

Special Project – Defining Literacy

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Literacy – “A Whole New Word”



“We are inadequately literate in part because we have inadequate ideas about literacy”

Introduction

In order to understand the catch22 that exists between illiteracy and other socio-economic problems in a society one needs to carefully analyse and bifurcate the term “illiterate”, in order to define it aptly and study its various forms and kinds. They do so from a conviction that how we define the term has substantial impact on the goals and methods that are set for literacy education, in particular, and for education overall. Definitions of literacy today are multiple, complex, shifting, and often it adds with each other.

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Aim

an experiment

If one has to collect literacy skills of all the citizens of India which definition and why would it be used? This project is an attempt into classifying what lies between the two ends of the scale of literacy and what constitutes the two extremities, in order to understand what different strategies are used by “the stereotypes” of various groups classified in order to realise these as potential insights which can be incorporated in the design process.



Objectives

- 1) To define the various categories and the scales prevalent within those categories of illiteracies.
- 2) To validate these categories and test the scales interviews and previously collected data.
- 3) Assign a set of tasks pertaining to some level of literacy and evaluating how people from different categories within the matrix generated deal with it. Within each category there can be more variables like sex, age, demographics etc.
- 4) generate a conceptual scale of literacy and place people on it compare that with their scale of receptivity to technology.
- 5) Observe and draw insights into the various problems faced and strategies used by people within different categories of literacy deal with it and generate a pattern looking at other socio-economic and cultural variables e.g. income, religion, occupation nearness to city etc.



Scope

The scope of the project is restricted to people residing in suburbs of Mumbai and most of the language proficiency testing is only valid to Hindi and English. The assumptions taken for native language may be incorrect. Only adults above the age of 20 were considered for the study.

Methodology

- 1) data collection – literature review consisted of newspapers, journals, books, key informants, Internet.
- 2) Group discussions
- 3) Validation with interviews.
- 4) Drawing insights



“ The Indian context ”

In India, large part of the population is illiterate or semi literate. There is a **huge variation** in the backgrounds of people in terms of education, profession, culture social standing , income etc. who live in a typical urban setting which is where they are faced with the every changing technology and function. According to recent statistics on an a average 2000 people migrate from rural areas to mumbai looking for employment in the suburbs. For them the definition of “**functional literacy**” changes drastically with this migration. The level of literacy which would have sufficed to function amicably within a rural setting gets challenged in the ever changing technologically savvy existence in the urban fabric.

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Existing definitions

All definitions presented earlier assume that, to be considered “literate,” a person has to be able to cope with some reading and/or writing tasks. Yet, **what level or type of reading and writing skills are needed?**

Literate- a person who can read and write in any language is literate. A person who can merely read but cannot write is not literate. It is not necessary that the person should have received any formal education or should have passed a minimum educational level or standard. All children of age below seven years have been treated as illiterate even though some of them may be attending school and may be able to read and write few words.

Illiterate – A person who cannot read or write in any language with understanding.

Semi- literate- a person, who can read, writes a few things but not everything. The person is not proficient reader and writer.

To define semi literate few conditions are put up which helps defining the term correctly.

- 1) A person who has never gone to school or had formal education.
- 2) A person had been to school at some stage of life but has lost touch with read and /or writing.
- 3) A person who had learnt selective terms, at his own initiative by peer learning.
time. Some definitions also include as part of literacy other mental skills, such as numeracy and problem solving.

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Process of generating a questionnaire

-mock interviews based on previous knowledge were taken to establish the protocol of the questionnaire.

-Formulate charts to check people on reading writing and numeracy quotient this was just their awareness not to be confused with ability to learn or intelligence quotient.

Most of the existing questionnaires either confuse literacy level with the intellectual ability or are very generalised and aimed at addressing many issues related to illiteracy as a social problem.

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Technological quotient (based on attitude)

Afraid	Neutral	Interested	Mechanical	Technological enthusiast
do not attempt to use machines or new technology	don't care if they exposed to do not use it as a tool rather as just entertainment	watch and learn a a) without a conceptual idea of the overall system b) with some conceptual idea of the overall system	solve problems have a conceptual model learn by trying out themselves or learning from people. Update themselves to new things and observe them with interest.	

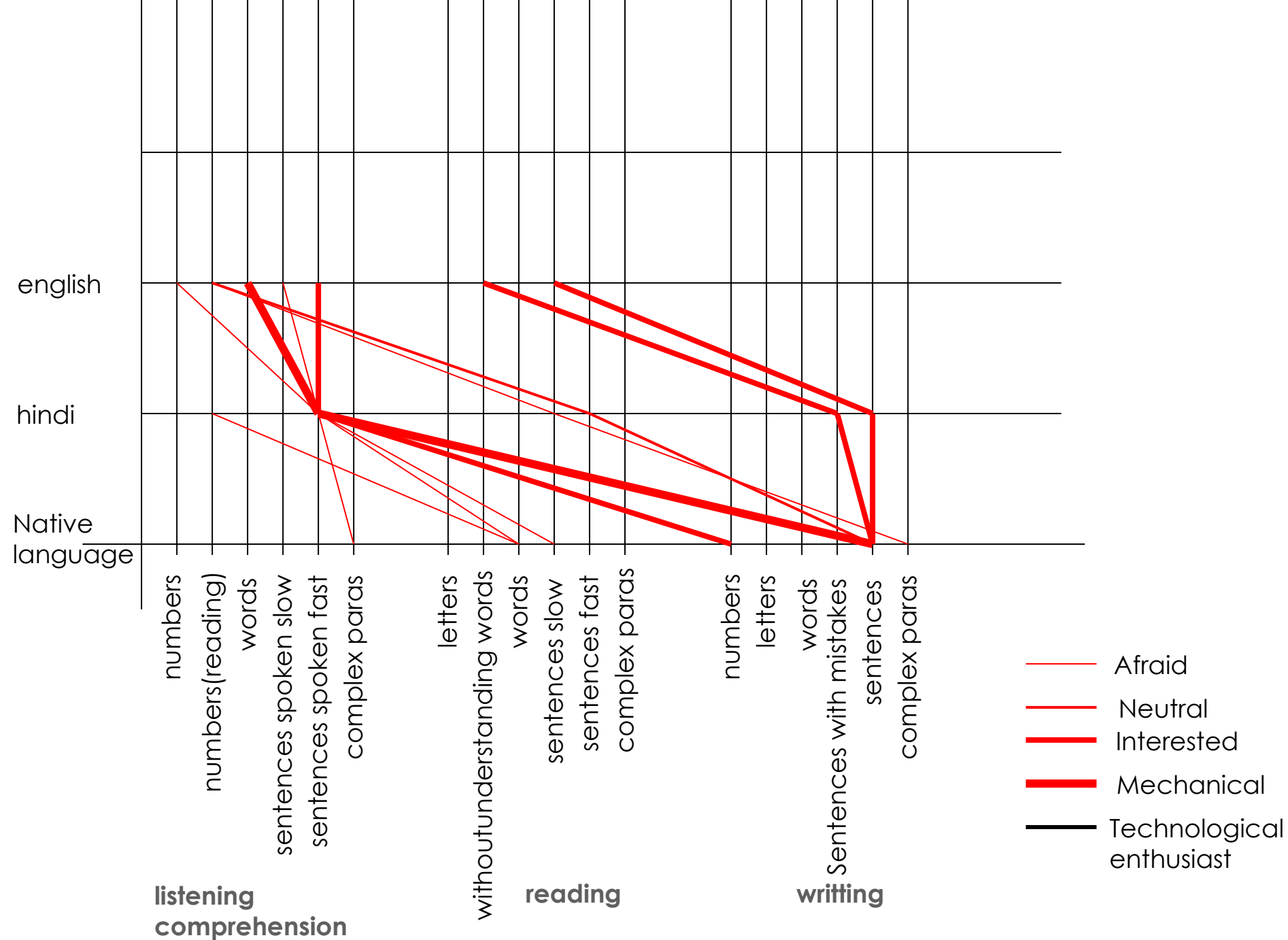
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Interviews (10 detailed interviews and 12 quick interviews)

Interviews were taken and they were placed on the charts indiscripancies were checked and the charts were revised.

Scale was made with differents levels in a sequences of hierarchy according to literacy.



Common observations :-

-Proximity to urban areas is directly proportional to level of comprehending hindi and english.

-Most of the people learn to read and understand numbers on their own.

-People know how to read language through combination of letters which is taught in primary school but they cannot grasp the correct pronunciation or meaning , because they cannot judge the correct pronunciation mostly in the case of english .

-they mostly ask queries with people of their own economic and many times same literacy level therefor due to inability they do not acquire new knowledge.

-Literacy is defined as ability to speak and understand english by many urban people with lower level of literacy because their occupation demands them to interact with tourists and well educated people who converse with them in languages mixed with english. They have better economic possibilities in an urban setup if they understand and speak english.

-Level of literacy is judged according to efficiency or skill at which person operates in a society so it is directly expected to result into betterment of economic standard which is not so in many cases.

-people use technology to do things they otherwise can not do due to illiteracy.

-people are not motivated to use their work time to study more.

- Going to school is not feasible for those who discontinued education for need of money.

strategies

-Even those with low level of reading writing skill are well versed with numerical literacy mostly recognising numbers spoken and written and to do basic additions which they learn by repetitive use , need to know numbers is basic survival need in a market.

-People who build a conceptual model usually accept technology and attempt to repair devices.

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Common strategies employed-

- people learn listening comprehension in various language from devices like radio and T.V, they are more receptive to informal teaching aids. Public spaces need informal information delivery systems . e.g. T.V
- There are people who remember certain specific letters and words by there iconic or graphical appearance. Through -
memorising fonts, memorising certain combination of letters by there graphical value and symbols.
- people recognise products by remembering the overall “design of the object” which means the typeface, the colour, the images represented next to it or on it. They cannot spot minor alterations which is an aspect exploited by companies to sell fake imitations like Reobock and nikee
- people remember products by their brand colours .
- people mostly translate what they read in their mother tongue then retranslate to speak or write mostly in the case of numbers and calculations.
- people do multiplication and division using basic idea of addition and subtraction.
- people can read english but cannot understand so they usually break the word in parts or read them in parts to make sense an recognise them by their pronunciation..
- people prefer asking other people for immediate solutions to problems rather than learning.
- people recognise places and objects by semantic associations like temple police station etc.
- In some cases because of inability to write they developed better retention of words and sentences and numerical figures.
- Copy and place the number and letter is a strategy used by those who do not now how to read and write. e.g use of telephone, signature.

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Design implications

-This study helps in understanding the user in designing Human Computer Interaction devices e.g

Speech based enquiry for local railways.

Railways booking systems.

Money transaction mediums.

-This study can be used to generate scales in the rural areas and to make comparatives in order to develop better user interaction systems and devices.

-In product design it gives a strong clue that an object needs to maintain its distinct semantic character or adopt another existing object's otherwise it will not be accepted easily.

- In generating form, colour, pattern etc. the designer needs to understand the contextual inference capabilities of the user as these modes communicate more than written text.

-Scales and calculation devices can be designed which can aid people with limited knowledge of arithmetic.

-Audio and visual feedback is very important for most of the users

to overcome their respective lacunas.-informal or playful manner of displaying information has more impact.

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“Literacy cannot be just defined as a dicotomy where one is considered literate or illiterate.”