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IFLA - Section for Libraries Serving Disadvantaged Persons

Easy-to-Read - An important part in reading promotion and in the fight against illiteracy

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Abstract

Approximately 20 per cent of the earth's population are still illiterate due to insufficient educational resources. At the same time there are many people who, as a result of disabilities or for other reasons, find difficulty in reading and are therefore incapable of reading ordinary newspapers and books.

Reading promotion and the fight against illiteracy has been given high priority by the United Nations and UNESCO, its educational and cultural organisation. IFLA has also strongly emphasised the importance of measures to promote reading. The publication of easy-to-read material - books, newspapers and other information - should be in a position to play an important part in these efforts.

This lecture describes what is meant by the concept "easy-to-read", and examples from what has already been published are shown. Opportunities are also suggested for cooperation between countries.

Easy-to-Read - An important part of reading promotion and the fight against illiteracy

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Access to information and literature - a democratic right

Being able to take part of information, literature, etc., is normally considered a fundamental democratic right. 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. Reading newspapers and books gives access to other people's thoughts and ideas.

In recent years the United Nations, UNESCO and IFLA have drawn particular attention to the need to stimulate reading and have become involved in the struggle against illiteracy. The UN pronounced 1990 the year of literacy and many contributions have been made during this decade.

At its twenty-fifth session in 1989 the General Conference of UNESCO adopted a plan of action for the eradication of illiteracy, summed up in the slogan "Literacy for all by the year 2000". UNESCO regards the strategy in this area as its "priority of priorities".

In *The Public Library Manifesto*, for instance, UNESCO stresses *The right to know* and has strongly emphasised the influence of information and literature on human development and social welfare.

And as you probably know, in 1993 UNESCO and IFLA published *Guidelines for Public Libraries Promoting Literacy*. The IFLA Section for libraries serving disadvantaged persons has been working on *Guidelines for easy-to-read*.

IFLA is in the process of drawing up another *Core Programme on the promotion of literacy and reading through libraries*.

How is the situation in the world today with regard to literacy?

"Literacy" or rather "functional literacy" is generally understood as literacy sufficient to read and to write a short account of one's own life, read short notices and brief articles in newspapers, etc.

A rule of thumb is that four years of basic schooling are required in order to achieve sufficiently good literacy to manage in daily life.

A report from the United Nations about progress made and problems encountered in the struggle against illiteracy tells about the situation today. (UN, General Assembly Economic and Social Council, A/50/181, E/1995/65):

The situation in the world today with regard to illiteracy can be seen from the following table. The information is based on UNESCO's statistics and "literacy" here is taken to be the proportion of people who have received

such a degree of **education** that they can be **supposed** to be able to read satisfactorily. (*Table*)

The Table states the percentage of literates in the world, in the developed countries and in the least developed countries for the years 1980, 1990, 1995 and the expected figure for the year 2000. It can be seen that literacy has increased in all parts of the world, particularly in the least developed countries. The increase in the number of literate adults is a result of the expansion of primary school enrolments and the impact of adult literacy programmes.

However, still more than 20 per cent of the adult population in the world are illiterate, which in 1995 corresponded to nearly 900 million people. More than three in five illiterates are women.

In the least developed countries the figure for illiteracy is still more than 50 per cent. Nine countries - Bangladesh, Brazil, China, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Nigeria and Pakistan - account for more than half of the world's population and over 70 per cent of the world's illiterate adults.

Increasingly, literacy initiatives serve as a supplement to, not a substitute for, primary schooling. A growing number of participants in literacy and adult basic education activities - often a sizeable majority - have had at least a partial primary education, but have failed to achieve an adequate level of functional literacy.

Many children who are enrolled, especially in the least developed countries, attend schools that are patently inadequate in staffing, equipment and facilities.

In 1990 there were, according to the UN, almost 130 million children out-of-school in the developing countries and, even more alarming, this figure is projected to reach 145 million in the year 2000.

Reading problems caused by handicap or other factors

However, functional illiteracy is not only about insufficient **education**. We must not forget all those who have problems in reading due to a **handicap** or other factors. This applies, for instance, to people with dyslexia, intellectual disability, autism or aphasia.

It also applies to people deaf from childhood, for instance, who often experience difficulty in reading and understanding written text. People with social problems and the mentally ill may also often have difficulty in reading.

Immigrants with a different native language do not have reading problems due to a handicap, but during the first years in a new country when they are learning the new language they are at a **linguistic disadvantage**.

Thus, if people with a reading handicap are also included, quite a large proportion of the population may be termed functional illiterates even in the most developed countries. This group can probably be estimated in most countries as at least 5, probably 10 per cent, and in many cases considerably higher.

A few examples:

The National Library of Australia arranged a seminar in 1990 called The Right to Read. At the seminar it was stated that more than one million Australian adults (that is about 10 percent) have basic reading and writing problems. The definition for this was that they could not:

- read a simple sentence in English
- read classified newspaper advertisements
- follow instructions for medication or product use
- utilise simple application forms

Low literacy was estimated to cost Australia about 2.6 billion US dollars a year in lost productivity. This figure was based on the extra time that it takes to communicate in the workplace.

At the seminar it was also stated that very little reading material is produced for people with literacy problems derived from an intellectual or learning related disability, from deafness acquired before language development or from brain damage. People with such disabilities need materials relevant to their interests, age and information needs, written in clear, simple and easily understood language. (Elizabeth McMillan)

The Swedish curriculum for education at primary schools tells that students after nine years schooling should be able to read articles in a standard newspaper with **good** comprehension.

In the newly accomplished "International Adult Literacy Study" (IALS) Sweden participated together with six other countries; (USA, Canada, Germany, The Netherlands, Switzerland and Poland). The results for Sweden showed that 20 percent of the young people in age group 18-25 did

not manage this requirement. On the other hand, half of the group showed very good reading ability and understanding.

Those with low reading ability often are less successful even after school. The unemployment is ten times higher among them with the lowest reading ability compared to the good readers.

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. 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.

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.

For others such as the intellectually disabled, easy-to-read texts may fill a need and be all they can manage in the way of reading.

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 can the need for easy-to-read material look like?

Groups which may find easy-to-read materials useful, and the relationship between these groups, can be roughly illustrated using a figure.

In the figure the various target groups are symbolised by circles and the squares represent the need for easy-to-read material. As can be seen, the need for easy-to-read material varies in most groups.

Not everyone in a group requires easy-to-read material. In several cases the targets may overlap. A person can be uneducated, an immigrant and dyslectic, for instance. (*Picture*)

What makes a text easy-to-read?

What do we mean by easy to read? Perhaps we really ought to say "**easy to understand**", since what we mean is texts that are easy to read and easy to understand not only because difficult words are avoided, but also because the presentation as such is made specific and easy to follow.

Here are some examples of criteria that can be used to make a text easy to read and easy to understand.

- 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 symbolical language (metaphors) that may be misunderstood by the reader.
- e) Be concise. Do not place several actions in a single sentence. Place the 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.

If this general advice is followed - concrete and logical story construction with a common thread in the story line and so on - then we can substantially reduce problems for people with **intellectual** disabilities.

This kind of accessibility in most cases makes it easier also for **other groups** with reading difficulties - like dyslectics or people who are more or less illiterate. It is a simplicity that need not be distracting. A well-made

text in a simple language can in fact be a positive experience for anyone to read.

The importance of pictures

We all know that a picture can say more than a thousand words. In the content of easy-to-read, pictures often play a more important role than in other types of books, papers or information material.

A picture which *concretely* depicts that which is described in the text improves understanding and clarifies the message of the text.

But a picture may also add another dimension to the text. There has been considerable discussion about how to use *abstract* or non-realistic pictures in the easy-to-read context. Our experience is that abstract pictures **can** work well for an easy-to-read audience such as the intellectually disabled (who understand and interpret the world in a concrete manner.)

An non-realistic picture can, for instance, communicate an atmosphere described in a text, strengthen feelings, and so on.

However, the picture must **agree** with the text. A picture which leads in the wrong direction or does not communicate the same feeling as the text can instead confuse, making reading even harder for people with serious reading difficulties.

Layout

In the easy-to-read context the layout is almost as important as the content. Layout should be clear and comfortable. Wide margins and generous spacing make a text more accessible.

Text should be in blocks with a limited number of lines per page. Each sentence should be broken off at speech measure.

The cover should give a hint of the content. A book or a paper should have an attractive appearance, and for an adult audience, it should not give a childish impression. An easy-to-read book should look like "a real book".

Easy-to-read is not just one level

Easy-to-read is not about just **one** level. Easy-to-read literature is needed for different levels of difficulty. Differences in reading ability also exist within groups with reading problems. It is important to keep in mind that people with intellectual disabilities, for instance, are not a homogenous group, they range from severe cases to people on the border of normal intelligence.

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

Considering the need, all types of material should be available in easy-to-read form.

There should be easy-to-read literature of both fiction and non-fiction, special titles and adaptations of the classics. These include all genres like

novels, short-stories, thrillers, poetry, travel books, etc.

Regarding news information and information about society there is reason to lay stress upon the democratic right to easy-to-read versions. It can be said that the audience for easily understandable news and information about society is probably even **larger** than the audience for books.

Many people experience difficulties in understanding normal news channels. Articles in newspapers are too long, written in a language that is too difficult, and contain too many specialised terms.

The reader is also assumed to have substantial background information in order for the reporting to be comprehensible. Television news flickers by at a pace that is much too rapid for many people.

IT and media other than printed matter

Easy-to-read, (or easy-to-understand), does not only apply to printed matter. Versions that are easy to understand and use are also required within audio-cassettes and also the new media such as computer-based programs. Multimedia or IT in particular may be of great interest to functional illiterates and weak readers and here it is a question of adapting the software so that it can also be used by these groups.

Different angles of approach to easy-to-read

A three-dimensional figure or a cube can serve to illustrate that easy-to-read material is required at several levels of difficulty, that both fiction and

non-fiction are needed, and that there is a need both for material specially written and also adaptations of material already published.

One might then continue by dividing fiction into various genres, and by dividing non-fiction in the same manner. In principle news and information about society can be dealt with in the same manner.

(Picture)

How much easy-to-read material is available today?

Some examples

A certain amount of easy-to-read material for adults - newspapers or books- is published today in at least a few countries. In Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden and Italy, easy-to-read newspapers are published for adults with reading difficulties. In France, for instance, a newspaper for children is published.

Papers containing information about society are published in several countries for immigrants. A paper for mainly young people with intellectual disabilities is published in Holland. *(Pictures)*

"Easy Readers" for students have been published in English since quite a long time. Easy-to-read books for adults with reading problems are today published in the Nordic countries, Finland, Norway and Sweden, and to a certain extent in Germany.

A certain amount of easy-to-read material, although perhaps primarily for young people, is also published in Denmark and Holland. *(Pictures)*

The need of material for people with reading problems has also been the subject for some conferences with participants from different countries.

(Picture)

What can easy-to-read texts look like?

Some examples

A few examples are shown here, to give a better impression of what easy-to-read texts can look like.

First a few short excerpts from two famous classics - the first page of ***The Count of Monte Cristo*** by *Alexandre Dumas* and an excerpt from ***Boule de Suif*** by *Guy de Maupassant*. These books are available in easy-to-read versions in Swedish and a few fragments have been translated into English here

The Count of Monte-Cristo In M a r s e i l l e s

On 24 February 1815 a French ship came sailing into the port of Marseilles in south of France.

The name of the ship was Pharaoh.

Beside the pilot,
who was to guide the ship into the harbour,
stood a young sailor, leaning against the railing.
He was at most twenty years old.
He was tall and slim,
he had beautiful dark eyes
and his hair was black.

He looked strong and steady.
His name was Edmond Dantés.

The young man stood and watched
a small rowing boat
which was hurrying towards the Pharaoh.
A man in the rowing boat waved eagerly to him.
"Oh, it's you, Edmond Dantés", he called.
"Why do you look so sad, my young friend?"
"We have suffered a great misfortune, Mr. Morrel",
answered the young man.
"We have lost our captain !"

Boule de Suif *Ball of Fat*

At last the carriage is ready,
with six horses instead of four.
It has snowed and the carriage
will be heavy to pull.

"Is everyone seated?"
cries a voice from outside the carriage.
"Yes," replies a voice from inside the carriage.
And off they start.

The carriage rolls slowly, slowly forwards.
The horses take small, small steps.
The wheels of the carriage cut down into the snow,
the whole carriage creaks and shakes.
The horses slip and pant and steam with sweat.
The coachman's long whip cracks constantly.

It becomes gradually lighter.
The snow is no longer falling.

The travellers in the carriage
look curiously at each other.

The Swedish poet Benkt-Erik Hedin's poems which have been translated into English and published by *National Library in Australia*. *(Picture)*

A page with easy-to-read news might look like the example in the picture about the 50th anniversary of D-day during the Second World War.

(Picture)

An example of important information about society is the Standard Rules of United Nations concerning the rights of functionally disabled people in society. A page from this communication, in an easy-to-read version in English, can be seen in the following example. *(Picture)*

Another example of information about society is material concerning the European Union, EU. This is certainly an issue that everyone affected should be able to study. *(Picture)*

Does easy-to-read work?

Does easy-to-read work for the groups we have discussed and is there any interest among presumptive readers? Obviously, just as in other connections, information and marketing are important if the message is to be disseminated, and special paths may have to be used.

However, a couple of examples may serve to illustrate that easy-to-read material can work well for many groups.

The easy-to-read newspapers, *Klar Tale* and *8 SIDOR*, published in Norway and Sweden, respectively, are read by several groups such as immigrants, school children, dyslectics, intellectuall disabled, etc.

The Norwegian *Klar Tale* has a circulation of between 13,000 and 14,000 and a considerably higher number of readers - in a country with approximately 4.5 million inhabitants.

In Sweden an information sheet about the European Union was published in easy-to-read form prior to a referendum. 50,000 copies were printed first, followed by another 50,000, and the whole lot disappeared.

Obviously, considerably more than expected, found the easy-to-read version useful.

What can libraries do ?

The Guidelines for public libraries promoting literacy states when it comes to services for the illiterates that information about the library services must be given also in a way that is understood by non-readers.

The library should offer easy-to-read material, magazines, local newspapers and comics. Besides, audio-visual material such as talking books, videos and data programmes could be useful to improve reading.

The library should make sure that easy-to-read books are clearly marked and placed where they are easily accessible.

The library should take the initiative to start reading groups in the library and pay attention to the weak reader when preparing information material, brochures and book lists.

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, both text and illustrations, could be used in several countries and really only have to be translated. This could of course apply to many classical works of literature, such as *The Count of Monte Cristo*.

Social information about the UN and other international organisations, for instance, publications like *The Bible*, factual study books containing medical advice, for instance, handbooks about the environment or other manuals and hobby books such as cookery books, and so on, should also be well suited for cooperation between several countries - as soon as it is understood how easy-to-read material can be used and as long as there is a determination to do something about illiteracy!

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!