Letizia Cinganotto
Istituto Nazionale di Documentazione, Innovazione e Ricerca Educativa, Italy
l.cinganotto@indire.it
http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3541-7036

Daniela Cuccurullo
Istituto Universitario Suor Orsola Benincasa, Italy
danielacuccurullo@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1913-993X

Rethinking literacy in the 21st century: A pluriliteracies approach to CLIL[1]

ABSTRACT

The paper focuses on the concept of literacy in the 21st century, which takes the shape of "pluriliteracies" in order the meet the challenges of the knowledge society.

A project promoted by the European Centre of Modern Languages in Graz titled "Pluriliteracies Teaching for Learning" will be mentioned and described, referring to the conceptual framework aimed at deeper learning by interpreting and revisiting CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) methodology.

Keywords: literacy, pluriliteracies, CLIL, 21st century learner

1. Introduction

The term literacy is difficult to explain, as it has many shades of meaning and reflects a long historical, philosophical and educational tradition. What is meant by literacy, or to be literate in today's society, remains a matter of heated debate. The analysis of the international academic literature (García, Bartlett, & Kleifgen, 2007; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008; Crockett, Jukes, & Churches, 2011) reveals that literacy is a complex phenomenon which has attracted attention in many different disciplines.

For most of its history in English, the word 'literate' meant to be 'familiar with literature' or, more generally, 'well educated, learned'. Only since the late nineteenth century has it also come to refer to the abilities to read and write text,

---

[1]   The paper has been developed jointly by the authors. In particular, Letizia Cinganotto is author of Abstract, Paragraphs 3 and 4; Daniela Cuccurullo is author of Paragraphs 1 and 2.

while maintaining its broader meaning of being knowledgeable or educated in a particular field or fields. In 2002, the *United Nations Literacy Decade* acknowledged the place of literacy at the heart of lifelong learning, affirming that:

> Literacy is crucial to the acquisition, by every child, youth and adult, of essential life skills that enable them to address the challenges they can face in life, and represents an essential step in basic education, which is an indispensable means for effective participation in the societies and economies of the twenty-first century (p. 3).

2. Literacy in the 21st Century

In the 21st century "literacy as a concept has proved to be both complex and dynamic, continuing to be interpreted and defined in a multiplicity of ways" (UNESCO, 2006, p. 1). Broadly speaking, it has been recognized as "the ability to understand and employ printed information in daily activities, at home, at work and in the community" (UNESCO, 2006, p. 157). In other words, literacy is no longer just a question about being able to read but "is a more complex grouping of skills" (UNESCO, 2006, p. 148). There are four discrete understandings of literacy:

1. "literacy as an autonomous set of skills;
2. literacy as applied, practiced and situated;
3. literacy as a learning process;
4. literacy as text"[2].

"These broad areas of enquiry accommodate almost all theoretical understandings of literacy nowadays" (UNESCO, 2006, p. 148).

The PISA Report (OECD, 2009) defined reading literacy as: "understanding, using, reflecting on and engaging with written texts, in order to achieve one's goals, to develop one's knowledge and potential, and to participate in society" (p. 10), which implies the challenges facing today's learners with particular regard to reading and writing texts. The ability to convey information in writing, as well as orally, is one of human kind's greatest assets. The discovery that information can be shared across time and space, without the limits of the strength of one's voice, the size of a venue and the accuracy of memory, has been fundamental to human progress. And yet, learning how to read and write requires effort because it cannot be achieved without mastering a collection of complex skills (OECD, 2009). Success in reading provides the foundation for achievement in other subject areas and for full participation in adult life. How can we guarantee that our students acquire such complex skills so as to become well prepared to meet the changes and challenges of the future? Can they analyze, reason and communicate their ideas effectively? Have they found the kinds of interests they can pursue throughout their lives as productive members of the economy and society?

---

[2]   UNESCO (2006). *Education for All Global Monitoring Report*, p. 148.

The advance of technology has led to a proliferation of 'literacies'. The following terms appear in the literature related to the 21st century literacies (cf. Rosenthal Tolisano, 2013):

- "Basic Literacies (reading & writing)
- Media Literacy
- Information Literacy
- Network Literacy
- Global Literacy
- Financial Literacy
- Cultural Literacy
- Digital Citizenship".

These literacies characterize the informational society, as they represent the foundational literacies set by the World Economic Forum (2016) (Fig. 1); however, to fully develop the global competence needed today (OECD, 2018), one more literacy should be acquired: the emotional literacy, "the ability to understand one's own emotions, the ability to listen to others and empathize with their emotions, and the ability to express emotions" (Steiner & Perry, 1997, p. 11).

"To be emotionally literate is to be able to handle emotions in a way that improves one's personal power and improves the quality of life all around. The emotional literacy improves relationships, creates new opportunities among people, makes co-operative work possible, and facilitates the feeling of community, in order to understand and appreciate the perspectives and world views of others and engaging in open, appropriate and effective interactions across cultures" (OECD, 2018).
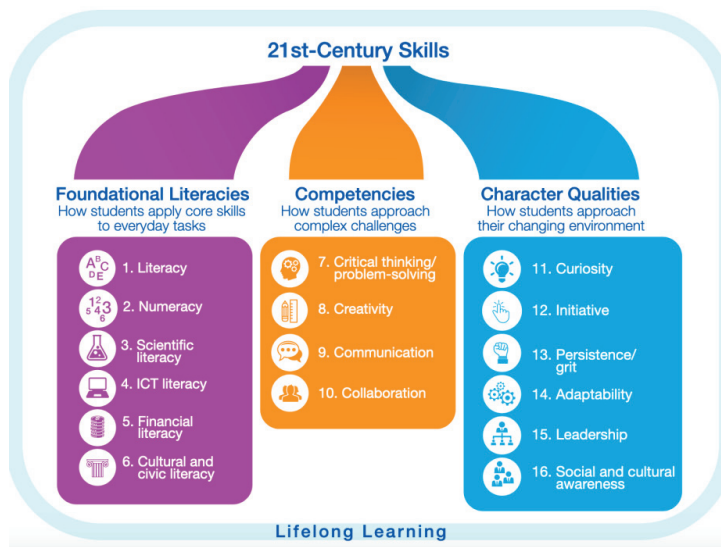

Fig. 1 - World Economic Forum, 2016 *New Vision for Education*

This proliferation of literacies determines the need to manage and integrate and inter-relate them, which means going beyond the mere and simple idea of literacy towards different concepts of multiliteracies and pluriliteracies. According to *The Common European Framework of Reference* (Council of Europe, 2001/2018) there is a distinction between the two terms: 'multilingualism', that is "the coexistence of different languages at the social or individual level and 'plurilingualism', that is the dynamic and developing linguistic repertoire of an individual user/learner. Plurilingualism is presented in the CEFR as an uneven and changing competence, in which the user/learner's resources in one language or variety may be very different in nature from those in another. However, the fundamental point is that plurilinguals have a single, inter-related, repertoire that they combine with their general competences and various strategies in order to accomplish tasks". Analogously, we can make the same distinction between the two terms: "multiliteracy", that is the coexistence of different literacies and "pluriliteracy", that is the complex, dynamic and inter-related literacy repertoire of an individual learner, a new competence to develop.

In order to clarify better the concept of multiliteracy, we can quote Goldoni (2008):

> Multiliteracy is a meaningful social and collaborative experience where students can work together with and learn from their peers and more experienced mentors. Multiliteracy is determined by social and cultural conventions that can be used and adapted based on specific purposes, modes and audiences. Therefore, a multiliteracy-based curriculum […] prepar[es] students to analyze multiple forms of text, discourses […] in multiple contexts and modes for multiple purposes and multiple audiences (p. 67).

The "Pluriliteracy" concept, on the contrary, "captures not only literacy continua with different interrelated axes, but also an emphasis on Literacy practices in sociocultural contexts, the hybridity of literacy practices afforded by new technologies, and the increasing interrelationship of semiotic systems. (García et al., 2007). It is a plural notion encompassing the manifold of meanings and dimensions of the before mentioned undeniably vital competencies. Such a view, responding to recent economic, political and social transformations, including globalization, and the advancement of information and communication technologies, recognizes that there are many practices of literacy embedded in different cultural processes, personal circumstances and collective structures" (UNRIC, 2018).

3. "Pluriliteracies Teaching for Deeper Learning": a project promoted by ECML[3]

The 21st century student has to face a wide range of challenges, therefore he/she must develop a large number of literacies or *pluriliteracies*.

This is the focus of a project promoted by the ECML (European Centre for Modern Languages), in Graz, titled "Pluriliteracies Teaching for Learning" (PTL), coordinated by Oliver Meyer and Do Coyle, aiming at interpreting CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) (Mehisto et al., 2008; Coyle et al., 2010; Cinganotto, 2018; Cinganotto & Cuccurullo, 2019) from a wider and deeper perspective.

In fact, in recent decades, research has focused mainly on the linguistic competence of CLIL students. Studies on the impact of CLIL on the disciplinary learning outcomes, although still limited, indicate that CLIL students remain at the same level, or under certain conditions can improve their outcomes compared to "non CLIL" students.

The use of language to learn a subject and to progress in the construction of knowledge and in the process of elaborating meanings must be supported by both linguistic and pedagogical foundations. Within this framework, CLIL can contribute to the pragmatic reduction of the so-called "functional illiteracy". This is the core of the PTL model (Meyer et al., 2015; Meyer et al., 2018; Meyer & Coyle, 2017), elaborated by the experts of the *Graz Group* at the European Centre for Modern Languages, according to which progress along the path of knowledge towards a deeper understanding of meanings requires a greater mastery of the mechanisms underlying discursive practices ("discourse"), as well as mastery of the specific "subject literacies", i.e., the literacies of the single disciplines.

Generally in DNL (non-linguistic subject) classes the subject teacher does not focus on the quality of literacy related to the specific discipline; in foreign language classes, this aspect is even considered irrelevant. Therefore, according to the experts of the Graz Group, if literacy were at the centre of the "learning agenda", regardless of the disciplines, there would be a fundamental change in the way of conceiving the lesson, which would facilitate deep learning.

In this regard, the PTL model integrates the 4 C (*Communication, Cognition, Culture, Content*) model of Do Coyle (Coyle, 2007) and draws a map of literacy and linguistic progression in CLIL contexts, acting as a guide for the design and implementation of teaching activities.

CLIL teaching also involves the ability to describe and explain representations and symbolic forms (e.g., a diagram or a map) in the foreign language, in the main

---

language of instruction, or in one's mother tongue. Students must therefore be guided to understand, translate, construct, rework and manipulate disciplinary content using all the various codes and communication channels they can benefit from.

In 21st century society it is natural to use a plurality of codes within the same communicative exchange: a continuous flow of languages, dialects, registers and semiotic systems characterizes our increasingly complex societies, where languages are not crystallized in diglossic situations, but forms of translanguaging, code-switching and code-mixing represent the daily routine.

As already mentioned, it is therefore necessary to facilitate and support this flexible use of the language and the exploitation of various communication codes.

For example, in the case of science, students must be able to write scientific reports on investigations or experiments. This requires the use of particular linguistic structures and textual genres, linked to specific disciplinary knowledge which is typical of that specific disciplinary area.

Each subject is characterized by a particular textual genre, with well-defined models and practices, which integrate written texts, oral productions, images, graphics, etc. During the learning process, students are stimulated to activate various cognitive discourse functions through the implementation of different activities (classified as: doing, organizing, explaining, arguing), which require the use of specific operational verbs, as illustrated in the "pluriliteracies wheel" shown in Fig. 2 below:

Fig. 2 – The Pluriliteracies wheel

Learning is the result of the intersection of a series of flows involving the personal growth of the student engaged in communication activities

(communicating continuum), which represent the expression and verbalization of cognitive processes activated (conceptualising continuum), under the constant guidance of the teacher (mentoring continuum), who implements a series of strategies to support learning (designing & evaluating, scaffolding, feedback, assessment), as illustrated in the image below, which is an effective synthesis of the PTL model (Fig. 3), which includes 4 Continua:

- communicating continuum
- mentoring continuum
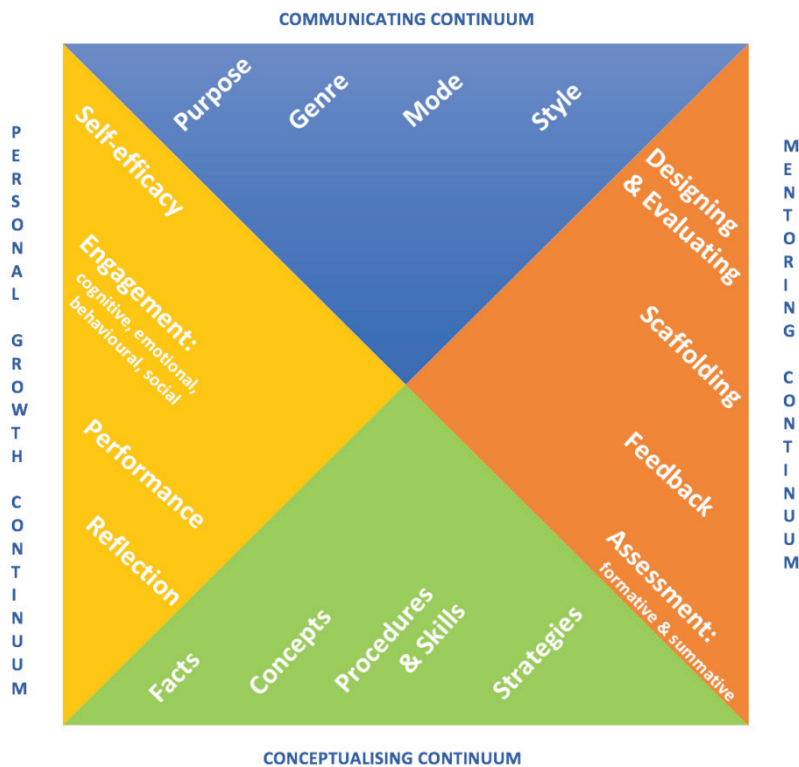- conceptualizing continuum
- personal growth continuum.

Fig. 3 – The 4 "continua"

The *Pluriliteracies Graz Group* has recently developed a new 3 D model, highlighting the ecological dimension of pluriliteracies, which incorporates affective factors, learner engagement, mastery-orientation and reflection in order to emphasize the impact of well-being and mindsets on deeper learning and personal growth.
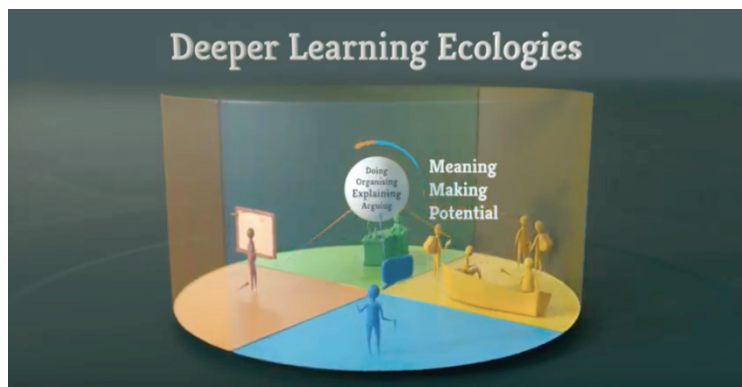
Fig. 4 – The new *Pluriliteracies* model[4]

4. Conclusions

The new and different paradigm of teaching and learning in the 21st Century culture and society requires the development of a spectrum of cognitive, critical, digital and emotional intelligences as a mindset and head-ware issue in a digital landscape through the cultivation of a pluriliterate citizenship.

In this context, the new pluriliteracies approach to CLIL will not only render content knowledge linguistically accessible yet cognitively challenging, but contribute to developing academic linguistic proficiency, a competence which is transferrable across languages and disciplines, thus redesigning and empowering the traditional concept of literacy.

References

Cinganotto L. (2018). *Apprendimento CLIL e interazione in classe.* Rome: Aracne.

Cinganotto L., & Cuccurullo D. (2019). *Techno-CLIL. Fare CLIL in digitale*. Torino: Loescher.

Council of Europe, *Common European Framework of reference for Languages*, 2001/2018.

Coyle, D. (2007). Content and Language Integrated Learning: Motivating Learners and Teachers. *The CLIL Teachers Toolkit: a classroom guide*, 10.

Coyle, D., Hood, P., & Marsh, D. (2010). *CLIL: Content and Language Integrated Learning.* Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.

Crockett, L., Jukes, I., & Churches, A. (2011). *Literacy is not enough: 21st Century Fluency Project*, Thousand Oack, CA: Corwin Press.

García, O., Bartlett, L., & Kleifgen, J. (2007). From biliteracy to pluriliteracies. In P. Auer, & Li Wei (Eds.), *Handbook of Multilingualism and Multilingual Communication* (pp. 207-228). Berlin: De Gruyter Verlag.

Goldoni, F. (2008). Designing a Foreign Language Curriculum in Postsecondary Education Drawing from the Multiliteracy, Functionalist and Genre-Based Approaches. *Vigo International Journal of Applied Linguistics,* Vol. 5, 63-85.

Mehisto, P., Frigols, M. J., & Marsh, D. (2008) *Uncovering CLIL*, Oxford: Macmillan.

---

[4]   The video describing the new model is available here: https://youtu.be/QSQisLoOcQE.

Meyer O., Coyle D., Halbach A, Schuck K., & Ting T. (2015). A Pluriliteracies Approach to Content and Language Integrated Learning – Mapping Learner Progressions in Knowledge Construction and Meaning-Making. *Language, Culture, and Curriculum, 28*(1), 41-57.

Meyer, O., Coyle, D., & Schuck, K. (2018). Learnscaping – creating next-gen learning environemnts for pluriliteracies growth. In D. Elsner, & J. Buendgens-Kostens (Eds.), *Multilingual Computer Assisted Language Learning* (pp. 18-37). Bristol, UK; Blue Ridge Summit, PA: Multilingual Matters. DOI: 10.21832/BUENDG1480.

Meyer, O. & Coyle, D. (2017). Pluriliteracies Teaching for Learning: conceptualizing progression for deeper learning in literacies development. *European Journal of Applied Linguistics,* pp. 199-222. DOI: 10.1515/eujal-2017-0006.

OECD (2009). PISA Report. Reading Literacy in PISA 2009. In R. Perkins, G. Moran, G. Shiel, & J. Cosgrove (2009)*, A Guide for Teachers.* Dublin: Educational Research Center. Retrieved March 1, 2018 from http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?10.1.1.564.1858&rep=rep1&type=pdf.

OECD (2018). *The Global Competence Framework.* Retrieved December 1, 2018, from https://www.oecd.org/pisa/pisa-2018-global-competence.htm.

Rosenthal Tolisano, S. (2013). *Skilled, LIterate & Fluent in the Digital World.* Retrieved September 4, 2019, from http://langwitches.org/blog/2013/02/18/skilled-literate-fluent-in-the-digital-world.

Shanahan, T., & Shanahan, C. (2008). Teaching Disciplinary Literacy to Adolescents: Rethinking Content-Area Literacy. *Harvard Educational Review*, *78*(1), 40-59.

Steiner, C., & Perry, P. (1997). *Achieving Emotional Literacy*. London: Bloomsbury.

UNESCO (2006). *Education for All Global Monitoring Report*. Retrieved March 1, 2018 from https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000141639.

UNRIC (2018). *The Evolving Definition of Literacy*. Retrieved July 12, 2019, from https://www.unric.org/en/literacy/27791-the-evolving-definition-of-literacy.

World Economic Forum (2016). *New Vision for Education.* Retrieved September 4, 2019, from https://www.weforum.org/reports/new-vision-for-education-fostering-social-and-emotional-learning-through-technology.