

READING AS A TOOL FOR SOCIAL EDUCATION AND EASY-TO-READ AS A TOOL FOR SOCIAL INTEGRATION

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Reading

Through reading we are able to share ideas, thoughts, and experiences, and grow as human beings. Access to information and literature is a fundamental democratic right. By reading we are able to understand society and exercise our democratic rights. It is necessary to be well-informed in order to participate in social life, in discussions at work and in order to be able to influence one's own situation. It is also a matter of quality of life. Being able to read gives us a tremendous amount of self-confidence, enabling us to expand our view of the world and to participate in the society. Reading gives us knowledge and perspectives.

Broader perspectives and greater understanding towards other people are essential in a social environment. Unprivileged people are often also poor readers. They who are poor readers will hardly get a job in a modern society and they will probably not feel part of the society. Those people can easily be influenced by destructive movements, undemocratic forces, etc.

Can easy-to-read play an important role in society by being a door opener to people who are untrained as readers and in that perspective also be a tool for social education and social integration? Yes, I think so.

What about the literacy situation today?

The international Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) is a collaborative effort of several governments (USA, Canada, the Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland, Great Britain, Ireland, Belgium, Poland, Australia, New Zealand and Sweden) and three intergovernmental organizations (the OECD, EU and UNESCO.) The aim is to assess, analyze and compare adult literacy across populations as well as between subgroups within populations.

The literacy assessment has been carried out as an open test and a background questionnaire to samples of around 3 000 individuals above 16 years of age. Literacy tasks were drawn from everyday materials (newspapers, brochures, information leaflets, medicine recipes, etc.).

The results reveal that a substantial proportion of the adult population of each country has problems mastering even modest literacy demands – ranging from about 25 percent in Sweden to about 75 percent in Poland. Their ability to utilize written material to cope with new work tasks, to understand public information, or understand and use commercial information is limited. They have difficulties in reading an ordinary newspaper with good comprehension. They do not have the reading skill that is needed in a modern society. To cope well you actually need a reading skill at the level of nine years of schooling. Immigrants, early retired, less educated and elderly people are specially at risk groups. Younger age cohorts outperform older in literacy.

When background factors are analysed in relation to test performance, reading habits stand out as a discriminating factor. In working life as well as in other life contexts, adults in high performing countries tend to read more than adults in low performing countries do.

The results also point to the necessity of further skill development after school leave. The educational systems are successful in raising people's literacy level to an intermediate level. Further education or life experience is needed to develop literacy beyond that level.

Which problems do we see?

The literacy situation has not declined in any of these countries. The reading ability has generally been improved. But the society itself has become much more complex and complicated during the last decades. A modern society often means that most jobs has become more qualified. Computerizing etc does not always mean an easier situation for everyone. A modern society often means that most jobs has become more qualified.

To be able to cope well you need to tackle a lot of information in writing, read instructions, deliver reports. There are not many jobs today that do not require much of reading skills. The structure of the working life these days requires an ability to deal with problem in a more intellectual way.

The correlation between reading habits and literacy or reading ability is obvious. We often think of reading as something we learn at school and after that carry around as a luggage. This is not true. To keep your literacy at a good level you need to practice your reading constantly. You need to read at work, in your spare time or in further education. If you do not your reading ability will decline.

They who leave school with a good literacy and a positive attitude towards reading and learning by reading often end up in reading and demanding environments later in life. Their reading ability will develop further on. They who leave school as poor readers and with a negative attitude towards reading and writing will probably avoid reading environments. Their reading ability has a negative trend. They tend to become non-readers. Often these people face unemployment. If they do not get an opportunity to train reading and train using written information their future does not look so good. Those with low reading ability often are less successful even after school. The correlation between unemployment and poor reading is clear in all countries. The unemployment is ten times higher among them with the lowest reading ability compared to the good readers.

What causes can we see and what are the risks?

The causes of reading problems and poor reading ability may vary. Beside disabilities like dyslexia, ADHD and intellectual handicaps there may also be social factors and problems in school involved and quite often a combination of these factors. Minorities and immigrants tend to be groups at risk. There are also more men than women who are non-readers.

What are the risks with illiteracy in a modern society, beside unemployment? They who are poor readers and face unemployment will probably also be lacking a social network. They may lose self-confidence and may not feel part of the society. Unemployment and alienation often is a base for destructive forces. They who feel outside society will more easily be attracted to undemocratic movements, vote for simple solutions etc.

These people need something that is easier than the ordinary prose, they need something written in plain language.

Easy-to-read

Can the publication of easy-to-read materials constitute a useful means both in the struggle against illiteracy and to give those with a reading handicap access to information and literature? Yes, I am convinced of it.

For many people not in the habit of reading, easy-to-read material may open doors and awaken an interest in reading newspapers and books and an opportunity to practise their reading. Later on they may tackle books and newspapers published normally. But all people do not even have the chance to be good readers. For some, such as the intellectually disabled, easy-to-read texts may fill a need and be all they can manage in the way of reading.

But how do we define «easy-to-read»?

The publication of easy-to-read literature, news and other information is based on the fundamental belief that all people are equal and that all people therefore should be entitled to cultural experience and information appropriate to their own capabilities.

One may ask whether it is really possible to satisfy the needs of several groups in this way. However, experience of the easy-to-read material already published shows that interests in most cases can be combined. There is more holding the groups together than separating them.

What is easy-to-read?

The aim of easy-to-read publications is to write simply and understandably, but at the same time in an adult and varied manner.

To achieve this you have to take into consideration

- the content,
- the language,
- pictures and
- the graphic layout.

You should try to combine easy reading and understanding with quality and a professional work.

What makes a text easy-to-read?

Here are some broad guidelines:

- a)** Write concretely. Avoid abstractions and transferred concepts.
- b)** Be logical. The action should follow a common thread with logical continuity.
- c)** Action should be direct and simple, without long introductions and without too many characters involved.
- d)** Avoid symbolic language (metaphors) that may be misunderstood by the reader.
- e)** Be concise. Do not place several actions in a single sentence. Place words of the same phrase on the same line.

f) Avoid difficult words, but attempt to use a language that is adult and dignified. If unusual words have to be used, they should be explained by context clues.

g) Even rather complicated relationships can often be described and explained if this is done in a concrete and logical manner, where events take place in a natural chronological framework.

Layout

Easy-to-read is not about the written word only. Easy-to-read is also about layout, design, typeface and type size.

The layout should be clear and attractive. Wide margins and generous spacing make a text more accessible. The text should be in short blocks with limited lines per page. The typeface should be clear and fairly large.

Pictures

In the context of easy-to-read materials, illustrations often play a more important role than in other types of publications.

A picture which concretely depicts what is described in the text improves understanding and clarifies the message. A non-realistic picture can communicate an atmosphere and strengthen a feeling. But - the picture must agree with the text. A picture which leads in the wrong direction is likely to confuse.

Levels of difficulty

Easy-to-read is not just **one** level of difficulty. There are differences in reading ability even within groups with the same sort of reading problem.

Materials should be produced at various levels of difficulty, from very easy, maybe picture based stories up to the level that requires a certain reading skill, but still is easier than ordinary books and papers («plain language»).

What kind of materials should be available in easy-to-read ?

There is a need for easy-to-read materials in all kinds of media, printed media as well as e.g. electronic digital media on the Internet. Looking at the future, the digital publishing will become more important also for the easy-to-read format.

Literature. Both fiction and non-fiction is needed. Specially written materials and adaptations of classics, etc. All genres such as novels, short-stories, poetry, thrillers, etc.

Newspapers and magazines. Specially made easy-to-read newspapers or easy-to-read pages in ordinary newspapers.

Information about society. E.g. Information about the election procedure, taxes, etc. and information from insurance companies, banks, etc.

Programs on TV, radio etc. There should also be a regular service of easy-to-understand programs on TV and radio. Easy-to-read materials should be available in audio format.

Information Technology and Digital Publishing

I am sure that digital techniques, like software programs for computers, multimedia productions on CD-rom, DVD and Web sites etc, are and will become very useful for persons with disabilities. When we talk about accessibility there is a great advantage that the digital format allows the users to progress through various levels of skill.

Who can benefit from easy-to-read ?

Which groups and how many people may benefit from easy-to-read materials?

We can identify two main groups: Persons with a disability and persons with limited language or reading skills.

Some readers will have a permanent need for easy-to-read materials. Other readers will find this kind of material useful for a certain time. Easy-to-read products can be a training and a door-opener to reading activities.

Among the target groups you will find, people with an intellectual disability, people with Dyslexia people with ADHD (Deficit in attention, perception and motor control, which often lead to reading, writing and learning problems) and people with autism.

Among people with limited language or reading skills we will find functionally illiterate people, educationally disadvantaged people, recent immigrants and in some respect also school-children.

Can the needs of all these readers really be combined under one easy-to-read model? There may be differences but there are more things unifying these groups than there are differences between them.

Is easy-to-read publishing supported by Rules and Guidelines ?

Easy-to-read publishing is strongly supported by the Public Library Manifesto adopted by UNESCO. The Manifesto says that «Specific service and materials must be provided for those users who cannot, for whatever reasons, use the regular services

and materials, for example linguistic minorities, people with disabilities or people in hospital or prison.»

Also the Standard Rules of the United Nations encourages services like easy-to-read by saying that Governments should develop strategies to make information services and documentation accessible for different groups of persons with disabilities.

The International Library Association (IFLA) has published Guidelines for Easy-to-Read Materials. These guidelines describes the need for easy-to-read materials, identifies some of the main target groups and offers some broad guidelines for publishing of easy-to-read products.

Easy-to-read in Sweden

Finally a few words about easy-to-read in Sweden and the Swedish Centre for Easy-to-Read (Easy-to-Read Foundation).

The Centre for Easy-to-Read is a publishing house, which provides easy-to-read materials and functions as a resource and competence centre.

It is established by a Parliamentary decision. The Government has drawn up the charter and appointed the Board of Directors. The operation is financed by income from sales and from state grants.

The Centre for Easy-to-Read consists of: The Newspaper 8 SIDOR, Easy-to-Read Book publishing, an organization of Reading Representatives, commissions and courses, information and marketingb and some developmental and experimental work.

The easy-to-read newspaper called *8 PAGES* contains news from Sweden and other countries, sport, culture, etc. - just like ordinary papers. It is published once a week.

The Centre for Easy-to-Read also publishes Easy-to-read books through its own book publishing house. Easy-to-read books are easier to read than other books but the degree of difficulty varies from one book to another. Easy-to-read books may be fiction and non-fiction; novels, short stories, thrillers, poems, technical books, etc. Some books are written directly in easy-to-read, some are adaptations of classics.

Can countries cooperate in publishing easy-to-read material? It should be possible for several countries to cooperate in publishing easy-to-read material, even if cultural differences sometimes exist that must be taken into consideration. A great deal of material could be used in several countries and really only have to be translated - as soon as it is understood how easy-to-read material can be used as a tool for improving literacy!

It need not cost much more to produce literature and information which is easily understandable and it would probably be of benefit to a great many people!