Literacy

Assessing literacy levels

In 1911 *The New Dictionary of Statistics* informed its enquirers that just over 3 per cent of men and a little under 4 per cent of women were recorded as illiterate between 1896 and 1900, and that this had gradually fallen to around 2 per cent for either sex by 1907. The literacy test was simple and negative, for if you could not sign your name on a marriage register you were deemed illiterate. By 1914 this figure was reduced to 1 per cent. By such determinants Britain became almost a fully literate country by the beginning of World War One. Sir Cyril Burt’s investigations refined such statistics into the categories ‘illiterate’ and ‘semi-literate’ (with reading ages between 6 and 8 years old) and thereby inflated the semi-literate population (barely able to comprehend a single newspaper paragraph) to 3 million. Burt was not only incautious with his figures, he also took his samples from poor rural and slum areas, suggesting general results from a specialised constituency. Burt’s work did nothing to resolve the question of capacity among literate readers – a question simply left in abeyance by other investigators, all of whose methods differed!

Documentation remained sketchy throughout the twentieth century and in 1990 UNESCO reported that Britain lagged behind other advanced industrial countries in its investigations into literacy rates and levels. The Adult Literacy Campaign which began in 1973 found it had to start almost afresh in its enquiries. In 1974 the British Association of Settlements (BAS) published figures based upon ‘the best related evidence, and on the firm opinions of acknowledged experts in the field’, using six previous surveys carried out by the National Foundation for
Educational Research (NFER) from 1948 onwards. On the basis of these mixed sources and the ‘opinion’ of ‘experts’, BAS estimated that approximately 6 per cent or 2 million adults were functionally illiterate, with reading levels below that of a 9-year-old. Other organisations suggested a basic age of 13 as representing a functional reading level and so the BAS figures appeared conservative. Whilst the BAS results were improvements upon Burt’s, they too were flawed by the methods used to gather the evidence, and again they told nothing of reading levels amongst those who could read and write at reasonable levels of fluency.

With haphazard research, no real gains in insight were available for almost ninety years. One researcher for NFER working in 1996 came to the conclusion that literacy rates had not changed significantly since 1948. The conclusion was that literacy levels (despite or because of education change and experiment) had remained stable since 1900. Nevertheless, by the late 1990s a flurry of activity, accompanied by fears over falling educational standards, resulted in a number of new surveys of a more detailed kind.

In 1997, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the UK Office for National Statistics both published the results from the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), which surveyed the literacy standards of several different countries. Within this survey, literacy standards were tested in relation to several different factors, including gender, class, and level of education; and furthermore (and with particular significance to cultural studies of literature) literacy was divided not just into levels but into categories according to type. Distinctions were made between ability to read and understand quantitative material (material related to arithmetic operations), document material (material contained in various documents such as formats, job applications, maps, and train timetables), and prose material (material from texts such as editorials, news stories, poems, and fiction).

Thus literacy standards were being tested for the first time with specific reference to the ability to read literature.

The majority of the British population between the ages of sixteen and sixty-five displayed either a level 3 (31.3 per cent) or a level 2 (30.3 per cent) reading ability, 21.8 per cent displayed level 1 abilities while 16.6 per cent displayed abilities which qualified them for levels 4 or 5. Within the UK the three most important factors