

The multilingual turn in FL education

Investigating L3/Ln learners' reading-writing

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The study reported in this article aimed at exploring the impact of pluralistic pedagogy practices on L3/Ln learners' reading and writing abilities in a multilingual classroom. Students attended an Intensive Elementary Italian course. The prerequisite to register for this course was knowledge of at least one other Romance Language or previous exposure to the Italian language. Specifically, the investigation examined whether and how the plurilingual system of these learners could affect the development of the language abilities mentioned above. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected using questionnaires and more traditional tests: a writing test and a reading test with a gradual increase in complexity. The results showed that a plurilingual pedagogy facilitated positive interlingual transfers, and consequently the development of both language abilities, particularly writing. It also appeared that connections between reading and writing were established, that is, the improvement of students' writing skills affected reading comprehension and not vice versa. The development of these language abilities also seemed to be affected by other variables such as the proficiency level of languages present in learners' plurilingual repertoire. To conclude, possible implications for language teaching/learning are discussed.

Keywords: plurilingualism, L3/Ln reading comprehension, L3/Ln writing ability, pluralistic instruction, language abilities

1. The multilingual challenge in North American higher education

Foreign Language (FL) departments of colleges and universities in North America have been facing a number of challenges posed by the increasingly multilingual composition of language classes in the last few decades. This condition has been created by globalization, which is characterized by phenomena such as emergent new technology practices, mobility and migration processes. In this changing

climate, FL departments need to thoroughly revise their mission and educational goals. This thinking was recently supported by the Ad Hoc Report on Foreign Languages issued by the Modern Language Association of North America (MLA 2007), which called for a radical redesign of the FL curricula (Spinelli 2015, 101). The report stated that one of the main goals of these language curricula should be the development of the student's translingual and transcultural competence, which places value on the ability to operate between languages. In fact, in this globalized society, learners need to develop new literacies in order to understand, negotiate, and use the multiple varieties of codes, genres, modes and semiotic resources they will encounter in the real world. New approaches to the curriculum, such as the Multiliteracies approach (New London Group 1996, 2000; Kress 2000, 2003; Cope and Kalantzis 2000, 2009) have been developed to respond to these new challenges and to enhance learning and teaching. This approach emphasizes the importance of enabling the emergence of a pedagogy of multimodalities – linguistic, visual, textual, aural, gestural – to find solutions for the creation and dissemination of texts promoted by the most recent digital technologies. This pedagogy of *multiliteracies* includes the capacity to communicate effectively within the multiplicity of modes by using *multiple languages* and dealing with cultural and linguistic differences *within* and *between* languages (New London Group 1996; Cope and Freeman 2001).

The multiliteracies pedagogical framework proposed by the New London Group (NLG) (1996) added another important component concerning four aspects on which teaching should focus: (1) situated practice (starting with the lived experiences of students), (2) overt instruction (explicit teaching in significant metalanguages), (3) critical framing (looking critically at what is being learned), (4) and transformed practice (applying meaning-making practices to other contexts).

Considering the growing multilingual composition of language classes in higher education in North America, this pedagogical framework has a two-fold implication in language teaching and learning. First of all, it emphasizes the need to draw on “students’ multilingual competences, even if they are learning a single language” (Kramsch 2012, 107). Secondly, studies on Third Language Acquisition (TLA) point out differences in learning a second language and the language/languages chronologically acquired after the second (Thomas 1988; Valencia and Cenoz 1993; Cenoz 2013). These differences are mainly determined by the L3/Ln students’ prior language experience, which makes them faster language learners given that they have access to two or more linguistic and communicative systems. This means that L3/Ln learners have more opportunities for making comparisons with the target language and can generate a larger number of hypotheses in their language learning process (van Gelderen et al. 2003).

This multilingual approach is also endorsed by the Common European Framework¹ (CEFR 2001) promoted by the Council of Europe (CoE). The CEFR aims at developing plurilingualism² in response to European linguistic and cultural diversity, through the learning of a wider variety of European languages.

Considering this multilingual turn in FL education and NLG's multiliteracies pedagogical framework, language practices should value language diversity in the classroom and students' multilingual backgrounds (situated practice). They should develop their metalinguistic awareness (explicit teaching) and the appropriate use of literacy skills (critical framing) acquired in previous language experiences in order to transfer more effectively this knowledge and these skills when learning an additional language (transformed practice). Pluralistic approaches (Candelier et al. 2010; Escudé and Janin 2010; Caddéo and Jamet 2013)³ to language teaching and learning embed all the levels of this framework. These approaches aim to involve simultaneously the use of several varieties of languages and cultures and foster students' plurilingual competence, emphasizing the transversal nature of their knowledge, skills, and learning strategies across languages. In order to facilitate the implementation these plurilingual and intercultural principles in language instruction, an integrating instrument known as FREPA (Framework of Reference for Pluralistic Approaches) has been designed (Candelier et al. 2010).

The present study reports data from an investigation of the impact of pluralistic pedagogy practices (e.g. intercomprehension, cross-linguistic comparison, translanguaging, etc.) on Intensive Elementary Italian students' reading and writing skills in a multilingual classroom. As noted before, there are studies suggesting an advantage for L3 learners when learning an additional language. This investigation aims to explore whether there are advantages for L3/Ln readers and writers as compared to L2 readers and writers, and if so, what these advantages

1. The *Common European Framework* (CEFR) is an instrument of reference that was designed to provide a transparent, coherent and comprehensive basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses and curriculum guidelines, the creation of pedagogical materials, and the assessment of foreign language proficiency. It is used mainly in Europe but also in other continents and it is translated in 39 languages.

2. In the European educational context, the terms *Plurilingualism* and *Multilingualism* have two different meanings. *Plurilingualism* refers to the multiple linguistic resources that an individual can use for communicative purposes. *Multilingualism* indicates the presence of more than one 'variety of language' in a specific geographical area (CoE, 2001). In this study these terms are used taking into consideration this difference of meaning.

3. Pluralistic approaches include: (1) awakening to languages, (2) intercomprehension between related languages, (3) intercultural approach, (4) integrated didactic approach to different languages studied. The pedagogical activities adopted can be transferred from an approach to another (Candelier et al. 2010).

are. It also begins to explore whether and how other background variables relating to students' plurilingual systems may affect the development of their reading and writing skills.

2. Reading and writing in L2 and L3/Ln acquisition

In the global world described above, the abilities to read and write effectively in L2/L3/Ln are becoming increasingly important and language instruction is assuming a fundamental role to enhance these skills.

In this section, the main theoretical perspectives concerning the development of reading and writing abilities in L2/L3 acquisition are described. It is worth noting that, whereas the literature in L2 reading and writing seems to be broad, in-depth research on the acquisition of a third or an additional language is still needed.

Many studies in reading comprehension abilities, in both L1 and L2 contexts, (e.g. Alderson 2000; Adloff, Perfetti, and Catts 2001; Grabe 2009; Khalifa and Weir 2009) have reached the consensus that reading comprehension involves several components: language skills, knowledge resources, and general cognitive abilities. The use of these abilities varies according to proficiency, reading purposes, and specific task.

It is essential to identify the different ways the reader can read and why he/she reads. Large numbers of people need to read in a second, third or additional language for a variety of reasons. As mentioned above, the advent of the Internet has increased the need to develop effective skills and strategies because we are required to cope with large quantities of information which may be provided simultaneously in different languages. Furthermore, the phenomenon of massive migrations around the world in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has contributed to the development of a multilingual society. Daily encounters with different texts, and the need to read them for a variety of purposes, engage us in different types of reading. As Alderson states (2000, 397), the more teaching draws students' attention to how to read for different purposes, the more students' reading ability will improve.

In attempting to understand what is involved in the reading comprehension process, researchers have proposed various theories and models of reading (e.g. Goodman 1967; Just and Carpenter 1987; Perfetti 1999; Cohen and Upton 2006; Birch 2007; Weir and Khalifa 2008). These theorists all recognize that reading comprehension combines the "bottom-up" visual information processing with the "top-down" world knowledge that the reader brings to the task.

In "bottom-up" processing, linguistic knowledge is employed to build smaller units into larger ones through different levels of processing: the orthographic,

phonological, lexical and syntactic features of a text, and then sentence meaning through to a representation of the entire text. In “top-down” processing, larger units affect how smaller units are perceived. Sources of information include context, where general and specific knowledge is used to develop the meaning representation of the text. Grabe (2009) defines these processes as *lower* and *higher processes*. Lower processes include: (1) *word recognition*, (2) *syntactic parsing*, (3) and *semantic-proposition encoding*.

Many studies (e.g. Adams 1990; Perfetti 1999) have demonstrated that word recognition is one of the most important processes for reading comprehension. Word recognition involves the interaction of activated orthographic, phonological, and semantic and syntactic processes (Perfetti 2007; Grabe 2009). Word recognition, therefore, goes through the process of visual/letter recognition, the phonological activation of the form and the activation of its semantic neighbors (collocations, similar meanings), which allow word-integration, before generating its meaning (lexical access). Nagy et al. (1993) point out that the awareness of many cognates across languages and instructional support to make effective use of cognates, facilitate reading in the target language.

Syntactic parsing is also important for reading comprehension. Syntactic information such as determiners (e.g. articles, possessives, etc.), transitional and organizational markers (e.g. connective words *therefore*, *although*; place references *here*, *there* etc.), and word ordering (fixed word order) establish relations within and between propositions and help the reader to build semantic meaning units equivalent to phrase and clause units.

Plurilingual speakers’ comprehension can be facilitated at this level of processing. As Koda points out (2007, 1), L2 reading is a cross-linguistic ability because it combines two languages, L1 and L2. In the context described in this study, this interaction involves more languages. Therefore, reading is no longer a dual-language involvement process (Cook 1997), but a multiple-language involvement process. For instance, Italian written forms that are unfamiliar to English speakers may be more familiar to speakers who have a plurilingual repertoire that includes Romance languages. As mentioned above, plurilingual readers work with the resources of more languages. Parallel grammatical ordering in more languages, cognates across those languages, similar determiners, etc. can facilitate transfers,⁴ particularly if explicit teaching/learning develops awareness of these similarities

4. Linguistic interferences can result in correct language production/reception (positive transfer) or be a source of errors (negative transfer). The goal of most activities adopted by this plurilingual instruction was to facilitate positive transfer, for instance by focusing on differences between cognates and false friends. For further details about the methodology please see Spinelli (2015).

and differences (Nagy et al. 1993; Cook and Bassetti 2005; Koda 2007; Grabe 2009). Thus, some skills such as word-recognition skills will be acquired more rapidly and learners will achieve a greater 'reading fluency'. This term refers to the "reader's ability to develop control over surface-level text processing so that he/she can focus on understanding the deeper levels of meaning embedded in a text" (Rasinski 2004). Grabe (2009, 39) underlines that recent research has accumulated evidence to demonstrate that also *higher level processes* contribute to reading comprehension. High-level processes include: (1) a text model of reader comprehension; (2) a situation model of reader interpretation; (3) a set of readings skills and resources under the command of the executive control mechanism in working memory (strategies, goals, inferences, background knowledge, comprehension monitoring).

In this study the first two higher processes are particularly relevant. The primary function of the *text model* is to represent as closely as possible the information intended by the writer. The reader builds a textual network of information by suppressing less important information, making simple inferences and aiding summary restructuring. However, the reader also brings a level of interpretation to the information being processed, and he/she builds a *situation model of text interpretation*. In the construction of a situation model, various factors are involved such as genre activation, similar story instances, general background knowledge resources, as well as attitudes towards and inferences regarding, writer, episode, and purpose. At this level of interpretation, the transfer of reading literacy (i.e. the capacity to understand and reflect on written texts) and the knowledge of genre structure become more and more important, as described below.

A familiarity with genre is also a fundamental component for the development of L2/L3/Ln writing, as many researchers point out. Writing is a socio-cognitive activity which involves skills in planning and drafting as well as knowledge of language, contexts (i.e. topic, cultural norms, genre, etc.), purpose, and audiences (Hyland 2003, 23). Studies of genre theory often underline the relevance of these factors in defining genre. The model elaborated by Swales (1990) and Bhatia (1993) emphasizes the social nature of a genre. According to Swales (1990), genres are recognizable within the same 'Discourse Community' because they are characterized by a set of communicative goals. For instance, if a L2/L3/Ln writer wants to write a complaint letter within the target community, he/she needs to know the characteristics and structure of that genre as well as all the rhetorical devices which are effective in that community (Spinelli and Parizzi 2010). Contrastive rhetoric (Grabe and Kaplan 1996) emphasizes how written discourse is influenced by culture, for instance the way to structure ideas and use rhetorical strategies (Kaplan 1966). Plurilingual speakers can recognize the textual features of a genre more easily when their linguistic repertoire includes language communities that

share similar discursive practices. The transfer of this knowledge plays a pivotal role in academic contexts with a growing international population.

2.1 Relations between reading and writing abilities in First, Second and Third Language

Different beliefs or principles have been put forward as the study of L2 reading-writing connections has emerged as a field of enquiry in its own right. Research into first language acquisition (Stotsky 1983; Belanger 1987, among others) has shown that there are strong correlations between reading and writing abilities (that is to say, good readers tend to be good writers and vice versa). These studies have also identified common cognitive processes, thus highlighting that instruction in one skill can improve capabilities in the other.

In contrast, fewer studies have explored this connection in second language learning. The experience of L2 learners is much more complex (Carson et al. 1990; Ferris and Hedgcock 1998; Grabe 2001; Hirvela 2004). It is therefore necessary to consider many other variables such as learners' L2/L3/Ln proficiency, interlingual transfer, and the relationship between literacy skills across languages (from L1 to L2 or from L1 and L2 to L3 etc.) as well as across modalities (from reading to writing and from writing to reading).

The departure from conventional thinking, which considered reading as a passive act, is represented by Tierney and Pearson's (1983, 568) statement that both writing and reading represent an act of composing, that is they are similar processes of meaning construction. Reading and writing may use the same rhetorical structures, thus learners can use their knowledge of writing conventions to make sense of their reading and vice versa (i.e. they may notice similarities in how they read and write). Correlation studies looked at this possible relationship and the role of one skill in supporting the development of the other. Among these studies, there is Tierney and Shanahan's (1991) review of the reading-writing literature. They affirmed that "reading and writing involve similar, shared, and overlapping linguistic, cognitive, or social resources" (246). They also added that both skills entail the negotiation of making meaning and that learners shift back and forth from reading to writing according to the goals to be achieved. Therefore, the relationship between reading and writing involves not only a cognitive but also a social dimension. Carson and Leki (1993) define writing as a communicative act, that is a process in which communicative purposes and audience lead learners' language choices. This social dimension is emphasized, as already mentioned in the previous section, by studies on genre theory (Swales 1990; Bhatia 1993) and contrastive rhetoric (Grabe and Kaplan 1996). By drawing learners' attention to the properties and conventions of reading and writing texts (*genre*), and focusing

on the dynamic nature of the relationship between these two skills, it is possible to guide their entry into the communities where these *genres* are used. As Grabe (2001) stresses, in order to understand the reading and writing processes in a L2 context, it is also important to take into consideration how the language itself is learnt and what skills L2 learners bring to those processes.

Such a transfer of literacy, language competence, and skills is more complex in a multilingual learning setting, as the one described in the present study. In this context, the learners' linguistic repertoires embody different linguistic, rhetorical, and cultural backgrounds, and involve varying degrees of literacy, not only in the L1 but also in the other languages (L2/L3/Ln). These transfers may either facilitate L3/Ln reading comprehension and writing or interfere with their development.

Cummins (1981) suggests that the literacy transfer capability from L1 emerges only after learners reach a threshold level in their L2 proficiency. Alderson (1984) underlines that this level is a prerequisite for transferring reading skills from L1 to L2. In their study, Carson et al. (1990) conclude that interlingual transfer may occur but varies according to the learners' first language background and other aspects of educational background and experience. As seen above, when the learners' language repertoire involves multiple languages this process becomes more complex. For instance, an English speaker who learns Italian as L3 having German as L2 will have a different language experience from an English speaker who studied French as L2, because Italian and French belong to the same language family and this proximity can speed up the language learning process.

Moreover, Carson et al. (1990) show that the ability to read is transferred more easily from L1 to L2 compared with the ability to write. They suggest that at a low proficiency level learners' interlingual transfer may be more important for L2 reading. Tierney (1992) compared beliefs and pedagogical practices in the 1970s and 1990s and affirms that in the latter years there was not only the acknowledgment that reading and writing go hand in hand but also that early writing is an *avenue* for reading development.

Even though correlation studies have developed some of the principles discussed above, there is still not an exhaustive model of L2 reading-writing connections. However, a model can be drawn from the ideas, findings, and beliefs that have emerged over the last few years. As Hunt (1985) suggests, in order to create the reading-writing connection model, we need to rely on "common sense". This common sense "dictates that reading and writing are related" (159) and supports the core notion that "reading and writing are inseparable as two sides of the same coin" (Peritz 1993, 382).

3. Research questions

In the light of the aforementioned possibilities for future research on plurilingual learners' skills development, the present study investigates the following questions:

1. What is the nature of the reading and writing abilities of Italian as L3/Ln language learners?
2. What is the relationship between their reading and writing abilities?
3. What are the effects of plurilingual practices on the development of these two skills?
4. What is the relationship between the learners' range of their plurilingual repertoire (including the mother tongue) and their reading and writing abilities?

4. Method

4.1 Setting and participants

All of the information on the participants in this study was gathered through an initial background questionnaire. The participants were 14 students of the Italian Language Program, at a private university in the US, who attended the Intensive Italian Elementary course in the spring semester 2014. The prerequisite to register for this course was the knowledge of at least one other Romance Language or previous exposure to the Italian language, for instance during a limited stay in the country.

The characteristics of the group are shown in Table 1. Students' plurilingual repertoires comprised different languages (L1: English, French, Spanish, and German; L2/L3/Ln: German, Spanish, French, Portuguese, Russian, Hebrew, Arabic, Chinese, Irish, and Italian).

Table 1. Profile of participants

Variable	American ($n = 12$)	Swiss ($n = 1$)	German ($n = 1$)
	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>
English as mother tongue	11	–	–
Bilingual (English and Spanish)	1	–	–
Bilingual (French and English)	–	1	–
Bilingual (French and German)	–	–	1
Attending college	12	–	–
Attending graduate school	1	1	–
Plurilingual repertoire (2 languages)	1	–	–

Table 1. (continued)

Variable	American (n = 12)	Swiss(n = 1)	German (n = 1)
Plurilingual repertoire (3 languages)	7	–	–
Plurilingual repertoire (4 languages)	6	–	1
Plurilingual repertoire (5 languages)	2	–	–
Plurilingual repertoire (6 languages)	–	1	–
Plurilingual repertoire (7 languages)	1	–	–
Female students	8	1	–
Male students	4	–	1

4.2 Materials and instruction

The topics and learning objectives of the course for the development of language skills (reading, listening, spoken/written production, spoken/written interaction)⁵ and competences (lexical and grammatical competence) were identified using the CEFR (Council of Europe 2001) descriptors. Language objectives (lexical items, grammatical items and genres) were selected according to the taxonomy for the Italian Language of the *Profilo della lingua Italiana* (Spinelli and Parizzi 2010).⁶ The course aimed at enhancing these skills and competences in order to foster students' communicative language competence at the CEFR A2.2 level.

The standard curriculum goals were integrated with the goals considered necessary from a plurilingual and intercultural pedagogic perspective and described by the FREPA inventories.⁷ These descriptors were adopted to design the plurilingual activities that were incorporated in classroom work. The authoring tool Wiki was used to build a multilingual space (Spinelli 2015). The multiple modalities of representation available in the Wiki online environment (sound, picture, video, etc.) were used by learners to create multimedia and multilingual materials linking their existing knowledge and linguistic repertoire to the target language.

5. For this categorization see the Common European Framework (Council of Europe 2001). In spoken interaction the speaker participates in communicative exchanges with at least one interlocutor, while in spoken production he/she mostly produces one-way oral communication.

6. The *Profilo della lingua italiana* is the outcome of the European Project "Reference Level Descriptions for National and Regional Languages" promoted by the Language Policy Division of the Council of Europe in 2005. The Project aimed at describing the linguistic and communicative competence of CEFR levels for different languages among which are Italian, French, German, English, and Spanish.

7. For CARAP-FREPA descriptors see: <http://carap.ecml.at/CARAP/tabid/2332/language/en-GB/Default.aspx>

In a preliminary phase, students were asked to read some excerpts from the literature on plurilingualism in order to familiarize themselves with its key-principles. They were then asked to: (1) build multilingual tables according to the known languages and making inter-linguistic comparisons (e.g. focusing on similarities of linguistic exponents used across languages to carry out communicative functions such as “asking for information”: *come, comment, cómo, como*); (2) build a multilingual dictionary and find bridges between languages (e.g. identifying cognates or orthographic correspondences: *università, université, universidad, universidade, university*); (3) focus on similarities and differences in the use of grammar structures across languages (e.g. the use of the past tense) and at the word level (e.g. cognates versus ‘false friends’:⁸ the words *anniversaire* and *aniversário* – ‘birthday’ in English- are cognates respectively in French and in Portuguese but are ‘false friends’ compared to the words *anniversario* in Italian and *aniversario* in Spanish – ‘anniversary’ in English); (4) read in an unknown language (e.g. in another Romance language such as Catalan) in order to identify individually and with peers the reading strategies and cross-linguistic transfers used when dealing with written texts in different languages. These activities were closely linked to the topic of each unit in the syllabus, and affected classroom dynamics. In fact, even though the main language used in classroom interactions was the target language, multiple language practices (e.g. code-switching, code-mixing, translanguaging) were considered an integral component of the Italian language learning process. Also, while comparing Romance languages, students spontaneously involved other languages drawn from their repertoires (e.g. English or German).

This comparative approach and the simultaneous presentation of known languages allowed learners to find linguistic adjacencies also between languages which did not belong to the same language family, but which developed relationships for geographical proximity (Castagne 2011) or for historical reasons (e.g. the Italian word *stazione* shows a closer orthographic and semantic correspondence with the English word *station* than with the French word *gare*).

4.3 Data collection

The data were collected during the spring semester by means of different tools: (1) an initial questionnaire⁹ divided into 3 main sections (to collect information

8. Cognates are words related in origin and with a similar meaning in genetically related languages descended from the same ancestral root. ‘False friends’ are words that have the same origin and spelling but convey different meanings.

9. The initial questionnaire, post-reading test and final questionnaire included selected-responses and open-items.

about each student's language profile, motivation, and awareness of his/her plurilingual skills); (2) traditional tests for assessing students' reading and writing skills; (3) a post-reading test questionnaire; (4) a teacher's journal; (5) recordings of classroom interactions; (6) and a final questionnaire organized around 4 main aspects: the frequency of the access to the plurilingual space, the development of plurilingual skills, the usefulness of the authoring tool Wiki in building this space, and students' suggestions for further improvement.

The findings described below mainly focus on data collected through the traditional tests and the post-reading test questionnaire because they provide relevant information about the development of students' reading and writing skills in this specific instructional context.

The reading test used for this study was based on Weir and Khalifa's (2008) reading model. The benefit of this model is that it correlates the cognitive processes activated in the reading comprehension and the type of readings. Weir and Khalifa (2008, 9) list these processes in terms of cognitive load from the easiest to the most difficult in the following way: (1) scanning/searching for specific information; (2) careful local reading; (3) skimming for the gist; (4) careful global reading to comprehend the main idea(s); (5) search reading for global information; (6) careful global reading to comprehend a text; (7) careful global reading to comprehend texts.

While this model is not empirically based, several studies demonstrate the gradual complexity of this scale of items. For instance, Ashton (2003) showed that the reading sub-skills described by items 6 and 7 of this scale are consistently more challenging than that of item 5. Also, this model shows some correspondences with the CEFR level descriptors. For instance, while scanning/search reading is more evident at the A level, skimming for the gist and careful global reading to comprehend main ideas are included in the descriptors of the B level.

In accord with this model, the reading test was designed with gradually increasing difficulty. It involved three types of reading, each of them entailing a different cognitive load: scanning and searching for specific information (first reading); careful local reading (to find local information) and skimming for the gist (second reading); careful reading at global level (to understand main ideas such as feelings and wishes) and careful local reading (third reading). The second and third types of reading required respectively a text model and both a text and situation model of reading comprehension according to Grabe's definition outlined above. In the case of L2 students, if a text is too difficult in relation to their language proficiency, they will over-rely on their early situation model and will poorly develop their text model of comprehension. In order to avoid this, the texts used for the reading test were selected according to the taxonomy of the *Profilo della lingua italiana* (Spinelli and Parizzi 2010).

Taking into consideration the socio-cognitive nature of writing, the test was designed to assess task fulfillment, vocabulary range, organization, and accuracy. Task fulfillment concerned clarity of communication, development of the content points and quantity and complexity of the language used. In this study, students were asked to produce a referential email text using an informal register. The goal (describing vacation activities) and the addressee (an Italian friend) were chosen to reflect a real-world task. Task fulfillment included clarity of communication, which may be affected by the presence of errors that may or may not impede communication. So, task fulfillment is inextricably related to accuracy and this, in turn, is determined by the learners' level of competence, as described by the grammar taxonomy of the *Profilo della lingua italiana* (Spinelli and Parizzi 2010). Thus, the use of more complex structures was assessed positively, unless they made the meaning obscure. The vocabulary range was closely related to the topic of the task and vocabulary assessment included the appropriate use of words for the assigned task and specific context. Lastly, organization focused on the coherence and cohesion of ideas through the use of connective words covered by the syllabus taught during the first part of the semester and according to the grammar taxonomy of the *Profilo della lingua italiana* (Spinelli and Parizzi 2010). Both tests were part of the midterm exam, which is a university requirement half-way through each course. It covers half of the curricular syllabus.

Finally, the correlation between reading and writing skills was intended to be determined by knowledge of context (which includes audience, purpose and genre), linguistic knowledge (syntactic and lexical), and language proficiency level. Both reading and writing tests were used to collect quantitative data about the level of language proficiency that students were able to reach half-way through the semester, as a result of integrated instructional practices including traditional¹⁰ and plurilingual activities.

Another question addressed in this study concerned the impact of such instruction, in particular of the plurilingual pedagogy, on students' reading and writing skills. To this end, a post-reading questionnaire was submitted right after the reading test. This questionnaire functioned as 'stimulated recall' for students' cognitive processes and affective responses activated during the test. It also served to evaluate the role that the different plurilingual skills developed through this pedagogy played in facilitating reading comprehension.

10. The instructional approach integrated traditional and plurilingual activities that is, although the main focus of the work in the classroom was the target language, plurilingual practices (e.g. code-switching, code-mixing, translanguaging, etc.) were used to convey meanings.

5. Findings

The scores of the descriptive statistics provided relevant information about students' reading and writing skills. The analysis, which is shown in this section, concerns the most informative data. As shown in Table 2, the negative kurtosis (-1.415) and the positive skewness (0.90) highlighted that the distribution of scores of the reading test spread out pretty widely across the students. It is interesting to note that, according to the qualitative data collected through the initial background questionnaire, the students who obtained the highest score (12) had a similar profile. They both had a wide plurilingual repertoire (from 5 to 7 languages), which includes at least two Romance languages. Most importantly, they had reached an advanced level of Spanish language proficiency and had stayed in a Spanish-speaking country for a fairly long period of time. In addition, the students who scored 7 on reading also obtained the lower scores on writing. Further details of the relationship between these students' reading and writing abilities are given below.

Table 2. Dispersion statistics for the overall reading test

<i>Statistic</i>	<i>Minimum</i>	<i>Maximum</i>	<i>Range</i>	<i>Std. Dev.</i>	<i>Skewness</i>	<i>Kurtosis</i>
<i>Value</i>	7	12	5	1.823	.090	-1.415

Since the reading test was a test with a gradual increase of complexity, both the quantity (how many) and quality (which type) of the questions students answered correctly were important. Therefore, for the purpose of this investigation, a more specific analysis of the data related to the reading test sub-constructs provides more relevant information.

The reading test included 13 questions aimed at testing reading sub-skills and entailing a gradual increase of cognitive load, namely 2 items for expeditious reading at word and sentence levels (first reading), 2 items for expeditious reading to catch the gist, 2 items for careful reading to identify local information (second reading), 3 items for careful reading to identify local information, and 2 items for careful reading to identify the main ideas concerning abstract concepts such as wishes and feelings (third reading).

The central tendency for each reading sub-construct is shown in Table 3. The gradual decrease of the mean across reading sub-skills which gradually entailed a greater cognitive load – expeditious reading at word and sentence levels respectively 1.79 and 1.93, expeditious reading for the gist 1.36, careful reading for main ideas 1.07 – showed that students progressively answered fewer and fewer questions correctly. For careful reading to identify local information, we need to take into account that the mean was higher (3.21) because the number of

items to test this sub-skill was greater (5 items compared to 2 items for the other sub-constructs).

Table 3. Central tendency statistics for reading test sub-constructs

<i>Sub-construct</i>	<i>N (participants)</i>	<i>K (items)</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Median</i>	<i>Mode</i>
<i>Expeditious Read (word level)</i>	14	2	1.79	2.00	2
<i>Expeditious Read (sentence level)</i>	14	2	1.93	2.00	2
<i>Expeditious Read (gist)</i>	14	2	1.36	1.00	1
<i>Careful Read (local info)</i>	14	5	3.21	4.00	4
<i>Careful Read (main idea)</i>	14	2	1.07	1.00	1

The distribution of scores seem to confirm that there is an evident difference of difficulty between expeditious reading and careful reading as described in Weir and Khafila's model (2008). The course attended by these learners aimed at reaching the CEFR A2.2 level. These data show that the students with the plurilingual repertoire described above seem to have reached mastery at the A2.2 level already half-way through the semester, as far as reading is concerned. In fact, they could "understand short, simple texts on familiar matters of concrete type which consist of high frequency everyday language", and they could "find specific and predictable information" (Council of Europe 2001, 69–70). This corresponds to the expeditious reading at the word and sentence levels of Weir and Khafila's model of reading (2008), which was the focus of the questions for the first reading text of this test.

The qualitative data collected through the post-reading questionnaire which, as previously stated, was submitted immediately after the reading test, confirmed these results. Six out of 14 students affirmed that the first reading was "very easy", for 7 it was "easy", and only one student chose the option "pretty easy". The most common reasons they provided to explain their responses were: "because it is a simple and a concrete text" (8 students); "because of the familiarity I had with the genre" (6 students).

The data also showed that the students' reading skills were closer to the B1.1 level because they were also able to find relevant information and to catch the gist in everyday material such as a newspaper (Council of Europe 2001, 70). However, when they were asked to scan longer texts (careful reading for local information) in order to locate specific information or to collect information from different parts of the text in order to fulfill a task (careful reading to identify main ideas) – as described by the can-do statements of the B1.2 level of the CEFR (Council of Europe, 70) – the distribution of students' scores seemed to become more symmetrical. Indeed, the majority of students did not answer correctly all the questions on reading texts 2 and 3, which aimed at testing these two reading sub-skills.

This tendency was confirmed again by the qualitative data of the post-reading questionnaire. Eleven out of 14 students evaluated the third reading as the most difficult one, while 3 of them considered the second reading to be the most complex one. Students found the third reading most difficult because of: (1) the type of reading required: “because a precise understanding was required through more complex questions”; (2) the more abstract content and unfamiliar lexicon: “the text was not straightforward, it was difficult to identify the main ideas”. The other 3 students found that the second text was the most difficult one because of: (1) the type of questions that required careful reading: “the questions were more challenging”; and (2) the lack of familiarity with the genre: “because it was a bit more technical”.

Students’ feedback also highlighted that they adopted different reading strategies and cross-linguistic transfers. In the post-reading test questionnaire students were asked to select which plurilingual activities (they could choose more than one option) they found most useful to prepare them to tackle the test readings. Eight students found the overall plurilingual activities used during the course “pretty useful”, while six found them “very useful”. Fifty-seven per cent of their answers underlined that both activities on developing metalinguistic awareness of cognates and orthographical correspondences were helpful.

In contrast, 50% of preferences focused on: identifying cognates and ‘false friends’, reading in an unknown language, and sharing strategies after reading in an unknown language with peers. The option “pedagogical practices focused on the comparison of the use of grammar structures across languages”, was found to affect reading comprehension to a lesser extent (only 21%). If we group these data it is evident that students evaluated as most effective the plurilingual activities aimed at activating language transfers at the word level (use of cognates, differences between cognates and ‘false friends’) and at the syntactic level (e.g. focusing on connective words, determiners), and the transfer of reading literacy skills (reading in an unknown Romance language). In fact, students stressed that they also adopted other strategies such as making inferences from the title or picture and following the paragraphs of the text in order to answer the questions of the reading test. These reading strategies depend on students’ metacognitive reading skills (Flavell, 1979; Baker and Brown, 1984; Schoonen, et al. 1998), which are presumed to be relatively independent of the language in which the text is written (L1, L2, L3, Ln).

The descriptive statistics of the data concerning the writing test showed that almost all students performed really well in the test. The dispersion statistics showed that the maximum score was 3.81 and the minimum score was 2, while the range was 3.29.

Table 4. Dispersion statistics for writing test (average)

<i>Statistic</i>	<i>Minimum</i>	<i>Maximum</i>	<i>Range</i>	<i>Std. Dev.</i>	<i>Skewness</i>	<i>Kurtosis</i>
<i>Value</i>	2	3.81	3.29	0.46	-.168	3.93

It is important to note that the score of 2 was received by only 1 student. The student's plurilingual system involved English as L1 and Italian as heritage language. The student was sporadically exposed to a diatopic variation of Italian (dialect) in family contexts. Even though the student's writing score may depend on other variables (e.g. educational background, motivation, etc.) this information was significant in terms of the correlation between his/her reading and writing skills as described below.

The writing test was assessed by two raters, one of which was the instructor of the course. For the inter-rater reliability for writing sub-constructs (Task Fulfillment, Vocabulary Range, Organization, and Accuracy), Spearman-rank-order correlation coefficients were computed, The Pearson Product-Moment correlation coefficient was calculated for the overall average. Table 5 shows that the inter-rater reliability for the overall average is positive and moderate ($r = .790$). It is statistically significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed), meaning that there is a 99% probability that the correspondence between the two examiners is not by chance.

Table 5. Inter-rater reliability correlation (Spearman and Pearson): observed variables ($N = 14$)

<i>Sub-constructs</i>	<i>Correlation coefficient</i>
<i>Task Fulfillment</i>	.411
<i>Vocabulary range</i>	.465
<i>Organization</i>	.516
<i>Accuracy</i>	.527
<i>Overall Average</i>	.790**

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The inter-rater reliability of the two components, Task Fulfillment ($r = .411$) and Vocabulary range ($r = .465$) observations, are low and not statistically significant. This might be due to the fact that one of the two raters was also the instructor of the course. Even though the names of students were erased in their writing responses and there was a meeting between the two raters to clarify the purposes of the test before rating, the instructor might have had a clearer idea of the learning objectives to be achieved in the test.

The correlation between reading and writing sub-skills was investigated using the Pearson correlation coefficients. The relationship between the reading and

writing test scores was found to be positive, low ($r = .257$), but not statistically significant at the 95% level. This low correlation might be due to the nature of the two tests, which were not integrated. The reading test aimed at measuring the level of proficiency of students' reading comprehension by using different genres (announcement, newspaper articles, letter) with gradual increase of complexity (from A2 to B1.2 CEFR level). The writing test required the production of an email, a genre similar to the third reading text (letter), but with a different purpose and theme (calibrated on the A2 CEFR level). Also, the limited number of test takers ($N = 14$) and items ($K = 13$ for the reading test and $K = 4$ for the writing test) might have caused the decrease in the reliability coefficient.

However, more significant findings, in terms of reading-writing connections, emerged from the Spearman correlation between the reading and the writing sub-constructs, as shown in Table 6.

Table 6. Correlations reading and writing sub-constructs ($N = 14$)

	<i>Correlation coefficient</i>
<i>Reading X Task Fulfillment</i>	.334
<i>Reading X Vocabulary Range</i>	.548*
<i>Reading X Organization</i>	.547*
<i>Reading X Accuracy</i>	.489

* .Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Reading and vocabulary range as well as reading and the organization of the writing component showed a moderate correlation (respectively $r = .548$ and $r = .547$), but significant at the 95% level. Reading and task fulfillment and reading and accuracy showed weak ($r = .334$) to moderate ($r = .489$) correlations, but not significant. These outcomes seem to indicate that in reading comprehension, lower-level processes played a dominant role, in particular the semantic and syntactic processes (Grabe 2009). However, these processes seemed to gradually lead students towards higher-order comprehension abilities even though still text-based (Singer and Leon 2007). As explained earlier, these processes allow learners to understand central ideas, make minimal inference links to connect new propositions to previous ideas through transitional and discourse organizational markers. The CEFR descriptors seem to suggest that the correlation between writing and reading is more and more evident going from A2 to B1 level, that is, as language proficiency increases.¹¹ Since the learning and language objectives of the course (in terms of

11. This relationship is highlighted by the CEFR can-do statements for both writing and reading skills. As far as writing is concerned, at A2 level the language learner "can write a series of phrases or simple sentences linked with simple connectors like *and*, *but* and *because*", while at

instruction and assessment) described in this study were based on the CEFR descriptors, these indications were useful to better understand students' reading and writing proficiency levels.

The low and not significant correlation coefficient ($r = .334$) related to the reading and task fulfilment seems also to suggest that other higher-level processes such as genre activation and writer's purposes (components included in task fulfilment writing sub-construct) were still weak in reading comprehension. But, as already noted, this low connection could also be due to the lack of connection between the genre required by the writing task and the genres included in the reading test. Significant information related to writing and reading connections emerged, instead, from the correlation between reading and writing specific sub-constructs, as shown in Table 7.

Table 7. Correlations expeditious reading at word level and writing sub-constructs ($N = 14$)

	<i>Correlation coefficient</i>
<i>ExReadWord X Organization</i>	.594*
<i>ExReadWord X Accuracy</i>	.623*
<i>ExReadWord X Vocabulary Range</i>	.573*

* .Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The correlation between the reading sub-construct – expeditious reading at word level – and three writing sub-constructs – vocabulary range, organization and accuracy – was moderate (respectively $r = .573$, $r = .594$, $r = .623$), but 95% significant. These results confirm that students activated lower-level reading processes in which word recognition involved syntactic processing such as word ordering to identify the grammar category of the word, morphological processing (e.g. word endings), and semantic processing (e.g. using cognates or synonyms) to gain lexical access. In these terms, reading and writing seemed to be connected and writing appeared to be an *avenue* for reading.

Finally, the Pearson correlation coefficient was used in order to address the last question of this study and to investigate the effect of another variable, the range of student's plurilingual repertoire, on his/her reading and writing skills. In this repertoire all languages were included. The number of languages (NofL) students knew with different levels of proficiency included their mother tongue

B1 level he/she can “write a straightforward *connected* text” (Council of Europe 2001, 61). This gradual competence is mirrored in reading skill descriptors. At A2 level the language learner “can understand short and simple text containing the highest frequency vocabulary” and at B1 level he/she “can read straightforward factual texts on subjects related to his/her field and interest with a *satisfactory level of comprehension*” (Council of Europe 2001, 69).

(or mother tongues in case of bilingual speakers) and Italian. The data for this variable were extracted from the initial background questionnaire (e.g. number of languages known by each student and level of proficiency for each language).

The relationship between the NofL and reading and writing test scores was found to be positive and weak to moderate (respectively $r = .172$ and $r = .471$), but not statistically significant (see Table 7). However, by reducing the range of every student's language repertoire to the languages in which they had a higher level of proficiency (mother tongue included), the result changed significantly. The correlation between the variable number of languages with a high level of proficiency (NofLHP) and reading was higher, but still moderate ($r = .400$) and not significant. On the other hand, the correlation between the NofLHP and writing was stronger, and although moderate ($r = .726$), it was significant at 99%.

Table 8. Correlations background variables (NofL and NofLHP) and reading and writing tests ($N = 14$)

	<i>Correlation coefficient</i>
<i>NofL X Reading</i>	.172
<i>NofL X Writing</i>	.471
<i>NofLHP X Reading</i>	.400
<i>NofLHP X Writing</i>	.726**

** .Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

According to these data it seems that it was not the number of languages known by a student which affected his/her reading and writing scores, but rather the number of languages with a higher proficiency level. Therefore, language proficiency appeared to play a major role, in particular in relation to writing. The significant correlation between the higher proficiency of languages known by students and students' writing skills seem to confirm the outcomes of studies in early L2 writing. L3 learners' writing enabled them to access and make effective use of their languages with a higher level of proficiency, and to transfer their knowledge and skills to reading. Therefore, writing was a key element in linking L3/Ln reading and writing constructively.

6. Discussion and conclusion

The results of this study provide answers for the four research questions. First of all, according to students' qualitative feedback and the quantitative data collected through the traditional tests, plurilingual instruction seemed to have had an impact both on their writing and reading skills.

According to the achievement test results, apart from one learner, students performed better in their writing test than in the reading test. This result was expected, but not to such an extent for the entire class. Learners already showed a full mastery, in terms of learning and language objectives at the CEFR A2.2 level of competence, half-way through the course. The reading test score distribution, instead, spread out pretty widely across students. However, this distribution was not surprising considering the nature of the test, which was with incremental complexity. More significant data emerged from the dispersion statistics of each reading sub-skill. These data show that lower-level processes (such as semantic, syntactic, and morphological processing) were clearly and diffusely activated by students. Studies in reading comprehension (Perfetti 1999) emphasize the importance of promoting lower order processes for successful reading. According to students' qualitative responses to the reading test, plurilingual skills, developed during the course to identify similarities and differences at the word and syntactic level across languages, helped them in dealing with the written texts.

However, word recognition and syntactic processes are necessary but not sufficient for successful reading comprehension (Gough and Tunmer 1986). In fact, the data emerged from the descriptive analysis for the reading sub-skills showed a gradual difficulty in dealing with written texts when higher-level processes needed to be activated. The distribution of scores gradually became more and more flat with the increase of cognitive load required by the reading sub-skills such as the expeditious reading for the gist and the careful reading to identify local information or main ideas. In fact, according to the data, the majority of students' higher-level processes were still limited to a *text model of comprehension* (Grabe 2009, 40). They were, *de facto*, able to comprehend the central ideas referred to a concrete concept and to network these ideas for constructing meaning. But, when these central ideas involved abstract concepts (e.g. writer's attitude) they encountered more difficulties.¹² Interlingual transfer was particularly significant in this reading context. However, it seems that this transfer was still linked to language features rather than to broader literacy-related and metacognitive skills.

These data seem to confirm the predictions of the threshold level hypothesis (Alderson 1984), that is "for L2 and L3 readers there may be a so-called threshold level of fluency that has to be surpassed before they actually can apply strategies directed at text comprehension" (van Gelderen et al. 2003, 11). In fact, the correlation between the background variables and reading and writing abilities showed that the interlingual positive transfer could occur according to the proficiency level of languages known by the students (and not by the number of languages known),

12. In this sense, according to the CEFR reading taxonomy, the majority of students showed mastery at CEFR B1.1 level of competence half-way through the course.

even though this correlation was significant only for writing skills. The significant correlation between students' writing skills and the level of proficiency of languages they knew, together with students' successful results in their writing test, point to the fact that students' writing skills support their reading development. Carlson et al. (1990) suggest that the nature of this reading-writing relationship changes as L2 proficiency develops. It is also important to note that the way in which reading and writing develop and interlink, particularly in a plurilingual context, depends on many other variables, such as students' educational background, experience, motivation, and their individual use of language resources and strategies.

Given the exploratory nature of this study and its limitations, these findings should be treated with caution. Moreover, because of the *n*-size of students, it is difficult to draw any conclusions about the role that language proficiency plays in reading and writing relationships or to make any other generalization. Nevertheless, these preliminary results suggest some pedagogical implications. Given the importance of the activation of bottom-up processes in lower proficiency L3/Ln learners shown by this study, teachers that adopt plurilingual instruction could focus more on semantic, syntactic and morphological correspondences across students' plurilingual repertoire and on the transfer of reading strategies. At the higher proficiency level they could design activities aimed at developing transfer of literacy-related skills (e.g. genre activation and socio-cultural feature analysis in multilingual academic contexts). Furthermore, considering the impact of the proficiency level of languages known by the students while learning an additional language, teachers could collect relevant information about the learners' language profile. This information would allow them to design more focused plurilingual activities.

The findings of this exploratory investigation raise several questions. They point to the need for further research aimed at examining: (1) the language proficiency as a variable in plurilingual students' literacy development; (2) the relationship between reading and writing for plurilingual speakers, given that current studies focus particularly on the L1 and L2 relationship; and (3) the effect of interlingual transfer in reading/writing development in plurilingual classrooms compared to more traditional instructional contexts.

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