

## A Study on the Adult Literacy in Korea and International Comparative Survey among OECD Countries

**AUTHORS:** *Hee-Su Lee, You-Kyung Han, Hyun-Jeong Park, Sye-Jeong Lee, Jeong-Hee Lee, Jae-Hyun Kwon.*

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The knowledge-based society has brought the expansion of the concept and level of literacy as well as its category to the area of life skills, and the importance of literacy has been emphasized among countries. Based on this context, this survey attempted to provide estimation of the literacy level of Korean adults using International Adults Literacy Survey (IALS) items which was implemented for 20 OECD countries from 1994 to 1998. Specifically, this study had its purpose on paving the groundwork for participation in Adult Literacy and Lifeskills (ALL) survey in the future with its first attempt for international comparisons of literacy, stimulating the continuous studies on literacy status in Korea, and providing the necessary information to the policy-makers. The research methods used in this study include literature review, experts meetings, development of literacy survey materials, field testing, and seminar.

The main results of this study can be summarized as follows. Adult literacy survey was conducted to 1,200 males and females who are 16 to 65 years old in Korea. This survey was consisted of three domains of literacy: prose literacy which is the ability to use the necessary information from newspaper and advertisement, etc.; document literacy which is the ability to sort and understand the information from maps, schedules, charts, and figures; and quantitative literacy which is the ability to apply the basic arithmetic operations. The scores of this survey was derived from Item Response Theory and ranged from 0 to 500. These scores were divided into five levels: level 1 from 0 to 225 (lowest literacy proficiency), level 2 from 226 to 275 (low literacy proficiency), level 3 from 276 to 325 (literacy proficiency which can cope with demands of everyday life), level 4 from 326 to 375, and level 5 from 376 to 500 (level 4/5 indicating high literacy proficiency).

In Korea, the adults showed highest mean scores for quantitative literacy and lowest mean

scores for document literacy. More specifically, the mean score was 269.16 for prose literacy (level 2), 237.5 for document literacy (level 2), and 276.87 for quantitative literacy (level 3). The proportions of adults at or above level 3, which is the minimum level of competence needed to cope with the complex demands of everyday life, are 48.3% for prose document, 34.3% for document literacy, and 56.5% for quantitative literacy. In general, the literacy level in Korea in each literacy domain was appeared to be low, just as other participated countries in IALS. Even in the Scandinavian countries which showed the highest level of literacy, about a quarter of total adults scored level 1 and level 2, which are under the minimum level of competence needed for the everyday life. Considering the fact that about three quarters of adults scored level 1 and level 2 in the lowest performing countries like Chile and Portugal, the levels of literacy in Korea were somewhat low even with the high educational attainment levels of adults. Especially, the document literacy level was among the lowest countries.

In the background questionnaire, there was a question on the participation in any continuing education and training (CET) which includes lifelong education classes, private lessons, workshops, vocational training, and any education and training offered at the various lifelong education institutions during the last 12 months. Among 943 respondents, 315 adults, which is 33.4% of total respondents, answered that they have received CET during the last 12 months. Based on the facts that Scandinavian countries with high literacy proficiency showed more than 50% of CET participation rate and that most of IALS participating countries showed about 40% of participation rate, the participation rate in CET in Korea can be considered to be low. Also, about 33% of respondents indicated the lack of time as the reason why they had not taken any CET.

In conclusion, this study derived following propositions based on the research findings. First of all, the issue of literacy and the education of literacy should be re-recognized in the context of national policy-decision level. Also, international criteria for literacy should be adopted and periodical surveys on literacy status as a part of population census should be implemented. Along with these, the financial support for literacy education facilities and the specialization of literacy education should be pursued aggressively. Also, the rate of illiteracy will be decreased if we present the honorary teacher's certificates to the voluntary teachers with certain amount of voluntary hours and provide the financial support and official commendation to the educational facilities with enough years of history and numbers of graduates.