percentages do not tell the whole story. Undoubtedly, the proportion of illiterate people has generally been falling in recent decades – but the total number of individuals with literacy problems is steadily rising. The World Bank Report of 1975 talked in terms of 750 millions (of people over 15 years old). Current estimates suggest that nearly 900 million adults are illiterate, and that up to 100 million children get no schooling at all. Why is there this persistent increase? Several factors are involved:

• The overall increase in world population (currently 1.7% per annum) is partly to blame, especially in the third world. In Africa, for example, overall illiteracy had decreased to around 40% by 1982, but the extra population led to an increase, in real terms, to around 156 millions. In India, there are now far more illiterate people than at independence: 437 millions in 1981, compared with 300 millions in 1947.

• The literacy campaigns which have been introduced in many countries since the Second World War have not been as successful as had been hoped. In some Arab territories, for example, these campaigns produced relatively small increases in literacy. In 1980, the illiteracy level was still about 80% in Oman, and 86% in the United Arab Emirates.

• But this is not simply a 'third world' problem: it is becoming increasingly apparent that the amount of illiteracy has been massively underestimated even in the developed countries, and that figures will have to be revised *upwards*. The scale of the problem is unexpectedly large.

In 1982, the European Parliament estimated that there were between 10 and 15 million illiterate people in the EEC. In Greece, the proportion was thought to be around 14%; in Portugal, 23%. In several countries the totals are still unknown, and official and unofficial estimates vary widely, depending on the extent to which governments are prepared to recognize the existence of the problem. In Italy, for example, the official estimate is 2½ millions (out of 57m), but some of the unofficial estimates have suggested that a more realistic figure would amount to a third of the population. And in the EEC survey, France, West Germany, and Luxem-

burg denied they had any illiteracy problem at all!

Illiteracy in English

How do the English-speaking peoples fare in all this? Several countries have made a serious effort to determine the size of the problem. In the UK, the figure most commonly cited is 3½% (2 millions). In Australia, in the late 1970s, the figure was around 14% (many of these being new immigrants). In the USA, estimates have varied – depending on the criterion used, of which more below – between 10% and 20% (around 18 millions). The highest estimates have come from Canada: the 1981 census found that 21.9% of Canadians were 'functionally illiterate' (4 millions over the

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age of 15), and a fifth of these were 'completely illiterate'.

The national literacy campaigns, especially in the UK and USA, have raised the threshold of public awareness of the problem, and persuaded many who had not previously admitted their difficulties to seek help. For example, one 1984 television documentary in the USA ('Can't read, can't write', hosted by Johnny Cash) resulted in 7,300 telephone enquiries. The estimates of *partially literate* people, in particular, have dramatically risen as a result of such ventures.

Standards of literacy are generally rising, in the developed countries, so that it is nowadays much more difficult for 'illiterate' or 'semi-literate' people to achieve an acceptable standard of literacy. A democra-

tic society and a free press presuppose high general literacy levels. There are now more diverse and complex kinds of matter to read, and people are obliged to read more if they want to get on. People who had achieved a basic literacy are thus in real danger of being classed as illiterate, as they fail to cope with the modern everyday written demands of such areas as the media, business, bureaucracy, and the law. As a result of literate society continually 'raising the ante', therefore, the illiteracy figures rise, and the gap between the more and the less developed countries becomes ever wider.

'Functional' illiteracy

Of course, it all depends on what you mean by 'illiterate'. Statistics can be manipulated at will, depending on the kind of criteria used. And over the years, the criteria have altered. In 1951, UNESCO said:

A person is literate who can, with understanding, both read and write a short, simple statement on his everyday life.

In the 1960s, this had become:

A person is literate when he has acquired the essential knowledge and skills which enable him to engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning in his group and community.

The change has made the concept of literacy less arbitrary – but it has also made it more demanding. Instead of giving everyone a standard test, in which certain tasks have to be carried out regardless of their relevance to the person's background and needs, a concept of 'functional literacy' has been introduced.

This notion was first introduced in

I do not like writing becos
it hurts my hand and I
get bored and I can never
think what to writ and
sometimes I get mad with it.
thats why I do not like
writing
Jan

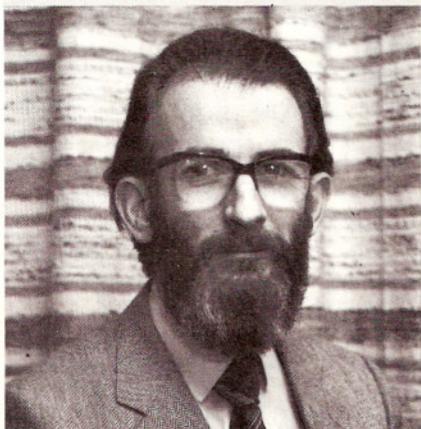
I like writing because if we could
not write we would have nothing
to do in school.
Joanna.

from About Writing Spring 1986

the 1940s, in an attempt to identify the minimum level of reading/writing efficiency which would be acceptable in the society to which a person belonged. In effect, you are literate only if you can perform the tasks for which society requires you to be literate. To be able to read some

simple sentences, such as 'The cat sat on the mat', would not qualify you as being literate, in this sense – a point well appreciated in World War II, when it was discovered that soldiers who had come through the process of learning to read, using the usual children's reading schemes, were still unable to read with understanding the written instructions concerning the operation and use of military weapons.

Certainly, some notion of 'functional' literacy needs to be invoked. But how is it to be defined? What are the minimal literacy demands which society places on its members? And how much literacy is required in order to survive? The US National Reading Council looked at this notion in 1970, in a 'Survival literacy study'. The test materials were five application forms in common daily use, ordered in an increasing level of difficulty: an application for public assistance, an identification form, a request for a driving licence, an application for a bank loan, and a



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request for medical aid. The test showed that 3% of Americans could not read the first of these, and 34% could not read the last. Of course, it all depends on what you feel is essential in order to survive. If leases and life insurance forms fall into this category, then undoubtedly most of the population of the English-speaking world is illiterate (this author included)!

The problem with 'functional' approaches is that there are so many contexts involved: road signs, the highway code, record-keeping, time-sheets, social services pamphlets, tax returns, safety regulations, business agreements, daily newspapers, medicine labels, and many other such contexts need to be considered and somehow graded. No-one, however, has yet found a way of equating levels of difficulty across social contexts: a five-word road sign may or may not cause the same amount of reading difficulty as a five-word medical instruction. Even within a context, there are so many variables. Many semi-literate people who are able to read the road signs in the slow-moving, familiar world of their home town have great trouble coping with the signs in an alien county when approaching them at 70 miles an hour!

'Reading age'

When the idea of a 'functional illiterate' was first mooted, it was felt that a roughly equivalent grade-level standard in school was below age 10 (grade 4, in the US system). But in the 1970s many people argued that

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this severely underestimated the levels of language difficulty found in written materials, and that age 15 (grade 9) would be a better minimal level. Even age 18 has been proposed, given that some studies have found deficiencies at that level. A 1971 study by J R Bormuth, for example, found that a third of middle-class 18-year-olds were unable to read with understanding a series of articles taken from daily newspapers. Such

Literacy in development

A conference was held in London on 27 June 1986 by the British Committee on Literacy at which it was agreed that a new association, the British Association for Literacy in Development (BALID), should be formed. BALID's aims are:—

- To promote adult literacy as an integral part of the development process, primarily though not exclusively, in the Third World.
- To increase awareness of the importance of the relationship between literacy, economic development and social change, working with appropriate organisations and institutions for this purpose.
- To inform and advise governmental and non-governmental agencies and to contribute to adult literacy projects and programmes within the wider context of development where advisable and feasible.
- To identify relevant resources and personnel and to facilitate their participation in development projects, programmes and exchanges.

The next stage in the Association's

formation will be the recruitment of members in preparation for an AGM early in 1987 at which Officers will be elected and BALID formally constituted.

Broadly speaking it is expected that members of BALID will be individuals or institutions in sympathy with the aims of the Association. Apart from those directly engaged in literacy work, both in the Third World and in the UK and other industrialized countries, these may include those involved in library and information work, design and graphic communications, printing and publishing and all aspects of development work.

Any enquiries and applications for membership of BALID should be sent to: Gil Skidmore
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16 London Road,
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major discrepancies, of up to 8 years, illustrate the uncertainty educationists have about the problem.

The grade-level issue, or any corresponding judgement in terms of reading tests, is crucial in evaluating any statistics about the subject. If we take a reading age of 7 (defined by some test) as the threshold level for literacy, we will find that x people will be unable to pass that test; but if we take age 9 as our threshold, this figure will be $x + y$; if 11, $x + y + z$; and so on. This is the main reason why international statistics do not mean very much: the criteria vary considerably from place to place. Some criteria are sophisticated; some are elementary. For example, the traditional criterion of being unable to write (as defined by having to sign your name with a mark) is still in use in some parts of the world.

The problem is compounded, too, by the difficulty of defining readability. The simple 'readability scores' which have been devised in recent decades are of little value when it comes to deciding the question of reading for meaning. Most are based on simple formulae, such that the longer a sentence, and the longer the words it contains, the harder it is supposed to be to read. But of course there is no necessary connection

between the length of a sentence and its structural complexity or comprehension level.

The literacy continuum

One has to be careful with the notion of literacy, therefore. It is not an all-or-none skill, but a continuum of gradually increasing levels and domains of ability, involving at least five factors:

- learning to read texts of increasing formal difficulty (as in a reading test or scheme) with understanding
- learning to read texts from an increasingly wide range of contexts (road signs, equipment instructions, government forms, etc.)
- learning to write (type, use a word processor) with increasing fluency
- learning to write in response to an increasingly wide range of demands (letters, questionnaires, forms, etc.)
- learning to spell

Someone who was totally illiterate would be unable to perform any of these skills, to any level. But within and between these factors, all kinds of possibilities exist. Thus, we find people who can read but not write or spell; people who can read, but with

poor understanding; people who can read only certain kinds of text; and so on. And, as pointed out by Peter Bryant and Lynette Bradley, in a 1980 article, there are even those who can spell better than they can read.

Causes and solutions?

It is evident that there is no single, simple cause of illiteracy. All kinds of factors have been implicated, in addition to the 'obvious' cases (i.e. a total lack of educational opportunity): child illness, frequent absence from school (including truancy), undiagnosed early hearing/sight problems, repeated changes of school, an unsettled family situation, poor motivation, a family background of illiteracy, too much television, ethnicity complications, inadequate school resources and teaching staff. Even the weather has been invoked: in warm countries, there is less motivation to stay in and read, rather than go to the beach! Multi-faceted problems, therefore, require multi-faceted solutions.

Doubtless the number of teachers

is critical, whether professional or voluntary. Carlo Cipolla in 1969 concluded that there should be between 1 and 3 teachers per 1000 pupils to ensure low rates of illiteracy. In many parts of the world, this would require radically different levels of educational investment than in the past. Nonetheless, some countries have such programmes: according to a 1985 statement by Rajiv Gandhi (*Challenge of education – policy perspective*), there is to be a fourfold increase in educational spending in India, with the numbers of teachers being doubled (to over 4 million), in an attempt to solve this problem.

But numbers alone are never enough: the level of training is critical too. Many teachers still leave their training programmes having received little on the development of reading/writing/spelling skills, and even less on language awareness in general.

There seems little doubt that individual tuition is essential, rather than attempting to deal with the problem in classes. It is not reasonable to put together a group of adults

who differ in age, intelligence, motivation, and background, and expect them all to progress. Illiteracy is a sensitive area, in which the person's dignity needs to be safeguarded, and this requires a modicum of privacy. A 1970s report by the Committee on Reading of the US National Academy of Education indicated that group teaching produced disappointing results, with slow progress being achieved, and people attending irregularly or dropping out. The more successful campaigns rely on a one-to-one situation, making use of a large number of volunteer teachers.

The continual pressure of routine literacy demands ('raising the ante') needs to be reduced. The most obvious way of doing this is to simplify the reading level of the more complex tests, which is often unnecessarily difficult. The work of the various 'plain English' movements (see *ET5*, Jan 86) is central in this respect. However, even the best simplifications of complex material presuppose a considerable reading age – often approaching age 15.

The one factor which repeatedly emerges from studies of ways of increasing children's reading ability is parental involvement – as shown notably in the various joint reading projects, in which parents agree to hear their children read for a fixed time each night over a certain period, or read along with their children as they read ('paired reading'). The more work done along these lines, the better.

It must not be forgotten that a bigger problem, in several respects, is writing. Very little writing is actually done in many schools in the industrialized world. Photocopying often replaces note-taking. Exam questions often involve multiple-choice ticks/checks rather than essays. Homework assignments are often restricted to a narrow range of writing tasks. Not surprising, then, to find that there may be a massive discrepancy between reading and writing performance. There are cases on record of people leaving high school with a diploma who were nonetheless unable to write a letter.

The problem is now recognized. In the UK, for example, there is the National Writing Project, a programme devised by the Social Curriculum Development Committee. This aims to develop and extend the competence of children and young adults to write for a variety of

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purposes and audiences, in order to enhance their growth as individuals, their powers of self-expression, their skill as communicators, and their facility as learners.

There is a pressing need for more research into questions of causes and the relative efficacy of teaching schemes and methods. Unfortunately, research of this kind requires government money, which is notice-

ably lacking these days. The Bullock Report in the UK made several sensible recommendations about the way literacy programmes might be developed and monitored. Few have been implemented at a national level. Money again.

Above all, the task of reading and writing needs to be made meaningful. As John Vaizey says, in his *Encyclopedia Britannica* article on educa-

tion, 'Generally speaking, attempts to achieve universal adult literacy are a failure unless there is a direct correspondence between the achievement of literacy and its subsequent use in daily life'.

Yes, if all such points were appreciated and implemented, illiteracy *could* be abolished within a generation. 2000 AD seems about right. If . . . **ET**

FROM OUR FILES

A social disease?

The following quotations indicate how words like 'literacy', 'literate' and 'illiterate' are currently being used around the world:

- 'You'll never be literate with spelling like this' (a teacher commenting on an imaginative but badly-spelled 3-page essay by a 12-year-old)

- 'All my students are illiterate when they come to university' (a lecturer in medical science)

- 'I don't think one is really literate until one has mastered Latin' (a teacher in a 'public' – that is, private – school in England)

- 'Please teach your radio announcers and script-writers to be literate. I have heard several split infinitives and misplaced adverbs and prepositions this week' (a letter to *English Now*, BBC Radio 4)

- 'In truth most definitions of illiteracy amount to this – that he is illiterate who is not as literate as someone else thinks he ought to be.' (*Reading Ability*, United Kingdom, Ministry of Education, 1950)

- 'Two very different senses of literacy exist side by side in common English usage. If I say, "A census conducted in 1962 indicates that 98.5 percent of all Upper Voltans are illiterate," most people will assume that the vast majority of the population of Upper Volta lacks the technical skills of reading and writing. I would be making no judgement of the Upper Voltan mind or character, any more than I would be if I observed that most Tibetans cannot drive cars. But if a New Yorker remarks that most Californians he has met are illiterate, few will misinterpret him to mean that they cannot read or write. His statement is a studied insult to some basic aspect of Californians' intelligence.' (Robert Pattison, *On Literacy: the Politics of the Word from Homer to the Age of Rock*, Oxford University Press Inc., New York, 1982)

- 'We – readers of books such as this – are so literate that it is very difficult for

us to conceive of an oral universe of communication or thought except as a variant of a literate universe. . . .

Persons who have interiorized writing not only write but also speak literately, which is to say that they organize, to varying degrees, even their oral expression in thought patterns and verbal patterns that they would not know of unless they could write.

Because it does not follow these patterns, literates have considered oral organization of thought naive.' (Walter J Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, Methuen, 1982)

- 'Patterns which are *exclusively* found on the basement level of grammar are incorrect on any other level – and since grammar itself is generally viewed from the educated level, illiterate patterns are usually, but loosely, called ungrammatical, though they are perfectly grammatical (because they are current and normal) on their own level. . . . This first principle of illiterate speech – emphasis on repetition – is evident not only in grammatical patterns but also in phraseology; the basement-level speaker frequently iterates an idea and then immediately reiterates the very same idea in slightly different words. He is not quite sure you will understand him until he has said a thing at least twice. The second principle of illiterate speech is either an intellectual inability or an instinctive unwillingness to make certain distinctions.' (Norman Lewis, *Better English*, Laurel Books, New York, 1948/56)

- 'The new illiteracy is new because it is a form of intellectual starvation that affects people who in fact read voraciously, even obsessively – food can labels, sports headlines, *People* magazine captions and at least the cover of the *National Enquirer*. But they don't read books. Or essays. Or any magazine article without pictures or with a "cont'd on p. 37." (Robert C Solomon, 'People who don't read are giving up their freedom', *Los Angeles Times*, August 1980)

'According to a recent federal study, five million Canadians don't know how to read or write well enough to function in their daily lives. . . . It said illiteracy is a neglected social disease that increases the cost of unemployment benefits, welfare, health care and workmen's compensation. . . . A Quebec study compiled by 12 francophone school boards outside the Montreal area said education facilities for illiterate adults are lacking. '*Rapport sur la clientele analphabete, les personnels et les services offerts*' says there is no encouragement for illiterates to take courses and no means exist for them to return to school full-time. As a result, only about one per cent of illiterates are taking such courses.' (Julia Maskoulis, 'Illiteracy', *Montreal Gazette*, 10 Nov 79)

The above citations indicate – among many other things – the emotive, judgemental and dismissive force of a word like 'illiterate', placing it in the same dangerously ambiguous category as 'dialect' and 'native' (words upon which we have commented in earlier issues of *ET*). The social potency of words like these suggests that care can usefully be taken when talking negatively about literacy: the form 'illiterate' can be so socially loaded that it might be counter-productive to use it, say, of oral societies that have never had a script of any kind. Such societies are better described neutrally as 'non-literate', if they have to be seen from the angle of vision of literate peoples; even to call them 'pre-literate' can bias any description of them in favour of the literates of the world.

Just as many language commentators now prefer the word 'variety' to the older term 'dialect' when talking about different versions of the same language, so we may need in the near future a term which separates the condition that in French is called *analphabétisme* from the stigma of 'illiteracy', unless of course we feel as a world community that inability to read and write (well) – for whatever reason – is worthy of being stigmatized. Readers' views are welcomed.