A Pluriliteracies Approach to Teaching for Learning

Putting a pluriliteracies approach into practice

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In cooperation with
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To find out more about the plutiliteracies approach visit http://pluriliteracies.ecml.at

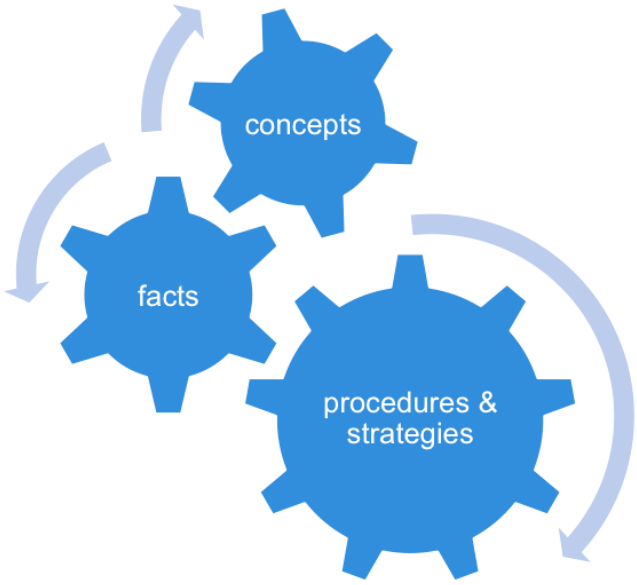
A. Introduction

A pluriliteracies approach to teaching for learning (PTL) puts subject literacy development in more than one language at the core of learning because we believe subject literacies are the key to deep learning and the development of transferable skills. This approach focuses on helping learners become literate in content subjects or topics and to empower them to successfully and appropriately communicate that knowledge across cultures and languages.

A pluriliteracies approach provides teachers with the tools to help their learners acquire increasingly deep subject knowledge which consists of

- ***facts***
- ***concepts***
- ***procedures***

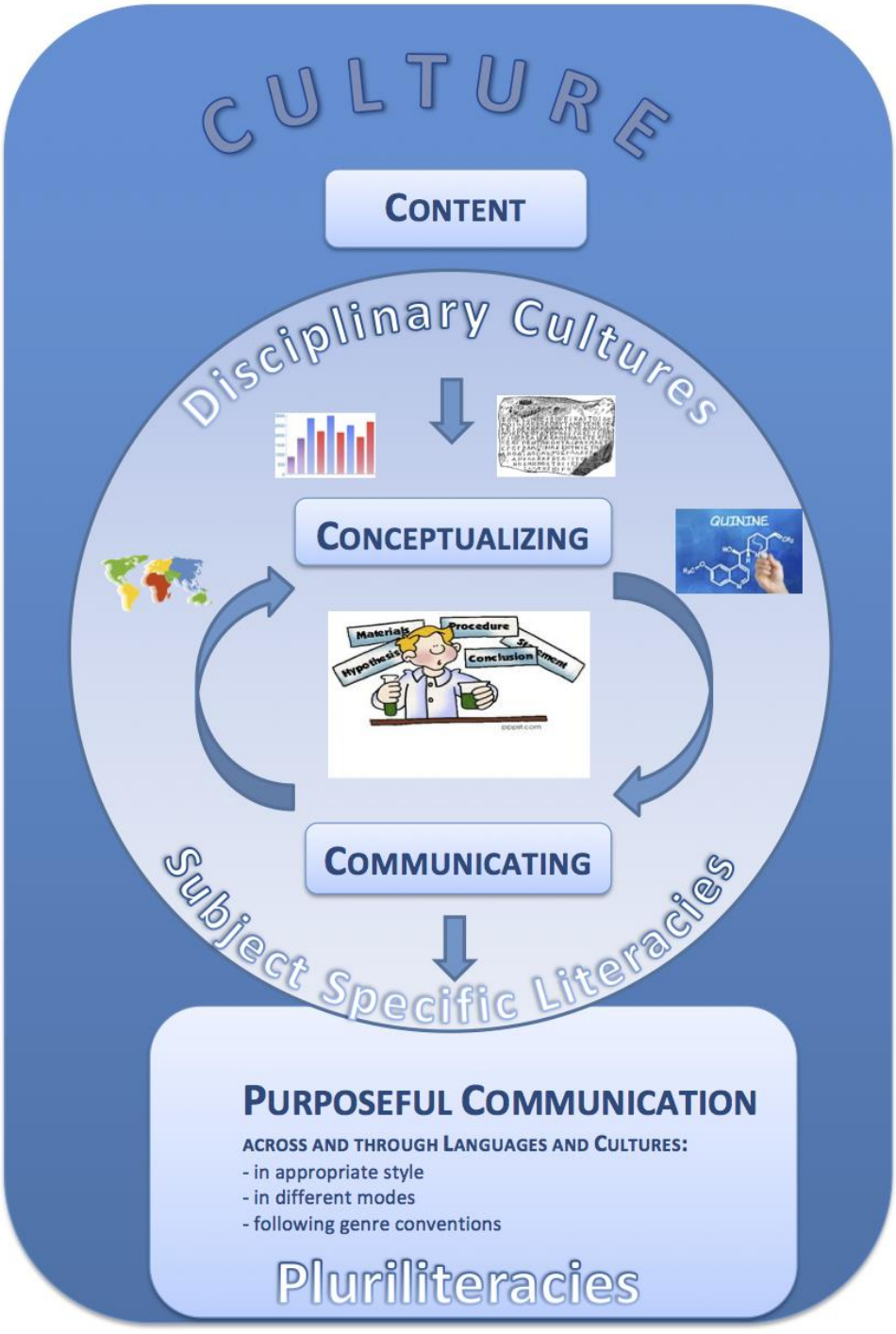
However, knowledge alone is not enough to make progress in a subject or discipline. Learners also need to be taught the subject specific ***strategies,*** to solve the increasingly complex tasks typical of each subject and to learn how to develop the skills that will enable them to do so.



A pluriliteracies approach acknowledges that learning a subject is about so much more than "simply" learning content. It is based on the idea that education is a developmental activity. Therefore learning a subject is not about reciting facts but about **learners** deepening **their** conceptual understanding which may eventually lead to the development of transferable skills and to new ways of thinking.

We know now that ***language is the key to developing and increasing conceptual understanding***. It is this focus on language that will ultimately lead to deeper learning which can be defined as the ability to take what was learned in one situation and apply it to another situation. Through deeper learning (which often involves shared learning and interactions with others in a learning community), learners develop expertise in a particular subject and master its unique ways of creating and sharing knowledge.

Helping our students become pluriliterate (= acquiring subject literacy in more than one language) will empower them to construct and communicate knowledge purposefully and successfully across languages and cultures and prepare them for living and working in the "knowledge age".



B. So what's new?

In line with recent educational thinking we revisit concepts that are regularly used, bring them together and in so doing, renew our understanding of them.

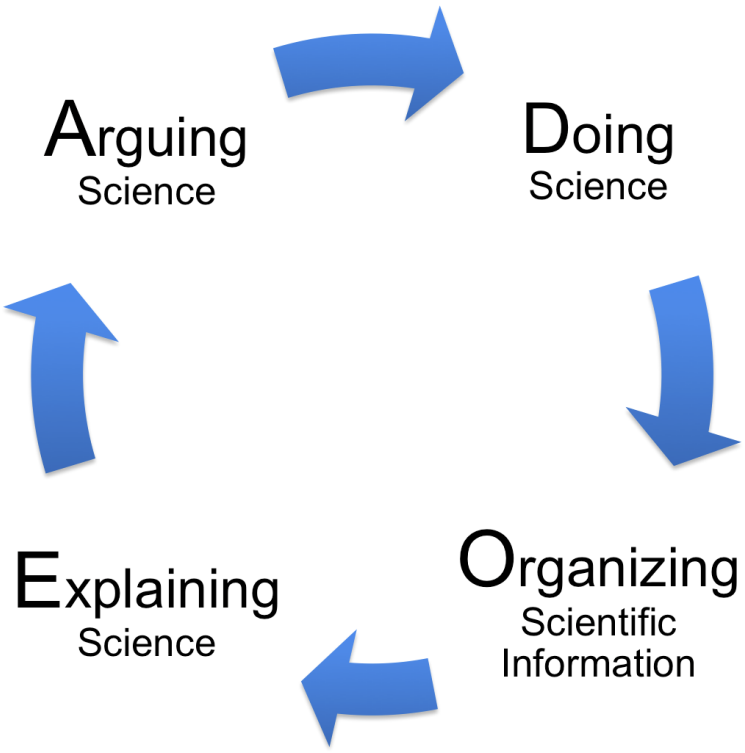
Principles of Pluriliteracies Teaching for Learning (PTL)

Literacies development doesn't just happen, but needs to be planned for and consciously fostered in the content subject lessons. In order to do so, five fundamental principles have to be taken into account.

1. Conceptualising Learning Progression

In order to help our learners make progress along the knowledge path into a subject, teachers need to have a clear understanding about the individual ingredients of progress, how they are interrelated and how they can be made accessible for learning.

The idea that learners of all age groups can participate in all the ways of working and creating knowledge in a subject (**doing, organising, explaining, arguing**) *at an age appropriate level* is one of our model's most central points.



In the same way that students of any age are able to participate in all forms of working in the content subject at different levels of complexity, the language they use will also vary in terms of sophistication. This is illustrated in the Lego analogy: cognitive discourse functions and genres interact at different levels in the process of constructing and communicating knowledge. It shows that, as thinking develops through experience and practice, from the concrete to the abstract, learners are able to process content at an increasingly complex level and communicate their understanding through increasingly sophisticated text types and genres:

Literacy Level \ Genre Level	Micro-Level (i.e. cause and effect)	Meso-Level (i.e. explanation)	Macro-Level (i.e. lab report)
Novice			
Intermediate			
Advanced			

Compared to a novice, a more advanced student should:

- know more facts about any given topic
- have a deeper conceptual understanding of the specific subject content
- have a better command of subject specific procedures/skills and strategies

Since learning cannot be separated from language, learner progress must be expressed through an individual's ability to communicate knowledge and demonstrate understanding by being able to:

- extract information from increasingly complex texts in all relevant modes
- use more genres and genre moves (= sub-parts of a genre)
- express a deeper understanding of relevant concepts within those moves
- communicate his/her understanding in a wide variety of subject specific modes (charts, maps, tables, formulas, drawings, etc., using both analogue and digital media)

However, progression and improvement should not only be observed when comparing student production at different levels over a certain period of time, but should also be promoted by working on any one particular text production. That means that teachers should have a clear idea of what their students need in order to move from task A to task B but they need to make sure that students can improve performance **within** a certain task, i.e. by handing in several drafts/revisions (A1 → A2 → A3).

As teachers, we often accept students' output as the result of students' ability at any given time, without being aware that by going over the product several times, and encouraging and guiding students' work on it, the result can be much improved. A

brilliant illustration of this process, at a very simple level, can be found in the video Austin's Butterfly.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hqh1MRWZjms

Show me how:
Teresa's chemistry materials show how an experiment about redox-reactions conducted under increasingly complex conditions, can lead to an in-depth understanding of the underlying concepts **at three different levels**. (see materials section on our website)

This is demonstrated through a growing command of genre at the meso-level (definition) and macro-level (lab-report), and through the ability of learners to transfer their skills to solve complex tasks.

2. Focusing on the learner

A pluriliteracies approach aims at building learners' meaning making potential, in order to help them move along the knowledge path into a subject. This process focuses on enabling individuals to become independent thinkers and autonomous learners within subject communities.

According to our model, learner progress can be measured by how well learners can link the conceptual continuum and the communicating continuum, or, in other words, how well they can demonstrate their understanding of subject knowledge.

From that point of view, the question of

"How do I know you know
until I hear what you say,
read what you write or
see what you show me
in an appropriate way?"

becomes fundamental to literacy teaching and learning. and puts the learner, a learner's individual needs and talents, and also learner development at the core of a pluriliteracies approach.

Rushing through content just in order to satisfy the demands of a curriculum will not create opportunities for deep learning and will not lead to literacy development. Content that has not been processed or conceptualised by learners is meaningless to them and will soon be forgotten.

Providing students with more opportunities to engage in communicative activities may lead to greater fluency over time but ***will not automatically increase the quality of the students' output*** in terms of complexity or task appropriateness of the language used. Neither will such activities guarantee a deeper understanding of the respective content.

We believe that a purely content oriented approach to learning will fail just as likely as a purely communicative one when it comes to deep learning (defined as internalisation of conceptual knowledge and mastery/automatisation of target skills).

Learning will not reach its full potential until we take a closer look at students' actual task performance in terms of the conceptual understanding expressed in appropriate language. In other words, we need to make sure the quality of the learner output is appropriate to the task demands and the purpose of the communication, and that it reflects the desired level of content processing and understanding.

So instead of saying "I taught my students about the solar eclipse today", teachers will facilitate learning and create opportunities for knowledge construction and meaning making, and not move on to another topic until they can be sure that a full understanding of the underlying concepts has been *actively demonstrated* ***at the appropriate level*** by their students.

3. Languaging for understanding

Language or rather languaging is the key to successful internalisation of concepts which is a prerequisite of deep learning. The two continua in our model (the conceptualising continuum and the communicating continuum) are like rotor blades of a propeller, a plane will only fly if both of them are perfectly aligned. Languaging is the force that sets the blades in motion, accelerates them and keeps the propeller spinning.

What is languaging and why is it important?

Languaging is a means of mediating our thinking. Languaging is the process through which we express our thinking and thus make it visible to others as well as ourselves. It is through the process of languaging that learners make meaning, shape knowledge and experience, thereby reaching increasingly sound understandings and developing the ability to express them appropriately. This continuous process of refining understanding and expression of understanding makes it possible for students to abstract their concept construction from the more anecdotal instance that triggers it. This, in turn, will allow for *transfer* of the knowledge, strategies and procedures developed through this process

of refining understanding to other contexts. It also surely and successfully moves the students beyond the simple parroting of knowledge that constitutes a danger in any subject learning. In other words, we have to dig deep before we can begin to develop transferable knowledge and skills.

How do we help learners develop languaging?

Teachers are familiar with the importance of higher order thinking when they design learning tasks. Cognitive discourse functions***(CDFs)*** are the building blocks of higher order thinking. ***We language through cognitive discourse functions***

It is through these CDFs that learners build and structure knowledge, which allows them to make sense of new content, for example by:

- *describing* and *labelling* the parts of a cell
- *explaining* and *defining* a complex process such as photosynthesis
- *comparing* different types of volcanoes
- *assessing* and *evaluating* the opportunities/threats of hydraulic fracturing (fracking)

A pluriliteracies approach to learning stresses the need to help learners become literate in their subjects. That means that we have to make sure that learners are enabled ***to actively use CDFs*** at increasingly complex levels.

Clearly, asking our learners to "define x" or to "explain y" is not enough for them to fully understand a concept. In addition to that, we have to make visible how to language and,

more importantly, how to language increasingly well. Teachers therefore need to know more about the nature of CDFs and how to make them accessible to all their learners.

Summing up:

Teachers and learners need to become aware of the various aspects of teaching CDFs. For example, in the case of explanation, they need to ask themselves questions such as

1. What different types of explanations exist (i.e. sequential, simple causal or multi-causal)?
2. What do these explanations consist of (i.e. cause and effect structures)?
3. What makes a good explanation? What distinguishes a basic explanation from a more sophisticated one? (i.e. sequential explanation vs multi-causal explanation).
4. How can I help my students improve their explanations? What language materials, tasks or exercises will they need in order to succeed?

Show me how:

Anja Woike's Geography materials (see materials section on our project website) demonstrate how cognitive discourse functions. In her case different types of explanations at different levels of complexity, can systematically and explicitly be incorporated into materials and tasks for different age groups. Learners are systematically supported in gaining an in-depth understanding of the relevant content and of how to communicate their increasingly sophisticated knowledge successfully at increasingly complex levels of language.

4. Realising cultural embeddedness

Learner progression in a subject is clearly related to the ability to understand and produce subject specific text types. In order to acquire subject knowledge and become familiar with the specific conventions of a particular subject, learners need to learn how to:

A) **extract information** from typical text types (like maps, images, tables, charts, etc.)

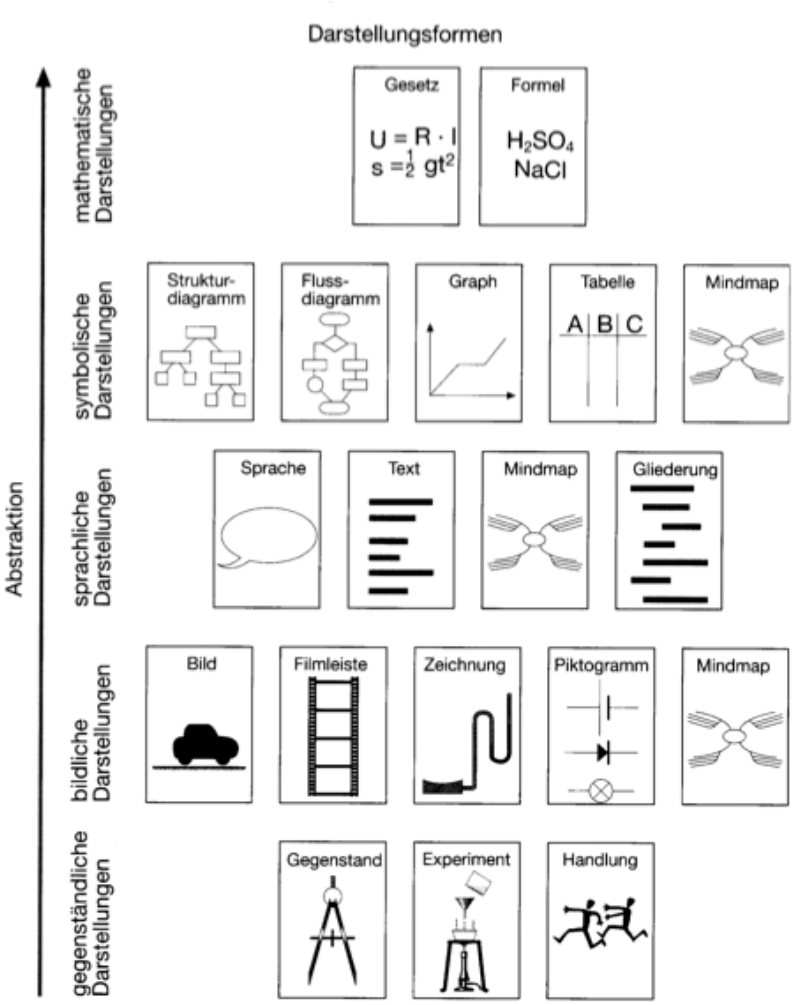


Figure 1: Modes used to communicate subject knowledge
(Leisen, J. (2005): Wechsel der Darstellungsformen. Ein Unterrichtsprinzip für alle Fächer. In: *Der fremdsprachliche Unterricht Englisch* 78, 9-11.)

B) **encode information** and newly gained conceptual understanding into typical text types and/or genres

Scientific Processes	Genres	Purposes
doing things scientifically	• Experiments & protocols	Instruct someone how to do things
	• Laboratory reports	Provide a recount of the method, as well as the results, discussions and conclusions.
	• Investigations	Set out the design and decisions behind students' attempts to behave scientifically
describing & organising the world scientifically	• Descriptions	Describe multiple aspects/features of a natural or physical phenomenon
	• Comparisons	Compare features of two or more physical phenomena
	• Compositions	Present (describe and or define) component parts of a physical phenomenon
	• Classifications	Present different types/classes of a phenomenon
explaining phenomena scientifically	**temporal explanations**	
	• sequential explanations	Explain physical phenomena by presenting the events producing the phenomena in chronological order
	non-temporal explanations	
	• factorial/consequential explanations	Explain the multiple factors/consequences that contribute to a particular event or phenomenon
	• theoretical explanations	Define and illustrate a theoretical principle
arguing scientifically	• Arguments	Persuade the reader/listener to agree with a particular point of view on an issue and some exhort, and to take action
	• Discussions	Present the case for more than one point of view

Figure 2: The genres constituting school science. (Polias, J. (2015 forthcoming). Apprenticing students into science: Doing, talking, writing and drawing scientifically. Stockholm: Hallgren and Fallgren.)

Note: transforming one text into another, in a different style, mode or even a different language is considered to be the key to subject literacy. This opens up new ways of conceptualising and designing learning tasks and of crossing language barriers through

translanguaging or mediation activities as recommended in the Common European Framework of Reference.

5. Rethinking scaffolding for learner development

The terms "scaffolding" and "zone of proximal development" have been widely used in recent years and have become an integral part of CLIL learning and teaching methodology. However, for most people scaffolding simply means providing students with enough supporting materials to help them complete a given task.

It is important to understand that scaffolding is much more than that: following Lantolf we believe that scaffolding is about optimising learner development through appropriate forms of mediation.

Just like a gardener who needs to attend both the flowers that have already blossomed and the ones that are only budding today, it is not enough for us teachers to be only concerned with functions that have already fully formed; we must pay equal attention to functions that are still developing and which might be amenable to teacher intervention.

We must therefore focus our teaching as much on products of past development AS WELL AS on emerging abilities that may become manifest in learner participation in joint activity with others: "what a learner can do today in a cooperative activity, s/he can do tomorrow independently" (Lantolf 2014: 149).

PTL is oriented towards learner development by scaffolding deep learning (defined as the internalisation of conceptual knowledge and increasing mastery/automatisation of the skills and strategies needed to construct and communicate that knowledge).

In PTL, scaffolding becomes multi-dimensional, it is both pro-active and responsive, differentiated and individualised, it ranges from short-term lesson planning to long-term learning trajectories. Scaffolding for deep learning is about providing materials and tasks for knowledge construction and meaning making, as well as practice opportunities and feedback (by peers and teachers), all of which are designed to help learners master relevant skills and strategies (via automatisation) and internalise conceptual knowledge.

In PTL, scaffolding is

- **pro-active** because it anticipates students' prior knowledge and skill level and it focuses on learning progressions
- **responsive & process-oriented** because it contains feedback and reflection activities
- **performance-oriented** as it increases our students' subject specific performance through carefully balanced practice activities (controlled practice, communicative practice, awareness-raising activities as well as opportunities to reflect on learning experiences)
- **continuous** because it constantly provides feedback and practice loops
- **contingent because it is only put in place for as long as the learner needs it.**

C. Planning for PTL

Questions to guide PTL lesson planning

1. What do I want my students to know or do?
2.
    a. What are the facts, concepts, procedures, strategies my students need to master a new topic/theme?
    b. What do my students already know/know how to do and express?
    c. How can I help my students acquire the necessary skills/knowledge? What is the best way to introduce a topic?
    d. How can I help them understand/conceptualise?
    e. How can I help them communicate their understanding?
    f. What kind of learning activity is best suited for the desired learning outcome: student-student interaction; teacher led, student led etc…
    g. What will the focus of my intervention/feedback (key terms, cognitive discourse functions, relevant skills/strategies…)

3. How do I want my students to demonstrate their understanding? What is the desired product/output?
4. How will my learners reflect on their learning?
5. How do I know they know? How do I assess their progress?

Planning CLIL with a Pluriliteracies Focus

CULTURE (BI-FOCAL LENS: BROADER CULTURAL ASPECTS AND DISCIPLINARY CULTURE

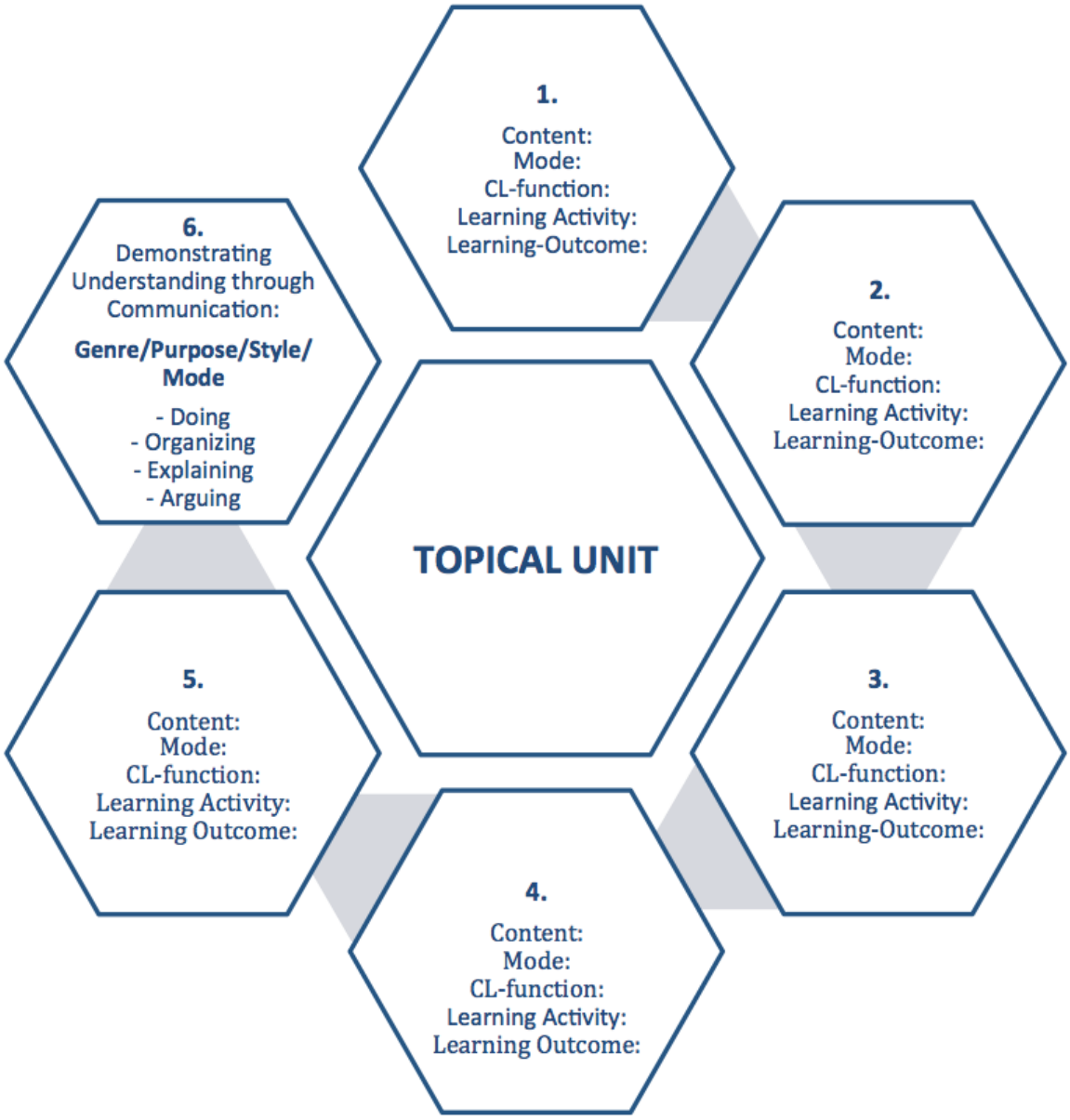
DISCIPLINARY FILTER DETERMINES HOW CONTENT IS BEING PROCESSED

- WHICH DISCOURSE FUNCTIONS ARE USED TO CONCEPTUALIZE CONTENT?
- WHICH STRATEGIES/SKILLS ARE NEEDED TO CONSTRUCT MEANING?

CONTENT TO BE CONCEPTUALIZED

Mode (Input)	○ Text (written, audio, video) ○ Chart ○ Diagram ○ Map ○ Historical Source, etc.	**Processing Level** ○ Beginner ○ Intermediate ○ Advanced	
COGNITION: CONCEPTUALIZING AND COMMUNICATING FOR KNOWLEDGE CONSTRUCTION			
Cognitive Discourse Functions **CDFs**	○ Naming/Labeling ○ Describing ○ Explaining ○ Reporting ○ Evaluating ○ Arguing ○ Hypothesizing ○ Experimenting ○ Simulating ○ Modeling, etc.	○ Beginner ○ Intermediate ○ Advanced	
COMMUNICATION: DEMONSTRATING UNDERSTANDING/ MAKING MEANING			
Purpose	Intercultural filter: On/off	**Literacy Level**	
Genre	**Doing:** ○ procedure ○ practical report **Organizing:** ○ descriptive report ○ taxonomic report **Explaining:** ○ sequential ○ causal ○ factorial ○ consequential ○ theoretical **Arguing:** a) argument ○ analytical argument ○ hortatory argument b) discussion	○ Beginner ○ Intermediate ○ Advanced	
Style	○ formal/informal		
Mode (Output)			
Learning Objectives (planning the what)		**Learning Activities** (planning the how)	
Demonstrating Understanding: How do I know my learners know?			

CLIL-Unit Planning Tool



Info-Box:

Internalisation of concepts and automatisation of skills – key mechanisms of pluriliteracies learning

It is very important for teachers to understand how concepts are internalised, how skills can be automatised and how they as mediators can professionally support that process.

I. Successful internalisation of concepts follows three steps (Vygotski):

Understanding ⇨ **Abstraction** ⇨ **Transfer**

1. Material phase (promotes understanding of a concept):

To capture the systematic essence of a concept in ways that are not only understandable for the learners but which also allow them to apply that concept in subject specific tasks and activities, concepts need to introduced in a hands-on fashion with materials (material objects or charts, diagrams, models) which can be used and manipulated by the students.

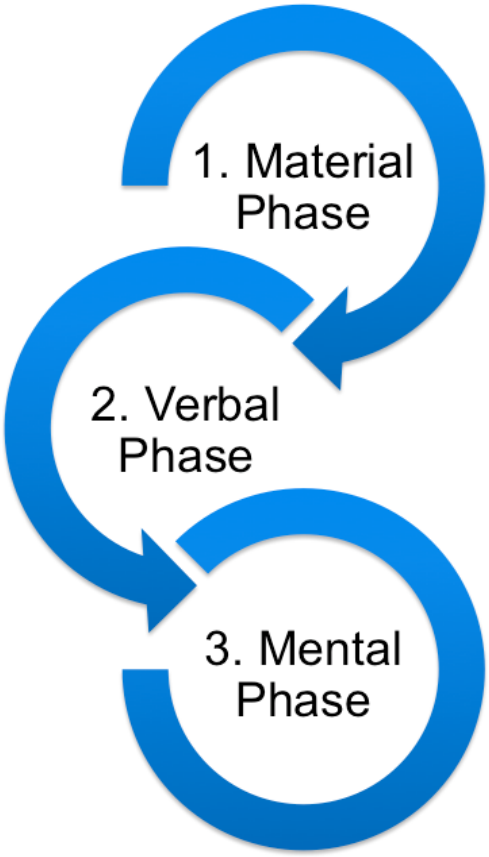
Using materials (compare "DOING SCIENCE") instead of relying on purely verbal instruction familiarises students with the ways of getting things done in a specific subject and greatly reduces the risk of students memorising content without any real understanding.

2. Verbal phase (promotes abstraction of a concept):

As soon as students demonstrate that they can use a concept successfully with material support, it is necessary to remove those materials.
In a next step, students need to communicate the concept either to another (social communication) or to themselves (private speech). This step is absolutely essential because students gain control over a concept and its use through language, so they need to be provided with opportunities to share and deepen their conceptual understanding appropriately. Relying on verbal support in order to appropriately use a concept in a practical activity/task is an important step in transferring the knowledge of a concept and how to use it from the material to the mental plane because it helps students move towards an abstraction of the concept which is a fundamental step towards using a concept in a wide array of different contexts.

3. Mental phase (promotes transfer of conceptual knowledge):

As learners gain mastery over the concept through communication, the process becomes a purely mental one, it becomes inner speech. At this point, understanding and using a concept also become a completely mental process. The individual is now able to use the concept successfully in different contexts and in creative ways.



Summing up:

Language or better *languaging* is the key to successful internalisation of concepts. Successful transfer of conceptual knowledge is only possible when concepts have successfully been moved from the material to the mental phase. Material support is very important in the beginning because it encourages students to really understand a concept rather than only memorising and parroting it.
In other words, we have to dig deep before we can begin to develop transferable knowledge and skills.

Further reading:

- Lantolf, James P, and Matthew E. Poehner. Sociocultural Theory and the Pedagogical Imperative in L2 Education: Vygotskian Praxis and the Research/practice Divide. , 2014. Print.

II. The automatisation of skills also follows three steps and requires carefully balanced practice activities and tasks as well as the right kind of feedback

According to cognitive psychology, skills (see glossary: = "abilility to routinely, reliably and fluently perform goal-directed activities as a result of practice") can be automatised through practice. Automatisation is a powerful process because once we have automatised a skill, it requires fewer resources and allows us to pay attention to other things.

1. Cognitive phase:
   Learners receive explicit instruction about how to solve a task or they watch and observe an expert and try to imitate him/her. This stage requires deliberate attention and effort from the learner, performance is slow and full of mistakes.

2. Declarative phase:

   Through practice, declarative knowledge can become proceduralised.

3. Autonomous phase:

   In this stage, performance is automated, there are hardly any mistakes and learners usually are no longer aware of the individual 'parts' of an action.
   It is very important to mention, that declarative knowledge (i.e. rules about how to do sth./how to complete a task) is stored in a different part of the brain than procedural knowledge and unfortunately, there is no direct route from one memory system to the other. That is why students are usually able to parrot grammar rules but cannot apply that rule in a natural situation. To make things even more complicated, each memory system requires different types of practice activities

However, research has also shown that there are ways of promoting automaticity (the transfer from rule based to memory based system) in the classroom through a mix of

a) awareness raising activities
b) controlled practice
c) communicative practice
d) activities to reflect learning outcomes
e) scaffolding and feedback

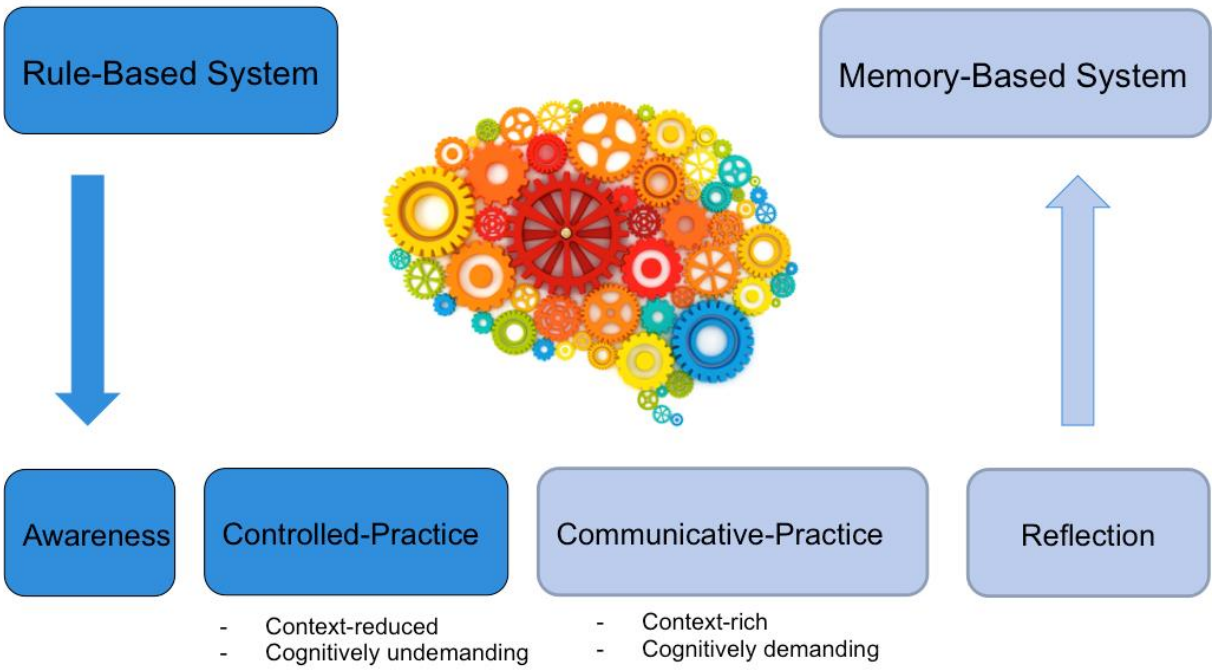


Figure 3: Skill Acquisition, Practice and the Dual-Coded Memory Model – a synopsis (Meyer 2014)

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