

# How EFL primary teachers define literacy: An empirical study

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Received: 26 April 2021 / Accepted: 19 June 2022

DOI: 10.30827/portalin.vi38.21068

ISSN paper edition: 1697-7467, ISSN digital edition: 2695-8244

**ABSTRACT:** Literacy development is at the core of our interactions with the world around us. However, this concept is not static and changes over time, adapting itself to different circumstances and needs. In the present study, a group of EFL teachers (n=104) is required to define 'literacy'. Their definitions are then analysed to determine their accuracy with those found in present specialised literature in the area. Results show that the notions provided by participants still contain traditional features, thus highlighting the importance of including the conceptualisation of literacy as a crucial component in in-service teacher education programmes.

**Keywords:** Literacy, conceptualisation, English as a Foreign Language, teachers, teacher education

## **Cómo define la alfabetización el profesorado de primaria de inglés: un estudio empírico**

**RESUMEN:** El desarrollo de la alfabetización está en el núcleo de nuestras interacciones con el mundo. Sin embargo, este concepto cambia con el tiempo, adaptándose a las diferentes circunstancias y necesidades. En este estudio, se pide a un grupo de docentes de inglés (n=104) que definan qué es alfabetización. Sus definiciones son analizadas para determinar su grado de corrección en comparación a las que se presentan en la literatura especializada en el área. Los resultados indican que las nociones que muestran los participantes contienen rasgos tradicionales y, por tanto, subrayan la importancia de incluir la conceptualización de la alfabetización como un componente fundamental en los programas de formación permanente de profesorado.

**Palabras clave:** Alfabetización, conceptualización, inglés como lengua extranjera, profesorado, formación de profesorado

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

The present study is part of the research and dissemination phase of the Erasmus+ Project “Developing FL literacy in CLIL contexts” (2018-1-PL01- KA201-050920).

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Making meaning is in our genetic code. We need to understand ourselves, other beings, the world around us and the profound sense of our existence and, at the same time, are also compelled to communicate our feelings and thoughts in different ways. The origin of making meaning is essentially visual (paintings in caves) and oral (through fables, legends and myths), and then it evolved to the creation of written codes that helped us make messages last for generations after generations (Vallejo, 2020). Knowing how to communicate gives us access to the wisdom of our ancestors and also helps us find our voice to interact in the world.

UNESCO (2004) recognises that literacy is a universal right that needs to be guaranteed. However, today’s world is still showing wide gaps in access to literacy and how it is developed in schooling. In this sense, the United Nations in 2015 presented the *Development Sustainability Goals for 2030*, which includes ‘Quality Education’ as a goal (number 4). In the description of this goal, the UN explicitly mentions that the lack of literacy skills is still a problem and that “even the children who are attending schools are lacking basic skills in reading and math” (United Nations, 2015, para. 2).

The notion of literacy has evolved over time. While reading and writing have always been associated with literacy learning at school, oral skills were somehow taken for granted. Furthermore, and looking at the world around us, we can see that new applications and software are changing the way we communicate very rapidly. Also, the fast spread of multilingual educational contexts is broadening horizons to the inclusion of two or more languages. In Europe, this plurilingual policy was officially launched with the *White paper on education and training* (1995) by the Commission of the European Communities. Many countries now are recognising the delivery of instruction in diverse languages, understood as languages of schooling and, therefore, potential vehicles of communication in and out the classroom.

Although literacy is a lifelong skill, a good part of literacy learning is developed in the early years of schooling. In this sense, Carter highlights the need to “ensure that teachers are able to support literacy development in all children” (Carter, 2000, p. 8). This is especially relevant because research demonstrates that the quality of teachers and their teaching are the most critical conditions for student outcomes (OECD, 2005). However, there is relatively little information on how teachers influence students’ literacy development and, more specifically, how this is done in learning contexts when more than one language is used.

One of the most influential factors in how teachers facilitate students’ literacy development is their knowledge, experiences and beliefs around what constitutes literacy and how it should be implemented in the classroom, as demonstrated by research (Borg, 2006, 2009; Kuzborska, 2011). Although the merit of teachers’ beliefs and behaviour has been disputed as a valid research tool, some researchers (Pajares, 1992; Aguirre & Speer, 2000) argue that

tapping into this resource is not only valid, but will also provide us with relevant information to improve teacher education programmes.

The present study analyses teachers' conceptualisations of literacy to discover whether they match current notions of this concept. To do so, a group of Foreign Language (English) Primary Teachers in Spain (N=104) was asked to provide a definition of literacy. In this piece of research, other possible influential factors in teacher's conceptualisation (Korthagen, 2001; Pozo et al., 2006), such as age, experience and teacher education and training were analysed to find possible differences and relations in the data presented. Research outcomes are expected to shed light on whether teachers conceptualise literacy in a traditional or more contemporary way and whether any of the variables of the study have an impact on this conceptualisation. The conclusions of the study will hopefully help to fill in a research gap, which will contribute to the improvement of teacher education programmes and curricula, and to a better understanding of how practitioners connect beliefs with their teaching practices.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Traditional definitions of literacy have included 'reading and writing' as the basic skills to develop this ability. However, current notions are more complex, considering communicative purposes, contexts and channels of communication, as well as people's identity and vision of the world (Gee, 2004). Also, they emphasise the role literacy has in demonstrating power relationships and specific cultural practices (Street, 2014). In this line, Winch et al. (2001) define literacy as:

The ability to make and share meaning by constructing and interpreting texts. Texts may be oral or written, contain graphic elements, such as images, maps or tables, be paper-based or electronic. Literacy also includes an understanding of the relationship between text and context and involves the integration of speaking, listening, and critical thinking with reading and writing (p. xxxii).

In the same line, and more recently, the Council of the European Union (2018) lists literacy as the first key competence needed for lifelong learning and define it as:

(...) the ability to identify, understand, express, create and interpret concepts, feelings, facts and opinions in both oral and written forms, using visual, sound/ audio and digital materials across disciplines and contexts. It implies the ability to communicate and connect effectively with others, in an appropriate and creative way (p. 189).

This increasingly complex nature of the concept of literacy is put forward by Cope and Kalantzis (2015), who proposed the notion of 'multiliteracies' to recognise its multimodality and its role in "culture, social, and domain-specific contexts" (p.3). Also, as the notion of literacy is attached to the creation of knowledge and the lifelong skills necessary to become a full citizen, international organisations have put its development in the spotlight. Citizens'

literacy development may be a predictor of social justice and socio-economic development, as indicated by UNESCO (2004) and the United Nations General Assembly Resolutions in the United Nations Literacy Decade (2002).

Literacy has also ceased to be solely defined by the four communicative skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening). This emergent notion runs parallel to the changes made in the Common European Framework of References for Languages, where the four skills have been replaced by four communicative modes: reception, production, mediation and interaction (Council of Europe, 2020). Thus, there is a recognition of emergent skills, such as those needed to establish communication when speakers are unable to do it directly (mediation) (North & Picardo, 2016); and the need to reinforce communication strategies linked to current ways of communication, such as videoconferencing or e-mail writing, where interaction with others plays a pivotal role, as has also been expressed by the OECD PISA programme (2018).

In the context of our study, in Spain, literacy has often been translated as *alfabetización*. However, this concept is not considered an exact equivalent of literacy (Fernández-Fernández and Halbach, 2007). A recently coined equivalent is *literacidad*, used by recent works of Lorenzo (2016), Montes and López (2017) and Halbach (2018). In official documents, such as the official curriculum for Spanish Primary Education, the word *alfabetización* appears just once and it does so in relation to mathematical competences. In bilingual curricula, literacy is explicitly found as a subject for the 'Integrated curriculum' of schools with bilingual programmes run by the Ministry of Education and the British Council.

Concerning Teacher Education programmes, literacy is not included specifically in the official curricula for Primary Education Teachers in Spain (Order ECI/3857, 2007). However, competence 3 refers to the students' capacity to successfully face plurilingual and multi-cultural contexts where different languages are learned; the need to promote the use and critical analysis of texts of different scientific and cultural domains included in the school curriculum and the need to develop their knowledge to communicate ideas successfully. Even so, it does not mention the disciplines or genres involved in this process. Regarding in-service teacher education, an analysis of the programmes offered in different training centres in Spain during the academic course 2019/2020 shows that literacy does not appear explicitly in the curricula. However, we can find the notion associated with areas other than the linguistic one, such as emotional literacy or digital literacy.<sup>1</sup> Although they do not make 'literacy' explicit, some courses are focused on reading or synthetic phonics.

When looking at research on teachers' conceptualisation of literacy, this comes fundamentally from the United Kingdom and is focused on identifying success criteria to implement literacy practices. Medwell et al. (1998) isolated effective strategies for literacy instruction using questionnaires, interviews, observations and a quiz to measure participants' knowledge about literacy. Although teachers' beliefs were not their primary concern, their findings indicate that effective teachers were more specific and detailed in describing literacy and literacy practices. In their conclusions, they put forward teachers' beliefs as an area to

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<sup>1</sup> Training programmes analysed were available at: [edu.xunta.es/fprofe](http://edu.xunta.es/fprofe) (Galicia), <https://www.comunidad.madrid/centros/centro-regional-innovacion-formacion-acacias> (Madrid), <http://centroformacionprofesorado.castillalamancha.es/comunidad/crpf> (Castilla La-Mancha), <https://www.juntadeandalucia.es/educacion/portals/web/ced/actividades-formativas> (Andalucía), <https://formacionprofesorado.aragon.es/formacion-inicial-novel-y-permanente/catalogo-de-acciones-formativas-curso-18-19/> (Aragón)

explore, considering that literature is scarce on this topic.

The exploratory study by Poulson et al. (2001) is a continuation of the work by Medwell et al. (1998). The research involved more than 200 teachers who were considered successful in their literacy teaching practices. Then, they analysed their methodological preferences and practices, and the variables which could potentially explain this success, including teaching experience, the type of training received, their teaching qualification and their responsibility for coordinating English/literacy. Teachers' methodological preferences were organised into three categories: phonic, word/skill and whole language. Results showed that teachers generally preferred whole language practices. However, the youngest teachers were more in agreement with a phonic orientation to the teaching of reading, even if they considered the whole language orientation an effective tool. Also, those participants who had acquired the highest level of qualification rejected the phonic model and showed a very positive perception of the whole language methodology. Results also indicate that teacher education programmes were determinant, as those teachers taking the Certificate in Education course in the 60s and early 70s showed a preference for skills/word recognition in literacy development. The coordination of English/literacy did not prove to be a significant factor.

Also in the UK, the Ofsted Report (2012) evaluated 50 trainee teachers regarding how well they were trained to teach literacy and language. Inspectors in charge of the evaluation concluded that participants had not generally received high-quality teacher education on literacy to ensure good practices in their classrooms. Four key factors were found to be essential to expand teachers' chances to be successful in developing students' literacy skills: a good understanding of children's language and literacy development as well as early developmental experiences; continuous assessment of teachers' knowledge and skills on language and literacy development, which will also serve to guide in-service teacher education courses; provision of high-quality feedback on teachers' performance; and the promotion of collaborative work together with more skilled practitioners.

From a more specific angle, Kuzborska (2011) researched 8 EAP teachers at the tertiary level in Lithuania on their beliefs and practices around reading. Through observations and interviews with stimulated recall sessions, the study concludes that teachers had a skill-based approach to reading, based on activities working on vocabulary and translation, and mostly at the word level. These practices were in line with their beliefs and their experiences when they were learners or started to teach. The author makes a call for further research in the field and gives a word of caution about the need to provide practitioners with appropriate in-service teacher education programmes tailored to their needs.

In line with research by Kuzborska's study, Golpour et al. (2020) surveyed 120 EFL university teachers in Iran. Their research confirmed that teachers' beliefs about writing methodologies (code-based or meaning-based) correlated with their classroom practices. Code-based teachers focused on writing mechanics, grammar and vocabulary in individual tasks, whereas meaning-based teachers favoured in-pairs and group tasks or even whole-class writing. The study did not favour any of the methodological beliefs, as these were reported to be effective depending on the context. Nevertheless, the authors did highlight the need to discuss beliefs with teachers to make them run parallel to their practices.

In Spain and referring to EFL literacy development, Fernández-Fernández (2020) presented a study with 115 EFL Primary teachers working in grades 3 to 5 in the Autonomous Community of Madrid. Most of them had more than five years of experience in teaching and

worked in chartered schools, and 80% were teachers in bilingual schools. Results show that participants have little training in EFL literacy development (68.7%, no pre-service training; 65.2%, no in-service training). The definitions produced were rated as poor, as only 16.5% of the definitions provided could be classified as ‘very good’ or ‘excellent’. Concerning factors, only age was statistically meaningful, as older teachers produced less accurate definitions of literacy in comparison with those found in specialised literature.

To sum up, teachers’ beliefs and conceptualisations seem to have an impact on their practices; however, there is little research on how this may affect the development of students’ literacy in EFL/CLIL contexts, and whether teachers’ conceptualisations are in line with current literature on the topic. The present study aims to fill this gap by offering an analysis of teachers’ conceptualisations of literacy, and reflecting on the impact of variables such as age, years of teaching experience, specific training in literacy, school context and participation in a literacy project.

### **3. METHOD**

#### **3.1. Research aims**

The present study has a descriptive and exploratory character and tries to discover whether participants’ literacy definitions match the characteristics of literacy found in current literature. To do so, we first identified the elements that reflect an incomplete or lacking perception of literacy in the definitions analysed; then, we categorised them and discussed possible reasons why some of these elements were more present than others. Also, we considered general variables collected in the questionnaire such as age, years of teaching experience, specific training in literacy, school context and participation in a literacy project. These variables were considered following the work by Poulson et al. (2001) and the Ofsted Report (2012).

The research questions of the study are:

- Do the definitions reflect an incomplete or lacking perception of literacy? If so, which specific features are not present?
- What is the relationship between an incomplete conceptualisation of literacy and factors such as age, years of teaching experience, specific training in literacy, school contexts and participation in a literacy project?

#### **3.2. Data gathering tool and participants**

This study is part of the first phase of the Erasmus+ Project “Lit4CLIL”, which called for a needs-analysis questionnaire to be used in three countries (Spain, Poland and Slovenia). The tool was designed by the international team. Reliability and validity were ensured using two measures: first, a preliminary study, which was conducted with the same population of the present study, i.e., EFL Primary Teachers delivering English in years 3, 4 and 5. Second, following the Delphi Method, a panel of experts contributed to improving the original version.

The final version of the questionnaire consisted of 47 questions. The present study focuses the section on literacy conceptualisation, where teachers were asked to provide a definition of literacy. It also considers the information provided by respondents in relation to general information: age, certification, years of teaching experience, specific training in literacy and participation in a literacy project. Respondents to the needs-analysis questionnaire were self-selected, as the online questionnaire was made available through e-mail, social media and personal contacts of the partners in the project.

Regarding Spanish data, there were 104 participants who completed the questionnaire on the website: <https://www.1ka.si> from December 2018 to March 2019. The sample is composed of 82 women (78.8%) and 22 men (21.1%). Their age ranges from 24 to 60 years, with an average age of 38 years ( $s=9.01$ ). All the participants are Primary Education teachers with an average time of experience in the teaching profession of 13.59 years ( $s=9$ ). Their qualifications are described in the following table:

*Table 1. Participants' teaching qualification*

	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Primary teacher with EFL specialisation	37	35.6
Primary teacher	8	7.7
English teacher	37	35.6
Other	22	21.2

There were 22 participants who claimed they did not fit into the qualifications provided. From these, there were teachers who were certified as Secondary teachers (7 participants), Infant teachers (1), teachers with double degrees in Infant and Primary Education (3 participants), Primary Education and Special Educational Needs (1 participant) teachers, or Primary teachers specialised in Physical Education (3). Also, there were two teachers with a bachelor's degree in Physical Education. Six teachers were Primary teachers with a C1 level of English, which enables them to teach content in English in bilingual schools. Finally, 11 participants did not provide accurate information concerning their qualifications and it is believed that they described their teaching areas as Primary and English.

The participants who have completed training on literacy development in an additional language make up 50% of the sample. From these, 21.5% work in schools with a literacy project, mainly a CLIL programme, and 85% of those participants know the project and use it.

### 3.3. Data analysis

The analysis was performed contrasting the definitions of literacy written by participants with the predominant elements in the current definitions offered by literature. In this way, eight dichotomic variables were created to illustrate the level of completeness of the definitions and indicate areas where they are perhaps lacking or incomplete.

- Subject-based definitions. They generally defined literacy not as an ability, but as content, i.e., something to teach.

- One-sided definitions, which associated literacy learning just with the development of one language, usually the additional one.
- School-based definitions, which limited literacy to practices which are only done in the classroom and within the school context.
- Early-learning definitions, which limited literacy to the teaching of basic skills in the early years or did not consider literacy as a lifelong ability.
- Minimal definitions, which defined literacy as a set of basic skills, usually the foundation of reading and writing.
- Less-skills definitions, which did not consider literacy as an ability encompassing different communicative skills and modes.
- Vague definitions, which did not include sufficient information to understand the notion appropriately. However, the elements included seemed coherent or adequate.
- Irrelevant definitions, which contained elements that are not commonly associated with literacy and may be considered unrelated.

Each of these binary variables has a value of 1 if the definition displayed this category, and 0 if it did not. Additionally, two other variables were constructed. The first one was based on the sum of the eight variables to reflect how much a definition is lacking in terms of the principal elements of literacy found in literature. The second was built from the different combinations of gaps where the definition was incomplete, which produced a variable that can be considered nominal, and that explains descriptively which combinations of gaps are the most frequent, making it possible to offer a cross analysis with other variables.

A reliability analysis was performed of the coding system between two of the researchers involved in the study to ensure that the creation of the categories of the eight initial variables was optimal. More specifically, they classified, separately, the answers of 15 participants randomly selected from the study. Then, the Kappa coefficient was used, which produced a result of .588 ( $p < .001$ ) and indicates moderate agreement (Landis & Koch, 1977) amongst the assigned classifications by each researcher. This led to a joint review of the results of the two researchers in order to check that the categorisation made from the definitions was sound. After this process, another 15 definitions were randomly selected and classified a second time by the researchers independently. In this case, there was almost uniform agreement (Kappa = .956;  $p < .001$ ), which ensures that the categorisation can be considered adequate.

Data analysis has been conducted using two complementary approaches. First, a quantitative analysis which provides a description (study of frequencies) of the work in the categories and their possible relationships; second, a qualitative type, with a descriptive and exploratory purpose (McMillan & Schumacher, 2005), allowing us to interpret the definitions given by each of the participants. The software used in the data analysis and the creation of graphics is SPSS v.27.

#### 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis describes each of the variables, first as individual items, then as a group. The individual analysis (see Table 2) shows different behaviours in the variables in terms of the percentage distribution of the values. All of them show a greater percentage in the value ‘no’, that is, the feature is not present in the definition. There is only one exception in the variable ‘less-skills’, which shows similar results in the distribution of ‘yes’ and ‘no’ answers, with a slightly higher value for the option ‘yes’. It is also worth highlighting that the variable ‘irrelevant’ shows the lowest value (7.7%) when compared to the rest of the variables.

Data shows that definitions are most commonly incomplete in relation to the category ‘less skills’ (51%), i.e., participants often consider that literacy is related to just reading and writing. Also, they tend to associate literacy with the school context (42.3%). The third area where definitions are lacking is related to ‘subject-based’ (29.8%), which includes definitions that conceive literacy as something that is taught, sometimes even as a subject-content that needs to be learned. This partialness aligns with a traditional view of literacy, defined as reading and writing skills learned in a school context. These notions fall short of covering the four modes of activity, as expressed in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (2020), leaving aside oral skills, interaction, and the developmental notion of mediation (North & Piccardo, 2016).

*Table 2. Percentage of incompleteness in the variables*

VALUE	SUBJECT-BASED	LANGUAGE ONE-SIDED	SCHOOL CONTEXT	EARLY YEARS	MINIMAL	LESS SKILLS	VAGUE	IRRELEVANT
Yes	29.8	14.4	42.3	11.5	16.3	51.0	17.3	7.7
No	70.2	85.6	57.7	88.5	83.7	49.0	82.7	92.3

The degree of incompleteness in each of the definitions (Table 3) is a variable which can range from 0 to 8, although no variable obtained a value of 6 or higher in this sample. A 0 score indicates that none of the features were found, and an 8 score means that all of the features analysed were present. It is worth noting that the more features present, the less complete the definition is. Results show an average degree of incompleteness of 1.9 (s=1.16) in each definition, with a mode of 1.

*Table 3. Degree of incompleteness in each definition*

DEGREE OF INCOMPLETENESS	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE	CUMULATIVE PERCENTAGE
0	9	8.7	8.7
1	35	33.7	42.3
2	27	26.0	68.3
3	26	25.0	93.3
4	4	3.8	97.1
5	3	2.9	100.0
Total	104	100.0	

With the purpose of describing the variables in more depth and stating what may be the relationship among them, new variables were grouped into different elements that were lacking. The most frequent combination found was ‘less skills’, ‘school context’ and ‘subject-based’, with 13.5% of the definitions showing this combination, the most common incomplete element being ‘less skills’, and the least, ‘subject-based’. Again, these combinations show features that belong to a very traditional view of literacy, which is linked solely to school practices, mainly concentrated on reading and writing, and focuses on how to teach them rather than how to promote them inside and outside the classroom. Even if the percentage is not very high (13.5%), it demonstrates that some of the variables may be present together, maybe because they are shown in this way in the teacher education programmes or because teachers experienced them in this way in their own experience as learners. This last possibility has been put forward by specialised literature since 1975, when professor Lortie (1975) established the idea of ‘the apprenticeship of observation’, indicating how previous teaching experiences have an impact (often negative) on teaching practices. These ideas can be found in literature since then, such as in Pringle (2006) or Purhosein (2012).

When analysing years of experience, the highest degree of incompleteness in the distribution is found in the range between 6 and 15 years (Figure 1). However, participants showing more complete definitions are found in the category of teachers with fewer years of experience. Results are in line with findings in Fernández-Fernández (2020), that showed that older teachers generally offered less accurate and updated definitions of literacy. However, these results run counter to those obtained by the Ofsted report (2012), which observed that newly trained teachers were lacking good quality and updated knowledge on language and literacy. In any case, a more complex and updated conceptualisation of literacy may be a first step to provide high-quality classroom practices, as Medwell et al. (1998), Kuzborska (2011) and Golpour et al. (2020) proved with their research.

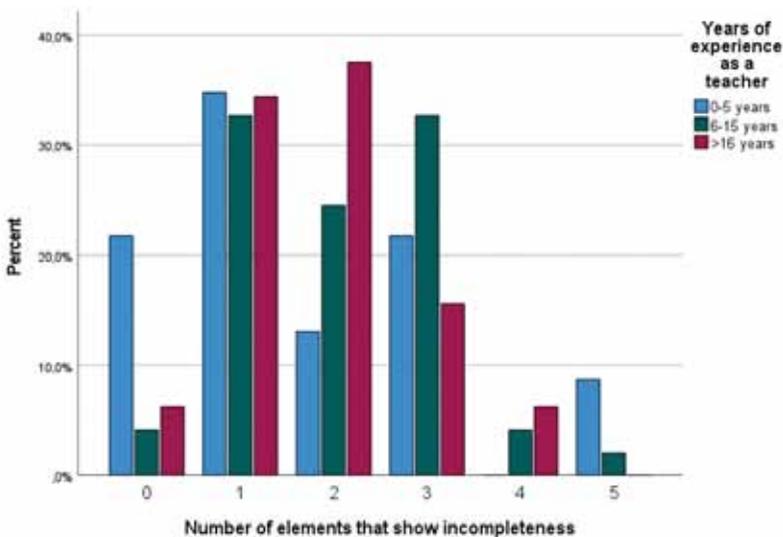


Figure 1. Degree of incompleteness in relation to the years of experience

As literacy is not a fixed notion, teachers need to continuously be aware of new ways of information processing and communication, and promote them in the classroom. Considering what teachers believe to be a literate student and how literacy should be developed in plurilingual contexts is of pivotal importance to foster successful learning experiences. In this regard, Poulson et al. (2001) considered that policymakers should not overlook teachers' beliefs, as they may help "teachers to accommodate, or adjust to, innovations by relating them to their existing theoretical belief structures" (p. 290). Therefore, teachers should be provided with metacognitive strategies that can guide them to self-evaluate their approach to literacy and their practices to ultimately adjust them to the new needs and contexts. In this regard, exposure to different ways of developing literacy by other practitioners and with other methodologies may invite them to know, compare and assimilate teaching tools and strategies that can guarantee students' successful literacy development.

The way in which definitions are lacking cannot be said to be in relation to participants' age (Table 4). At all ages, 'limiting, skills' is the area where definitions are most commonly incomplete, which is associated with a definition that does not encompass all the communicative skills and, more often than not, only refers to reading and writing. It is remarkable to see that 68.2% of the participants in the 40-50 age range have produced definitions reflecting this limiting view of literacy. Nevertheless, half of the youngest participants' definitions also share this characteristic. Results are in line with the study by Poulson et al. (2001), who discovered that some specific cohorts of teachers who were trained in the late 60s and early 70s showed a skill/word approach to literacy. In this case, it may be claimed that the teacher education programmes they received at the time have created an epistemological framework they have used as a reference over time. These results should be taken with caution, as it may be that their classroom practices have shaped the way they have conceptualised literacy. This may be caused by the use of specific resources and materials that were promoting this type of approach towards literacy.

*Table 4 Areas of incompleteness found according to age (intervals)*

	AGE (INTERVALS)			
	<=30	30<x<=40	40<x<=50	x>50
SUBJECT-BASED	27.3%	34.9%	27.3%	25.0%
ACROSS LANGUAGES, LANGUAGE ONE-SIDED	22.7%	16.3%	9.1%	6.3%
LIMITING, SCHOOL CONTEXT	36.4%	44.2%	40.9%	43.8%
LIMITING, LIFELONG	9.1%	14.0%	9.1%	12.5%
LIMITING, MINIMAL	13.60%	20.90%	13,60%	12.50%
LIMITING, LESS SKILLS	50.0%	44.2%	68.2%	43.8%
VAGUE	13.6%	25.6%	13.6%	6.3%
IRRELEVANT	13.6%	2.3%	13.6%	6.3%

A second step in the analysis has been to verify if the variables related to the incompleteness found in the definitions are related to other variables in the study such as age,

years of teaching experience, qualification, specific training, and participation in a literacy programme. To do so, the variables showing incompleteness have been considered individually and as a combination of variables. Several statistical measures have been applied, according to the characteristics of the variables studied.

A pair of variables showing significant relationships is “qualification” and “school context” ( $\Phi=.358$ ,  $p=.004$ ). When looking at these relationships in more detail (Figure 2), it may be claimed that English teachers tend to conceptualise literacy as an ability that is solely developed in school. This profile of participants belongs to those teachers who followed the old curricula of the Teacher Education degree (before 2010), and were trained as English teachers in a 3-year programme fully specialised in the teaching of English as a foreign language. In contrast, Primary teachers with English specialisation (a new 4-year teacher education degree) produce a more open notion of literacy. Results run parallel to Poulson et al. (2001), who found that teachers with higher qualifications tend to have a more constructivist view of literacy. Also in this line, the Ofsted report (2012, p. 6) indicates that “an initial degree in English, other language-based subjects or child development usually provided a stronger foundation of understanding for teaching language and literacy.”

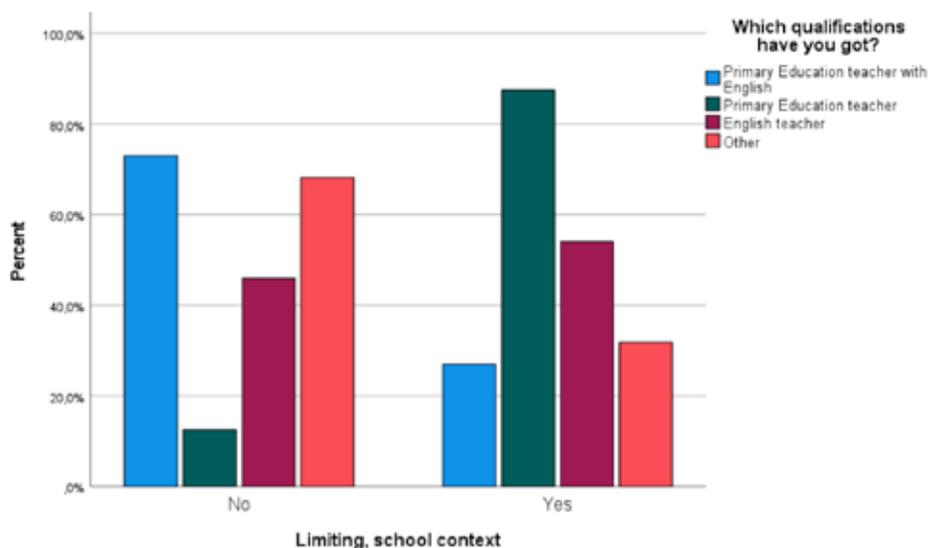


Figure 2. 'Limiting, school context' according to participants' qualifications

Another pair of variables showing a significant relationship is ‘qualification’ and ‘subject-based’ ( $\Phi=.346$ ;  $p=.006$ ) (Figure 3). The tendency shown in the previous analysis is followed. Teachers prepared with the old curricula show higher levels of incompleteness and often consider that literacy to be a subject-content or a piece of knowledge that needs to be taught, but not something that a learner can develop autonomously and outside the classroom.

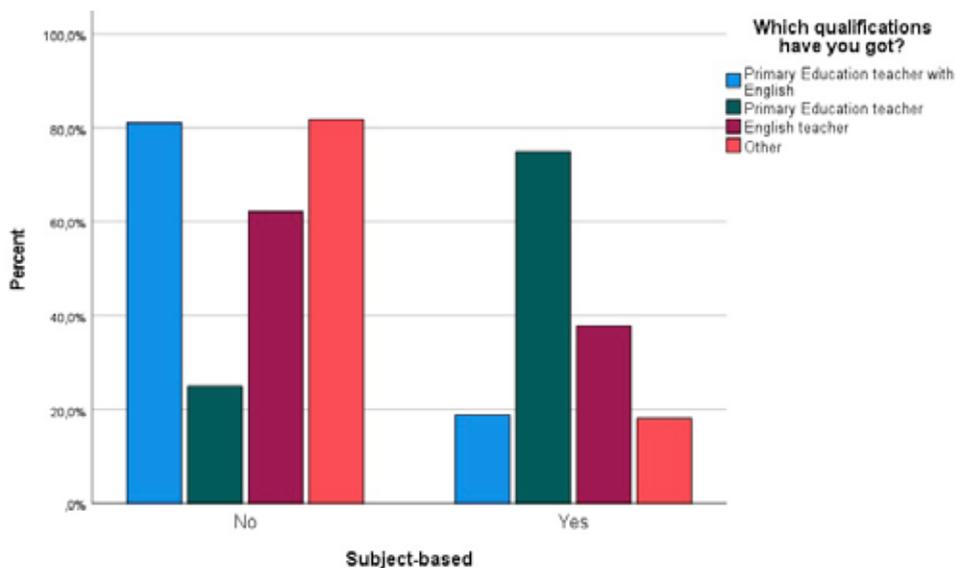


Figure 3. 'Subject-based' according to participants' qualifications

It has also been discovered that the variables “the school/high school has a programme to develop literacy which is involving more than one subject and teacher” and the area of incompleteness termed “Irrelevant” are showing a significant relationship ( $\Phi=0.306$ ;  $p=0.003$ ). This is a striking result, as it may seem evident that teachers working at schools with literacy programmes should show a better conceptualisation of the notion of literacy. They are working in this area and trying to promote it. However, this may also indicate that programmes are built around notions of literacy that are incomplete and, therefore, are not helping teachers to revise and renew their views on literacy. Therefore, it may be essential to assess the foundations of these programmes and establish a framework that describes literacy more accurately in order to promote it appropriately.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of the present study was to find out whether the definitions of literacy provided by English primary teachers matched current definitions found in specialised literature. It is our belief that teachers who have a limited conceptualisation of literacy may not foster literacy development to its full extent, as indicated in previous literature by Medwell et al. (1998), Kuzborska (2011) and Golpour et al. (2020). Results indicate that traditional definitions of literacy are still predominant, with a tendency to associate this notion to early years and minimally to the skills of reading and writing. In this sense, participants seem to only scratch the surface of such a complex concept as literacy. Current definitions of literacy taken from specialised literature emphasise the need to incorporate oral skills, critical thinking, mediation

(North & Piccardo, 2016), as well as other information support and channels provided by new technologies (tweets, voice messages, *TikTok* videos, podcasts, etc.).

Results also show that teachers with a teaching experience of more than six years tend to produce less complete definitions. Therefore, in-service teacher education curricula should incorporate literacy as a permanent professional need that should be revised and reshaped. In this sense, teacher education proposals should not only provide updated notions of literacy, but also invite practitioners to explore their beliefs and conceptualisations around them. In this line, studies conducted by Fernández-Fernández et al. (2005), Pena-Díaz and Porto-Requejo (2008), Rubio-Mostacero (2009), Fernández-Fernández and Halbach (2011) and, more recently, Pérez-Cañado (2014), evidence the need to improve continuous teacher education to address teachers' beliefs and conceptualisations. Ideally, teacher's professional development should favour contact with other practitioners so that they can compare their beliefs and practices.

This study has also shown that the implementation of literacy programmes at schools may be inaccurate in terms of the theoretical framework they are based on. In our sample, teachers who participate in these programmes were more likely to produce definitions with higher levels of incompleteness. Therefore, it is recommended to revise what they mean by literacy and how they are developing it in these projects. Using authentic and highly-contextualised methodologies, such as Project-Based Language Learning or the CLIL approach, may naturally foster effective literacy practices in line with more complete notions of the concept.

We do acknowledge that there are some weaknesses in this study. First of all, this piece of research would clearly have benefited from the participation of more teachers. Secondly, we believe that the categorisation of teachers into different certifications should have been made clearer to avoid having so many responses classified as 'others'. Finally, and as Poulson et al. (2001) indicate, there is a need to gather information about other variables that may be related to teachers' beliefs and conceptualisations, such as their classroom practices, their literacy learning experiences as students, or the methodologies, and the type of materials and resources used.

Some future lines of study could be to conduct exploratory research on teacher education students' conceptualisation of literacy and compare it with in-service teachers' data. This may give insights into how their beliefs and notions evolve over time and what factors may be influential in shaping them. This may be followed up with an experimental study where literacy modules can be delivered in teacher education programmes to observe their impact on teachers and teacher trainees' conceptualisations and practices over time. Finally, another line of future research would be to investigate how the use of different active methodologies may change teachers' notions of literacy. The case may be that the experience of using certain methodologies may change the way teachers conceptualise literacy.

Even if the study does indeed contain some flaws, we are aware of its strengths. If literacy is believed to have a crucial role in our society to guarantee access, equity and freedom, it should become a major research area. This study tries to consider it from the perspective of teachers, with the conviction that they are active agents in fostering good literacy practices that hopefully will help learners reach their fullest potential required in our rapidly changing world.

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