

Research Note 02/10/01

Research Into Practice #1: U.S. Army Manuals and ABE in Great Britain

Thomas G. Sticht
International Consultant in Adult Education

Adult literacy researchers are often called upon to justify their activities to policymakers, practitioners, and various funding organizations. Recently, I was reminded of how obscure and circuitous the path often is from research on adult literacy to its effects on policy and practice.

I was reading Mary Hamilton's and Juliet Merrifield's chapter, *Adult Learning and Literacy in the United Kingdom*, which appears in the *Annual Review of Adult Learning and Literacy: Volume 1*, sponsored by the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy and published by Jossey-Bass (Comings, Garner & Smith, 2000). It brought back memories of what some might consider rather arcane research on estimating the reading demands of Army manuals and how it influenced, in a small but significant manner, the state of adult literacy education in Great Britain today.

In 1967, I was asked to join the George Washington University's Human Resources Research Office (HumRRO) which had been established after General of the Armies Dwight David Eisenhower had left the Army and assumed the presidency of Columbia University. In his new education post, General Eisenhower expressed his disappointment on finding during World War II that millions of American young people, mostly males, were undereducated and functionally illiterate. He called for a program of human resources conservation similar to the natural resources conservation that had been initiated under President Franklin D. Roosevelt during the Great Depression of the 1930s. HumRRO had been established by the U. S. Army as a research office to improve human resources activities in the military. In 1967 my job was to identify the literacy requirements of Army jobs and to provide guidance on how materials might be designed to be more usable and how Army literacy programs might be made more effective in preparing people to use their Army written materials more efficiently.

As a part of this work, I directed a team of researchers that developed a new readability formula to estimate the reading difficulty of technical materials. This formula, which we called the FORCAST formula for Patrick FORd, John CAylor and Tom STicht, was the first readability formula developed and normed with adults working in technical jobs. Later I published an article in *Literacy Discussion*, Vol. No. 3, September 1973 (International Institute for Adult Literacy Methods (UNESCO) that described the FORCAST readability formula and how to use it.

The next year, in 1974, the British Association of Settlements published its manifesto for adult literacy action in Great Britain called "A Right to Read: Action for a Literate Britain." In this publication, citing the Literacy Discussion article about the FORCAST formula, they state, "The best way to illustrate the practical effects of functional illiteracy is to show how many familiar and commonplace pieces of writing are beyond the reach of the person with a reading age of less than thirteen years...for the purposes of our research we have elected to use a method employed by the US Army to test the readability of its training manuals. It is called the FORCAST, and has the virtue of being the simplest test we have so far encountered." (p. 5) Five of the 25 pages of the Right to Read manifesto are devoted to descriptions of the reading demands of consumer, health and other functional documents using the FORCAST formula.

Twenty-six years later, in their chapter, Hamilton & Merrifield state: "The British Right to Read campaign, ...although first seen as a temporary response to a short-term crisis... in fact laid the groundwork for a new, publicly funded adult basic education (ABE) service" (p. 243). They go on to show how Great Britain's present delivery system for adult literacy education owed a great deal of its existence to the Right to Read campaign, of which they state, "This was the first adult literacy campaign to take place in a Western European country" (p. 249).

This illustrates how adult literacy research may have important, albeit indirect, effects beyond what the research was originally intended to accomplish. It supports the call in the Action Agenda for Literacy for a strong research and development capacity for moving the Adult Education and Literacy System (AELS) from the margins to the mainstream of American education .