



## Adolescents' learning of civics in linguistically diverse classrooms: A thematic literature review

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**Keywords:** Civics; second-language students; content-area learning; literacy development; prior knowledge

### Highlights:

- Few empirical studies elaborate on second-language (L2) students' civics learning.
- A four-field model is provided as a conceptual framework and an analytical tool.
- Four types of abilities and knowledge and their interaction with each other are highlighted.
- Civics teachers play a crucial role in making the content knowledge comprehensible. Civics tasks are used by teachers to support both literacy development and civics learning.

**Purpose:** This article explores the interrelationship between second-language students' literacy development and civics learning in studies focusing on L2 students' civics learning.

**Design/methodology/approach:** The conceptual framework and the analytical tool in this thematic literature review consists of a four-field model in which the four key components of a. literacy abilities, b. disciplinary literacy abilities, c. prior knowledge, and d. content-area knowledge are in focus.

**Findings:** It is suggested that an interaction between the four components (a-d) could support the students' civics learning and literacy development. Civics teachers play a crucial role in making the content knowledge comprehensible. Second-language students' language- and content-related difficulties are better understood in connection to the civics tasks and activities that they work with in civics classrooms.

**Practical implications:** This article addresses issues of continuous education in civics for teachers in L2 civics classrooms.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

It can be argued that the content of civics provides a meaningful context for second-language (L2) students to develop their literacy, while L2 students' prior knowledge and literacy abilities provide mediums for learning from the discipline-specific content of civics. Keeping this in mind, the aim of this thematic literature review is to study in what ways the relationship between L2 students' literacy development and civics learning is discussed in studies in which the focus is directly on L2 students' civics learning. The research questions that guide this article are: 1) In what ways do disciplinary literacy activities support adolescent L2 students' content-area learning and literacy development in civic education? 2) In what ways are activating and building on adolescent L2 students' prior knowledge acknowledged as an integral part of content-area learning in civic education?

The term L2 is used here with respect to those students who have acquired their second language after the age at which the first language was learned, and where L2 is the official language of their school and society. Similar terms such as emergent bilinguals and multilinguals are avoided here, with the aim of placing the focus on the process of second-language learning. Since multilinguals refers also to first language (L1) speakers who are fluent in more than one language, this term is not used to reduce the risk of possible confusion. The term prior knowledge includes L2 students' language repertoires, life experiences and their previous content knowledge.

### 1.1 The prevalence of the problem

Given that L2 students are a heterogenous group of learners with various linguistic, educational, and cultural backgrounds, it is likely that the type and level of language- and content-related difficulties they meet in civics classrooms vary. One of the frustrations reported by social studies teachers, including civics teachers, is that they often recognize their L2 students' language-related needs in content-area classrooms, but that they require more specialized knowledge of teaching about language. They also express needs for strategies that enable them to bring a language focus into social studies classes without being constrained by aspects like time and the large quantity of content that needs to be covered (Zhang, 2017; Yoder, Kibler & van Hover, 2016). The positive effects of a dual focus on students' language and content learning have been emphasized within the research field of content and language integrated learning (CLIL) (Dalton-Puffer, 2011; Feddermann, Möller & Baumert, 2021). However, in this study, I aim to center the focus on the interrelation between literacy development and civics learning, viewed through lenses of literacy as a social practice in which the process of civics learning is framed within a broader perspective.

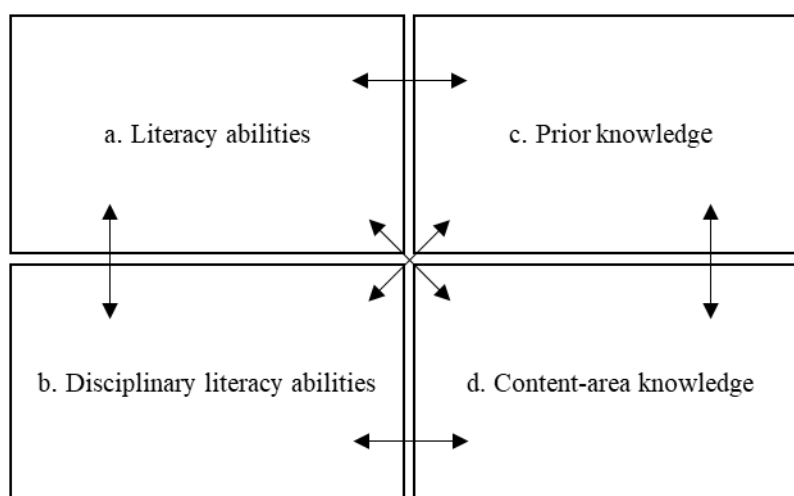
Within CLIL research, teacher competence and teacher support are emphasized as two important indicators of students' learning (Sylvén, 2013). In L2 civics classrooms, teachers' awareness about L2 students' language- and content-related difficulties is important in

order to offer comprehensible instruction and inclusive civics tasks. Without teacher support, there is a risk that L2 students who experience difficulties with civics learning may find themselves in situations where they feel that addressing their language- and content-related needs becomes their individual responsibility. Such situations can be harmful for L2 students' self-concept, and give rise to a deficit-oriented approach, meaning that perceptions about what L2 students cannot do become highlighted instead of what they can do.

## 1.2 The conceptual framework and analytical tool

To study the relationship between L2 students' civics learning and literacy development, I realized that it was necessary to construct a conceptual framework for understanding and analyzing the findings in this thematic literature review. The conceptual framework is illustrated in form of a four-field model (Figure 1) by which the learning context of civics is studied through a broader perspective where the focus is centered on four key components: a. literacy abilities, b. disciplinary literacy abilities, c. prior knowledge, d. content-area knowledge, and the interplay between them. One of the potentials of this model is that it makes it possible to define what language- and content-related needs are important for civics teachers to consider when supporting L2 students' literacy development and civics learning. The indicators a-d do not indicate any linear order between the four components, and the two-headed arrows demonstrate the bidirectional relationship between them. In this study, the four-field model is also used as an analytical tool when analyzing the findings.

**Figure 1: The four key components for supporting L2 students' content-area learning and literacy development**



In line with Street's (1984) and Barton's (1994) definitions, I approach literacy as a social

and situated practice. For the four-field model presented and argued for in this article, this conception of literacy is crucial, meaning that literacy abilities go beyond the mere learning of reading, writing, listening and speaking. Literacy, in the civics classroom, thus includes social, cultural and personal practices surrounding and defining the students, while making use of their literacy abilities and prior knowledge, when learning discipline-specific content in civics.

In the following section, I explain why the four components (a-d) in the four-field model and their interplay with each other are necessary for supporting L2 students' literacy development and civics learning. In doing so, I provide a brief overview of previous research in which these four components are each discussed separately from each other in relation to L2 students' content-area learning in social studies. One of my intentions with constructing this model is to draw attention toward the interplay between these four components, since none of them alone can cater for L2 students' language- and content-related difficulties in civics classrooms.

## **2 PREVIOUS RESEARCH**

### **2.1 Literacy abilities**

Within the context of civics classrooms, various literacy activities make it possible for L2 students to use their literacy abilities to read, write, listen and speak about the content which is mediated by different resources like various civics-related texts and civics teachers' instruction. In this way, the students develop their language through various meaningful literacy activities while they learn civics. For instance, when it comes to reading and learning from texts, L2 students need to activate their reading abilities not only for decoding the texts, but also for decontextualizing and understanding the main concepts, and identifying important passages in texts that are often written in an academic language using content-specific terms and abstract concepts. For those students who are in the process of learning an L2 and have not yet received enough opportunities to develop their L1 and L2, the process of learning from the discipline-specific contexts in social studies can be experienced as more challenging (Echevarria, Vogt & Short, 2017; Schleppegrell, 2012; Fang & Schleppegrell, 2010). One way of supporting L2 students' civics learning and language development is through improving their disciplinary literacy abilities.

### **2.2 Disciplinary literacy abilities**

Disciplinary literacy involves the use of reading, investigating, analyzing, critiquing, writing and reasoning to learn content-area knowledge in a particular discipline (here civics). According to Bennett (2011), disciplinary literacy as an approach to teaching and learning "integrates academically rigorous content with discipline-appropriate habits of thinking" (p. 53). Advocates of disciplinary literacy argue that to help students build

strategies, practices and processes to make meaning in disciplines such as social studies, other aspects of reading and writing that are specific to each discipline should be taught to students in an explicit way (Moje, 2008; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008, 2012). For instance, to better prepare students to read and write in social studies, teachers need to encourage students to analyze texts and other documents by paying attention to the unique qualities in each of the core areas of social studies (Chen, Chang & Yang, 2017). Making distinctions between the discourse patterns of different academic texts at school and recognizing authors' discipline-specific ways of writing within the discipline of social studies cannot be learned without teachers explicitly teaching about this (Dong, 2017). The social studies teachers in Gray's study (2009) realized that students' language- and content-related needs were better understood in relation to specific tasks and activities that the students worked with.

### **2.3 Prior knowledge**

Dong (2017), like Cummins (2014), argues that having knowledge about L2 students' second-language development and their native language, culture and learning style is an important quality that should be included in the concept of culturally relevant pedagogy and linguistically responsive teaching. Using dichotomies like native language versus non-native language when defining students' language competences is, however, criticized by Dewaele (2018). He argues that using such terms should be avoided because of the ideological assumptions embedded in them, signifying a hierarchical order between them. In a similar vein, Conteh and Meier (2014) discuss that although the potential of L2 students' language repertoires for their learning is repeatedly highlighted in research, monolingual bias is still predominant across many classrooms, and multilingual practices tend to be regarded as problematic.

In addition to language repertoires, L2 students' life experiences from living in other countries, and their preunderstanding of the social, political, cultural, and historical contexts in which the content of social studies is embedded are highlighted as useful resources for civics learning. The social studies teachers in Mangram and Watson's study (2011) acknowledged the benefits of an interculturally diverse classroom where students' own experiences and examples from living in other countries were used as a starting point for introducing new content knowledge. Likewise, O'Brien (2011) argues that social studies teachers should think about prior knowledge both in relation to the curricular topics and the required literacy abilities that L2 students learn in their L2 and L1(s).

### **2.4 Content-area knowledge**

What is specific to civic education is its focus on multidimensional topics such as societal, political and ideological perspectives, for example, knowledge about communities and about individuals' worldviews, ideologies, norms and values, and how these are articulated in society (Stymne, 2020). Another purpose of civics is that it provides students

with knowledge so that they can view their society from an intercultural perspective, reflecting on the ways that individuals are shaped by their social and cultural environments.

Given the multidimensional topics and the high frequency of content-specific concepts within civic education, it seems reasonable to suggest that developing content knowledge requires adequate literacy and disciplinary literacy abilities. L2 students need to utilize and develop these abilities in addition to their previous content knowledge to understand, analyze, critically review and then use the acquired knowledge in their own writing and oral language production. According to Sandahl (2015), two major challenges with civic education are: the process of transforming civics knowledge from abstract to concrete and the other way around; and the process of acquiring first- and second-order concepts. First-order concepts are basic concepts which are embedded in a wider context that gives meaning to them (e.g., the term democracy), while second-order concepts are the procedural ways that social scientists “think and act” within civics as a discipline (see also Wineburg, Martin & Monto-Sano, 2012). This description of second-order concepts could be seen to correspond to the definition of disciplinary literacy abilities. With support from disciplinary literacy activities connected to the civics curriculum goals, L2 students are able to practice thinking and acting like a civics “expert” (e.g., civics teachers and scholars within the field) when they use their acquired literacy abilities and prior knowledge to make sense and deepen their understanding(s) of the new knowledge.

### **3 METHOD**

In this thematic literature review, I have explicitly searched for qualitative studies where the focus is on civic education in L2 classroom settings, aiming to study the interrelationship between literacy development and civics learning. In this way, the focus is on civics-specific tasks, classroom activities and teacher instructions through which L2 students' language development and civics learning are supported. By drawing on qualitative studies, this thematic literature review seeks to provide a descriptive and context-specific analysis that can be discussed by researchers and civics teachers alike. To make the review as transparent as possible, I followed the nine tasks for systematic reviews suggested by Gough, Oliver and Thomas (2017): formulating review questions and developing protocol; defining inclusion/exclusion criteria; searching for studies; screening studies; mapping the results; appraising study quality and relevance; synthesizing findings; extracting relevant data from included studies; and communicating the findings. The following section describes the steps I took in conducting this review.

The process of searching started in the educational databases hosted by EBSCO (including ERIC and Education Research Complete). In my search, I systematically used different sets of keywords to test what terms directed me toward more accurate results corresponding to the aim of this study (see Appendix 2). I noticed that two terms complicated the search: second language and social studies. For instance, the variety of terms used to describe second-language learners required careful reading about which

group of learners the terms described. Terms like language minority, non-native speakers, English as a second language, English as a foreign language, and English as an additional language were all used to describe L2 learners. In all my searches, I intentionally chose to use the term second language rather than non-native, since L2 learners can also be native speakers of their L1(s).

The term social studies also caused complications, since history, geography and religion, in addition to civics, are all included within the term social studies. Although I used the functions in the databases to exclude studies other than civics, civic education or citizenship education, a wide range of studies found still directed me toward the subject of history (e.g., historical thinking). I then decided to develop two sets of criteria to find studies that best corresponded to the aim of this literature review. The first set of criteria served as inclusion parameters. To be included, each study needed to: (a) report on classroom content, (b) document qualitative research with L2 students, and (c) focus on the teaching and learning of civics content. The second set of criteria articulated whether the requirements for methodological rigor in qualitative research were described clearly. These indicators are: (a) the selection of study participants and setting, (b) the data collection process, (d) the methods employed (e.g., interview, observation), and (e) the data analysis and the presentation of the results. In addition, limiters like peer-reviewed articles and published year (20000101-20211231) were used in all my searches. In my evaluation of the included studies, I followed these two sets of criteria strictly.

The twelve searches with different keywords resulted in a total of 67 studies. On five occasions, the keywords used did not lead me to any study at all (see Appendix 2). After those twelve searches, I continued the process by starting to look at all studies found ( $n = 67$ ). After reading the titles and abstracts thoroughly, and in some cases by reading the whole article, I realized that three articles among the 27 articles that were found by using classroom AND "second language" AND civics as keywords guided me to studies following the two sets of criteria. By reference chaining, i.e., looking at the reference lists and the citations in these three articles, I was directed toward five new studies that I considered to be relevant. Reading these five articles, including the reference lists, guided me toward two doctoral dissertations that also needed to be included. These two dissertations were tracked in another database, ProQuest Dissertations & Thesis. A total of ten studies were collected for the final analysis. These are eight peer-reviewed articles, accessed as full-text academic publications (Dabach, 2014, 2015; Myres & Zaman, 2009; Jaffee, 2016; Dabach & Fones, 2016; Gibson, 2017; Di Stefano & Camicia, 2018; Dabach, Fones, Merchant & Adekile, 2018), and two doctoral dissertations (Deltac, 2012; Lai, 2018).

### **3.1 About the ten studies**

All ten studies discuss L2 students' challenges and opportunities in civics classrooms from both L2 students' and civics teachers' perspectives, and took place in bilingual linguistically diverse civics classroom settings, at different educational stages. The context of teaching and the classroom constellations differ in the ten studies. While the student

groups in some studies consist of L2 students who all share the same L1 and have access to teachers who possess the students' L1, the other classrooms consist of students having various linguistic backgrounds. One study was conducted with students in grade 3 (Di Stefano & Camicia, 2018), two of the studies took place in middle schools (Gibson, 2017; Lai, 2018), and six studied high-school students (Dabach, 2014, 2015; Myres & Zaman, 2009; Deltac, 2012; Jaffee, 2016; Dabach & Fones, 2016; Dabach et al., 2018).

The research methods of the ten studies represent a range of qualitative design. Four studies employed field notes. Seven studies used classroom observations. Five studies recorded and transcribed data from teacher interviews, and two studies employed interviews with students. One study documented interviews with other school personnel (Dabach, 2014). Two studies analyzed documents, focusing on lesson plans, student work and curricula. In two studies, data was gathered as part of a larger ethnographic study. One study (Myers & Zaman, 2009) explicitly used a mixed methods design (in-depth and semi-structured interviews with students, pre- and postquestionnaires with students, observations, and text analysis). For a more detailed description of the included studies, see Appendix 1.

### **3.2 The process of analysis**

The four components (a-d) in the four-field model function as the themes on which the analysis is based. However, an abductive approach is applied when the findings are analyzed. In so doing, in addition to the four key components, I also look for unexpected components that are not included in the four-field model but are relevant to the research questions. After reading the ten studies thoroughly, I continued with the process of analyzing the findings by searching for examples where the four components of literacy abilities, disciplinary literacy abilities, prior knowledge and content-area knowledge could be recognized. Identifying these themes proved to be difficult, since these four components (except for prior knowledge) were not always expressed using the same terms in the articles.

To identify the presence of the theme literacy abilities in a study, I focused on the type of literacy activities that civics teachers used in civics classrooms when teaching about new content knowledge. I studied how civics teachers used these literacy activities to instruct L2 students about the linguistic characteristics in texts and in other primary sources that the students worked with. The opportunities created by civics teachers, through which L2 students could practice their literacy abilities when working with civics tasks, were also studied. Regarding disciplinary literacy abilities, I focused on content-specific literacy activities, prepared by civics teachers, in which L2 students received instructions about civics-specific language used in texts and in other resources they met in civics classrooms. I also looked at civics tasks through which L2 students became actively engaged and could use their newly learned content knowledge and prior knowledge in their own language production, for instance, in discussions and in writing assignments.



The theme of prior knowledge was studied by paying attention to the various ways that the term is used in the studies. I also looked at classroom activities and civics tasks that allowed L2 students to activate and build on their prior knowledge to make sense of the new content knowledge. Finally, when analyzing the theme of content-area knowledge, I looked at the type of material, forms of literacy activities, and the selection of topics that civics teachers purposefully used when introducing the new content knowledge. The findings are presented next.

## 4 FINDINGS

This literature review indicates that there are currently very few empirical studies with a focus on L2, civics, and literacy development available in the educational databases hosted by EBSCO. The findings also indicate that the teacher perspective is predominant in the ten studies focusing on L2 students' civics learning. The student perspective is included in only two of the ten studies (Di Stefano & Camicia, 2018; Myers & Zaman, 2009). Moreover, the analysis of the findings, based on the four themes of a. literacy abilities, b. disciplinary abilities, c. prior knowledge, and d. content-area knowledge, shed light on various qualities that contributed to development of literacy abilities, disciplinary literacy abilities and civics learning. Next, the findings are presented under each theme. A summary of the major findings is provided in Table 1.

### 4.1 Literacy abilities

The analysis of literacy abilities reported in each study began with a search for literacy activities through which civics teachers brought a language focus into classroom activities. This was studied by paying attention to language-oriented instructions and the type of literacy activities that civics teachers used when teaching about new content knowledge.

Findings from the ten studies (Myres & Zaman, 2009; Dabach, 2014, 2015; Jaffee, 2016; Dabach & Fones, 2016; Gibson, 2017; Di Stefano & Camicia, 2018; Dabach et al., 2018) showed that terms such as literacy, literacy abilities and literacy activities were seldom used by the interviewed civics teachers in their descriptions of language-oriented classroom activities. Moreover, the analysis showed that even though the main purpose of the planned literacy activities was to serve L2 students' civics learning, L2 students' literacy development was indirectly considered by civics teachers. This could be seen in relation to various writing, reading, listening, and speaking activities, where civics teachers used terms such as linguistic knowledge, linguistic skills, language proficiency and language objectives in their description of content-specific classroom tasks and activities.

Civics teachers used content-specific tasks to exemplify language conventions in civics. For instance, teachers encouraged L2 students to identify the elements that made the content of their own written texts more precise to enable them to look for similar elements in other civics texts they read (e.g., Dabach & Fones, 2016; Jaffee, 2016). The main purpose

of this task was to inform L2 students about the structure and linguistic characteristics of the explanatory texts that make them more comprehensible and coherent.

Some other examples of literacy activities are listening, writing and oral activities where L2 students were encouraged to express their standpoints about a particular civics topic in English and to listen to each other's oral presentations (e.g., Myers & Zaman, 2009; Jaffee, 2016; Gibson; 2017; Dabach et al., 2018). For instance, in Dabach and Fones' study (2016), oral discussions about the word limit and its connotations in relation to presidential debates and presidential processes in different countries can be identified as a literacy activity where discussions about the key concepts contributed to the conceptual understanding of specific terms and to the development of oral proficiency.

In a similar manner, but with a focus on writing activities, the genre and structure of texts such as letters, modelled by the civics teacher, supported students' ability to participate in claim-making by learning how to formulate demands and present standpoints in their own text production (Dabach, 2015; Di Stefano and Camicia, 2018). In another study, Lai (2018) showed that including civics in English-language classes caused shifts in language teachers' preparation for literacy activities. Discussions about the novels not only provided opportunities to exercise oral proficiency, but also enabled L2 students to make connections between the civics topics being discussed and the imaginary worlds described in the novels.

Furthermore, findings from these ten studies indicated that civics teachers endeavored to use multimodal primary sources and authentic themes, i.e., societal issues from real life rather than imagined contexts, for introducing the new topics and for providing examples of how other people talked and wrote about civics topics. Bilingual multimodal sources like YouTube videos, podcasts and printed authentic documents (e.g., real voting forms) were among examples of platforms by which teachers gave L2 students access to a wider range of literacy practices where language was used in different ways to deliver a certain message with a particular purpose (e.g., Dabach, 2014; Dabach & Fones, 2016; Gibson, 2017).

Although having sufficient literacy abilities in L1 and L2 is acknowledged by civics teachers as a prerequisite for successful civics learning in all ten studies, there is little discussion about the type of language-related difficulties that L2 students experience in civics classrooms. The need for explicit literacy support is reported only in one study (Deltac, 2012).

## **4.2 Disciplinary literacy abilities**

In the analysis of the disciplinary literacy abilities, the focus was placed on civics teachers' instructions and prepared classroom activities through which L2 students learned about the discipline-specific language of civics and could use their newly learned concepts and phrases in their own language production (e.g., oral presentations and writing assignments).

The analysis of the ten studies (Myres & Zaman, 2009; Deltac, 2012; Dabach, 2014, 2015; Jaffee, 2016; Dabach & Fones, 2016; Gibson, 2017; Di Stefano & Camicia, 2018; Dabach et al., 2018; Lai, 2018) showed that the term disciplinary literacy was not used by the teachers, with the exception of one study (Lai, 2018), where the focus was on incorporating civics into English-language courses. As with the findings about literacy abilities, it could be seen that civics teachers did not clarify the language demands in relation to the civics tasks and classroom activities, as the main focus was on understanding the content. Nonetheless, despite the absence of disciplinary literacy as a term, there were several examples indicating various ways by which the content-specific language of civics became available to L2 students through civics-related literacy activities constructed by civics teachers, even if they saw the main purpose of these activities as being to foster students' content learning rather than literacy development.

To increase L2 students' awareness about how language was used to mediate a certain content with a particular purpose, civics teachers utilized civics-specific tasks, bilingual multimodal classroom activities, students' own writing and oral language production, and real societal issues. In writing and oral literacy activities, civics teachers encouraged their L2 students to focus on the genre and the content of the texts rather than their semantic and syntactic features. For example, in one particular study, Jaffee (2016) showed that L2 students identified the content-specific language of civics by learning about significant elements (who, what, where, when, why and how) in their own text production which they compared with the elements used in other primary source documents dealing with specific civics topics.

Open classroom discussion and group work on these activities promoted interpersonal communication abilities, developed disciplinary literacy abilities (e.g., by using civics-specific terms and applying the argumentative genre to make their standpoints more clear) and increased the students' civic engagement. Civic engagement was observed in students' desire to discuss their viewpoints and in their reflections on current events related to what "people do in a democracy" and how language can be used as a "political act" when making decisions (Jaffee, 2016, p. 172). A similar result was reported by Myers and Zaman (2009), who noticed that topics such as immigration sparked L2 students' curiosity, resulting in active participation in extensive classroom discussions. The benefits of thinking aloud about the content and using content-specific terms and lines of arguments were also mirrored in L2 students' writing assignments, where the texts turned out to be longer and the content became more coherent (see also Jaffee, 2016; Dabach, 2014).

The findings also indicate that when civics teachers were informing their L2 students about the language objectives in relation to the content-based tasks, they did not only talk about how language was used to deliver a certain content in a certain way, but also how language was used as a political act for getting access to new knowledge in civics. Terms such as civic engagement, civic thinking and civic act appeared in interviews with civics teachers when they reflected on the importance of L2 students using both language and

civics knowledge to increase their abilities regarding democratic participation in society. To support students' civic engagement, these teachers provide several opportunities where L2 students can use their previous civics knowledge and oral language abilities to participate in open classroom discussions about relevant civics topics.

Authentic materials, such as voting forms and topics based on real-life events, rather than imaginary contexts, were used by the civics teachers in the studies when they instructed L2 students about how to integrate civics knowledge and literacy abilities in their discussions about current topics. For example, Di Stefano and Camicia (2018) showed how using translanguaging allowed L2 students, by providing access to bilingual sources (Spanish and English) online, to share and discuss their experiences and understanding of the content in connection to how they comprehended their own identities as bilingual citizens in interaction with those language practices that they were connected to.

Novels also appeared to be a resource for developing language and civics knowledge, where L2 students could apply their civic thinking about their own reality and everyday experiences in classroom debates (Lai, 2018). Similarly, Gibson (2017) states, "civics teaching must be grounded in the worlds of students themselves. It is, after all, through their languages, identities, and cultures that students make sense of their social worlds" (p.18).

Based upon the findings, it emerges that prior knowledge plays an integral part in the disciplinary literacy activities constructed by civics teachers. However, the inclusion of prior knowledge in the classroom activities takes several forms, discussed next.

### **4.3 Prior knowledge**

In the analysis of how the ten studies indicate prior knowledge, I focused on the ways in which the term was defined by civics teachers in the ten studies. I also looked at civics tasks and literacy activities that gave L2 students opportunities to activate and build on their prior knowledge to make sense of the new content knowledge. Findings from the ten studies indicate that incorporating L2 students' prior knowledge into content learning is the common thread in these studies. Prior knowledge as a term is, however, often discussed by the teachers in relation to L2 students' previous content knowledge and life experiences. L2 students' language repertoires (L1 and L2) are not always clearly included in the definition of the term in all ten studies. Regarding civics teachers' perspectives in relation to L2 students' prior knowledge, two different approaches are taken by them. Prior knowledge is either viewed as an obstacle by civics teachers, when they identified a lack of prior knowledge as a reason for L2 students' underachievement in civics classrooms (e.g., in Dabach's study, 2014), or it is valued as a resource that L2 students bring to the civics classrooms.

For example, Jaffee (2016) argues that L2 students' prior knowledge matters, since these young people already possess civic and political knowledge and ideas which might challenge the normative views of citizenship discussed in the civics classrooms, where differences should be seen as a resource rather than a threat. Similarly, Dabach et al.

(2018), Gibson (2017), Dabach (2015), and Di Stefano and Camicia (2018) argue that building on L2 students' prior knowledge is a prerequisite for teaching the content knowledge, meeting students' state of knowledge and supporting them in moving towards the curriculum goals.

Gibson (2017), in her case study, by explicitly asking students to draw on their experiences living within two communities and cultures (Mexican and U.S.), created a "curricular space" for naming and investigating the differences between the communities observed on a daily basis. Moreover, Jaffee (2016), by constructing a theoretical framework of culturally and linguistically relevant citizenship education (CLRCE), directs attention to the notion of funds of knowledge. In Jaffee's definition (2016), a fund of knowledge consists of previous experiences of civic education in the social, emotional and political contexts that L2 students encounter. Other aspects like commitment to their own community, cultural groups and parental influences are included in this definition. Similarly, Dabach (2015) showed how civics teachers used the classroom as a genuine form of active community life where lessons were learned (see also Myers & Zaman, 2009). In these situations, teachers started from the students' perspective and let them describe their understanding of the concepts and what these concepts meant to them and others. Moreover, Dabach and Fones (2016) argue that in many cases, it is difficult for teachers to view and evaluate L2 students' prior knowledge, since these are also acquired and developed outside school settings.

#### **4.4 Content-area knowledge**

The focus of the analysis in this section is on the content by which new civics knowledge was taught to L2 students by civics teachers. Therefore, the focus is placed on the teaching material and the civics topics through which the civics teachers introduced the new knowledge to their L2 students.

The analysis of the ten studies shows that the teaching materials, with their direct connection to current civics topics, were either produced by other people within the discipline to deliver specific civics knowledge (e.g., textbooks and policy documents), or they were produced by L2 students themselves in the form of content-based assignments in accordance with civics curriculum goals. Similar to findings about disciplinary literacy abilities, civics teachers used authentic materials and bilingual multimodal primary sources for introducing the new knowledge. For example, stories about deportation, narrated by undocumented immigrants, were used as a springboard to bring together knowledge of how to participate civically with the realities that many undocumented young people and mixed-status families were experiencing (Dabach, 2015; cf. Dabach et al., 2018). Similarly, Jaffee's study (2016) demonstrates how literacy activities like writing about their own successful experiences in life enabled L2 students to make connections between new content knowledge and their own life experiences. On the other hand, L2 students with Mexican origin in Gibson's case study (2017) used online documents written in Spanish and in English in finding information about citizenship rights and the

differences between the U.S. and the Mexican constitutions of democratic rights. By reading and discussing such online documents, L2 students could refine their understandings of injustice and inequality and begin to question the negative characteristics presented in narrations about their own nationality.

Findings also show that topics such as human rights, citizenship, identity and sense of belonging, and political events were planned in accordance with civics curricular goals to equip students with the knowledge required in order to increase their democratic participation as active citizens of society. Nonetheless, the analysis indicates that civics teachers' beliefs and expectations regarding their L2 students' abilities and potential seem to affect the quality of the teaching. For example, Dabach (2014) noted that when teachers had lower expectations regarding their L2 students due to their level of language proficiency and non-citizenship status, they simplified and watered down the content, aiming to make the content more comprehensible for their L2 students. She argued about how "language sorting systems designed to serve students by enhancing access to content could potentially serve as a mechanism through which other forms of differentiation occurred that were less beneficial" (Dabach, 2014, p. 47). Organizing L2 students based on language proficiency was also criticized by Jaffee (2016), who argued that such separation may cause a subtractive schooling environment resulting in L2 students feeling disconnected and alienated in relation to schooling.

## 5 DISCUSSION

The aim of this thematic literature review was to explore if and in what ways the relationship between literacy development and civics learning is discussed by researchers within the field of social studies, with particular focus on second-language students' civics learning. In what follows, I answer the research questions: 1) In what ways do disciplinary literacy activities support L2 students' content-area learning and literacy development in civic education? 2) In what ways are activating and building on L2 students' prior knowledge acknowledged as an integral part of content-area learning in civic education?

In relation to the first research question, based on the findings, the interrelation between the four components of literacy abilities, disciplinary literacy abilities, prior knowledge and civics learning is made possible by arranging literacy activities in which reading, writing, listening, and speaking abilities are used in direct connection to civics curriculum goals. Moreover, civics teachers' selection of civics topics in accordance with these goals, their instructions to the students and the type of material used by them appear to be crucial not only for L2 students' civics learning and literacy development, but also for increasing their civics engagement. Civics topics that depicted real life events and informed students about current political and societal issues like elections, immigration and citizenship are among examples that sparked L2 students' curiosity and increased their engagement in civics classrooms. This was seen in L2 students' desire to discuss the topics in open classroom discussions and in writing assignments where, by drawing on their life experiences and previous knowledge, they could share their understandings with

each other. The result of such knowledge exchange was in turn seen in an improved quality of L2 students' language production (e.g., Gibson, 2017; Dabach & Fones, 2016; Myers & Zamans, 2009).

**Table 1. Summary of the major findings**

| Themes                          | Major findings   |
|---------------------------------|--|
| Literacy abilities              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Literacy abilities are practiced in various ways when working with civics tasks: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Writing: L2 students' own texts are used to discuss the language elements.</li> <li>– Speaking: Oral presentations and classroom discussions in which students practice their oral proficiency discussing civics topics.</li> <li>– Reading &amp; listening: Bilingual multimodal sources like YouTube are used to read texts and listen to other people discussing the current civics topics.</li> </ul> </li> <li>○ Teacher support: Instructions about structure &amp; linguistic characteristics in civics texts, explanations about content-specific terms, and the use of translanguaging.</li> <li>○ Additional literacy support was seldom provided by civics teachers.</li> </ul>  |
| Disciplinary literacy abilities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Disciplinary literacy abilities are exercised through content-specific civics tasks: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Reading &amp; writing: L2 students are encouraged to identify the language elements used by other civics experts (authors &amp; debaters) and use them in their own language production.</li> <li>– Listening: Bilingual multimodal sources like YouTube are used to listen to other people talking about current civics topics.</li> <li>– Speaking: Oral presentations in which L2 students practice using civics-specific language when presenting their thoughts.</li> </ul> </li> <li>○ Teacher support: Instructions about the discipline-specific language of civics, several opportunities where L2 students can employ their newly learned terms &amp; phrases in discussions and in writing assignments.</li> </ul> |
| Prior knowledge                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Prior knowledge is often defined as L2 students' life experiences and previous civics knowledge in the studies.</li> <li>○ Teacher support: Translanguaging and selecting civics topics that L2 students could connect to support their in-depth understanding of the new content knowledge.</li> </ul>   |
| Content-area knowledge          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Important elements considered by teachers when teaching civics: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Civics topics are selected in accordance with civics curriculum goals.</li> <li>– Civics topics are selected from current political events and societal issues based on real life.</li> <li>– Teaching material: Textbooks, novels, authentic material online like policy documents, and other bilingual multimodal sources.</li> </ul> </li> <li>○ Teacher support: Civics teachers' expectations about their L2 students' abilities have a direct impact on the quality of teaching.</li> </ul>  |

According to previous research, social studies teachers have repeatedly raised questions about how to bring a language focus into their social studies classes without being constrained by aspects like time and the large quantity of content that needs to be covered (e.g., Zhang, 2017; Yoder et al., 2016). Based on the findings from the ten studies, the language focus is brought into the civics classroom by civics teachers without separating the language from the content. This is done in three ways: Firstly, civics teachers made sure that the central civics-specific terms were explained and understood by the students. Civics terms were either explained within the context in which they were embedded (e.g., Jaffee, 2016; Dabach & Fones, 2016; Gibson, 2017) or they were explained as isolated terms, i.e., outside their context, using strategies such as word organizers and word lists (e.g., Myers & Zaman, 2009; Deltac, 2012; Lai, 2018). However, according to previous research, content-specific terms are better understood by students when they are explained within their context (e.g., Echevarria et al., 2017; Sandahl, 2015). Secondly, the language focus was brought into the civics classrooms by preparing literacy activities where L2 students were encouraged to pay attention to the structure and linguistic characteristics of texts written by experts within civics (e.g., authors and debaters). Thirdly, by allowing students to get access to multimodal primary sources like YouTube and online documents, civics teachers created meaningful opportunities for translanguaging, meaning that L2 students could use their L1 and L2 when searching for additional information online and use what they have read and heard in both languages to develop their work (e.g., Gibson, 2017; Di Stefano & Camicia, 2018). Wei (2018) states that translanguaging enables L2 students to display the best of their creativity and criticality by employing their language repertoires when learning new knowledge.

The analysis of the findings directs attention toward another component that was not predefined in the four-field model but was shown to have a central role in supporting L2 students' literacy development and civics learning, i.e., civics teachers' expectations about their L2 students' abilities, an issue which is problematized in Jaffee's (2016) and Dabach's (2014, 2015) studies. These researchers argue that civics teachers having low expectations of their L2 students is harmful, in the sense that by excluding authentic texts (e.g., real voting forms) and by simplifying the content with the intention of making it more comprehensible for their L2 students, they do little to promote L2 students' literacy development and civics learning. These two researchers further argue that the organization of civics classrooms based on informal assessments of L2 students' language proficiency may result in L2 students feeling disconnected and alienated in relation to schooling. This discussion raises questions about how evaluations of L2 students' language proficiency and previous knowledge can be improved to better address their language- and content-related needs. Since there is no evidence presented in any of the ten studies relating to test scores or assessment results, by which L2 students' literacy abilities and previous content knowledge are evaluated, the civics teachers' perceptions about L2 students' literacy abilities tend to be imprecise. Based on these informal perceptions, any adjustments made by the teachers to make the content comprehensible, either by



simplifying the content or by setting overly high expectations on the students, may complicate rather than facilitate L2 students' content-area learning and literacy development.

Moreover, there is little discussion in the ten studies about the type of language- and content-related difficulties that L2 students experience when learning civics. Nor is it mentioned what forms of literacy support are provided by civics teachers to support L2 students' literacy abilities in connection to civics tasks. For instance, it can be argued that accomplishing advanced tasks such as searching for information about civics topics on multimodal internet sources and reflecting critically on the accuracy and validity of information, requires an adequate level of literacy abilities in both L1 and L2. The fact that civics teachers in some of the studies are either bilingual or have good knowledge of their L2 students' L1, in addition to the organization of classrooms where all students speak the same L1 (e.g., Spanish classes), enable the teachers, by employing their L1 knowledge, to continually and simultaneously assess, support and address the language- and content-related needs of their L2 students when working with civics tasks. However, it needs to be emphasized that arranging such resources in school settings with a high diversity of L2 students with various linguistic and educational backgrounds, which is common in most European countries, is not an easy task and requires increased organization and resources. Evaluating L2 students' literacy abilities in L1 and L2 and their previous civics knowledge would therefore be a good start before planning for support.

In relation to the second research question, the findings indicate that the dominant use of life experiences as a term when describing L2 students' prior knowledge is visible in more than half of the studies (e.g., Myers & Zaman, 2009; Gibson, 2017; Dabach, 2014, 2015; Dabach & Fones, 2016; Dabach et al., 2018) indicating that the inclusion of L2 students' previous life experiences generates increased civic engagement, in the form of content-rich classroom debates and increased quality in the L2 students' own written texts (e.g., Dabach & Fones, 2016; Myers & Zaman, 2009). However, two aspects need to be considered when bringing L2 students' life experiences into the context of civics as an integral part of their prior knowledge. Firstly, life experiences as a term is too general and broad, and it entails a spectrum of different aspects of knowledge which in turn makes it difficult for civics teachers to evaluate, activate, and build on knowledge when teaching civics. That is why a more explicit definition is required to determine what prior knowledge we mean that L2 students would benefit from in order to develop their civics learning. Secondly, it needs to be acknowledged that activating previous life experiences may risk reawakening experiences that L2 students, for emotional and personal reasons, may be reluctant to remember or share with their classmates and teachers. Nevertheless, only two studies (Dabach & Fones, 2016; Dabach et al., 2018) reflect on the delicacy of activating this type of knowledge.

Other terms like culturally responsive pedagogy (Jaffee, 2016; Dabach et al., 2018; Lai, 2018; Gibson, 2017; Myers & Zaman, 2009; Deltac, 2012) and funds of knowledge (Dabach & Fones, 2016) also appear and speak of prior knowledge viewed as a resource for content-

area learning. However, Dabach (2014) gives the example of a case where L2 students' lack of prior knowledge and their low level of language proficiency, perceived as two obstacles by the civics teacher, resulted in a watering down of the content, which is not beneficial for L2 students' content-area learning. It seems preferable to use funds of knowledge as a concept here, as it includes students' previous civics knowledge, including their personal attitudes, strategies, and understanding(s) of the civics concepts, in addition to the language repertoires they bring into the classroom. All these types of knowledge, in addition to the knowledge that L2 students bring from their homes, communities and cultural groups, inevitably influence the ways these students understand, reflect and apply the new content knowledge in civics in interaction with those social contexts they participate in. This approach is also supported by CLIL researchers who emphasize that L2 students' social practices outside the school need to be connected to the social practices inside the school, to create a more inclusive learning environment (Sylvén, 2013).

Finally, it needs to be emphasized that learning new knowledge in civics requires that students structure their prior knowledge (including literacy abilities in L1 and L2) in order to activate the useful knowledge and to discard the knowledge that is not useful for the purpose of the civics tasks. Such an activating process is complex, and students need teachers' support with it.

## 6 CONCLUSION

This thematic literature review contributes to conceptualizing how civic education can be more inclusive and comprehensible for L2 students. Civics teachers play a key role in successfully meeting the language- and content-related needs of L2 students in civics classrooms. The interplay between the four key components of a. literacy abilities, b. disciplinary literacy abilities, c. prior knowledge, and d. content-area knowledge, presented in the four-field model (Figure 1) was shown to be made possible through a range of disciplinary literacy activities which are purposefully prepared by civics teachers not only to support L2 students' literacy development and civics learning, but also to increase their civics engagement. Civics teachers took a series of steps in meeting their L2 students' language- and content-related needs when working with civics-specific tasks, including providing instructions about the structure and linguistic characteristics of texts rather than simplifying the content of texts in civics, selecting civics topics based on societal issues from real life to which L2 students could connect, and using teaching material such as bilingual multimodal sources and authentic material such as policy documents and voting forms. The positive results of connecting content to students' prior knowledge is viewed in L2 students' increased desire to discuss the civics topics in open classroom discussions, and in the improved quality of the texts written by them. Lastly, future research could investigate more about the type of language- and content-related difficulties that L2 students with diverse linguistic and educational background perceive in civics classrooms. The four-field model could be useful for identifying and understanding such difficulties.

## 7 LIMITATIONS

It can be argued that civics curricular goals and the constellation of classrooms, in addition to the accessible resources in the civics classrooms, are all important aspects that can have an impact on the teaching/learning conditions in civics classrooms. Based on the findings, L2 students in half of the studies were placed in homogenous classroom settings where all L2 students spoke the same L1 (Spanish) and had access to teachers who spoke both English and Spanish. Further research is needed to provide a more nuanced description of L2 students' language- and content-related difficulties in civics classrooms. Studies involving learning of second languages other than English in more diverse classroom settings, where students have various levels of literacy abilities and linguistic backgrounds, are needed and would contribute to increased knowledge about the challenges and opportunities that L2 students encounter in civics classrooms. One limitation in this context is the author's limited knowledge of other languages which the studies available in the databases might be written in. Another limitation is the fact that four of the ten studies are authored or co-authored by the same researcher (Dabach). However, despite the limited sample of studies, the findings presented here shed light on important educational factors regarding young L2 students' civics learning from a language- and content-oriented perspective which deserve more attention within the research field of civics.

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Further reading:

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**APPENDIX 1**

## Basic description of the ten included studies

| Author, year and country    | Method  | Educational stage/setting   | Major findings   | Publishing journal                       |
|-----------------------------|---|---|--|--|
| Myers & Zaman (2009)<br>USA | Mixed method case study, in-depth and semi-structured interviews with 20 students, pre- and postquestionnaires with 79 students, observations and curricular document analysis. | High school<br>The Pennsylvania Governor's School for International Studies | Civic education curricula should focus on the intersection of national with global issues and affiliations to help adolescents with developing flexible and multiple civic identities. | <i>Teachers College Record</i>           |
| Deltac (2012) USA           | Teacher interviews, classroom observations and document analysis (e.g., curricula and lesson plans).  | High school<br>Urban area   | By incorporating students' cultural diversity, teachers contributed to a supportive classroom environment where civic norms and responsibilities could be discussed.                   | <i>ProQuest Dissertations Publishing</i> |

|                           |   |  |  |   |
|---------------------------|---|--|--|---|
| Dabach (2014) USA         | Multiple school-site observations that yielded field notes, photographs, and artifacts, along with interviews with other school personnel.  | High school<br>7 urban<br>comprehensive California<br>high schools | Due to absence of in-depth knowledge of L2 students' actual language knowledge and their citizenship status, immigrant youth were exposed differently to curricula.  | <i>Journal of International Social Studies</i>          |
| Dabach (2015) USA         | Semi-structured interviews with teachers, observations including field notes and audio recordings.  | High school<br>7 urban<br>comprehensive California<br>high schools | Teachers, by incorporating bilingual practices, brought together culture, language and citizenship in their content teaching.  | <i>Harvard Educational Review</i>                       |
| Dabach & Fones (2016) USA | Data were gathered as part of a larger ethnographic study, (Civic Lessons and Immigrant Youth) aiming to understand teacher practice and immigrant youth's experiences in high school civics classes during U.S. elections. | High school<br>1 urban high school & 2<br>suburban<br>high schools | Teachers' recognition and orientation toward immigrant youth's transnational fund of knowledge was shown to be a meaningful resource for countering assimilationist discourses while teaching U.S. civics. | <i>International Journal of Multicultural Education</i> |



|                                 |  |   |  |  |
|---------------------------------|--|---|--|--|
| Jaffee (2016) USA               | Observations and cross-case analysis of 4 teachers' social studies pedagogy including multiple units of study.                               | High school<br>4 urban<br>newcomer<br>high schools                  | Five principles of culturally and linguistically relevant citizenship education should be considered when teaching diverse students: pedagogy of community; pedagogy of success; pedagogy of making cross-cultural connections; pedagogy of building a language of social studies; and pedagogy of community-based, participatory citizenship. | <i>Theory &amp; Research in Social Education</i> |
| Di Stefano & Camicia (2016) USA | Observations, field notes, document analysis (Homework and artifacts), semi-structured audio-recorded interviews with students and teachers. | Grade 3<br>Public school<br>located in an<br>urbanized<br>landscape | Using strategies such as translanguaging is highlighted as a meaningful resource for empowering students and providing them with more equitable access to educational resources.   | <i>Education sciences</i>                        |
| Gibson (2017)<br>USA/Mexico     | Teacher narratives.  | Middle school<br>The American<br>School                             | Translanguaging was incorporated into civics classroom activities as a resource by which students  | <i>The Social Studies</i>                        |

|                          |  |   |  |  |
|--------------------------|--|---|--|--|
|                          |  | located in the central city of Guadalajara, Mexico            | could study citizenship across national contexts.  |  |
| Lai (2018) USA           | Classroom observations, teacher interviews, document analysis (students' artifacts). | Middle school<br>Urban<br>California<br>district              | Bringing civics to English Language Arts caused shifts in the teachers' practices of literacy study. Reading novels created an imaginative space for civic deliberation. | <i>ProQuest<br/>Dissertations<br/>Publishing</i>             |
| Dabach et al. (2018) USA | Multi-sited ethnographic study, interviews and field notes.                          | High school<br>1 urban<br>school and 2<br>suburban<br>schools | Context, safety and legitimacy are raised as key features of teaching civics in mixed citizenship status settings with undocumented immigrant youth.                     | <i>Theory &amp;<br/>Research in<br/>Social<br/>Education</i> |

**APPENDIX 2**

Presentation of the keywords and the search results

| Keywords   | Search results | Keywords   | Search results |
|--|----------------|--|----------------|
| ((((CLIL OR "content and language learning" OR "citizen*" OR "social stud*" OR civic OR "civic education")))) AND "second language learners" NOT (history OR adult OR "historical thinking" OR science)  | N = 8          | ((classroom AND "second language" AND "social studies" AND "social science" AND "citizenship education"))  | N = 1          |
| classroom AND "second language" AND civics AND Literacy AND content  | N = 1          | ((disciplinary literacy AND civics AND civic education AND "citizenship education" AND "second language" AND Classroom))   | N = 0          |
| (classroom AND "second language" AND civics) NOT (history OR geography OR religion) NOT Adult  | N = 27         | (("Content area learning" AND civics AND "civic education" AND "second language learning" AND literacy)) NOT Adult   | N = 0          |
| classroom AND "second language" AND civics AND "civic education" AND "citizenship education") NOT (history OR geography OR religion) NOT Adult   | N = 5          | ((Prior knowledge AND civics AND "civic education" AND "second language learners" AND literacy AND "disciplinary literacy" AND "content area learning"))                             | N = 0          |
| ((classroom AND "second language" AND "citizenship education" AND learning AND teaching))  | N = 23         | ((classroom AND "second language" AND "social studies" AND literacy AND content area learning")) AND (civics and citizenship AND "civic education")                                  | N = 0          |
| ((classroom AND "second language" AND "social studies" AND "integrating language and content"))  | N = 2          | (("disciplinary literacy" AND literacy AND prior knowledge AND civics AND "civic education" AND "citizenship education" AND "second language learners" AND "content area learning")) | N = 0          |
| <p><b>Limiters used in all searches:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Peer review</li> <li>- Published Date: 20000101-2021231</li> </ul> <p>Databases: ERIC; Education Research Complete<br/>                     Search modes: Find all my search terms</p> |                |  |                |
| <p>Additional database used: ProQuest Dissertations &amp; Thesis</p>   |                |  |                |