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## **Low levels of literacy in France**

### **First results from IVQ<sup>1</sup> survey 2004/05 – focus on the ANLCI<sup>2</sup> module**

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#### **1. General Background**

##### **1.1 European and French political background**

Most European countries are currently trying to reach educational goals defined in Lisbon European council in March 2000. The council stressed that: “Every European citizen must be equipped with the skills needed to live and work in this new information society”. To face this challenge, countries have to be sure that every citizen is equipped with the base of competencies required to guarantee each individual conditions that are favourable to his or her personal fulfilment, active citizenship, social and cultural integration, as well as his or her professional integration.

To achieve Lisbon goals, Barcelona council in March 2002 called for further action to “improve the mastery of basic skills”. If “competencies in information technologies, foreign languages, technological culture, entrepreneurship and social aptitudes” are necessary in a knowledge society, the mastery of the traditional core of competencies, which includes language skills (reading, writing and oral communication) as well as mathematics skills and cognitive skills (logical reasoning, spatial and temporal orientation, the capacity to learn, etc.), is still compulsory to access to other competencies. In this context, countries have to build and implement an active public policy and to face this task they must have elements for diagnosis and evaluation.

The situation can only be appreciated by linking qualitative and quantitative approaches. To count and characterise people with basic skills needs French stakeholders could use since 1998 the assessment carried out among 17-year olds during the JAPD<sup>3</sup> (Registration day for defence preparation). JAPD provides stakeholders with periodical data whose could allow to understand the evolution of the phenomenon among French youth<sup>4</sup>.

Now IVQ survey, carried out by the INSEE (*National Institute of Economical and Statistical Information*) and ANLCI, in association with the main ministry statistics offices and public research institutes, can provide data on the way French adult population masters basic skills. Because fighting illiteracy is a national priority, the IVQ survey, even though it

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<sup>1</sup> *Information et Vie Quotidienne, Information and Daily life.*

<sup>2</sup> *Agence Nationale de Lutte Contre l'Illettrisme (ANLCI)*, National Agency for Fighting Illiteracy. The ANLCI was created in October 2000 in order to federate and optimise the energies, actions and resources of all of stakeholders and to make the national priority, included in the Law, become effective. Its core missions are to ensure that the guiding principles of the fight against illiteracy are well known to all, taken into account, and deep-rooted in policies and practices, but also to evaluate the impact of the policies and initiatives carried out and to count and characterise people in situations of illiteracy. In September 2005 the field of ANLCI action has been extended to basic skills.

<sup>3</sup> Journée d'Appel de Préparation à la Défense.

<sup>4</sup> Foreigners living in France, even if they were born in France, do not attend JAPD.

assesses all levels of literacy and numeracy, focuses on lower literacy levels. ANLCI Module has been designed to face this challenge.

### 1.2 Illiteracy in France in 2005, a complex situation with many different faces

“In order to measure illiteracy we must first understand what we are referring to. The different forms of illiteracy and the absence of common definitions or criteria make assessment very difficult... One of the major difficulties in the fight against illiteracy is identifying the people concerned. What do we mean by reading literacy? Each of us has a different relationship with reading and writing... In addition, people who do not overly suffer from their difficulties with the written word will not spontaneously identify themselves as illiterate, nor try to solve the problem on their own.”<sup>5</sup>

For all of these reasons, it is difficult to evaluate illiteracy and the number of people that can be considered to be facing illiteracy. On the other hand, since “measuring the extent of the illiteracy phenomenon” appeared to policy-makers early on to be crucial, it was necessary to produce figures to estimate the extent of the problems and in correlation the intensity of the efforts required to solve them. For reasons of time and facility, first assessments were produced on the basis of declaratory surveys, but everyone can agree that due to their nature (declaring that you had difficulties in school is usually not spontaneous and often is influenced by strategies aiming not to provide an exact answer but to provide an answer deemed acceptable by the survey) these surveys should be regarded with caution, whereas surveys using practical tests usually provide information of better quality. For this reason, the IVQ survey was based on standardized tests. It therefore essentially proposes to supply figures to better determine the degree of illiteracy, using tools to measure the performances of individuals faced with written or oral communication tasks in standard French.

### 1.3 Defining illiteracy

The national reference guidelines promoted by the ANLCI and its partners offers the following definition: “The term illiteracy describes the situation of people over 16 years old who, although they have attended school, cannot read and understand a text related to situations in their daily life, and/or are unable to write in order to communicate simple information.”<sup>6</sup> France, by adopting the word *illettrisme*<sup>7</sup>, chose to distinguish between two situations: *illettrisme* for French speakers who attended school in the French language but did not acquire a sufficient command of the written word, and *analphabétisme* for foreigners or people of foreign origin who never learned to read or write. One must even add the case of people who learned to read and write in another language than French and whose performance in this language is not satisfactory.

<sup>5</sup> Illiteracy. Effective action through better understanding. Marie Thérèse Geffroy and Valérie Grasset Morel, Les Essentiels Milan, 2003.

<sup>6</sup> The definition continues: “For certain people, these reading and writing difficulties are sometimes combined, to different degrees, with an insufficient mastery of other basic skills such as oral communication, logical reasoning, comprehension and use of numbers and operations, spatial and temporal orientation, etc.

In spite of these deficiencies, people facing illiteracy have acquired experience, a culture and a skills capital that are based very little or not at all on the ability to read and write. Thus some of them have been able to integrate into social and professional life, but the balance is fragile and the risk of marginalization constant. Others find themselves in situations of exclusion where illiteracy is combined with other factors.” ANLCI National Guidelines, 2003.

<sup>7</sup> Bernard Lahire: L’invention de l’«illettrisme», Rhétorique publique et stigmates, Paris: La Découverte, 1999.

Etymologically speaking, an *analphabète* is someone who does not have the key to the code allowing him to move from oral to written communication, a person who does not have a good command of the transcription code, the alphabet, based on the correspondence between sounds (phonemes) and graphemes (graphic units whose vocation is to represent a sound). The appearance of standards for the written word and the evolution differential between oral and written languages, among others, mean that the systematic nature of this correspondence decreases over time, making the transcription of the oral language into a standardized written language difficult, even for the habitual speakers of the reference language.

In other words, although in all cases there is an absence or a lack of sufficient capacity to read and write in French, the causes of the problem, people's experiences, and the support methods are different. It is this pedagogical classification aspect that promotes the distinction between *illettrisme*, French as a foreign language, and *analphabétisme*. In this context, the fight against illiteracy has developed side by side with the linguistic training policies for immigrants.

#### 1.4 Historical background of the IVQ survey

In France, in the 1980s, national surveys were conducted, but only on a declarative basis. In 1994, France took part initially in IALS international survey, but withdrew before its results were officially revealed. The reason for this withdrawal was the finding that around 40 % of the adult population of working age performed at level one, IALS lowest level. Such departure generated numerous comments, which we would rather not stir up, as well as reports criticizing the methods used by IALS.<sup>8</sup>

Such critical comments prompted the main Statistics and State Departments involved in educational process or the prevention of illiteracy to cooperate so as to plan and conduct a survey taking into account all the criticisms that had been levelled at IALS. Since then, in 1998, a group of experts bringing together (among others) the Statistics departments of the Ministry of Education and the Labour Ministry have worked under the aegis of INSEE (National Institute for Statistics and Economical Surveys) at the elaboration of a new survey known as the *Information Vie Quotidienne* (IVQ).<sup>9</sup>

In 2000, at the request of INSEE, the ANLCI joined the working group, to provide an evaluation test unit designed for people with reading problems. At the request of the ANLCI and with its collaboration, the *Psychology Lab* (PsyEF) of the Lyon 2 University took over the theoretical and practical issues raised by the development of the test.

#### 1.5 The choice of a national survey

By choosing to draw out their own literacy survey, members of the IVQ steering group just anticipated on *UNESCO Institute for Education* (UIE) recommendations to *European Union* (EU): "National studies are generally framed (drawn) to assess the national educational goals or to provide information about the competencies of the national population. By construction the national study is closer to the specific context of the country, even if one can

<sup>8</sup> Blum A, Guerin-Pace F, "Des lettres et des chiffres", Fayard, Paris, 2000.

<sup>9</sup> The main team mates and members of the steering committee are: The *National Institute for Statistics and Economic Studies* (INSEE), the *Ministry of Education* (DEP), the *National Institute for Demographic Studies* (INED), the *Ministry of Social Affairs* (DARES), the PsyEf from University Lyon 2, the EVA team from University Rennes 2 and Ste-Anne hospital Paris and of course the *National Agency for Fighting Illiteracy* (ANLCI); information in *daily life*.

consider that the national survey does not take into account regional contexts. ... national studies provide more information on the real level of proficiency of the population than international surveys like *Adult Literacy and Lifeskills* (ALL), but cannot provide useful international comparisons.”<sup>10</sup>

The comparability of those surveys is small, *even translated*, but not inexistent. There are many examples of bilateral surveys using half of the items proposed by one country and half of the items proposed by the other country. All items proposed submitted by one country have to be accepted by the other (Alison Wolf, JP Jeantheau<sup>11</sup>). “The way to combine national and international advantages should be by creating an international framework for the construction of national surveys.” ANLCI, with twelve institutions from nine European countries started to explore this way since the end of 2005 by initiating the Socrates Grundvigt 1 project MODEVAL.

## 2. Presentation of IVQ survey and assessment tools

### 2.1 Objectives of the IVQ survey

The IVQ is typically a counting operation using a representative sample. The general purpose is seeking the best possible incentive for the people taking part in the survey. It is important not to reproduce a context too reminiscent of school exams.

The access to information and the capacity to actively communicate, both orally and in writing, are the keys to autonomy essential to each individual's success and to the progress of all. So IVQ assesses:

- Comprehension of oral messages, (Production of oral messages is not assessed because of technical difficulties)
- Production of the written language (written words)
- Reading of the written language
- Numeracy (defined as mathematical skills for everyday life).

In order to understand the results obtained in the tests, information on the interviewees is needed. A biographic questionnaire has been designed to collect useful data about one's personal life, family, schooling, literate environment, etc.

IVQ 2004 was preceded by IVQ 2002. In IVQ 2002, the use of 14 IALS prose items<sup>12</sup> for part of the sample (800 respondents) showed a very big difference in the results obtained between the 1994 Survey and the 2002 Survey: 15% of interviewees performed at prose level 1 in 2002 against 42% of interviewees performing at level 1 in IALS Survey in 1994. Part of this very important difference could be attributed to the difference in motivation of the interviewees.

This difference originates probably in the way the testing was carried out. This fact confirms the huge impact of survey context in the results of a survey, and informs on the degree of reliability of international surveys facing by construction different testing contexts.

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<sup>10</sup> Why literacy in Europe, Enhancing competencies of citizens in the 21st century.

<sup>11</sup> Wolf, Alison 2003: International colloquium about assessment of low levels of literacy, Lyon; Jeantheau, Jean-Pierre 1997: Performance comparée des élèves français et écossais en mathématiques. In: d'Education et formation, n°50, Paris.

<sup>12</sup> Literacy, Economy and Society, OECD, 1995.

## 2.2 Characteristics of the IVQ 2004/2005 survey

The IVQ is a household, face-to-face survey, requiring mainly oral answers, lasting 1 hour 30 minutes for each interview. The interviewer is computer assisted. Apart from the dictation, all the answers in the lower and higher unit are marked by the interviewer. Computer assistance allows the re-routing of people from one test to another, or to one question to another following the respondent's answers. For example, people who do not speak the language of the test are directly oriented to the biographic module. Then they can fill in the questionnaire with the help of a relative speaking both French and the language known by the interviewee.

The interactive face-to-face approach has enabled study designers to come closer to interview techniques usually dealt with in academic psychology research work. For example interviewers are professionals and have attended a three-day training session including a presentation of the goals of the survey, specific information about illiteracy and illiterates' psychology and the ways to develop confidence and motivation for those people. Psychologists could of course act more efficiently, but in the material conditions of the survey, we consider that the quality of the data collection is good.<sup>13</sup>

IVQ sample was designed as a two-stage stratified sample (random sample of housing units in 21 metropolitan regions, and a randomised choice of the interviewees among the occupants of the house unit). 10400 interviewees (18 to 65 years old) were assessed from October 2004 to January 2005, more than 2000 of them were tested with the ANLCI module.

9800 interviewees answered the tests (others just filled the biographic module). The number of respondents is higher than 1500 in special underprivileged urban areas, higher than 1700 in the region "Nord Pas de Calais", higher than 1400 in the region "Pays de Loire", and just a little under the 950 respondents in the region "Aquitaine". Those three regions carried out a special extension of the survey. Those numbers of respondents will allow us to produce specific results for those regions or areas.

## 2.3 IVQ general design

Assessment begins with the Orientation Module. It assesses, in generally less than ten minutes the global reading literacy level, using a TV program as printed support of oral questions. The orientation test begins with a set of questions meant to introduce the interviewee to the given situation (the task required is to identify the type of document provided), then it carries on with the detection of words or "pseudo-words" of variable length.

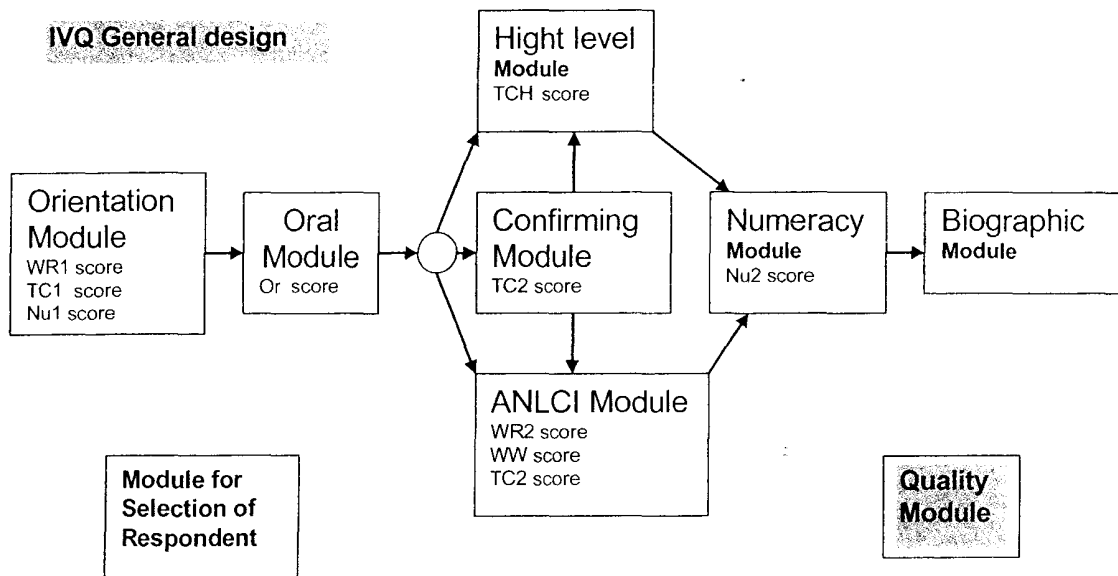
The test ends up with a few questions aiming at the simple comprehension of a simple text (a film preview). Depending on their scores (Reading words score, text cop; subjects are oriented to the high level test or to the ANLCI module, lower level module). Those for whom literacy orientation test is not clear, have to take a confirmation test, and following their scores they are oriented to higher level module or to the ANLCI module.

At the end of the orientation test, the interviewee has to answer questions on numeracy. The principle consists of stopping the questions after three wrong answers. Those questions have been ranged, progressively, from very simple to more complex questions. The first set of questions is called the "numeracy orientation test" and this was given to all the interviewees.

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<sup>13</sup> In the AFPA survey, using ANLCI module, carried out in November 2005, the interviewers was psychologists.

Diagramme 1:



WR: Word reading, TC: Text Comprehension; Nu: Numeracy, Or: Orientation, TCH: Text Comprehension Hight, WW: Word Writing.

Depending on the results, and regardless of their performance in the literacy test, the interviewees are oriented to a high-level numeracy test or a low-level numeracy test, which are in fact two different entries to the same suite of exercises. Those tests are submitted after the high-level or low-level literacy test and prior to the biographic questionnaire. The interviewer ends the numeracy test as soon as the interviewee has given three wrong answers.

High level items are not very different in conception from those from IALS or ALL: a large range of items representing the kinds of reading literacy that an adult would require in his everyday life (reading material extracted from literature, economic statistics, maps, etc.). Nevertheless they are more adapted to the French stakeholders' needs and to the French context.

## 2.4 The ANLCI module

The ANLCI module, which is devoted to the low levels of literacy, is very different from IALS. It enables to provide a description of the difficulties faced by respondents performing at lower levels. The ANLCI module, using three tests, tries to explore oral skills, basic written skills and basic reading skills. Even if oral test is a part of ANLCI module, in IVQ the steering group decided, because of its interest to propose it to all respondents. In the first test (oral comprehension test) one listens to two short messages (a female and a male voice) which are respectively a road safety advertisement and the weather forecast. One has to answer six listening-comprehension questions. The interviewees may listen to the same messages once more (this time being aware of the questions) and the Interviewer can ask them the same questions, once again. Only the best answers are taken into account for the score. Six other questions testing oral comprehension do not need special memory

abilities because the interviewer repeats, in the course of the questions, the words or sentences the interviewee has to explain.

The second test is close to a dictation. The Interviewer draws a situation in which tested people have to write a message. Tested people have to write a list for shopping, including words and pseudo-words of variable length, and a short sentence. The key words given in the dictation are presented in the following table.

Table 1: List of words included in test 2 of the ANLCI Module

|                                  | 3 phonemes    | 5 phonemes       | 7 phonemes            |
|----------------------------------|---------------|------------------|-----------------------|
| Pseudo-words                     | JOC<br>DUXE   | GOBAR<br>SIRAPE  | MICATOL<br>PEVANORE   |
| Phonographically regular words   | SEL<br>ANTI   | TOMATE<br>CERISE | EPICERIE<br>AUBERGINE |
| Phonographically irregular words | PAYS<br>RHUME | ALCOOL<br>FIANCE | SOLENNEL<br>PHARMACIE |

Finally, a CD box is handed to the interviewee, who has to perform tasks similar to those of the orientation unit. The choice of the words was made so as to enable the testing of either the two ways of reading a word (“assemblage” or “addressing”), and the mastery of the difficulties linked to the words’ length (memory).

This type of conception based on phonetic and semiotic characteristics makes it possible to build comparable tests using different words (or languages), even if the comparability is not completely guaranteed by the construction. The key words the interviewee has to read are presented in the following table.

Table 2: List of words included in test 3 of the ANLCI Module

|                                  | 3 phonemes     | 5 phonemes         | 7 phonemes               |
|----------------------------------|----------------|--------------------|--------------------------|
| Pseudo-words                     | SAR<br>BIX     | TIPAC<br>CHANGOZ   | MOVONFUL<br>JANDENOC     |
| Phonographically regular words   | MER<br>AMI     | NATURE<br>SOUPIR   | DOMICILE<br>CAMARADE     |
| Phonographically irregular words | FILS<br>PAILLE | EXAUCE<br>AIGUILLE | SOUPCONNER<br>SUCCULENTE |

On the fourth cover of the CD there is a text. Interviewees have to answer written comprehension questions. The text and the questions are presented in the appendix.

After the tests (that include a numeracy test), one answers a biographic questionnaire that takes about 30 minutes. Questions of the biographic questionnaires are submitted depending on the orientation decided for the interviewee. Nevertheless the core of the questionnaire is mainly the same for all interviewee, even if people who had taken the lower literacy test will take a personalized biographic test, of which a few questions on reading habits were suppressed, and replaced by questions on their abilities to solve everyday problems involving reading skills.



In addition to the collection of classical personal data, such as gender, age, degree, ... the main inquiries of the test are about home languages and language used for learning how to read, family and one's schooling, professional status and activity, income and home comfort. A sample of 200 respondents (with difficulties in front of writing messages) will be revisited for an informal interview in order to better understand their way of life and the links between the data collected and their everyday life.

### **3. Main results of the IVQ survey**

#### **3.1 Results concerning the whole adult population<sup>14</sup>**

According to the results of the test, the respondents considered to be facing difficulties in tackling daily written texts are those who have failed at the orientation test or at the intermediate test, attaining less than 80 % correct answers in at least one ANLCI component score out of three (i.e. word reading, writing and comprehension).

On the contrary, those regarded as literate (those who are able to tackle daily written texts without difficulty) succeeded in the orientation test or the intermediate test. Some of them (8.6 %) obtained less than 40 % correct answers to the questions of the high-level module, and their classification issue is not firmly resolved. Neither is such classification issue resolved for those of the respondents who obtained more than 80 % correct answers in the ANLCI module. That seems to be the typical problem with groups which are in proximity to the cut point.

The ANLCI module has enabled us to highlight the fact that within the category of people with difficulties in front of writing tasks, there is a great variety of competence profiles. The persons facing difficulties (those who have obtained less than 60 % correct answers) in all the tested domains (word reading, word writing and comprehension of small texts) are very rare. In addition, we should take into account the fact that some of those people have shown good numeracy skills.

#### **Numeracy**

Numeracy tests were proposed to the whole population despite of their orientation. Main results are: 32 % of interviewees succeed in at least 80 % of the questions, while 15 % have poor numeracy performances and do not reach the threshold of 60 % correct answers.

Even if, the score in numeracy and the scores in other fundamental fields of reading and writing link is rather strong, the percentage of respondents with poor numeracy performances represents 8 % for the respondents with no difficulty in the main fields, against 42 % for those who have faced difficulties in one of the three main fields.

Still, among the latter, we notice that a significant percentage (9 %) do succeed numeracy tests, in spite of the difficulties they face in writing tests. Men performed a little better than women.

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<sup>14</sup> Adults aged from 18 to 65 living in metropolitan France.

Table 3: Numeracy scores

| Percentages         | Whole sample | Women | Men  |
|---------------------|--------------|-------|------|
| Score < 40 %        | 7            | 8     | 6    |
| 40 % < score < 60 % | 6            | 8     | 5    |
| 60 % < score < 80 % | 55           | 58    | 51,5 |
| 80 % < score        | 32           | 26    | 38   |

Source INSEE Field: people aged 18-65 living in Metropolitan France;

Reading keys: 7 percent of the whole population obtain a numeracy score lower than 40 % of correct answers.

### Oral comprehension

Like for numeracy, oral test was proposed to the whole sample. Most of respondents attend to the group with higher scores (more than 80 % of correct answers). The proportion of people with poor performances in oral comprehension (threshold set to less than 60 % correct answers) represents 6 % for the respondents with no difficulty in the main writing fields, against 33 % for those who have faced difficulties in one of the three main fields.

Thus, for some of the respondents, the writing difficulties originate in more general comprehension problems; however, one third of the people with difficulties in one of the three main writing fields succeed the oral test perfectly.

Table 4: Oral scores

| Percentages         | Whole sample | No difficulties in literacy | Difficulties in one literacy domain |
|---------------------|--------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Score < 40 %        | 4            | 2                           | 16                                  |
| 40 % < score < 60 % | 10           | 7                           | 22                                  |
| 60 % < score < 80 % | 23           | 21                          | 29                                  |
| 80 % < score        | 63           | 70                          | 33                                  |

Source INSEE Field: people aged 18-65 living in Metropolitan France; Reading keys: 4 percent of the whole population obtain an oral score lower than 40 % of correct answers, 2 percent of respondents showing no difficulties in literacy obtains an oral score lower than 40 % of correct answers; etc.

### Literacy

First of all, 12 % of the respondents refused to do the tests, stating that they were not able to perform the tasks required, usually declaring that they did not speak French good enough.

Secondly, 3.7 % of the respondents obtained less than 80 % correct answers in reading word tests. They are in serious difficulty, and their results in the other assessed domains confirmed this statement. Those two categories of respondents have been systematically added to the category "With deep difficulties".

### Gender differences

Previous national or international studies<sup>15</sup> of reading have shown that girls and women tend to surpass boys and men in their achievement levels in reading. IVQ confirms these trends at the lowest levels.

Nevertheless, in numeracy, males obtained better scores. The testing process itself has probably influenced the result, for the questions were oral. Thus females could not value their better understanding of written messages as they usually do in numeracy assessments using written questionnaires.

Table 5: Gender differences in literacy and numeracy

| %            | Literacy                                   |                      | Numeracy     |              |
|--------------|--|----------------------|--------------|--------------|
|              | With difficulties (at least in one domain) | Without difficulties | score < 40 % | score > 80 % |
| Whole sample | 20   | 80                   | 8            | 32           |
| Females      | 17   | 83                   | 9            | 26           |
| Males        | 23   | 77                   | 6            | 38           |

Source INSEE Field: people aged 18-65 living in Metropolitan France;  
Reading: 20 % of the whole target population showed difficulties facing literacy tests.

### Differences following the age of first arrival in France

In the Following table, it's possible to compare the results of respondents following their age of first arrival in France. First of all it is important to highlight that in the two domains, foreigners arrived very early in their life in France have the same level of proficiency in oral skills or in literacy skills (at least at an every day life level) than native French peoples. For oral comprehension three thresholds are obvious (dark).

Table 6: Literacy and oral comprehension scores following age of first arrival in France

| Percentages                      | Literacy          |                      | Oral comprehension |            |
|----------------------------------|-------------------|----------------------|--------------------|------------|
| Age when first arrival in France | Deep difficulties | Without difficulties | Score < 40         | Score > 80 |
| Born in France                   | 4.3 %             | 84 %                 | 3.6 %              | 65.4 %     |
| 1 to 5 y.o.                      | 6.3 %             | 82.9 %               | 6.3 %              | 64.6 %     |
| 6 to 11 y.o.                     | 9 %               | 75.9 %               | 7.1 %              | 50.7 %     |
| 12 to 17 y.o.                    | 30.5 %            | 56.9 %               | 13.7 %             | 40.6 %     |
| 18 to 25 y.o.                    | 36.1 %            | 42.1 %               | 25 %               | 30.3 %     |
| 26 to 35 y.o.                    | 41.9 %            | 42.9 %               | 30.8 %             | 30.6 %     |
| Older than 36 y.o.               | 48.4 %            | 31.2 %               | 26.3 %             | 18.6 %     |

INSEE data processed by ANLCI Field: people aged 18-65 living in Metropolitan France;  
Reading: 4.3 % of persons born in France faced deep difficulties in Literacy.

First threshold corresponds to primary school, second one to secondary school and the third one to the end of compulsory schooling. For Literacy skills, there is mainly two thresholds.

<sup>15</sup> IEA Study of Reading Literacy (1990-91), International Adult Literacy Survey (1994 and later), PISA 2000, French national surveys such as annual third and sixth class surveys or 9<sup>th</sup> class surveys.

This means that oral or literacy skills are more dependant to the level of schooling you enter in the general curriculum than to the country where you were born. That means also that one very important challenge the French educational system has to face is to incorporate in good conditions new foreign students, especially when they arrived in France at the age of the secondary school. Some special programmes have been implemented, mostly in urban areas but their efficiency seems affected by the complexity of the welcome problems. Maybe it could be important to rethink the French dogma of language immersion and have a look to Nordic country systems. The table shows that the concern of linguistic integration of adult migrants (the large majority of migrants in France) is really important. It will not be possible to reach Lisbon goals if there is not a significant progress in this field.

Processing other variables we found out that if gender differences are significant, they remain smaller than the differences that can be noticed between the persons who have learned to read in French and those who have learned to read in another language.<sup>16</sup> As expected after 2002 methodological survey, the results in the reading tests are strongly linked to the languages used during childhood, whether this relates to respondents' mother tongue or the schooling language. Insee first paper<sup>17</sup> also confirms it: "country of schooling is more relevant for score analysis than country of birth".

### Age-based differences

Reading proficiency decreases with age. This result is quite classical, even though the media has kept on claiming for decades that the school level is getting worse each year. However, it could be interesting to investigate if this result is linked, at least partially, to the fact that test questions, or test processes, are close to the formal testing used in formal education, even if the supporting material is representative of written texts used in daily life.

Table 7: Degrees of difficulty demonstrated following age groups

| Age groups | Not able to perform the test | Serious difficulties | Strong difficulties | Some difficulties | No difficulties | Total |
|------------|------------------------------|----------------------|---------------------|-------------------|-----------------|-------|
| 18-25 y.o. | 0.4 %                        | 2.9 %                | 2.6 %               | 6.7 %             | 87.3 %          | 100 % |
| 26-35 y.o. | 1.0 %                        | 4.5 %                | 4.2 %               | 5.7 %             | 84.6 %          | 100 % |
| 36-45 y.o. | 1.0 %                        | 5.0 %                | 5.3 %               | 6.5 %             | 82.1 %          | 100 % |
| 46-55 y.o. | 1.6 %                        | 8.6 %                | 6.4 %               | 7.0 %             | 76.5 %          | 100 % |
| 56-65 y.o. | 2.2 %                        | 10.0 %               | 7.7 %               | 9.5 %             | 70.6 %          | 100 % |
| Total      | 1.2 %                        | 6.2 %                | 5.3 %               | 7.0 %             | 80.3 %          | 100 % |

INSEE data processed by ANLCI Field: people aged 18-65 living in Metropolitan France;  
Reading: 0.4 % of persons aged 18-25 are not able to perform the test, 2.9 % faced serious difficulties.

It seems obvious that the performances do not decrease on a regular basis. We can pinpoint a threshold within the groups aged 36-45 and 46-55. We shall explore in future papers the possible reasons for this performance decrease. Those results are not surprising for specia-

<sup>16</sup> Non-French speakers do not have to answer tests (including the ANLCI test) and have not been taken in consideration for the computing of Table figures. The group of Non-French speakers is included in the category of people whose mother tongue is different from French, but is not representative of this entire category.

<sup>17</sup> Insee première, oct. 2005.

lists, but for man of breeding who hear that today the level of education decreases day after day and notices that his young colleagues very often don't know how to work. The last works on the IVQ data showed that the level of literacy is very linked with the level of schooling attained. And old generations have a lower level of education than younger ones.

At the same level of education the differences between the age groups are not very important or inexistent for instance at the high education level (University). But at the lower levels there is a decrease of scores following the age groups. In this case the influence of literacy environment at work or at home is certainly the main cause of the phenomenon. We have to face other questions like: Are the tests developed till now really adapted to describe adults basic skills really used in the real life? Are the tests not too close to educational conception of knowledge?

### **3.2 Results concerning adults who started schooling in France (i'llettrisme) "Illettrisme"<sup>18</sup> and age groups**

There are more people facing illiteracy in the older age groups, and the rate is the lowest in the youngest age group.

4.5 % of young people between 18 and 25 who were first schooled in France are facing illiteracy, which is a fairly low proportion of young people having recently left the school system. This figure can be compared, even if the tests are different, with the percentage of young people detected during the *Defense Preparation Day* (JAPD)<sup>19</sup> tests as possibly facing illiteracy: in 2004, 4.4 % of young French citizens between 17 and 19 indeed showed serious difficulties in comprehending the written word when they passed these tests.

The fact that this figure is relatively low can partially be attributed to the efforts deployed by the French Education System and its environment to enroll and supervise students throughout their schooling. Indeed, the performances on the different IVQ and ANLCI module tests are strongly linked to the level of the diploma. With the same diploma, and especially the same higher education diploma, the percentages of individuals succeeding in the tests is quite similar.

The youngest age groups have the most diplomas among them and thus benefit from a "diploma" effect. As for people with no diploma or with low levels of certification from mainstream or vocational education, given the figures it cannot be excluded that these individuals have undergone a decrease in their performance level over time, due to a lack of use of the skills acquired during their schooling. It is also possible that a group encouragement effect comes into play when the younger age groups pass these tests.

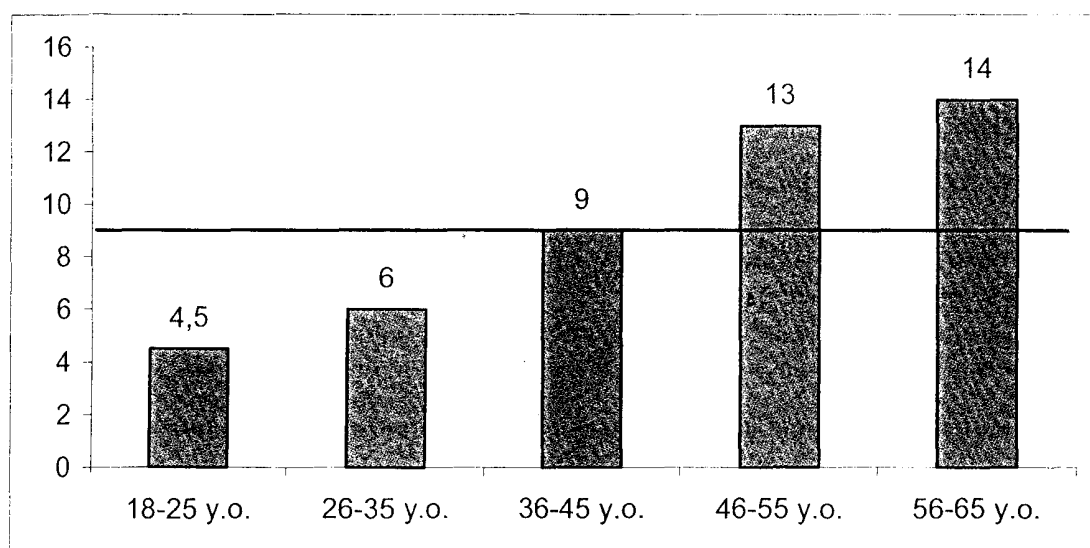
We must nevertheless keep in mind that even if the percentage of young people facing illiteracy appears low, it still represents roughly 200.000 young people who face numerous difficulties in their daily life when confronted with the demands of our society. Moreover, if these young people are able to live with their difficulties with the written word by avoiding them, their employment possibilities nevertheless decrease due to the increasingly technical nature of most professions and the increase in the level of qualifications required

<sup>18</sup> In this paragraph we are considering only illiterate people (French schooling but still literacy difficulties).

<sup>19</sup> Les évaluations en lecture dans le cadre de la journée d'appel de préparation à la défense, note d'évaluation 05-11, Direction de l'évaluation et de la prospective, Ministère de l'Education nationale, 2005.

by employers. Their elders who faced the same difficulties with the written word did not necessarily have the same difficulties in finding a job in the past. Furthermore, without a genuine lifelong education, will their skills be suitable and adaptable 30, 40 or even 50 years from now?

Chart 1: "Illettrisme" and age groups (in percentage)



INSEE data processed by ANLCI Field: people aged 18-65 living in Metropolitan France and having begun their schooling in France; Reading: 4.5 % of the people aged from 18 to 25 y.o. appear to be illiterate.

Over half of the people facing illiteracy are over 45, although they represent only 38 % of the reference population, and thus the majority of them have been out of the initial educational and training system for over 25 years.

Table 8: Distribution of persons concerned by "illettrisme" following age groups (in percentage)

| Age groups | Illiterates | Whole population |
|------------|-------------|------------------|
| 18-25 y.o. | 9           | 17               |
| 26-35 y.o. | 15          | 21               |
| 36-45 y.o. | 23          | 23               |
| 46-55 y.o. | 30          | 22               |
| 56-65 y.o. | 23          | 16               |
| Total      | 100         | 100              |

INSEE data processed by ANLCI Field: people aged 18-65 living in Metropolitan France and having begun their schooling in France; Reading: inside the group of persons who appear to be illiterate 9 % are aged from 18 to 25 y.o. Persons aged from 18 to 25 y.o represent 17 % of the population aged from 18 to 65 y.o.

Given the decrease in the percentages recorded in the youngest age groups, we could be tempted to believe that things will improve by themselves for the overall population thanks to the replacement of the generations with a high number of illiterate people by young peo-

ple exiting the school system with a higher skills level regarding the written word. This phenomenon could certainly exist, provided that the level of competency required by our society remains constant, and assuming an absence of basic skills erosion over a lifetime. In this case, if we count on this mechanism alone, the average improvement of the skills level with the written word will take a long time.

This amount of time is incompatible with the acceleration of the demand for a good command of the written word that we see today, and in any case it is also incompatible with the objectives that all of the countries of the European Union have set for themselves<sup>20</sup>. The 35-year-old workers in difficulty today will probably still be at work 30 years from now, if not longer! While the young people surveyed who had just graduated from their initial schooling showed that they are probably better equipped than their elders to face the changes of today's society, without a genuine lifelong education will their skills still be suitable and adaptable 30 or 40 years from now?

### **“Illettrisme” and territories<sup>21</sup>**

The IVQ results show that there are more people facing illiteracy in rural areas and small towns. Given this phenomenon and the demographic size of these areas, half of the people facing illiteracy live in urban areas with low population density or rural areas. The gap that may exist between the IVQ results as they are presented here and the ordinary perception of the illiteracy phenomenon is certainly due to the fact that only the people who had their initial schooling in France were counted.

If we took into account the people who did not attend school or who first went to school in a foreign country, the results would be different. The Paris area is in a favorable position: 6 % of its adult population of working age having attended school in France faces illiteracy, whereas on the national level this group represents 9 % of the adult population of working age.

Table 9: Distribution of persons concerned by “illettrisme” following urban categories (in percentage)

| Urban category                     | Illiterates | Whole population |
|------------------------------------|-------------|------------------|
| Rural areas                        | 28          | 26               |
| Less than 20.000 inhabitants       | 21          | 18               |
| From 20.000 to 100.000 inhabitants | 17          | 14               |
| More than 100.000 inhabitants      | 24          | 27               |
| Paris area                         | 10          | 15               |
| Total                              | 100         | 100              |

INSEE data processed by ANL CI Field: people aged 18-65 living in Metropolitan France and having begun their schooling in France; Reading: 28% of the persons appeared to be illiterate are living in rural areas, 21% are living in small towns with less than 20.000 inhabitants.

<sup>20</sup> Lisbon European conference March 2000.

<sup>21</sup> In this paragraph we are considering only illiterate people (French schooling but still literacy difficulties).

If we look at the urban problem areas and the populations who live there, we find that 17 % of the people who first attended school in France face illiteracy, i.e. almost double the national figure (9 %).

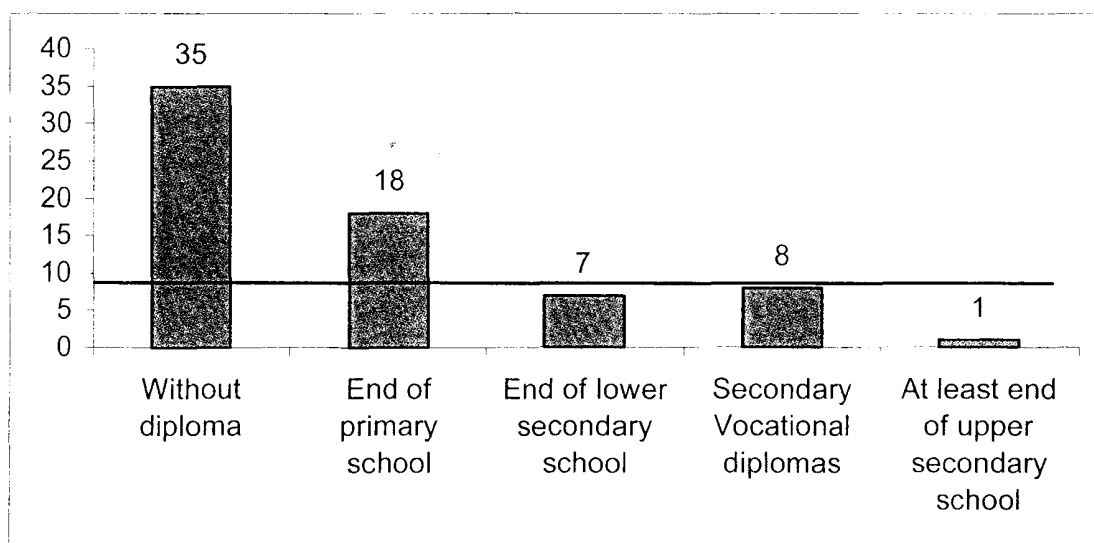
These areas must therefore benefit from a special focus when regional plans to fight illiteracy are drawn up. However, we must keep in mind that the “illiteracy phenomenon” goes well beyond the limits of these Urban Problem Areas and that, while we do not find the same concentration of people facing illiteracy in other areas, nine-tenths of the people facing illiteracy are located in other territories. This observation essentially results from the demographic weight<sup>22</sup> of the former.

### “Illettrisme” and diplomas

The proportion of interviewees considered to be illiterate decreases as their level of education (diploma) increases. Thus, among the people with no diploma, one third are illiterate while among those who have only completed a primary school certificate, the proportion is 18 %.

A small percentage of the persons having obtained their upper secondary school certificate got very poor scores, probably not because they are illiterate, but because of their lack of involvement in the testing process, or because they are in trouble.

Chart 2: Proportion of interviewees considered to be illiterate following their level of education (diploma) (in percentage)



INSEE data processed by ANLCI Field: people aged 18-65 living in Metropolitan France and having begun their schooling in France; Reading: 35 % of the people having declared having no diploma appear to be illiterate; Note: The persons who are still studying have been included in the “At least end of upper secondary school” group.

<sup>22</sup> Observatoire national des zones urbaines sensibles, Report 2005, p. 11: 2,700,000 people between 15 and 65 live in ZUS (Urban Problem Areas).



Table 10: Illiterate persons depending on their level of education (diploma) (in percentage %)

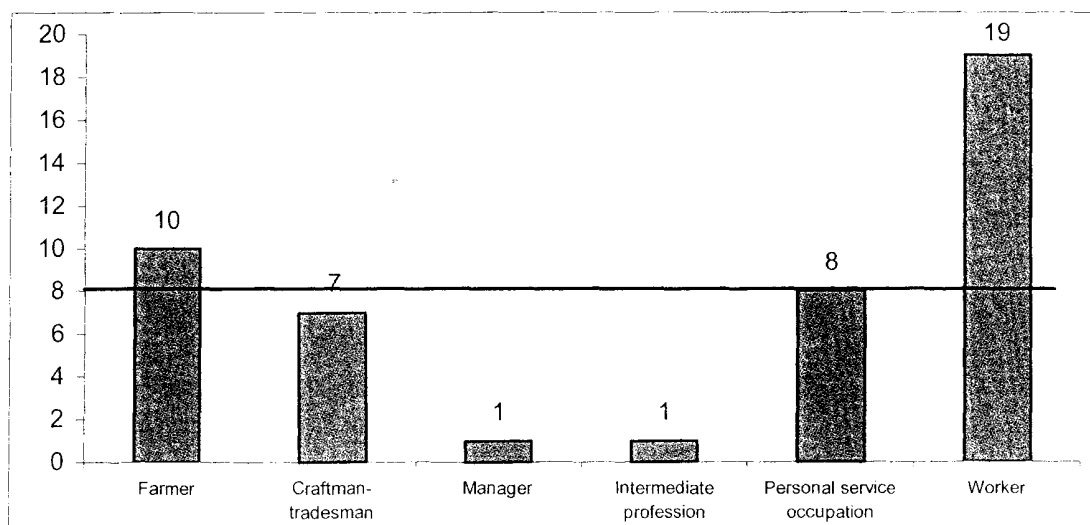
| Level of the higher diploma             | Considered as illiterate | Whole adult population |
|---|--------------------------|------------------------|
| Without diploma                         | 49                       | 13                     |
| End of primary school                   | 17                       | 9                      |
| End of lower secondary school           | 5                        | 7                      |
| Secondary vocational diplomas           | 24                       | 26                     |
| At least end of higher secondary school | 5                        | 45                     |
| Total                                   | 100                      | 100                    |

INSEE data processed by ANLCI Field: people aged 18-65 living in Metropolitan France and having begun their schooling in France; Reading: inside the group of people considered as illiterates 49 % have no diploma, 17% got a diploma corresponding to the end of primary school. In the whole adult population the corresponding proportions are: 13 % and 9 %; Note: The persons who are still studying have been included in the "At least end of higher secondary school" group.

### **"Illettrisme" and occupation**

Among the employed people aged between 18 and 59, the proportion of illiterates varies according to their occupation: such proportion is very low among top executives and "middle" professions (about 1 %), while it raises to one fifth among workers.

Chart 3: Proportion of illiterate persons according to their socio professional group (in percentage)



INSEE data processed by ANLCI Field: persons between 18 and 59, students excluded, living in metropolitan France, having started their schooling in France; Reading : 10 % of farmers are illiterate whereas 8% are illiterate in the reference population.

Because of their bigger difficulties and as they stand for an important part of the employed population, workers represent the majority of illiterate persons having a job.

Table 11: Repartition of illiterate persons according to their socio professional groups (in percentage)

| Socio professional groups   | Illiterate persons | Whole population |
|-----------------------------|--------------------|------------------|
| Farmer                      | 3                  | 2                |
| Craftman-tradesman          | 6                  | 7                |
| Manager                     | 1                  | 13               |
| Intermediate profession     | 4                  | 26               |
| Personal service occupation | 28                 | 29               |
| Worker                      | 57                 | 23               |
| Total                       | 100                | 100              |

INSEE data processed by ANLCI Field: persons between 18 and 59, students excluded, living in metropolitan France, having started their schooling in France; Reading: 3 % of illiterate working persons are farmers.

## Conclusions

The IVQ, which assesses oral comprehension as well as numeracy, or text comprehension, uses a particular literacy module (the ANLCI module) focusing on the lowest levels of literacy. The ANLCI module assesses interviewees' proficiency in reading and writing words and in understanding short simple texts. The IVQ process enabled people lacking self-confidence due to past experiences in formal assessment (for example in school) to answer orally the reading comprehension questions instead of being faced straightaway with written questions requiring written answers. The context thus created during the orientation test, even though it remains artificial, is nonetheless closer to real-life reading context than most of comparable studies are, even if it is possible to improve it.

In addition, orientating respondents with low literacy levels towards better adapted tests within the ANLCI module enables such people to better involve themselves in the survey (by limiting early renunciation to about 3 %) as well as investigating proficiency in writing communication components.

Numerous results are already available: one French person out of five encounters difficulties facing written messages, including 16 % of population born in France and 45 % of population born abroad, 17 % of females, 23 % of males, 13 % of young adults (18-25 y.o.), 29 % of elders (56-65 y.o.). Most of them are able to cope with everyday life tasks and have no problem if they are not facing a new situation including new reading or writing tasks. Main other results of IVQ 2004/5 survey are: more than 7 % of inhabitants in France showed deep difficulties in literacy, 4,4 % of the population born in France, 30 % of the population born abroad, 6,2 % of females, 8,2 % of males, 3 % of young adults and 12 % of elders. Other figures: 8,3 % of the whole adult population<sup>23</sup> is considered by the IVQ as illiterate<sup>24</sup>, 28 % of them are living in countryside, Inside the group of adults who started their schooling in France; 8 % of women and 11 % of men are illiterates; 19 % of workers are illiterates, 10 % of farmers, 8 % of employees are illiterates.

<sup>23</sup> Aged from 18 to 65 living in Metropolitan France.

<sup>24</sup> "The term illiteracy describes the situation of people over 16 years old who, although they have attended school (in French), cannot read and understand a text related to situations in their daily life, and/or are unable to write in order to communicate simple information." French national guidelines to fight illiteracy (ANLCI 2003).

Illiterate persons are mostly male and elderly population. Another major result revealed by the survey: among the illiterate adults of working age (students and retired people excluded), two thirds have jobs and only 14 % of them are unemployed. Following this result the French policy of fighting illiteracy have to be dramatically developed at work.

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### For further information

ANLCI Website: <http://www.anlci.fr>