Perspectives on Literacy in the 21ˢᵗ Century

Louay Khatib

Doctorate School,
English department,
Lebanese University, Lebanon.
Louaykhatib@live.com

Abstract

There have been controversial views on what constitutes literacy. In earlier times classical literacy was the means of attaining the skills required for operating successfully in societies. In the 21st century, conceptions on literacy are changing. Current debates identify a shift in perspective as well as a new threshold in abilities and requirements (CALR, 2019). Functional literacy is currently acknowledged by UNESCO as an indispensable skill in the 21st century, at individual as well as community level. This study engages in reviews that reveal that many countries do not meet the threshold levels required, despite the interdependence of literacy and modernity, as well as the building of nation states. OECD countries set their threshold at functional literacy levels; MENA countries keep their focus within classical literacy requirements, focusing on ability to read and write. The study traces the development of perspectives on literacy and compares the effective skills of the population of 15 year olds in the comprehension and processing of texts, after years of education in English native language context and English as EFL situation. Practitioners' views are sought to illuminate the interpretations and chart future directions.

Key words: *functional literacy, cognitive perspective, multimodal literacies, classical literacy.*

1. Introduction

Literacy has been perceived as a phenomenon of transition. Its role in transforming societies has been acknowledged and underlined (Beavis, 2013; Bull & Anstey, 2010; Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 2000; Cloonan, 2008; Cope & Kalantzis, 2015). In Europe the transition from a restricted medieval literacy context to modern mass literacy one confirmed the important role of literacy in transforming societies and underscored the interdependence of modernity and literacy.

The concept of literacy, however, has changed over time. From a classical perspective, being literate means having the skills to be able to read, write and speak, to understand and create meaning. In education, classical literacy is focused on meaning making through the study of language and texts in a manner that supports learners' personal growth (the National Literacy Trust, 2012). After the invention of the printing press in the mid-fifteenth century, the quantity of written documents, from books to newspapers and leaflets, grew very quickly, and this contributed to the spread of literacy within its prototypal model.

In the 21st century the conventional notions of literacy started to expand to incorporate views on students' understanding of cultures (Atherton, 2005). It also encompassed empowering students in order to contribute to societies in a meaningful way. Several definitions and discourses started to develop the concept of literacy, drawing on concepts and interpretations associated with different theoretical perspectives.

Literacy practices of the 21st century English classroom included, according to Beavis (2012), Bull and Anstey (2010) and Cope and Kalantiz (2005), an understanding of semiotic meaning, multimodal references, as well as visual and embodied texts. According to the report published by the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), literacy is perceived to embrace, "the knowledge and skills essential for full participation on society" (2018:1). Searle (2003: 52) proposed that views on what constitutes literacy became so diverse that there is no longer one universally accepted definition of literacy.

2. Literature review

From the cognitive perspective, literacy is seen in terms of its relation to mental processes, resulting in the acquisition of knowledge and skills in reading and writing. Reading and writing are understood in this model to be generic basic skills that can be benchmarked and measured.

From a technicist perspective, literacy is perceived as a 'tool or conduit for performance, a means of encoding and decoding information, a generic skill or key competency' (Searle, 2003: 61). Critics of this approach often argue that this perspective results in a 'bolted on' approach to literacy whereby literacy is viewed as a competency that is transferable across different contexts.

The third perception on literacy draws on the socio-linguistic frame in perceiving literacy as a social practice. Searle (2003: 61) emphasizes that: 'reading, writing and enunciating are cultural practices that are learnt in specific cultural contexts which have epistemological significance'. However, in this view, literacy is regarded as a socially and historically construed practice that cannot be generalized across cultures, or treated as neutral or as technical, because it is subject to interpretations within a culture.

Tuominen *et al.* (2005: 337) suggest that literacies are connected 'to historically and contextually defined social values and technologies'. For Tuominen *et al.* (2005: 337), literacy essentially means 'being able to enact in practice the rules of argumentation and reasoning that an affinity group in a specific knowledge domain considers good or eloquent'.

Fairclough and Kress (cited in Cope and New London Group, 2000) advanced the concept of multiliteracies to argue that diversity is the new key aspect of literacy, associated with multimodal forms of expression and representation.

New conceptions of literacy spanned over textual, visual, audio, spatial and electronic mediums and has recently begun to challenge the autonomous and technical views of literacy. New conceptions of literacy have started to promote the need to move towards understanding how multiple ways of knowing are produced through the different domains. This has laid additional requirements on the individual in his pursuit of literacy and the recognition of the plurality of the process.

Elmborg (2006) advocates that literacy is a socio-cultural practice and proposes that it reflects the ideological positions of a community and is, therefore, influenced by the power and control that certain groups have. Elmborg (2006: 193) argues that literacy cannot be described in broad terms such as a set of universal skills or abstract processes, since it is in constant flux and embedded in cultural situations.

The variations in conceptions of literacy suggest that literacy is not simply a set of decontextualized skills that can be codified, measured and audited. Rather, literacy refers to a range of highly contextual social practices in which people engage. Green, in Green and Beavis (2012),

identified three main dimensions in considering 21st century literacy: the operational dimension, the cultural dimension and the critical dimension.
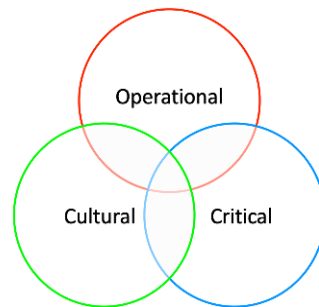

Figure 1: Green's 3 D model

The operational dimension involves the 'how to' knowledge, or the mechanical aspects of literacy, including: deciphering words and understanding the different language resources needed for different types of text, such as visual images. The cultural dimension focuses on: making meaning, making use of written, spoken and electronic texts in social contexts.

This includes engaging with knowledge about the text and using texts to participate in communities of learning. The critical dimension emphasizes reflecting on, questioning and interrogating views and beliefs embedded in texts activities that challenge taken-for-granted assumptions about the texts and the worlds from which they come. According to Green (2012), these three dimensions are interconnected and equally important, and they reflect the skills needed for the 21st century learners.

The educational context, however, seems to have, for the most part, kept its focus on the classical form of literacy, defined as the ability to read, write, and do math. This has resulted in learners who are able to read the words in a document, but are unable to grasp arguments. In the same vein, leaners may be able to write or type sentences, but are unable to express complete, intellectual thoughts. According to World Bank Report (2019), literacy remains a very real problem, specifically in parts of the world outside the West.

Contemporary studies suggest that there is a gap in the perception and attainment of literacy. From a notional view, OECD countries set their threshold at functional literacy levels. However, MENA countries keep their focus within classical literacy requirements. The below chart displays

illiteracy rates in eth MENA region according to World Bank Report (2019) for population aged 15-24, sorted by country.
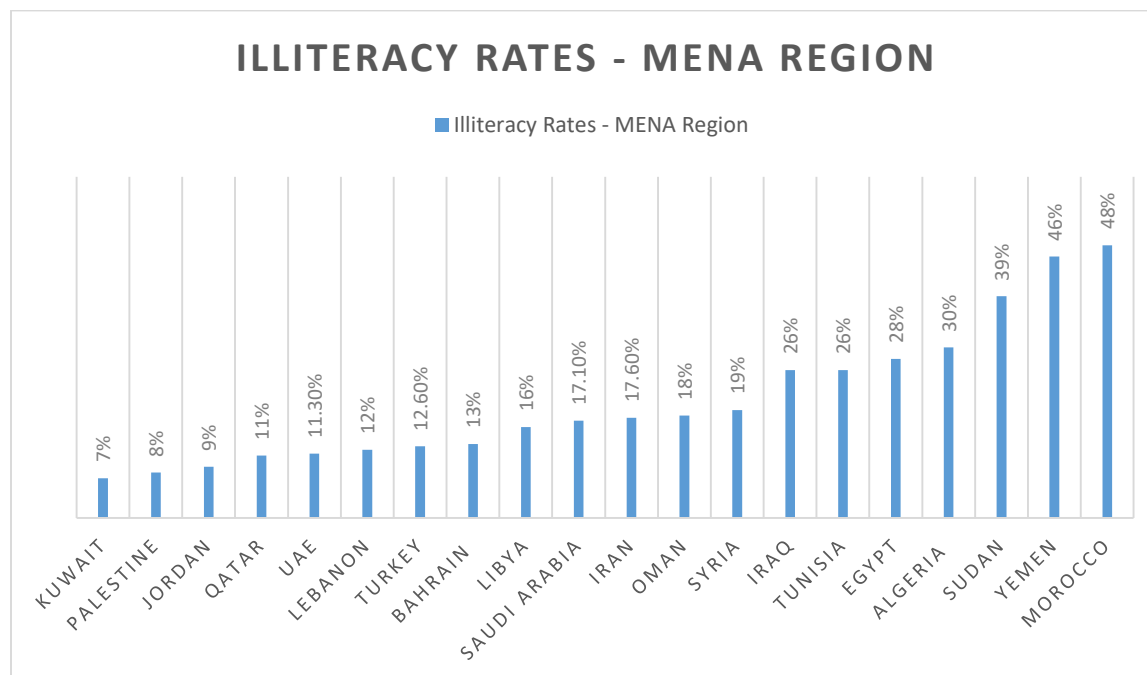

Figure 2: Illiteracy rates in the MENA region

While the figures presented by the World Bank Report on the MENA region (2019) are alarming, figures presented from Europe and the USA fall below expectations. According to the International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioural Sciences (2015), the majority of the population in early modern Europe lacked functional literacy skills and many countries do not meet the threshold levels required. According to the National Assessment of Adult Literacy in the USA (NAAL) 87% of U.S adults can't perform at the Proficient level; and 14% of the population, that is 1 out of every 7 people, are functionally illiterate, or perform Below Basic level. The Global Campaign for Education (2017) claims that 774 million adults worldwide, aged 15 and above, are unable to engage in basic literacy.

In the United Kingdom, according to the National Literacy Trust (2012: 2), "one in six people in the UK struggle with literacy; this means their literacy is below the level expected of an eleven year old". In addition and according to the same report, an estimated 370,000 parents in London struggle with literacy, which means that around 1 in 5 mums and dads may not be able to read confidently with their children (the National Literacy Trust, 2012: 2).

In comparison with the World Bank report on illiteracy distribution across MENA region, we have the below distribution.
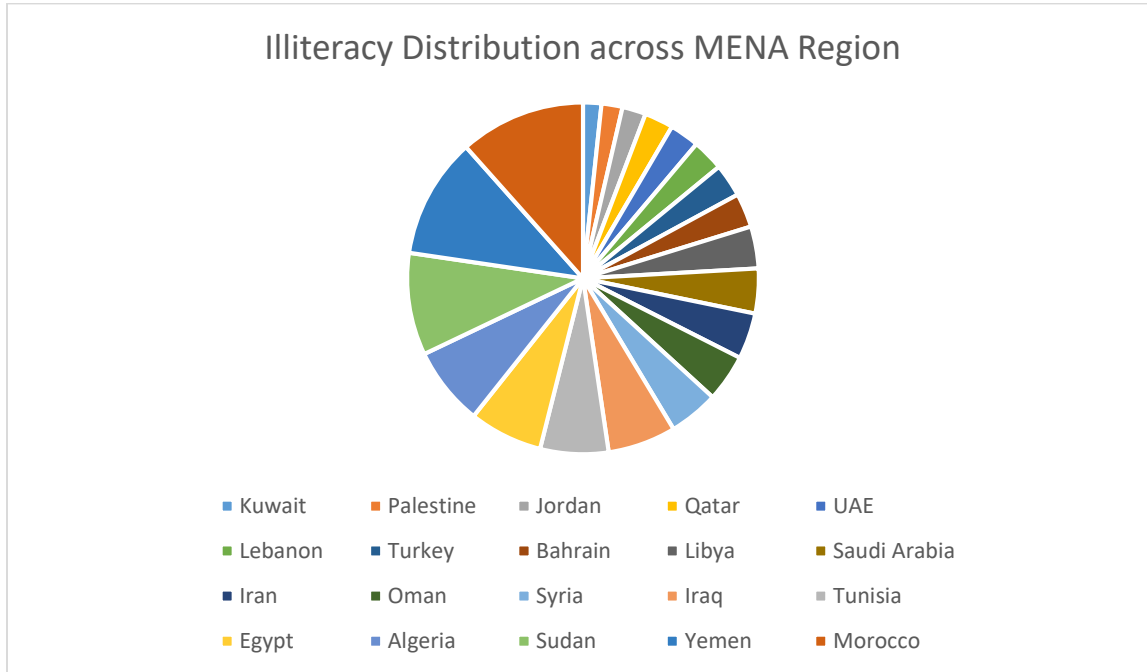

Figure 3: Illiteracy distribution across the MENA region

In comparison with literacy results or the equivalent for all Key Stages in the United Kingdom, Early Years Foundation Stage for age five learners presents the following results over three successive years:

	Percentage achieving expected level		
	2009	2010	2011
Language for communication and thinking	82%	84%	86%
Linking sounds and letters	74	77	79
Reading	72	74	76
Writing	62	65	67

(Source: National Literacy Trust, January 2012: 3)

For Key Stage 1, age seven learners in the UK, the following results were attained over three successive years:

	Percentage achieving expected level		
	2009	2010	2011
Reading (boys and girls)	84% (80/88)	85% (81/89)	85% (82/89)
Writing (boys and girls)	81% (75/87)	81% (76/87)	81% (76/87)
Speaking and Listening (boys and girls)	87% (84/90)	87% (84/90)	87% (84/91)

(Source: National Literacy Trust, January 2012: 3)

As for Key Stage 2 - age eleven learners in the UK, the following results were attained over three successive years:

	Percentage achieving expected level		
	2009	2010	2011
Reading (boys and girls)	86% (82/89)	84% (81/87)	84% (80/87)
Writing (boys and girls)	67% (61/75)	71% (64/79)	75% (68/81)

(Source: National Literacy Trust, January 2012: 3)

For Key Stage 3 - age fourteen, the results for literacy in English were 79% (86% for girls, 73% for boys). As compared with PISA (2018) results for Lebanon's 15 year old students, 32% of 5614 assessed students in 320 schools attained Level 2 proficiency in English, the foreign language, on ability to identify the main idea in a text of moderate length, find information based on explicit as well as complex criteria, and ability to reflect on the purpose and form of the text when directed to do so.

For Key Stage 4 - age sixteen, 65.6% (58.7% boys) and (72.5% girls) achieved A+ to C in English in 2011. It was noted in the National Literacy Trust report (2012) that children and young people not reaching expected literacy levels are more likely to be from disadvantaged backgrounds. The same view was held in PISA 2018 results report on Lebanon and OECD countries, where it was stated that, "the socio-economic advantaged students outperformed disadvantaged students" (OECD, 2019: 4).

3. Literacy or Functional Literacy

In the MENA region, prototype literacy education has been engaged in making developing societies literate or in compensating for lack of adequate schooling in modern societies. In Europe, however, literacy has been closely related to the building of nation-states. It is a precondition for citizenship and socioeconomic participation. The industrial worker must be literate in order to fulfill simple work tasks because logistics and communication are built into every single task on the shop floor.

Functional literacy, however, is about much more than getting a job. It's also about preserving skills that a society needs to function. Examples of functional literacy include:

Media Literacy and the ability to access, evaluate, and create messages through different types of media, with the purpose of turning people from mass consumers into thoughtful citizens who are not susceptible to propaganda or advertising. Religious Literacy with the ability to interpret religious scriptures and communicate with different faiths. Religious literacy is important for combating fundamentalism and religious fanaticism and prejudice like Islamophobia. Financial Literacy and the ability to manage finances and make decisions about money, whether form a consumer perspective or business owner, or voter. Understanding financial budgets, interest rates, and savings is an essential life skill. Computer Literacy and the ability to use computers. This skill set can range from basic competency such as using applications like email and Microsoft Office, to advanced knowledge like programming and computer science. Legal Literacy or the ability to comprehend laws so one is able to follow policies and legal procedures. Scientific Literacy and knowing how to conduct experiments and identify evidence that supports or contradicts preconceived beliefs or hypotheses. Health Literacy and the ability to understand healthcare information, particularly for making medical decisions or lifestyle choices about nutrition, exercise, sleep, and other factors that affect physical and mental well-being. Civic Literacy or civics, which is awareness of how government works as well one's rights and responsibilities as a citizen and voter.

A CBI report surveyed 566 employers in London in 2011 to follow up on their satisfaction with their employees' attained levels of literacy. The results showed 42% of the surveyed employers were not satisfied with the basic use of English by school and college leavers. To address the weaknesses in basic skills, almost half (44%) of employers have had to invest in remedial training for school and college leavers. The same report provided that of employers who rate the

competency of their low-skilled staff as poor or satisfactory, over half report problems with literacy. It was also noted that concern about basic numeracy and literacy is especially acute in retail and manufacturing with 69% of firms in retail and 50% in manufacturing report problems with literacy (CBI, 2011). Men and women with poor literacy were underlined to least likely be in full-time employment at the age of thirty. The report postulated that poor literacy skills can also be a serious barrier to progressing once in employment. 63% of men and 75% of women with very low literacy skills have never received a promotion. In addition, the report stated that there were too many adults who lack basic literacy skills.

In 2006 a Government sponsored review into basic skills, the Leitch Review, found that more than five million adults lack functional literacy, the level needed to get by in life and at work. Consequently, concern has moved from formal education to functional literacy or the competence to actually read and write in everyday life.

4. Functional Literacy

Functional literacy has been acknowledged by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as an indispensable skill in the 21st century, at individual as well as community level (CALR Call for papers, 2019). Functional literacy refers to the practical skill set needed to accomplish real-life purposes. People need to be able to understand and use words and numbers for real-life purposes (UNESCO, 2015). According to UNESCO (2015), literacy is classified according to four levels from a functional perspective:

1) Below Basic Literacy: this concerns reading and writing words and numbers in very simple documents, such as locating easily identifiable information on a chart; signing a form; adding a dollar amount to a deposit slip.

2) Basic Literacy: this level concerns the ability to apply simple skills in order to understand short texts, such as reading a pamphlet; using a TV guide; comparing ticket prices.

3) Intermediate Literacy: this level concerns performing challenging skills in order to understand long texts; examples include looking up information in a reference book; summarizing a long article; placing an order and calculating the cost.

4) Proficient Literacy: this level concerns performing creative and critical thinking skills in order to understand dense or complex texts; examples include comparing viewpoints in editorials; interpreting statistical graphs; measuring and calculating the costs of food items per gram unit.

Therefore, functional literacy, involves the capacity to read a newspaper, sign a check and write a postcard at least. Functional literacy, however, is not a new concept. It was an essential and indispensable precondition of the operating in the nineteenth and twentieth century society. However, this was lacking in the majority of the population in early modern Europe (Kress, 2003; Searle, 1999).

From what has preceded, we can argue that literacy needs to involve more than just the capacity to read and write. Literacy needs to represent a different way of seeing the world and decoding and using information.

5. Literacy in the 21st Century

Taking into consideration the findings of the National Literacy Trust (2012) above, a study was conducted, with 24 public and private English school teacher participants in Lebanon, representing different levels: 12 elementary teachers divided into 6 from cycle 2 representing grades 1, 2 and 3, and 6 from cycle 3 representing grades 4,5 and 6 at the rate of 2 English teachers from each grade, 6 intermediate level teachers representing grades 7, 8 and 9, and 6, and constituting cycle 4, and 6 secondary school teachers representing cycle 5 and distributed evenly on grades 10, 11 and 12.

The study involved survey questionnaire, observation and interviews, to gain an insight into practitioners' perceptions on literacy and the attainment of their students. The 24 teachers that agreed to take part in the study were colleagues of the researcher and worked with him on several projects. They all hold at least BA in English and 2 of them are coordinators with MA degrees.
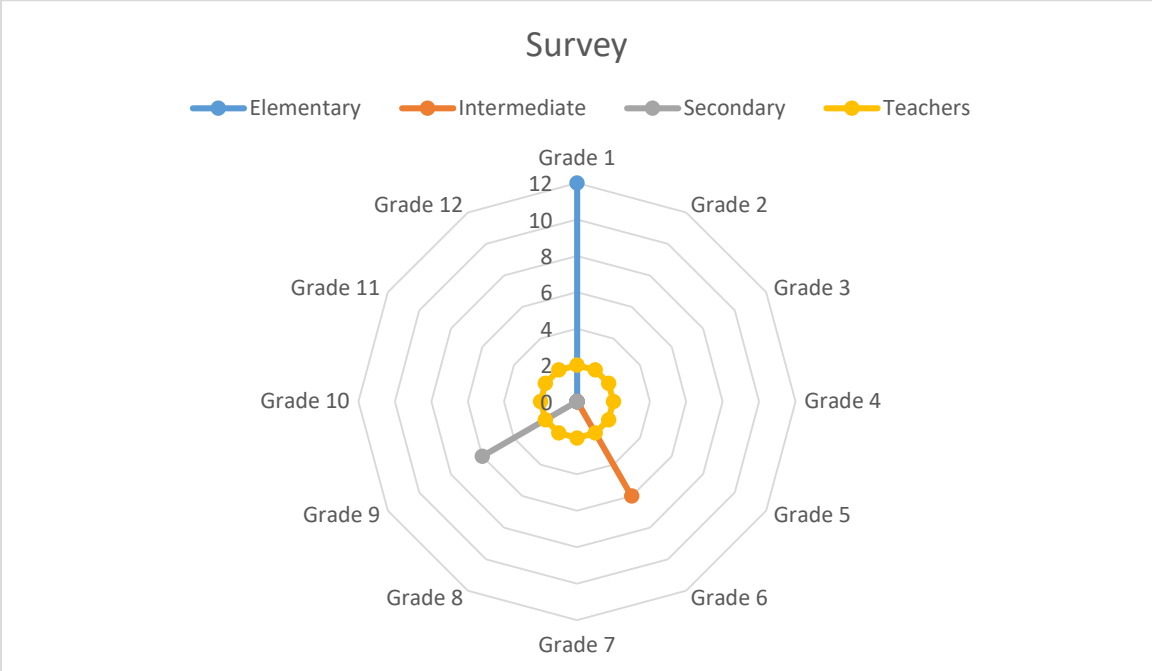
Figure 4: Survey

The survey requested English language teachers to present their view on what constitutes literacy in their perspective. The survey included categories on alphabetic awareness, phonologic awareness, structural awareness, digital literacy and functional literacy. The following findings were obtained:
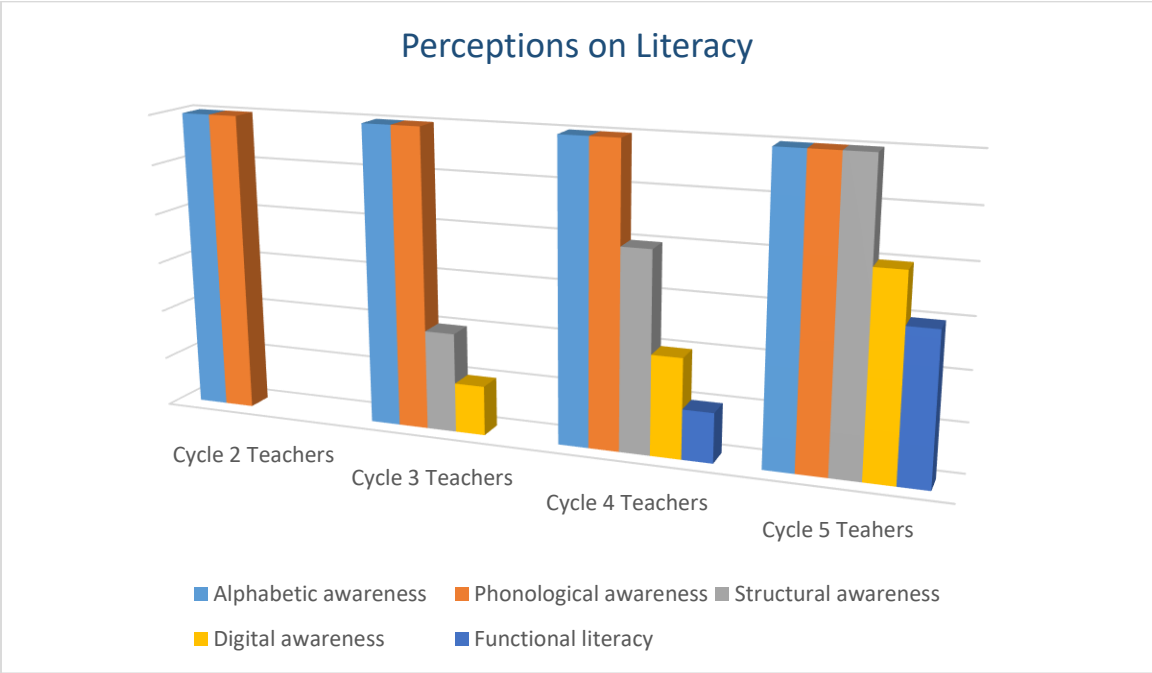

Figure 5: Perceptions on Literacy

Group interviews were conducted with each group of teachers to interpret their replies. All teachers were in agreement that basic perceptions on literacy include alphabetic and phonologic awareness. Cycle 2 teachers added that literacy lessons on phonemic awareness included story telling, action and writing. Grade 4 teachers mentioned that reading comprehension covers themes on ethnicity, langugae and literacy skills. Cycle 3 teachers provided that structural awareness is a features of literacy fo their level as well as some digital literacy. Cycle 4 teachers considered digital literacy imporatnt and some said that they discuss with their students how the learnt skills are used in the home context. Cycle 5 teachers explained that science literacy included functionality and experimentation.

In replying to further questions on what do they think of the concept of functional literacy and whether functional literacy differs from normal literacy, the below replies were obtained:
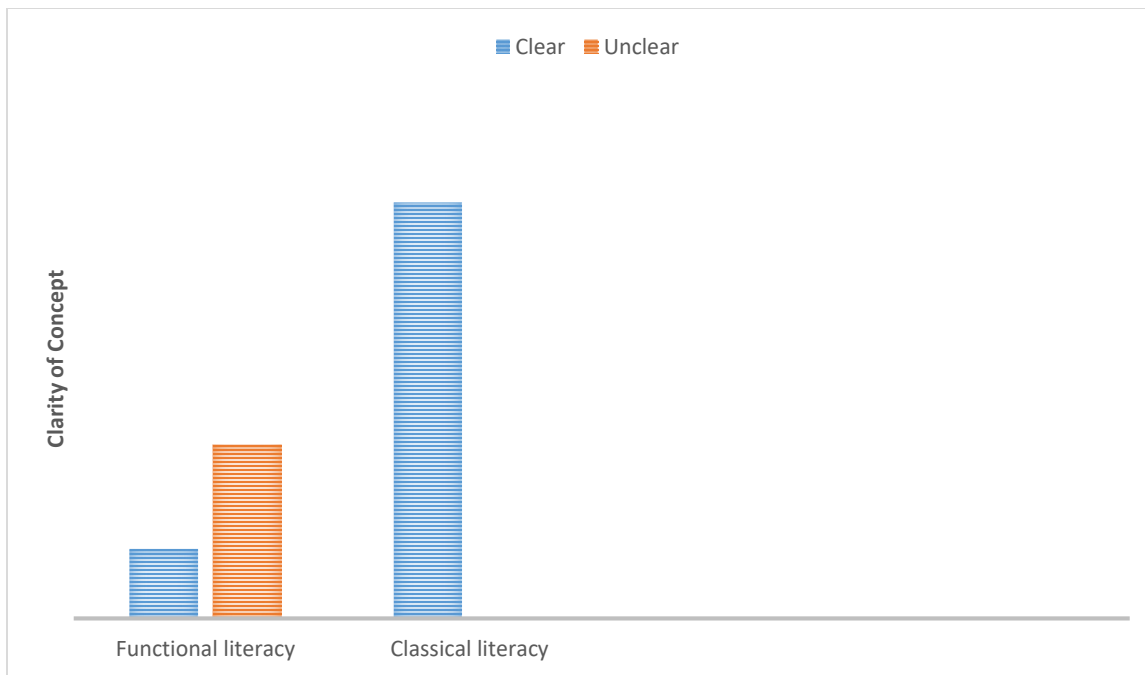

Figure 6: Clarity of Concept

15 teachers out of the 24 were not too clear on what functional literacy means (58%). 6 out of 24 replied that functional literacy means extending activities of reading and writing outside classroom context specifically to solve the assigned homework (25%). 4 out of 24 mentioned transferring the gained skills to real life contexts like preparing shopping lists and reading information on recipe (15%).
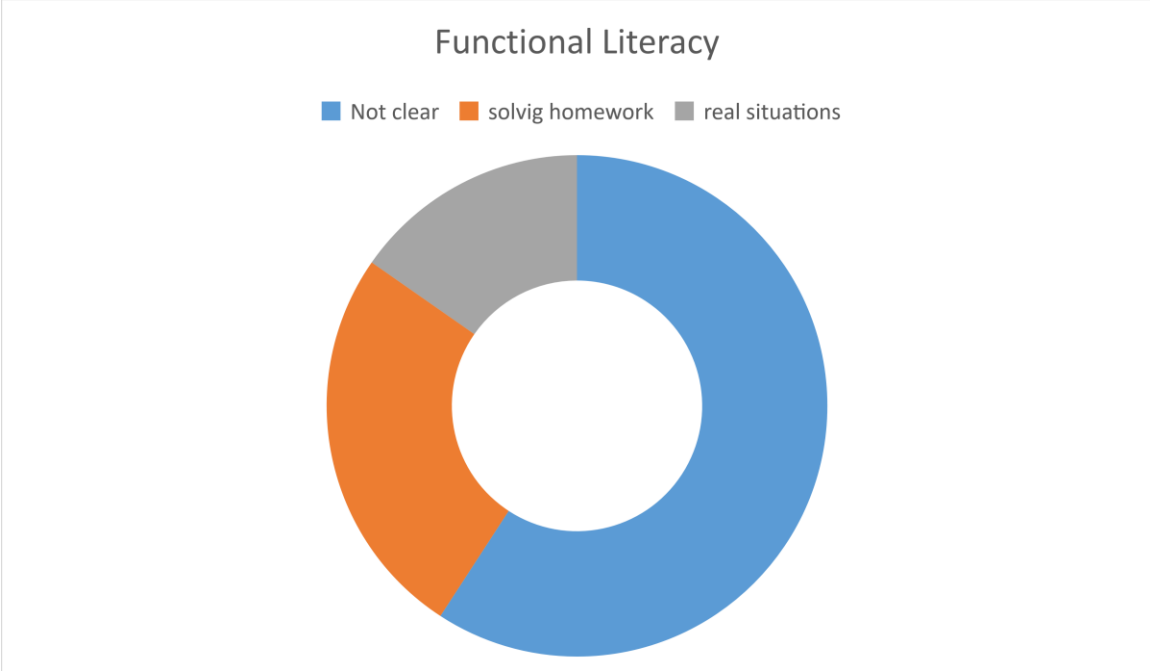
Figure 7: Functional Literacy

From the obtained results, it is evident that practitioners' perceptions on literacy in education remain mainly concerend with the traditional or classical notion of literacy. Teachers perceive that the main focus remains set on teaching learner sreading and writing skills. Additional abilities are required as learner sprogress in educational cycles. Digital and structural literacy feature with teachers qorking with advanced cycles. However, the concept of functional literacy is not too clear for teachers and would need additional awareness campaigns.

The recommendations from this study would urge more effort from syllabus designers to incorporate material that reflect real-life scenarios into texts, and for administrators to arrange workshops that raise awareness of practitioners to relate classroom literacies to real-life applications. Teachers need to engage more with the debate and support the development of societal and functional literacy.

References

Atherton, C. (2005). *Defining Literary Criticism: Scholarship, Authority and the Possession of Literary Knowledge,* 1880–2002. New York: Palgrave.

Beavis, C. (2012). Video Games in the Classroom: developing digital literacies. *Practically Primary, 17(1)*, 17-20.

Beavis, C. (2013). *Literary English and the Challenge of Multimodality. Changing English, 20 (3),* 241-252.

Bull, G., & Anstey, M. (2010). Using the principles of multiliteracies to inform pedagogical change. In D. Cole & D. Pullen (Eds.) *Multiliteracies in motion: Current theory and practice*. New York: Routledge. 141-159.

CBI. (2011). Building for Growth. London: CBI

Chouliaraki, L. and Fairclough, N. (2000). *Discourse in Late Modernity*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Cloonan, A. (2008). Multimodality pedagogies: a multiliteracies approach, *International Journal of Learning, 15(9)*, 159-168.

Cope, B. and Kalantzis, M. (2000). *Multiliteracies: Literacy Learning and the Design of Social Futures*. London: Routledge.

Cope, B. and Kalantzis, M. (2005). *Learning by Design*. Melbourne. Common Grounds Publishing.

Cope, B., & Kalantzis, M. (2009). "Multiliteracies": New Literacies, New Learning. *Pedagogies: An International Journal, 4(3)*, 164-195.

Cope, B., & Kalantzis, M. (eds.) (2015). *A pedagogy of multiliteracies: Learning by design*. Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave.

Elmborg, J. (2006). Critical Information Literacy: Implications for Instructional Practice. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship 32 (2),* March 2006, 192-199.

Gannon, S., Howie, M. and Sawyer, W. (2009). *Charged with Meaning: Reviewing English.* Phoenix Education.

Gee, J. (2002). New Times and New Literacies: Themes for a Changing World. *Learning for the Future*, ed. by Mary Kalantzis, Gella Varnava-Skoura and Bill Cope. Melbourne: Common Ground.

Green, B. & Beavis, C. (2012). *Literacy in 3D: An integrated perspective in theory and practice*. Sydney: ACER.

Green, B. (2018). *Engaging Curriculum Bridging the Curriculum Theory and English Education Divide*. New York: Routledge.

Jama, D. and Dugdale, G. (2012). *Literacy: State of the Nation. A picture of literacy in the UK today*. National Literacy Trust.

Kalantzis, M. (2004). Changing the Means of Representation of Meaning: An Historical Perspective. *International Journal of the Humanities, 3*.

Kalantzis, M. (2006). Changing Subjectivities, New Learning. *Pedagogies: An International Journal,* 1. 7-12.

Kress, G. (2003). *Literacy in the New Media Age*. London: Routledge.

Kress, G. (2000). Design and Transformation: New Theories of Meaning. *Multiliteracies: Literacy Learning and the Design of Social Futures*, ed. by Bill Cope and Mary Kalantzis. London: Routledge. 153-61.

Fairclough, N. (2000) Multiliteracies and Language: Orders of Discourse and Intertextuality. *Multiliteracies: Literacy Learning and the Design of Social Futures*, ed. by Bill Cope and Mary Kalantzis. London: Routledge. 162-81.

NEW LONDON GROUP. (1996). *A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social Futures*. Harvard Educational Review, 66. 60-92.

OECD. (2019). *PISA 2018 Results (Volume I): What Students Know and Can Do*. PISA OECD Publishing. Paris.

OECD. (2019). *PISA 2018 Results (Volume II): Where All Students Can Succeed*. PISA OECD Publishing. Paris

Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), (2018). *Lebanon Country Note. PISA Results*. OECD. PISA 2018 Database.

Scollon, R. (2001). *Mediated Discourse: The Nexus of Practice*. London: Routledge.

Searle, J. (1995). *The Construction of Social Reality*, New York: Free Press.

Searle, J. (1999). *Mind, Language and Society. Philosophy in the Real World*. New York: Basic Books.

Searle, J. (2001). *Rationality in Action*. Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press.

Vygotsky, L. (1962). *Thought and Language*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

UNESCO (2015). *Education for All 2000-2015: Achievements and Challenges*. Global Education Monitoring Report.