

# **Respondent variability in their approach to literacy surveys – some cross national comparisons**

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## **Introduction**

This paper describes the findings from some research conducted as part of a larger methodological project on behalf of the EU. The project concerned the results from the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) and set out to see if there was any evidence to support arguments that the results were in some way biased. The main strand of the project involved going back and redoing the interview and assessment in three countries, Sweden, France and Great Britain. The focus of this paper is on possible sources of non-sampling error and describes the findings of the cognitive work carried out while still developing the design of the project. This set out to look at respondent understanding of the survey request and intent, their commitment and application in doing a test in their own homes, and their views on incentives. We also looked at how respondents approached some specific tasks in the literacy test asking them to think aloud how they reached the answer. The results of the split sample retest of respondents has been reported and is not the concern of this particular paper.

The IALS consists of a 30 minute interview in the home. Respondents are given one of seven booklets to complete and are told they can take as long as they like to do it, average time taken is about one hour.

## **Methodology and sample**

The qualitative research took place in October-November 1997 in countries that had taken part in IALS; France, Great Britain and Sweden. Each country selected 15 former IALS respondents and 15 new respondents to take part in the qualitative research broadly matched in terms of characteristics.

Former IALS respondents were asked to complete a shortened version of the interviews and the same IALS booklet they completed last time. New respondents were given the full IALS background questionnaire and a booklet selected at random to complete. Respondents were stopped after they had spent 40 minutes on the booklet and were then interviewed in depth about the survey and their approaches to completing the booklet. Interviewers used a qualitative interview probe list to structure this qualitative part of the interview.

## **Respondent perceptions of what the survey was about**

Respondent understanding of what the survey was about was far from universal and it varied both within and between countries. In all countries that took part in IALS respondents would have been sent a letter asking them to take part in the survey. The title of the survey varied across countries and in some countries, such as France, it did not explicitly use the word 'literacy' in the title. For many, particularly in France, there was a discrepancy between their expectations of what the survey would be like and their experiences.

In Britain the survey was titled the Adult Literacy Survey and was seen by the majority of respondents as being about education, or about the skills based on the written word which are needed for daily life and society. These were perceived as important because literacy was believed to be necessary to improve the quality of life but few thought that literacy included numeracy.

Most respondents in Sweden thought it was a survey looking at reading, writing and arithmetical abilities, or something to do with school. Some respondents found it hard to give a definition of literacy, mentioning dyslexia, reading and writing problems, or the social problems of poor reading. In summary, IALS was seen in Britain and Sweden as a survey about literacy, which was broadly interpreted as reading and writing skills, or about education. In France, there was confusion about the purposes of the survey, with the references to daily life, and the expectation that opinions were being sought, being at odds with the school-like 'tests' which respondents were asked to complete.

### **Respondent approaches to completing the booklet**

One of the aims of the qualitative research was to provide information on the range of respondent understanding of items in the booklet and how they processed and answered the tasks. This would have been shaped by a combination of factors: respondents' perceptions of the content and purposes of the survey, the booklet itself, their experience of completing both this particular booklet and similar ones in the past, and an assessment of their own ability and knowledge. This is a complex cognitive process that is likely to affect both motivation and performance. Although the different strands cannot be disentangled in such a small sample, respondents' comments can offer some insights.

### **Overall views of the assessment booklet**

Respondents in all three countries likened the booklet to a school test or examination; for some French respondents, in particular, it evoked memories of being at school and of failure. This may have been strengthened by the fact that the name of the Ministry of Education was printed on every page of the booklet albeit in very small print at the bottom of each page.

Some respondents in all three countries expected trick questions; in France, because it is usual to have them in school tests; in Britain and Sweden because some questions were seen as 'too easy' or, in Britain, as a check to see whether people were reading the questions or following the instructions properly. Interviewers in Britain specifically told respondents, if they asked, that there were no trick questions.

Overall assessments of the booklet varied. Confusion over what the assessment was measuring made respondents nervous about the booklet, and unsure about how to approach it. British and Swedish respondents who felt positive about the booklet said it was enjoyable, interesting with a good variety of tasks and challenging. Other negative comments were that it was long, difficult, tedious, frustrating, stressful, or that tasks lacked clarity and included ambiguous question wording or material.

### **Approaches to completing the booklet**

Respondents in all countries had a variety of strategies for approaching the booklet. Depending on their view, those in France who were least involved in the task tended to do it as quickly as possible, even if this meant making errors; while those who saw it as a challenge read the questions first then searched the text for the answers, concentrated on writing with care, and erased mistakes. Those who were strongly reminded of school tests tended to start quickly in a panic then slow down and start reading and re-reading more carefully. This group also tried to answer easy questions first. Respondents who felt they understood the aims and purposes of the survey and took the booklet very seriously tried to work out the most efficient way of proceeding quickly, seeing the best approach or strategy to adopt as a problem to be solved first. They usually decided on reading the questions followed by selective reading of the text to answer them. This group tended to answer questions in the order they appeared in the booklet.

In Britain, respondents could be grouped into two broad categories. One group thought the objective was to finish the booklet quickly, answering as many questions as possible at the expense of accuracy. This group did not check their answers and tended to make 'educated guesses' rather than spending time working out the exact answer. The other group thought it was more important

to answer accurately at the expense of not completing the booklet. The approach of this latter group was to work slowly and methodically, taking time to check their answers.

In Sweden the most clear pattern was evident. Most respondents started from the beginning, and worked their way through the end of the booklet. Some started by reading the texts and then answered the questions; others read the questions before reading the text. Some respondents did the booklet as quickly as possible and found it 'a bit stressful'. Others said they hurried, and would have gone back if they had the time. Nobody wanted to stop before they were asked to, although some did skip a few questions, with the intention of going back to them.

### **Different types of question**

The IALS assessment covered a broad range of texts and had questions of varying levels of difficulty. Most French respondents reported feeling more comfortable with items familiar to them through their home or working life (which may relate to their expectation of the survey being about 'daily life'). Unfamiliar items or those lacking relevance for those who do not have daily experience of these things were more difficult. A few, however, saw the more unfamiliar items as a challenge and as an opportunity to learn something new. The bus timetable was thought to be old-fashioned and difficult to consult. The questions on frozen embryos made some respondents uncomfortable.

In Britain, some respondents indicated a preference for questions that had a clear right or wrong answer. A number, including those who did well (using a simple measure of the number of correct answers), disliked long texts and wordy sentences or complained about the presentation of some of the charts, with a particularly complex graphical text on consumer goods being the most disliked. Several respondents commented that some questions were ambiguous and open to interpretation, with no right or wrong answer, and that it was irritating having to locate answers in continuous prose.

In Sweden, quite a few respondents were surprised to find calculation tasks. Most thought some tasks resembled everyday or working life; they could see the relevance of being able to fill in forms, read advertisements, warranties, instructions for choosing a car seat for children, or a weather map. Some felt positive towards easy tasks, or towards topics which they had a personal interest in, such as the item on flowers. Very few found questions which were not relevant to Sweden.

Some questions were universally disliked, a long piece of text on IVF technology was seen by many as both tedious and on a difficult topic.

### **Ease or difficulty of questions**

Many respondents in all three countries did not like and/or found items requiring calculations difficult and in all countries respondents were surprised to find such questions in the booklet. In France, these items reminded people of difficulties they had experienced at school, whereas in Britain items requiring percentages to be estimated were avoided by those who 'knew' they could not do them without a calculator. Some Swedish respondents would have liked to have been told about the quantitative items before they started work on the booklet.

### **Use of prior knowledge**

Although all the information required to answer the questions was contained in the test booklets, some respondents drew on prior knowledge to speed up their search of the material or to double check their answers. Some disagreed with the information given in some texts, based on their own knowledge and experience of the topic, but could see this was not important as it was their skill in using the texts that was being tested. Others used their own knowledge to answer the questions rather than the information provided in the test wishing to demonstrate what they knew. This was sometimes at odds with the answer provided in the text and resulted in respondents answering the question incorrectly.

There was a widespread perception in all three countries that the booklet was a test, which coloured respondents' expectations and how they approached it. For those with bad memories of school, it

created some anxieties. Although most people recognised that it was a survey, many also felt that they personally were being judged and that their knowledge was being tested. The distinction between whether the respondent felt their skill (of handling printed material) or their knowledge was being tested is important. Familiarity, context and relevance were all seen as aiding comprehension and the likelihood of getting an item right, although what is familiar and relevant varied for different countries and for different groups of people within each country.

Respondents in all countries felt that more complex questions were more difficult, particularly those which required the extraction of material from a long text or that a judgement be made. Easy questions were not always liked, however, because they made some respondents feel uneasy and some respondents were suspicious thinking they must be missing something and that it couldn't be that simple.

### **Motivation**

One of the main aims of the qualitative research was to examine levels of personal motivation for literacy tests in the context of an interview in the home. As part of the debriefing, interviewers therefore asked respondents about a number of factors which may have affected their motivation.

Almost everyone appeared to be trying hard - or as respondents often put it, 'to the best of my ability'. From the observations made by interviewers in Britain there were a number of key indicators that people were trying hard, such as largely unbroken concentration; re-reading questions to clarify them when they got stuck; re-reading the material when the answer was not obvious; checking answers; or seeing difficult questions as a challenge and spending more time on them. Some respondents said, however, that in 'real life' they would usually skim read or give up.

### **Time pressures**

Those who had taken part in IALS previously had an expectation of how long it would take to complete the booklet and reported feeling less pressure than last time. Some said they deliberately worked more slowly this time. Among new respondents, some were able to make an assessment of the likely time needed for the booklet from the time the interviewer had suggested they set aside for her visit. Some respondents would have liked a clear indication so they could plan their time. Respondents were not always sure whether it was most important to complete the booklet accurately, even if this meant taking a long time, or whether speed was most important, even at the expense of accuracy.

The consequences of adopting a strategy of speed over accuracy in terms of getting a question right or wrong varies depending on the subtleties of the question. Without explicit knowledge on the part of the respondent as to how the test is scored their adoption of a particular strategy could have a big impact on their performance.

### **REFERENCES**

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