

## PLAIN LANGUAGE SUMMARIES

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### THE CANADIAN COMPONENT OF THE 2003 INTERNATIONAL ADULT LITERACY AND SKILLS SURVEY (IALSS): THE SITUATION OF OFFICIAL LANGUAGE MINORITIES

SUMMARY BY T. SCOTT MURRAY

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#### **What is this study about?**

This paper uses the results of the International Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (IALSS) to analyse the literacy skills of Canada's official language minorities. The author compares their results interprovincially and with the scores achieved by majority official language groups and analyses the impact on these scores of socio-economic indicators such as education, occupation, age, geographic location and cultural practices.

The first chapter, "Background", explores the history of Canada's official language minorities, and the policies affecting them, as the prelude for later chapters. The author states that any attempt to examine the literacy situation of official language minorities in Canada must be set in the socio-historical, political and economic context in which these linguistic communities have evolved. Consequently he provides an historical overview of the development of both federal and provincial government official language policies and draws specific attention to what he styles "Four Provinces: Four Unique Situations" in Ontario, Quebec, New Brunswick and Manitoba.

Chapter 2 looks at the literacy skills of Quebec Anglophones and Francophone minorities in other provinces, especially Ontario, Manitoba and New Brunswick. It explores the impact on literacy of issues like social integration, culture and identity, employment and the economy. Chapter 3 is devoted to an explanation of the 2003 International Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (IALSS) in Canada noting how it differs from the previous 1994 International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS). Chapter 4 explores the IALSS data to highlight the relative distribution of literacy and life skills competencies by language group. By presenting interprovincial comparative data the study confirms major gaps in how well Francophones, Anglophones and allophones performed.

Chapter 5 looks at literacy and education with special attention to the relationship between age and literacy proficiency. Chapter 6 explores the "Literacy of Francophones and literacy in French" with sub-sections focused on the language used to the test in relation to results, language of schooling, and province of schooling. Chapter 7 is devoted to "Literacy and Daily Life" exploring in detail issues such as use of libraries, visits to bookstores, reading of various documents (books, newspapers, articles and magazines, letters and e-mails. It also looks at the correlation between reading and writing habits and literacy skills as well as attitudes towards reading.

Chapter 8 is devoted to official language minority participation in adult education and training including both formal and informal learning. Chapter 9 looks at the relationship between “Literacy and the Labour Market” exploring such issues as work related literacy practices; occupation and literacy performance levels; level of education required to perform work as part of a main job; and knowledge-oriented occupations. Chapter 10 provides an “explanation of performance differences between language groups” and it is followed by a “Conclusion” summarizing the key points raised by the author.

#### **What are the questions addressed by the study?**

Jean-Pierre Corbeil says that he set about to accomplish the following objectives:

- Examine the literacy levels in French of Francophones living outside Quebec who chose to take the tests in English compared to those who took them in French;
- Analyse the effects of the language in which respondents read and write at home and at work, the language in which they watch television, etc.;
- Determine the literacy status of Quebec Anglophones and compare it to that of Anglophones in the other provinces and that of other minority groups;
- Determine the factors that contribute to the success and development of some groups living in a linguistic minority situation.

#### **Why is this study important?**

This report sheds new light on the literacy of Canada’s official language minorities using the results of two major surveys of literacy skill levels, the 1994 IALS and the 2003 IALSS. It also places these results in the historical framework required to understand the evolution of official language minority communities over time and the challenges that they have faced in terms of linguistic survival, both historically and contemporarily. The paper also links literacy to socio-economic outcomes presenting a clear portrait of the literacy and linguistic challenges these communities could face in the future.

#### **What does the study conclude?**

The author’s short historical overview effectively shows that Francophones, both in and outside of Quebec, have faced obstacles that explain their longstanding lag in literacy skills when compared to Anglophone Canadians. While the situation of Quebec Anglophones differs from one region of the Province to another, their average literacy proficiency level is generally higher than that those using French as their mother tongue.

Individuals with English as their mother tongue did much better in the different literacy and numeracy tests than those in the other language groups. Nevertheless Corbeil concludes that the literacy of Francophones has greatly improved over time due to major social and political changes like greater access to education and compulsory schooling to age 16. Consequently, he observes, the lower results of Francophones in the IALSS are largely the result of socio-historical and cultural factors. This does not mean, he adds, that problems of low literacy are non-existent among younger age groups.

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The study reports that IALSS testing results for young Francophones aged 16 to 24 in New Brunswick and Ontario showed that nearly 45% of them scored below level 3 on the combined prose and document scale. (IALSS Level 3 is considered to be the standard required to function effectively in Canadian society.) In comparison, approximately 34% of young Anglo-Quebeckers in the same age group were below level 3, a result comparable to Francophone Quebeckers. The situation of Francophones aged 25 to 44 in New Brunswick was found to be even more problematic, since 18% of them were only able to place at level 1, the lowest level, a proportion much higher than the scores of Francophones of the same age group in the rest of Canada (11%).

In general Corbeil concluded that the differences in education attainment between Francophones and Anglophones largely explain the differences their results on IALSS tests. These differences are reflected in characteristics and practices that affect literacy proficiency levels. For example, apart from the Francophones in P.E.I., those in New Brunswick have the largest proportion of persons aged 15 and over who have not completed grade 9. That province also had the largest proportion of workers engaged in occupations in the primary sector, goods processing and manufacturing, which are occupations with the largest proportion of persons at level 1 on the literacy and numeracy scales. These sectors are the ones in which employees have the lowest frequency of using, reading or writing certain documents as part of their main jobs.

Generally, level of schooling and type of job held also determine the level of participation in adult education and training, and in structured and non-structured informal learning. In other words, more educated persons who hold a job using high literacy skills are also those who receive the most opportunities for on-the-job training from their employer.

According to Corbeil the IALSS results reveal that Francophones with the same education and income levels are less likely than Anglophones to have developed frequent reading and writing habits in 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 lower literacy levels among Francophones outside Quebec in comparison to their Anglophone counterparts as measured in the IALSS tests.

Lastly, the IALSS results exposed a twofold challenge for Francophone minorities outside Quebec and New Brunswick: literacy in French rather than in English. Corbeil notes that 63% Francophones in Ontario and 85% in Manitoba took the IALSS tests in English. He concluded that while most said they had a very good or good ability to speak or write French; English was their preferred written language. He concluded that 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 in the future.

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