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PATHWAYS IN INTERCOMPREHENSION AND SCHOOLING

ABSTRACT. Intercomprehension is the communicative practice that allows two speakers of two different languages to hold a conversation each in their own language without this impairing their conversation. As a communicative practice, it has developed into a didactic experiment first and as a real language learning method later. This article will discuss possible applications of the methodology for university and high school students. We will first focus on the (non-exhaustive) definition and description of the concept of intercomprehension. Then, we will describe methodologies of multilingual teaching in intercomprehension (with a focus on the integration of this practice in secondary school and tertiary institution language courses. Finally, we will discuss strengths and weaknesses of intercomprehension soliciting further research into its teaching practice.
KEYWORDS: Intercomprehension. Romance languages. PCTO. University education. High school education.

Intercomprehension in a nutshell[1]

The concept of intercomprehension (henceforth IC), which has been

developed over the past 30 years, is based on the possibility of establishing

communication between individuals and groups of individuals speaking different

languages belonging to the same language family. Several international action

research projects have promoted the study of this practice in education and have

enabled the experimentation of many different communication activities in IC. IC

is applied to written and spoken communication involving different types of

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[1] For further information on the history of IC, the national and international research projects that have been developed over the last 30 years, the principles and skills, the receptive and interactive dimension of these practices see Bonvino and Garbarino 2022.

decoding strategies (for written and oral texts) produced in unfamiliar languages. Written IC is fundamentally based on the transparency of words and their interpretation, facilitated by the common origin of languages belonging to the same language family. The IC of spoken discourse, on the other hand, is undoubtedly a more complex process (since it involves a different and unknown acoustic landscape, and an oral message produced in a context that may hinder its reception, rapidity of elocution, etc.) but is not impossible as has been demonstrated by numerous studies over the last 30 years (see, among others, Martin 2021, Escoubas Benveniste 2016, Jamet 2007).

IC is one of the four plural approaches described in the *Cadre des Compétences pour les approches plurielles* (Candelier 2012) to language teaching aimed at developing plurilingual and pluricultural competence by exploiting the potential synergies of integrating knowledge of several languages.

From a scientific point of view, the notion of IC was first used by linguists and anthropologists in Africa and America to assess what was intelligible about an unknown language (Blanche-Benveniste, 2008: 41). This communicative practice was common in cultural exchanges as well as in the methods of evangelisation used in the Middle Ages (as argued by Sand 1855, cited by Janin 2016). This communicative mode was also highlighted in the research of the linguist Ronjat (1913) on Provençal, who noticed that people from different villages could have familiar conversations and discussions regarding business

without difficulty. There was a very clear feeling of a common language pronounced in a slightly different way; if problems of comprehension arose during the conversation, the speakers would endeavour to repeat, to explain a word or to change the order of the sentence so that it could be understood without jeopardising the overall comprehension (as Ronjat mentioned in Evenou, 2016: 68-69). Ronjat's studies also showed how in everyday life, it was the IC of spoken language that was the most common practice. In fact, it was easier for the speakers of that time to recognise sounds than signs because the sounds made when pronouncing the same word were more similar than the signs used to write down that word. The shift from sounds to letters (from phonics to spelling) increased the differences between dialects of neighbouring regions/countries (Ronjat cited in Evenou, 2016: 69).

The concept of IC stems from two assumptions: the first is that no individual is uniquely monolingual; the second is that language is an open space, under construction, constituted by continuous changes that become normality and represent a sort of substratum ready to welcome further changes.

In the early 1990s, several research groups began to reflect on the possibility of transforming this communicative practice into a pedagogical practice to propose and promote a new way of learning/teaching languages. These reflections gave rise to numerous national and international research projects that demonstrated the feasibility of such a hypothesis.

Multilingual teaching methodologies in IC

In this section, we will present two methods of teaching foreign languages in IC. The first describes the participation of university students in an international IC training session[2], while the second examines training courses designed for secondary school pupils which aim to develop transversal skills.

Participation in international IC training sessions

Thanks to the APICAD association[3] and to a group of teachers who have included IC in their students' educational pathway, an IC training session is organised every year for university students[4]. The training session usually lasts three months, from September to December, and involves between 100 and 150 people, including trainers and students from European and South American universities. The aim of this training is to design products, such as ebooks, videos, padlets, photo journals, etc., in which thoughts and exchanges that occur within

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[2] Experts who offer this type of training speak of "IC sessions" or "Miriadi sessions".

[3] The Acronym APICAD stands for International Association for the Promotion of the Online Intercomprehension. This association aims to manage the *Miriadi Network* by organising training sessions in IC and disseminating news about publications, research and events related to IC teaching for each level of education. For further information see https://www.miriadi.net/en/apicad.

[4] Until the academic year 2021-2022, the IC sessions were held on the Miriadi portal (https://www.miriadi.net/formation), which was created during the Miriadi project in 2012. Over the years, the portal, like all new technologies, has aged without evolving and risked creating problems during the session. From the academic year 2022-2023, the organisers have therefore decided to hold the training on the Moodle platform of University of Grenoble-Alpes.

the international working groups (*groupes de travail* or *GT*) are synthesised. The latter are created to facilitate multilingual exchanges and bring together students who want to develop the same subject. The "Romanophony and Cinema 5" session is currently taking place, in which international students are tackling the very general theme of disability[5], with each participant using their own language, working in close contact, albeit at a distance, with other students whose mother tongue is very often different. The main theme was chosen by the participants themselves, who decided to explore it in depth in various sub-themes and present their own final product in each working group. The IC sessions generally consist of 5 phases:

- In the very first weeks of training, the so-called phases zero and one, the work of the students is to introduce themselves and get to know the other participants by compiling and reading their own and others' profiles. One part of the work is dedicated to exploring the platform used to facilitate multilingual exchanges, which are mainly written; another part is dedicated to proposing possible topics of interest;

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[5] The short film that kicked off the work in this year's *GTs* was *The Butterfly Circus* (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zWHUKd-GORM), which emphasises the importance of knowing oneself in order to appreciate others, to fulfil one's deepest expectations and realize the beauty of one's existence.

- In phase 2, the participants propose a short film[6], whose topic will be the leitmotif of the entire training session;

- In phase 3, the work begins to take place in international working groups (*les groupes de travails* or *GT*), in which the participants usually establish a work plan indicating precisely the title and type of final product, the theme chosen from the short film selected, how the final product is to be disseminated (e.g. on social media or other media), the methodology of the collaborative work (what is to be done, who is to do it, what tools are to be used, etc.), what the multilingual dimension of the final product is;

- Phase 4 is the operational phase, in which all the decisions taken during phase 3 are finalised. It is the phase that develops over a longer period than the previous phases and the work continues in the different *GTs*. Participants can divide themselves into subgroups according to the different tasks assigned and use tools and platforms that allow faster and more immediate communication (usually WhatsApp groups and video meetings are used extensively to track progress).

- Phase 5 is devoted to reviewing the activities and mutually evaluating the final products of each *GT*. Questionnaires are usually distributed highlighting the progress, feelings, and experiences during the training.

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[6] This year, each institutional group (GI) submitted 5 short films, on which all participants voted to decide on a winner.

IC training for high school students

The second type of IC training is designed for high school students attending the last years of high school. The aim of this training is to familiarise students with the concept of IC and to put it into practice in order to discover languages that they know little or do not know at all through the strategies that pupils develop in the process. This course is conceived within the framework of PCTO training experiences[7] and it lasts six weeks, for two hours per week, totalling 12 hours. The languages covered are usually Corsican, Portuguese and Romanian, as the pupils already have a good knowledge of Spanish and French. Various goals are pursued throughout the training: linguistic and interlinguistic, cultural and intercultural. The pupils can develop multilingual competence based on their ability to make comparisons between languages they already know and other Romance languages with which they come into contact. The texts and audios presented convey information about the culture and history of the countries whose languages are used by the course participants.

This kind of training usually begins with activities aimed, especially during the first sessions, at motivating the students and encouraging them to become

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[7] The acronym PCTO stands for "percorsi per le competenze trasversali e per l'orientamento" which means "pathways for transversal skills and orientation". The PCTOs are part of the Italian government's efforts to promote Italian citizens' acquisition of skills and competences which are necessary to functioning in a changing society and work environment. These pathways enable students to acquire additional skills while promoting their career orientation.

involved in their own training. Motivation comes above all from realising that understanding an unknown language is possible, even if participants recognise that the modality of this kind of learning is *sui generis*. The subsequent activities enable pupils to make inferences and recognise the syntactic structures of unknown languages by comparing them with the structures of their mother tongue; all of which lead to important metalinguistic reflections[8].

Strengths and weaknesses of the approach

The following discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of IC, based on the results of students' surveyed opinions aims to encourage further reflection on foreign language learning experiences in IC and on the possibilities of including IC pathways in students' and pupils' education.

Opinions on the education of university students

The evaluation questionnaires[9] of the international IC training presented questions concerning the advantages and disadvantages of this experience. The students greatly appreciated the opportunity to "act", to do something practical: the design of a final product is one of the strengths of this type of training session. It is an experience described as fascinating, interesting,

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[8] You can find a more in-depth description of this training course in Di Vito 2022.

[9] We analysed the answers that the participants freely posted on the page of the site on which the evaluation questions of the 2020 IC session were posed.

enriching, constructive and energising. The students also spoke of curiosity, of a 'breath of fresh air'; they referred to the other participants as 'comrades', that is, people who work in a group to develop and complete a project. Participants also identified this training as a new way of learning languages, highlighting how such an experience can be turned into daily practice and can be implemented outside the training itself. This online collaborative work experience has also taught participants to work together, to make decisions, to be patient, to manage their time to accomplish different tasks and to respect other participants' time and perspectives. It has also urged participants to support and motivate each other.

Some negative aspects were identified in the use of the platform, which presented some technical difficulties, time-management issues (the students always kept on asking for more time) and problems related to the Internet connection.

High school students' opinions on IC application

What can be said about the high school students' experience?

First of all, the participants were surprised at their ability to understand languages they had never studied in the traditional way and were amazed that they could understand a speech given in an unknown language. The type of lessons proposed, and the mode of interaction chosen ensured that an environment was created in which each learner could express his or her own hypothesis about the meaning of the messages or texts and could be helped by the other participants.

The sharing of observations on the meaning of unclear words highlighted the value of collaboration between students. Many emphasised that it was a playful experience and that coming into contact with unfamiliar languages could be fun and interesting. One question in the questionnaire specifically concerned suggestions on the course content: in many cases, the content was evaluated as being appropriate to the age and interests of the participants, although some pupils requested contrastive grammar exercises in order to identify similarities and differences of the languages learned by them. They also suggested watching subtitled videos/films to understand more complex words or expressions. Some students also emphasised how this type of course could have positive implications for their professional future, as it opened their minds to new strategies they could use to understand languages they did not know.

Further insights

The intercomprehensive approach to teaching one (or more) foreign languages, as has been pointed out, is different from a more traditional one in several aspects. First, IC aims to develop and/or to enhance the learner's plurilingual competence. Through the rebuilding of their linguistic repertoire, learners "become autonomous in the management of their learning processes"[10];

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[10] See https://www.miriadi.net/it/il-soggetto-plurilingue-e-l-apprendimento.

furthermore, they realise that all linguistic knowledge (even of languages not fully recognised by society, such as dialects or minority languages) constitutes a linguistic and cultural resource that should not be underestimated (De Carlo & Anquetil, 2019: 170). The learning of IC strategies is part of the learning process of receptive skills; moreover, IC stimulates the acquisition of more than one language complying with language education policies in Europe, which promote plurilingualism.

In this kind of approach, the teacher's role changes since he/she will not have to teach a foreign language (which he/she may not know anyway): he/she will guide students to discover languages unfamiliar to them and to draw on their prior knowledge, spirit of discovery and ability to make inferences. This method appears to be an inclusive method since it pushes the student/pupil to act according to their own abilities and skills: they feel motivated by the discovery approach and also gratified as they are enabled and encouraged to use all their knowledge and skills.

Of course, further discussion is needed on the assessment of acquired competences in IC. In the current state of research, there are two tools that can be used to assess skills in IC: the REFIC and the descriptors developed during the Eval-IC project[11]. One of the results of the Miriadi project was the drafting of the

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[11] See https://evalic.eu/leprojet/.

skills reference data (REFIC), whose main aims are to "define attitudes, knowledge and abilities in IC that facilitate the multilingual and intercultural communication" and to "promote the curriculum integration process of IC, its spreading as a teaching and communicative experience"[12]. This tool can be used not only to construct learning processes but also to generate criteria for evaluating achieved skills. Eval-IC descriptors aim to produce a certification of IC skills. The latter have been divided into three different dimensions: the receptive, the interactive one and interproduction. The descriptors proposed in Eval-IC, as highlighted in Garbarino and Melo-Pfeifer (2020: 119), go beyond the linguistic dimension and consider as an integral part of the assessment of IC skills other dimensions that characterise a plurilingual approach, such as the cultural and intercultural, interpersonal, socio-affective, paraverbal and non-verbal aspects.

A final consideration is to be proposed on the application of such an approach to plurilingual teaching. At the latest ANILS 2022 conference[13], one of the questions raised at the working table on plurilingualism focused on the difficulty of disseminating such plurilingual practice in the various levels of language education. We believe that a solution could be found in the inclusion of

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[12] For further information see https://www.miriadi.net/en/skills-reference-data.

[13] ANILS annual meeting, Trieste, 09-10 December 2022, http://www.anils.it/wp/2022/10/26/convegno-nazionale-anils-75-anni/

training experiences in plurilingual practices and, in our case, in the IC training

of future trainers.

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[14] All the web pages were last accessed on November 2022.