

# The Fight against Illiteracy and the Adult Literacy Assessment in France in 2014

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## **Abstract**

For over thirty years France has been addressing the needs of young people and adults with limited basic skills competence and having the opportunity to start their initial schooling in France. The ‘fight against “illettrisme” (the term “illettrisme” became part of French public debate during the early 1980s and has since been a concept used solely in this country) is a national priority since 1998, and had been declared by the Prime Minister as the “great national cause” for the year 2013. The scale of the phenomenon has often been central in the public debate. A number of major national studies have sought to more fully understand its complexity and extent. In France as in the other countries, direct assessments of adult basic skills competence have progressively been found necessary for national evaluation. Since the 1990s direct surveys have attempted to provide more precise and reliable data than the available previous self-reporting ones have offered. This paper provides a presentation of the two major French adult literacy surveys: the IVQ survey (Information and Everyday Life Survey) carried out by the INSEE (National Institute for Statistics and Economic Studies) and the ANLCI (National Agency for fighting “illettrisme” since 2002, and the JCD survey (Military Registration Day) carried out by the ministries of Defence and Education since 1998. In addition it will show how INSEE and ANLCI took up the challenge of developing comparability between existing national indicators through specific statistical studies and to promote the IVQ (Information and Everyday Life Study) model for new tests. In the future, the ANLCI considers that it will be more efficient to build tests, which could be comparable with IVQ, even if adapted to a particular context.

**Keywords:** adult literacy survey, Illiteracy, literacy assessment, adult literacy, young adult assessment, France

## **Introduction**

At a time when a major debate on education is taking place, when illiteracy prevention is being developed, when decisions are being made to modify organizations and redefine responsibilities between the State and local communities, at a time when changes in employment policies and professional training are being negotiated in the framework of decentralization and negotiations between social partners, but also within the European framework of lifelong education and training, and at a time when integration and social inclusion policies are changing, it is more

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than ever necessary to provide decision-makers with clarified, stabilized and disseminated simple definitions and with effective and reliable literacy indicators on a phenomenon that is increasingly recognized throughout industrialized countries. Since the 1990s direct surveys have attempted to provide more precise and reliable data than the available previous self-reporting ones have offered and since 2000 the National Agency to Fight Illiteracy (ANLCI) associated with partners as the National Institute for statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE) or the Ministry of Education has made efforts to provide stakeholders with a comprehensive view of the extent of the illiteracy phenomenon.

Thus, the assessment of the extent (or frequency) of low literacy and the basic skills proficiency levels within the overall population has been considered a priority in France for several years now, and has been the subject of increasingly large-scale and scientific measurement campaigns. Policymakers have rapidly become aware that measuring low literacy levels is crucial to justify the creation and implementation of public policies. This measurement nevertheless encounters certain obstacles linked to the characteristics of the target population. When attempting to assess a non-captive adult population with respect to the basic skills or low literacy, one must face two main challenges: defining the social situation or phenomenon to be measured, and finding the appropriate methodology and technology to perform satisfactory measurements. The present paper will provide an overview of the adult literacy assessment in France in 2014

### **Assessing low literacy and basic skills proficiency: the French context**

Once the lack of basic skills among a large part of the population had become a social issue (Lahire, 1999), it was necessary to produce figures to estimate the extent of the problem and the intensity of the efforts required to solve them. In the 1980s several surveys were therefore carried out on literacy in France, yet the majority were more or less partial and based on self-declaration. It is thus easy to understand that, due to their very nature<sup>2</sup>, these surveys were debatable and led to arguments concerning the figures, still perpetuated by certain individuals.

The conviction that the information produced by surveys proposing practical tests to respondents was of much better quality led France to participate in the IALS<sup>3</sup> survey organized by the OECD in 1994. However, France withdrew from the study before its results were officially published. This withdrawal triggered many comments that we will not list here, as well as numerous reports criticizing the methodology used for the OECD survey.

Despite the controversy, the IALS episode marked a move in France towards surveys using a measurement approach based on standardized individual performance tests. The following year, in 1995, the Directorate for Military Service (DCSN)<sup>4</sup> organized a vast programme to test conscripts. As of 1997, the DCSN, in collaboration with the

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<sup>2</sup> the self-declaration of scholastic difficulties is usually difficult and is often avoided with strategies aimed to supply an answer considered acceptable for the survey rather than a truthful answer

<sup>3</sup> International Adult Literacy Survey

<sup>4</sup> Ministry of Defence

Ministry of Education's Directorate for Evaluation and Forecasting (DEP), studied a way to set up a test system for young French citizens to replace the psycho-technical studies previously used for the draft (selective tests designed to orient conscripts towards the positions offered by the Army that were the best adapted to their skills). In 1998, the Military Registration Day (JDC/JAPD) was instituted and included a reading skills test (as of 2000 this system was also extended to girls). The same year, after refusing to participate in the OECD's new ALL survey, the statistics departments of several French administrations decided to start designing a quantitative survey to measure the literacy levels of the adult population living in France. They drew upon the know-how of their statistics staff, in particular at the DEP and INSEE, as well as the years of qualitative surveys and studies concerning low levels of writing skills carried out by several university teams in order to design a new survey called the IVQ – Information and Everyday Life survey. The creation of the ANLCI (National Agency to Fight Illiteracy) in 2000, which subsequently became the INSEE's main partner in the consortium, led to the implementation of a specialised module to identify people with low literacy levels, called the ANLCI module. The IVQ survey was designed to supply, through testing, precise figures concerning the competences of the adult population living in France, information on low literacy and the skills of individuals faced with written or oral communication tasks in standard French, and some indications concerning their command of arithmetic in everyday situations. We therefore see that the years from 1994-98 were decisive in France for the development of direct surveys (based on tests) of adult skills.

### **Agreeing on the terms: illiteracy, “illettrisme” and basic competencies**

The development, more than the emergence, of direct surveys of adults was thus closely linked to the media coverage of illiteracy, even if the constraints linked to surveying an entire population of adults meant testing a large number of people who were not concerned by low literacy. During this period, the illiteracy issue (in fact “illettrisme”) was so topical that it eclipsed other subjects of public debate concerning adult literacy levels in the overall population.

France, by adopting the word “illettrisme” has decided to distinguish between three situations: “illettrisme” for people (native French speakers but not only) having attended school in French who have not acquired sufficient mastery of written communication, analphabetism for people (almost exclusively foreigners or people of foreign origin), who have never learned any written code, and immigrants who arrive in France and must learn French as a foreign language. While in all cases the ability to read and write in the French language is indeed absent or insufficient, the origins of the problem, people's background and the ways to help them all differ. The fight against “illettrisme” therefore was born and developed alongside the linguistic training policy devised for immigrants.

In other words, it is one thing to arrive in a new country without speaking the language and to have to learn this new language: this is the case for the immigrants who arrive in France and must learn French as a foreign language. It is another thing to have never attended school, and to be illiterate (“analphabète” in French), as are many men and especially women in countries where schooling is not compulsory. It is yet another, completely different situation to find oneself, after having attended school in France, unable to write a check, read signs,

withdraw cash from an ATM, read safety instructions, write a shopping list, read a child's school report, etc.... It is extremely difficult, and people often conceal the fact to avoid stigmatization, to have no command of the absolute basics: reading, writing, arithmetic and the fundamental skills required for autonomy in simple everyday situations. This last situation required a name, given to it by the French NGO "ATD Quart Monde": The term "illettrisme". It is a word that we would like to see disappear, a word that provokes reaction, but above all a word that should encourage us to act in a consistent and effective way by focusing our efforts where they are truly necessary if we want this phenomenon to be eradicated in France.

The initial definition of "illettrisme", was subsequently reworked, completed and above all generalized in 2003 by the ANLCl, who worked with nearly 100 partner institutions to revise and circulate it. Since 2003, the official definition is therefore as follows: "Illiteracy describes the situation of individuals over 16 years of age who, although they have attended school, cannot read and understand a text dealing with an everyday situation, and/or cannot communicate simple information in writing"<sup>5</sup>.

### **The main surveys available (not based on self-declaration)**

In France today, in order to assess and count the number of people with literacy problems, we can use several recent surveys, not based on self-declaration, whose frequency should allow us to comprehend the evolution of the literacy or basic skills of people living in France: the international PISA survey (Program for International Student Assessment), the PIAAC survey (Program for International Assessment of Adult Literacy) both organized by the OECD and carried out in France by the research departments of the Ministry of Education (PISA) and the national institute for Statistics and Economic Studies (PIAAC), the Military Registration Day (JDC/JAPD) tests organized by the Ministry of Defence with exercises supplied by the Ministry of Education, the LPP Survey (Reading and Incarcerated Population Survey) and finally the Information and Everyday Life survey (IVQ) carried out by the INSEE with the participation of the ANLCl.

Because the OECD's studies are very well documented and well-know (OECD provides numerous complete reports about PISA and PIAAC surveys), we will focus on the other surveys.

### **The Reading and Incarcerated Population Survey - Individual positioning**

The penitentiary administration, with the participation of teachers from the Ministry of Education, organizes detection upon arrival in prison. Since 1994, education services in French prisons use a battery of tests to situate incarcerated individual in relation to a level defined as illiteracy. The LPP tests involve simple word recognition reading and understanding of simple sentences and texts. Testing takes place in an individual face to face mode within penal institutions. They last ten minutes and include question and oral replies to written material. As is the case

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<sup>5</sup> Rest of the definition, read ANLCl National Guidelines, 2003, page 72

with the Military Registration Days, the purpose here is not statistical, even if the detection operations carried out do provide figures concerning low literacy in French prisons About 50,000 individuals are yearly tested (2013).

### **The Military Registration Day (JDC/JAPD) - Assessment focused on the individual**

The Military Registration Days (JDC/JAPD) were created in 1998 to replace the former draft system. Originally applied to boys only, they were extended to girls in 2000. These days provide the opportunity every year to measure the literacy skills of an entire age group with no distinctions made concerning academic background or gender, and to detect young people with literacy problems. The detection aspect is emphasized, since all of the boys and girls registered (and therefore of French nationality or requesting French citizenship), and who are at least 17 years old, take a series of tests organized by the Ministry of Defence in collaboration with the Ministry of Education.

The main objective of the JDC/JAPD (Military Registration Day) survey, contrary to PISA, is to actively search for young people with low literacy levels, and it essentially concerns young people between 17 and 19. While most 18-year-olds are still in school, young people in difficulty have often left the school system at this age and therefore, depending on the level of their test results, may enter the “illettrisme” category as it is defined in the ANLCl handbook.

The JAPD tests are administered collectively (classrooms of maximum 40 young people), due to the huge number of young people to be tested each year (nearly 800,000). They are administered in rooms specially set aside for these tests, most often within military facilities. As of 2009, after an experimentation phase, the test procedure (answer collection and processing) has been largely automated to facilitate operations and keep a better record of each young person's answers. Following this reading test, young people who have been detected with a problem are given the opportunity to meet with an adult to discuss their future, in a context that is different from the one they are familiar with. This meeting provides an opportunity to inform the individual of the possibilities available to help improve their level of written French, and can be continued through guidance and support activities offered by the educational system if the young person is still in school, or by local Youth Centres or other bodies if they have left school. For the Military Registration Day, no sample is formed. During the Military Registration Day, the main goal of the tests given is to identify young people with literacy problems in order to refer them to the support agencies that can assist them. These tests nevertheless supply files that allow the establishment of national and local statistics used as a reference for the public programs designed for these young people. The national figures were sometimes calculated in the past on the basis of samples (certain selected days), but only during the period when the test was being experimented with. Unfortunately, in 2004 the tests used since 1998 were replaced with new ones, interrupting the statistical series underway. The figures (table 1) for 2013 indicated that 9.6% of the 800,000 young people who took the tests had reading problems (4.1% had very severe problems and 5.5% had serious problems) .

The Military Registration Day tests concern different levels, but the detection of reading difficulties is the main focus. The tests include both systematic exercises to measure the extent to which deciphering a text is automatic for the young candidate, and others measuring the candidate's ability to identify information, understand it and process it.

Table 5 JDC Profiles in 2013

| Profile | Reading Comprehension | Reading automaticity | Vocabulary | Boys | Girls | Boys & Girls | %  |
|---------|-----------------------|----------------------|------------|------|-------|--------------|--|
| 5d      | X                     | X                    | X          | 68,7 | 74,1  | 71,4         | Efficient readers<br><b>81,8</b>                 |
| 5c      | X                     | O                    | X          | 12,2 | 8,6   | 10,4         |  |
| 5b      | X                     | X                    | O          | 5,6  | 7,3   | 6,4          | Mediocre readers<br><b>8,6</b>                   |
| 5a      | X                     | O                    | O          | 2,5  | 1,9   | 2,2          |  |
| 4       | O                     | X                    | X          | 3,6  | 3     | 3,3          | Readers facing difficulties<br><b>5,5</b>        |
| 3       | O                     | O                    | X          | 2,9  | 1,4   | 2,2          |  |
| 2       | O                     | X                    | O          | 1,8  | 1,9   | 1,8          | Readers facing strong difficulties<br><b>4,1</b> |
| 1       | O                     | O                    | O          | 2,8  | 1,8   | 2,3          |  |

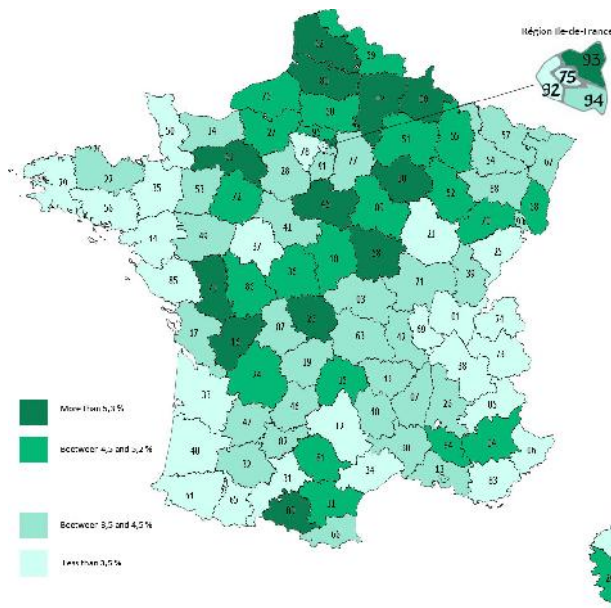
Source: Ministry of Education (DEPP), Ministry of Defense (DSN) Note : X = success, O = failure

The statistics drawn up after the tests taken by young people during the Military Registration Day are published in an annual report by the Ministry of Education's Directorate for Evaluation Forecasting and Performance (DEPP). They inspire no particular emotion nor heated debates, even though they are regularly quoted to support various positions. Since they are carried out by region and by "département", they mostly play a role in discussions on a more local level. They are also used as indicators by the regions to plan and monitor regional policies (regional plans for the fight against illiteracy in particular). Since their target population is very specific (17 to 19 years old in practice), they are in direct competition on the national level with the Ministry of Education's figures concerning

students leaving school with no qualifications and with the IVQ figures that cover the entire adult population from 18 to 65<sup>6</sup>.

The large dimension of the sample (in fact whole population) and the geolocalisation of persons<sup>7</sup> facing literacy difficulties enable JDC to provide stakeholders with figures by relatively small territorial units (departments, small towns, neighbourhoods of the large cities).

Map 1: JDC 2013. "Illettrisme" rates by "departments"



Note: The figures on the map correspond to the departments' codes

Data from Ministry of Education (DEPP), Ministry of Defence (DSN)

### The Information and Everyday Life survey (IVQ)

First studied as of 1998 by a steering committee made up of several partners, the tools and methodology for this survey were fine-tuned after several tests and a methodological survey carried out at the end of 2002 on a sample drawn from 10 regions in metropolitan France that enabled the performance of 2083 interviews. This survey includes a specific module to assess low literacy levels developed for this purpose by the University Lyon 2 upon request from the ANLCI. The first main survey was carried out in 2004/2005 by the INSEE using a very strict methodological approach, and following in-depth fine-tuning to guarantee the quality of the data collected. The last one was carried out in late 2011 and early 2012.

<sup>6</sup> The two first data sources (JDC and Ministry of Education data files) will be connected in 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Since 2014

## **The target population**

The IVQ survey focuses on representative samples of the general population, and among other goals tries to identify the proportion of people with low literacy levels among the overall population. It can therefore supply a wealth of information on this population, on the population referred to as illiterate, and also on all individuals living in France (including immigrants) or on any other sub-category of individuals, provided that they are sufficiently represented in the sample.

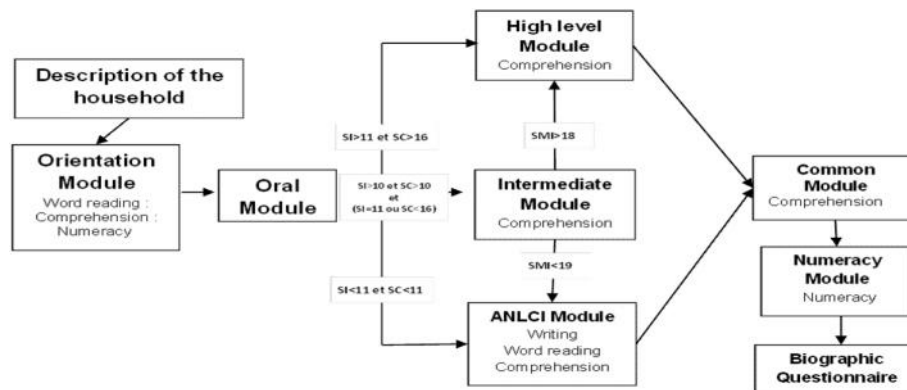
## **Test administration**

For the IVQ survey, the tests are taken individually in a one-on-one situation, at the home of the respondents. The INSEE interviewers selected are specially trained for this task for 3 days. They also use a software application CAPI that assists them in administering the modules, makes the required score calculations and automatically orients the people surveyed toward the most appropriate testing programmes. The software enables data entry in encoded form. The main objective is to encourage the involvement of the adults surveyed by proposing tasks very similar to those they encounter in everyday life, using materials linked to this situation, significantly limiting the use of the written word in the expression of their answers, and providing them with tests that are as appropriate as possible to their level. Thus during the interview in their home, respondents with literacy problems do not have to provide written answers, aside from the dictation test. Their answers are expressed orally and entered by the interviewer on his/her computer. This choice was made so that the tests could be taken in a context as different as possible from scholastic testing and as close as possible to everyday life.

The IVQ test initially orients the subjects (screening) as quickly as possible towards the test that is the most appropriate to their literacy competence level. Experiments resulted in the proposal of a twofold orientation: an orientation module that makes it possible with a few questions to initially detect the people in the sample with significant difficulties and those who seem to have none, and then an intermediate confirmation module for the people close to the orientation threshold. The diagram below shows the different steps and illustrates the sequence of the specialised modules.



Figure 1: Organization of the IVQ 2011 modules



## The samples

For the 2011/2012 IVQ survey, a data file is available containing 13,743 records (10,384 in 2004), i.e. the information collected from the 13 743 respondents who participated in the survey in metropolitan France. Basically, these candidates were chosen through a double random draw: first the random draw of a household, then a second random draw of an individual among the people usually living in that household and eligible for the survey. The main consequence of this method is that the population targeted by the survey represents a variety of nationalities and social backgrounds. However, certain populations are excluded, such as prisoners, the homeless, the members of certain religious groups, and students living in dormitories. Therefore all of the respondents correspond to an adult population of working age living in ordinary households. To facilitate a certain number of studies of specific problems, logical stratification measures were taken in the sample draw.

When the data base was set up, in order to ensure that the group of respondents was in conformity with the national population as it is known through other national surveys, it was adjusted, leading to the use of weighting for each respondent. All of the calculations were done using this weighting. INSEE has placed a methodology report on its website with additional details on these aspects.

## The tests used

The IVQ survey was designed using the conception of illiteracy and basic skills proficiency specific to France. Therefore, oral comprehension exercises related to simple texts are proposed (in order to subsequently determine whether failure is due to a lack of comprehension of the language), along with comprehension tests on short texts, tests involving the reading of words, groups of words or sentences, and the writing of simple words. It was also decided to refrain from calculating scores for the exercises or tests, but rather to assign levels according to success percentages. Thus when exploiting the data from the IVQ survey, it was decided that the category of "people with low

literacy" would be composed of adults between 18 and 65 (field of the survey) having achieved very low results<sup>8</sup> during the tests on the fundamental aspects of written communication. This simple construction can be used immediately and easily.

The tests proposed during the IVQ survey are organized into modules. The modules administered to all respondents (the orientation and oral comprehension modules) explore the reading of words, written and oral comprehension, and arithmetic (orientation and numeracy modules). Another module, referred to as the "high level" module, explores the competences of respondents with no particular reading difficulties in more depth, using varied materials (e.g., a TV programme). The ANLCl module, designed for respondents who had literacy problems with the orientation module, explores their ability to read and write words and to comprehend a simple text. The choice of exercises and their fine-tuning were the subject of research projects involving teams from several universities<sup>9</sup>. Efforts were especially focused on defining the survey methodology in order to guarantee the best possible data quality and avoid the biases that often affect this type of survey (Murat, 2005). Several experiments were carried out in the field to fine-tune the questioning procedures and set up a psychometric control of the modules including the 2002 field trial test. This large-scale methodological investigation made it possible to validate the questioning procedures used for the 2004/2005 IVQ survey and the following IVQ surveys.

### ***Impact of IVQ surveys***

As far as adult education is concerned, the IVQ survey has been a success in France. Its results are reported on and used by all of the national and local political and administrative officials, as well as by most academics and almost all NGOs. Extensions financed by the local public authorities were carried out in three metropolitan regions in 2005 and in 5 regions in 2011, but also in all regions of France's overseas territories since 2006. In addition to the methodological quality and the size of the samples, this success can be attributed to several factors:

*The tool design quality*, achieved by involving university teams familiar with the target population (especially for the ANLCl module). Indeed, in the case of adults, statistical knowledge alone does not allow the design of a tool that can be recognized as valid by practitioners. Since the validity of assessment tools for adults can only rarely benefit from external data that make it possible to confirm the external validity of the tools (or surveys), the choice of recognized experts is essential, at least during the first phases of tool development. (Jeantheau, 2008)

*A communication strategy* in which the ANLCl took into account the preoccupations of both the statisticians or researchers and the decision-makers. Communication on the figures was carefully targeted, and different documents were drafted for different decision-making levels; they were easy to read and understand but also highlighted aspects

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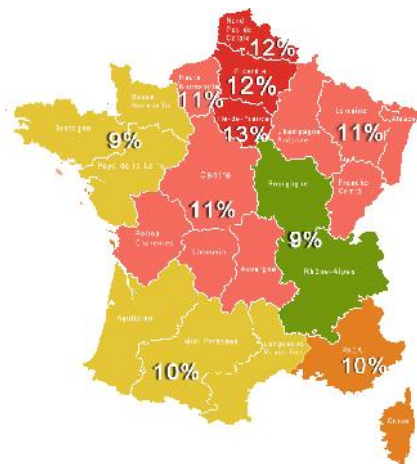
<sup>8</sup> Less than 60% success in one of the three areas described as fundamental to literacy.

<sup>9</sup> The work on the orientation module, the oral module and the ANLCl module was done by the team at the PsyEF lab of the Université Lyon 2, led by Jean-Marie Besse. The numeracy modules were the work of the team led by Camilo Charron and Claire Meljac at the Université Rennes 2 and the Hôpital St Anne, and the "high level" module was the responsibility of H. Tardieu's team at the Université Paris V.

of the results that, scientifically recognized, were in line with the preoccupations of the decision-makers. For example, IVQ figures are the main reference (15 pages) for the 2013 official report, “preventing and combating illiteracy” submitted to Mr. SAPIN, Minister of Labor, Employment and Vocational Training and to Mrs PAU-LANGEVIN, Deputy Minister for Educational Success<sup>10</sup>.

*The flexibility of the studies conducted.* they were always designed to meet the preoccupations of ANLCI partners or to immediately respond to topical issues under public debate. For example, the results of this survey were used to make a distinction in public policy between fighting “illettrisme” and teaching French as a foreign language. Indeed, the IVQ showed that the populations concerned by the first issue were much larger than those concerned by the second (maps 2,3,4).

Map 2: IVQ 2011 illiteracy rates by Regions and aggregated regions



Data from IVQ 2011 (INSEE), computed by author.

Map 3 and 4: “illettrisme” rates, on the left, and French as a Foreign Language rates (no initial schooling in France) on the right

<sup>10</sup> Summary and full report available in English on the web site: [www.cnfptlv.gouv.fr](http://www.cnfptlv.gouv.fr)



implemented and all are justified in their context. No single policy can make significant progress alone in the fight to improve access to the written word for all. The effectiveness of these policies can only be reinforced by coordinating the actions they deploy. Each partner or group of partners, along with the national coordinators and public authorities, needs statistical information. Some bodies have already set up indicators that correspond to their needs, such as the Military Registration Day tests of the Ministry of Defence, the prison entry tests for the Ministry of Justice, recruiting tests for vocational training organizations, etc. Other bodies have requested indicators, such as the National Employment Agency, the National Training Centre for Local Civil Servants (CNFPT), or certain NGOs. One of the ANLCl's current tasks consists in harmonizing the existing literacy indicators to make all the stakeholders speaking with the same statistical references. Thus, a study to create a bridge between the JDC/JAPD and the IVQ tests was completed in December 2008, another focusing on a link between the prison entry and the IVQ tests was carried out in June 2009.

The Vocational Training Agency (AFPA) was the first to use the IVQ tools in 2006 (ANLCl modules) in a study on 1000 candidates entering training courses. Other training organizations such as the National Training Centre for Local Civil Servants (CNFPT), representing several million local civil servants, have expressed their need for tools to help them identify individuals who could benefit from basic skills training. The CNFPT has chosen to align itself with the ANLCl's definition of "illettrisme", and since November 2007 it has been developing an assessment tool called EVADO compatible with the IVQ survey to be used on the Internet or with a DVD (2012), in collaboration with the ANLCl and the Caisses d'Epargne Foundation for Solidarity. Taking in consideration the last evolutions of the new governmental foundation of basic skills introduced by Decree at the very end of 2014, actually a new update of EVADO is carried out.

## ***Conclusion***

The development of tools to assess low literacy levels of adults is fairly recent in France. It was inspired by the recognition of the need to implement a national policy and encourage cooperation between stakeholders. The system is mainly designed to supply information to help manage public policies, even if it also assesses other subjects. It concentrates on the fraction of the population that is the focus of a public policy. This approach is fairly similar to the PIAAC, even if it is more radical and more in-depth, and therefore in the end simpler, more pragmatic, and less expensive. In addition to this method, it appears that rather than a national (or international) survey conducted with intervals that are often quite long, it would be extremely useful to have access to a large number of comparable surveys that could regularly or continuously supply reliable information concerning the different policies deployed. The "large-scale surveys" could then be used to place local indicators in better perspective. The cost of such a method, where the participants enter a tool-sharing process, could be considerably lower than that of an international survey, and at the same time more immediately useful.

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