

INTERCOMPREHENSION

Guide for the development of language education policies in Europe: from linguistic diversity to plurilingual education

Reference study

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Preface

This text, part of a series published by the *Language Policy Division*, is clearly significant in its own right because it deals with certain influential factors in the organisation and sociolinguistic foundations of language teaching and in the linguistic ideologies at work in problems related to the languages of Europe. It is however part of a larger project since it is one element of a collection of publications focused on the *Guide for the Development of Language Education Policies in Europe: From Linguistic Diversity to Plurilingual Education*.

This *Guide* is both a descriptive and programmatic document whose purpose is to demonstrate the complexity of the questions involved in language teaching, often dealt with in a simplistic manner. It aims to describe the processes and conceptual tools needed for the analysis of educational contexts with respect to languages and for the organisation of language learning and teaching according to the principles of the Council of Europe.

There are two versions of this *Guide* for different audiences; the *Main version* deals with a number of complex questions, albeit in a limited framework. It seemed necessary to illustrate these questions with case studies, syntheses and studies of specific sectors of language teaching, dealing in monographic form with questions only touched upon in the *Guide*. These *Reference Studies* provide a context for the *Guide*, showing its theoretical bases, sources of further information, areas of research and the themes which underlie it.

The *Modern Languages Division*, now the *Language Policy Division*, demonstrates through this collection of publications its new phase of activity, which is a continuation of previous activities. The *Division* disseminated through the *Threshold Levels* of the 1970s, a language teaching methodology more focused upon communication and mobility within Europe. It then developed on the basis of a shared educational culture, the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (published in its final version in 2001). This is a document which is not concerned with the nature of the contents of language teaching but rather with the form of curricula and syllabi for language teaching. The *Framework* proposes explicit referential levels for identifying degrees of language competence, and thus provides the basis for differentiated management of courses so that opportunities for the teaching of more languages in schools and in lifelong learning are created. This recognition of the intrinsic value of plurilingualism has simultaneously led to the development of an instrument which allows each learner to become aware of and to describe their language repertoire, namely the *European Language Portfolio*. Versions of this developed in member States are manifold and were at the heart of the European Year of Languages (2001).

Plurilingualism has been identified in numerous *Recommendations* of the Council of Europe as the principle and the aim of language education policies, and must be valued at the individual level as well as being accepted collectively by educational institutions. The *Guide* and the *Reference Studies* provide the link between teaching methods and educational issues on the one hand and policy on

the other, and have the function of making explicit this political principle and of describing concrete measures for implementation.

This text by Peter Doyé discusses one specific approach to implementation which extends the boundaries of traditional thinking about the nature and content of language teaching. In the principle of 'intercomprehension' there is an alternative to the oft-mooted proposal for an emphasis on a *lingua franca*, and at the same time the development of an understanding of the nature of language and human communication. Intercomprehension might for example take the form of reciprocal understanding between two speakers/writers as each speaks/writes their own language and understands the other and from this receptive knowledge there might grow at a later point in time an ability to use the language productively, thus adding another dimension to their plurilingual competence. Intercomprehension, the use of linguistic and non-linguistic skills and knowledge to understand an 'unknown' language, offers the opportunity to benefit from the commonalities in human communication and languages. It depends on raising awareness of what we already know but do not realise, our knowledge of how communication works, how human beings interact with each other, and then drawing on this to make 'educated guesses' at the unknown. The application of these ideas among the language families of Europe is a starting point, but Doyé also suggests that access to languages of other families is possible and developing the skills of access can be one of the aims of language teaching. There are unresolved issues but intercomprehension is an approach which is being investigated and experimented, and offers a complement to other ways of promoting plurilingualism.

This specific aspect of the problems of language education policies in Europe gives a perspective on the general view taken in the *Guide* but nonetheless this text is a part of the fundamental project of the *Language Policy Division*: to create through reflection and exchange of experience and expertise, the consensus necessary for European societies, characterised by their differences and the transcultural currents which create 'globalised nations', not to become lost in the search for the 'perfect' language or languages valued at the expense of others. They should rather recognise the plurality of the languages of Europe and the plurilingualism, actual or potential, of all those who live in this space, as a condition for collective creativity and for development, a component of democratic citizenship through linguistic tolerance, and therefore as a fundamental value of their actions in languages and language teaching.

Jean-Claude Beacco and Michael Byram

1. Defining intercomprehension

One of the most remarkable and challenging ideas for the realization of plurilingual education is the concept of intercomprehension.

It represents quite a new approach which originated from didactic discussions in the early 1990s. In the first few years of its development quite a number of definitions were tried out and there was little agreement about an optimal formulation of the essential components. In the meantime a common denominator has been found and most proponents accept the following definition:

Intercomprehension is a form of communication in which each person uses his or her own language and understands that of the other.

The advantage of this definition is that it includes both spoken and written communication and excludes using the target language, - qualities that are useful for the sake of clarity.

The inclusion of both modes of communication is important, because – depending on the circumstances - one of the two usually prevails: in some communicative situations it is the understanding of spoken utterances, in others the understanding of written texts.

The exclusion of the productive use of the other language is relevant, because it is a characteristic trait of intercomprehension that it does not demand the ability of verbal production in the target language.

For further differentiation it has been found helpful to distinguish between the competence and performance of intercomprehension. Like any other linguistic phenomenon, intercomprehension can be regarded from these two aspects. From the performance aspect it can be described as an activity of people with different first languages who communicate in such a way as to use their own language and understand that of the others. From the competence aspect it can be conceived as the capacity to understand other languages without having studied them.

The advocates of intercomprehension regard it as an alternative or complement to the common use of a *lingua franca*.

Undoubtedly, the universal employment of a *lingua franca* has one singular advantage over any other form of communication between people of different first languages: If all participants in interlingual/intercultural encounters use and understand one particular language, this facilitates their communication enormously.

But the general acceptance of the *lingua franca* idea, so strong until the turn of the century, has recently given way to a more differentiated and critical view. Educators begin to see – besides the obvious advantage – some serious handicaps of a global language. The most important of these are:

- the danger of linguistic imperialism;
- the disadvantage of a culture-free use of the *lingua franca*

- insufficient communication and potential depreciation of the mother tongue.

Several authors have examined these handicaps carefully and treated them in their recent works. Because of a lack of space we cannot deal with these arguments in detail; but perhaps a short quotation from one author each will suffice to illustrate the main objections.

Phillipson points to the danger that by putting one widely used language in the position of a *lingua franca* one might give it an unjustified dominance over all other languages; and he expresses his fear that such a predominance might lead to what he calls 'linguistic imperialism'. Phillipson is especially concerned about 'English linguistic imperialism', which he describes as 'dominance by the establishment and continuous reconstitution of structural inequalities between English and other languages'(1992, 80). For the sake of fairness one should add though, that the potential danger of linguistic imperialism is not restricted to English. It is inherent in the use of any widely spoken language as *lingua franca*, be they Russian, Spanish, French or German (see also Skutnabb-Kangas 2004).

Bassnett has expressed her fears that, if in future times English were mainly used as a *lingua franca*, then it would become a culture-free language cut off from its base:

If more of the world's population learn to speak English, then arguably native speakers of that language can relax and communicate in their own tongue. But the problem with this view is that it does not only cut off English speakers from other literary traditions and cultures, it is also leading to the development of an English that may be a *lingua franca*, but it is a language detached from any cultural roots (Bassnett 1999, 185) (see also Batley et al. 1993, 21).

The third disadvantage is closely connected with the second. A language that is used without association or reference to its original culture is always in danger of being superficial. The very circumstance that non-native speakers employ this language detached from its native foundation involves the risk that their communication lacks depth, clarity and significance. If in addition such communication becomes general practice, i.e. with many interlocutors involved who do not know the language well, then the disadvantage becomes a real danger.

Therefore scholars like Karl Rieder favour a 'new appreciation of the status of the mother tongue of the learners and the importance it is assigned in the comprehension processes between languages' (Rieder 2002, 23). And it is for this reason that UNESCO - besides its strong engagement in the promotion of foreign language education - stresses the importance of mother tongue instruction (UNESCO 2003).

The advocates of intercomprehension take these three disadvantages seriously and therefore propose a fundamentally different language education policy. They are convinced that by adopting their approach, either as a complement or as an alternative to the conventional procedures, language educators could avoid the

handicaps mentioned and would profit from the positive qualities inherent in Intercomprehension.

2. The advantages of intercomprehension

What are the advantages of this approach?

For an overview it seems useful to categorize the arguments according to their background: as political, psychological and educational reasons. From the proponents' point of view intercomprehension is

- politically relevant
- psychologically well-founded
- educationally reasonable.

1. Intercomprehension is in perfect agreement with the political necessities of a United Europe and with the educational consequences that the two representative institutions – Council of Europe and European Commission – have drawn from their consideration of these necessities: plurilingualism, diversification and flexibility.

If Europe wants to preserve its multilingual wealth, then it is not acceptable that one language dominates the others. 'The Council of Europe and its member states have taken the position that it is the promotion of linguistic diversity which should be pursued in language education policy.' (*Guide for the Development of Language Education Policies in Europe*, p.7) In the opinion of the promoters of intercomprehension it would be a contradiction to this principle to grant one language the privilege of a *lingua franca* which everyone has to learn in order to become a fully accepted European citizen and to exclude all those who do not know this language. In their view, any such inequality is avoided in intercomprehension: all languages receive an equal status through the simple arrangement that the participants in communication use the language they know best, which – as a rule – is their mother tongue (see also Piri 2002).

In this sense intercomprehension is in complete accordance with the overall aims formulated in the *Guide for the Development of Language Education Policies in Europe*, - certainly more than the universal use of a *lingua franca*.

2. Intercomprehension has a very solid psychological foundation. It rests on the interplay of man's faculty for language and his ability to exploit his previously acquired funds of knowledge.

The idea that human beings possess a natural capacity for language is nowadays commonly accepted in psychology and goes back to Ferdinand de Saussure's classical theory of language and language acquisition. Saussure not only introduced the – now well-known – distinction between 'langue' and 'parole', but also the concept of a general anthropological basis on which these two phenomena rest, namely 'langage', which he defined as the ability to encode messages in systems of signs and to decode these signs. (Saussure 1916, 26). This 'faculté du langage' enables human beings not only to express their ideas, feelings and intentions in languages, but also to understand messages in which such ideas, feelings and intentions are expressed. It is obviously this second part

of the human capacity that we are interested in, when we discuss intercomprehension: human beings possess a general interpretative faculty that allows them to comprehend messages. Normally these messages are encoded in linguistic systems that the individual has learnt. But the interpretative process is basically the same, when they are encoded in 'unfamiliar' systems (Pencheva & Shopov 2003, 36). The difference lies in the fact that in the second case the individual has to rely on other funds of knowledge than in the first.

The idea of exploiting previously acquired funds of knowledge is a complement to the idea of the natural capacity for language. Learners of intercomprehension are not linguistic novices, when they are faced with the task of interpreting texts or utterances in a new language. They possess considerable funds of knowledge which they can apply. The concept of funds of knowledge is based on the simple premise that human beings are learners throughout their lives and that they have at their disposal a variable amount of knowledge at any stage of their development which makes them competent to solve the problems they are facing. For the purpose of intercomprehension any knowledge in any area can be exploited that helps to interpret the signs of languages one has not studied.

3. The idea of an education for intercomprehension presupposes that the acquisition of competence in intercomprehension can be supported by teaching. This presupposition is theoretically plausible and – where put into practice – has already brought convincing results. Teachers as 'managers of learning' (Gagné 1975) are in a good position to arrange the conditions of learning in such a way as to make the intended learning possible. In order to help their pupils to acquire intercomprehensive competence they can provide conditions that are suited to facilitate the acquisition process.

They can do this by realizing a number of didactic principles which are generally appreciated - if not always practised and which are ideally suited for intercomprehension learning and teaching.

a) The first of these principles concerns motivation. A good way of motivating pupils for new learning is to make them aware of competences which they have already acquired. Intercomprehension teachers can take up their work by making their learners aware of their funds of useable knowledge and encourage them to activate this knowledge for the understanding of new texts and utterances.

b) The second principle is closely connected with the first. It demands that teachers should begin their assisting activities as precisely as possible at the 'status quo', i.e. at the stage of learning which their pupils have reached, and to employ methodological devices that are appropriate to this stage (Ausubel 1968, 26). The initial awareness-raising mentioned above provides a good basis for the search for such devices; and the methodology presented below is based on the principle of finding appropriate 'answers' to the learners' cognitive dispositions (see below).

c) The third principle concerns learner autonomy. The measures that teachers take should never lose the character of assistance and never become interference. This general principle is especially suited for the promotion of intercomprehension. The acquisition of intercomprehensive competence

lends itself to being organized as a self-directed process where the learners take the first steps and the teacher - only after close observation of their needs – offers support (Holec and Huttunen 1997: 27).

d) Last, but not least: the acquisition and promotion of intercomprehension offers good opportunities for intercultural education. In the educational philosophy of the Council of Europe mutual understanding has never been conceived as a purely linguistic objective, but as a broad cultural aim. The close relationship between language and culture virtually demands such a general orientation.

To reach this aim, intercomprehensive learning and teaching are particularly suited. The fact that in intercomprehension the interlocutors are on a par with each other is an essential advantage: it requires that they learn to see and treat one another as partners and develop the attitudes and skills needed in intercultural communication, namely respect, tolerance and co-operation.

3. Intercomprehension - a utopia?

However convincing the arguments presented above may be, there is little doubt that the introduction of intercomprehension on a large European scale would not be easy.

Is it at all practicable? Or is it utopian?

The sceptics are numerous. Most of them agree that intercomprehension is based on a good theoretical concept, but is impossible in practice. These sceptics have to be reminded of two things:

Intercomprehension is a reality in quite a number of European countries and regions already.

In some parts of our continent it has existed for a long time. In others it has become common practice in more recent years and is now part of many people's everyday life.

This is not restricted to border areas. Italians in Madrid, Swedes in Oslo or Serbs in Ljubljana can very well use their mother tongue and expect to be understood by many people of the host country. But as the examples show, such practice occurs mostly in the communication between speakers of related languages:

The fact that languages can be grouped in 'families' according to their origins means that those which are descendants from the same origins may be 'intercomprehensible', i.e. if the speakers of the languages in question each speak their own language they can be understood by the others (*Guide for the Development of Language Education Policies in Europe*, p.37).

It is a fortunate circumstance that many people in Europe can profit from the fact that the great majority of its languages belong to one of three 'language families':

The Romance language family with, for example, French, Italian, Portuguese, Romanian, Spanish, Catalan, Provençal

The Germanic language family with, for example, Dutch, German, English, Swedish, Norwegian, Danish, Icelandic

The Slavonic language family with, for example, Polish, Czech, Slovak, Russian, Ukrainian, Slovene, Serbian/Croatian, Bulgarian.

Linguists have for a long time been interested in the question of how similarities between related languages are recognized and processed and in the last few years educationists have begun to explore the ways of promoting intercomprehension through the development of translinguistic methods (Meißner and Reinfried 1998).

A number of projects have been launched for this purpose and three of them – one for each language family – are as follows.

EuroComRom

EuroComRom stands for ‘Eurocomprehension in Romance languages’. This is the biggest and most developed of all projects, and it is not by chance a project concerned with the most extensive net of languages in Europe. The great majority of Southern Europeans speak languages of Latin origin and the similarities between them are very obvious.

The EuroCom Rom method uses the close relation of Romance languages in order to promote reading comprehension among students who have learnt (only) one of these languages and wish to understand the others. Its main technique is ‘optimised deduction’ on the basis of extensive linguistic transfer (Klein and Stegmann 2000, 13).

IGLO

IGLO is the acronym of a project called ‘Intercomprehension in Germanic Languages Online’. It aims at promoting cross-linguistic understanding among the seven Germanic languages by focusing on their similarities and differences. The end product will be a web-based programme displaying the relations among the seven languages with the purpose of facilitating comprehension of more than one of them at a time (Mondahl 2002, 221).

Intercomprehension in Slavonic Languages

This project is based on the hypothesis that learners knowing one Slavonic language can easily widen their linguistic horizon by a systematic transfer of their knowledge to further languages of the Slavonic family (Zybatow 2002; 313).

Its method resembles that of EuroComRom and in particular uses the technique of the ‘Seven Sieves’, by which the learners ‘extract the gold from the new language by passing it through seven sieving processes’ (McCann 2003; 9). The ‘gold’ in this image stands for the knowledge that the learners possess by having previously learnt other languages.

The preceding descriptions should not be misunderstood as a kind of discrimination. Firstly, the concentration on intercomprehension processes within the three big language families does not imply the idea that a crossing of the boundaries between them is not practicable. It secondly does not mean that

the languages which do not belong to one of these families should be excluded, - that the less widely-spoken languages (see Piri 2002) could not benefit from programmes for the promotion of intercomprehension. It only means that in such cases the participants cannot profit from a relatedness of their mother tongue with 'neighbouring' languages, that they have to rely on other funds of knowledge and their task of understanding texts and utterances will be more difficult (see below). There are other projects which principally include the examination of such cases of 'boarder crossing' and therefore emphasize the role of non-linguistic factors in their research, for example

- *EU+I* (European Awareness and Intercomprehension) and
- *ILTE* (Intercomprehension in Language Teacher Education)

In the *EU+I* Project, intercomprehension is seen 'not only as the result of linguistic transfer between languages of the same family, but as the result of the transfer of strategies in the framework of a general interpretative process which underlies all communicative activity' (Capucho 2002).

In the *ILTE* Project one of the principal aims is to prepare teachers for the task of helping their students to transfer knowledge and skills from one language to another. Of course, its members take the proximity factor into consideration, too, but they also pay attention to the inclusion of languages that do not belong to the Indo-European languages (Rieder 2002).

The second counterargument to the sceptical critics is that - like many other educational programmes that look difficult and therefore daring at first sight - the intercomprehension programmes might be very demanding, but because of the solid theory on which they are based they have good chances of becoming a successful enterprise, provided that they are well organized and that they develop a special methodology that is appropriate to the new task. This methodology will have to differ considerably from the traditional ones applied in conventional language teaching, simply because the aim is different.

4. A methodology for the teaching of Intercomprehension

All the didactic principles described above point in one direction: teachers intending to help their pupils develop competence in Intercomprehension have to base their assistance on a clear observation of the needs of these pupils. Such an observation usually discloses the fact that most learners possess considerable funds of useable knowledge which can be exploited.

Consequently the teachers' task is

- a) to make their pupils aware of this knowledge and
- b) to enable them to use this knowledge by developing the appropriate strategies.

The funds of knowledge are individual properties and vary from one learner to the next. Therefore it would not be helpful to start from a presupposed basis of knowledge assuming that all or most of one's pupils possess it, but much more appropriate to make them aware of the different domains of knowledge in which they could look for suitable clues.

Which are these domains? What are the categories of knowledge that the learners could draw upon?

Several theorists of intercomprehension (for example Klein and Stegmann 2000, Pencheva and Shopov 2003, Rieder 2002) have proposed plausible classifications of the relevant knowledge, each of them with a different emphasis. The following overview attempts to integrate these proposals into a single logical system:

- i. General knowledge
- ii. Cultural knowledge
- iii. Situational knowledge
- iv. Behavioural knowledge
- v. Pragmatic knowledge
- vi. Graphic knowledge
- vii. Phonological knowledge
- viii. Grammatical knowledge
- ix. Lexical knowledge

The central methodological hypothesis is that all learners of intercomprehension have some funds of knowledge in each of these categories at their disposal, which they can exploit, and that teachers can help them develop the strategies to use these funds for the understanding of new texts and utterances.

- i. General knowledge

Before linguistic knowledge proper comes into play, it is often the general knowledge of the learners that guides them in their interpretation of a given text or utterance. Their knowledge of the world, their general encyclopaedic knowledge, often determines and facilitates their understanding.

If the listeners or readers are informed about a historical event (such as the building of the Berlin Wall), about the position of a particular country (such as Guyana) or about an institution (such as the Council of Europe), then this historical, geographical or political knowledge can enable them to make first assumptions about the contents of a respective conversation or a written text, when they hear or read particular clues.

To use such extralinguistic knowledge for the understanding of texts in an 'unknown' language learners do not need any special training, just motivation. What teachers can do is to encourage their pupils to mobilize their knowledge of the world for the purpose of interpretation. They can sensitize them to the various opportunities for applying their 'pre-knowledge' and demonstrate how such an application can help.

- ii. Cultural knowledge

In this domain the learners make use of their knowledge of other cultures and the relationship of these cultures to their own. They recognize certain place names or personal names and infer that the text deals with events in a specific culture. Such knowledge may be stereotypical and contain false generalizations or it may

be differentiated. But even if it is stereotypical, it may be helpful for a first rough orientation.

Listening to a discussion or reading a text the learners might find passages obviously referring to facts or events in a particular culture. If they are informed about this culture, they can use the references in their comprehension of the text. A mention of Anatolia for example may evoke images of Turkey and Turkish people. A reference to Vaclav Havel may elicit representations of the Czech Republic and its citizens.

Teachers of intercomprehension have a double task in the domain of cultural knowledge. On the one hand they must try to encourage their pupils to exploit their previously acquired knowledge and on the other hand to prevent them from false generalizations, in particular to show them the inadequacy of stereotypes for deeper understanding.

iii. Situational knowledge

Every text or utterance is embedded in a situation. The persons who produce it, the occasions on which it occurs, the places where it is used provide indications about its contents. They all give clues which the learners can use for basic comprehension of the message.

There is always a speaker or writer who pursues a personal interest in the performance of the speech act or act of writing. There are always the factors of place and time which determine the speaker's or writer's verbal production. There are people to whom the speaker or writer addresses his/her speech or writing. And if the learners are informed about these factors, they can make intelligent guesses about the meaning of the message.

The function of intercomprehension teachers in this domain is to make the learners aware of their situational knowledge. They can encourage their pupils to ask themselves what they already know about the constellation and to activate this knowledge.

iv. Behavioural knowledge

Verbal utterances are often accompanied by other forms of communicative behaviour, and all learners of intercomprehension know that they exist. They have experienced – in their home culture and possibly in other familiar cultures – that people do not only use verbal signs to express ideas, emotions and intentions and that there are other patterns of behaviour which quite successfully serve the purpose of conveying information. The most common non-verbal patterns in direct face-to-face communication are gestures, facial expressions, posture and movement; the most frequent means in indirect written communication are visuals and the format of the message.

In this domain the teachers' function is again twofold: they have to make their students aware of the general behavioural knowledge they have acquired growing up in their home culture, but also of the limited applicability of this knowledge in the encounters with other cultures. They can show their students what they have to look for in the behaviour of members of other cultural and linguistic backgrounds and to help them recognize these nonverbal signs and to

interpret them on the basis of previously acquired behavioural knowledge. On the other hand teachers have to point out the potential differences between the meanings of the kinesic patterns in their home culture and in the target culture, - in other words make their students understand the culture-bound nature of such patterns. In addition, they might inform their pupils about the actual meaning of the most important kinesic patterns in some other culture.

v. Pragmatic knowledge

Pragmatic knowledge is closest to situational knowledge, for quite often the situation in which a text appears gives clues to the purpose it serves. If for example a certain text in a certain format appears on the last page of a newspaper among many other similar texts, it is probable that it has the function of an advertisement. Or if an utterance is made at the end of a long meeting, the assumption is justified that it serves the purpose of closing the session and saying goodbye.

There are many other indicators of the illocutionary function of a given text, also in languages unknown to the learners. Readers of a written statement can for example conclude from its outer form, whether it is a declaration, a directive or a commissive. Listeners to an utterance in a foreign language can deduce from the stress and intonation in which it is made, whether it is a request, a promise or an apology.

The teachers' task is to cause their pupils to handle such 'pre-knowledge' with caution. Above all, they must make them aware that similar grammatical categories can have the same, but also quite different pragmatic functions in different languages, that for example certain tenses – in addition to their function as indicators of time – can serve the purpose of expressing belief, likelihood, certainty or intention. The pupils have to learn that, on the one hand, they can use a lot of their previously acquired pragmatic knowledge also for their understanding of new languages, but, on the other hand, have to be cautious and assume only provisionally identical functions.

vi. Graphic knowledge

On the basis of previously encountered writing systems the learners make assumptions about the writing system used in a given text. If the new system is familiar to them, they can – in connection with their prior grammatical and lexical knowledge – make further assumptions about the contents of the text.

Other graphic indicators of meaning are text segmentation, capitalization, the use of different scripts, underlining, punctuation marks, numbers and universally applied graphic symbols. The teachers can make their pupils aware of these indicators and, in addition, point out spelling correspondences between the mother tongue and the target language.

vii. Phonological knowledge

On the basis of previously learnt sound systems, listeners make inferences in order to discover the meaning of spoken utterances.

This is the weakest domain in the field of linguistic knowledge, because phonic representation differs from language to language. However, there are a few

essential sound correspondences between all European languages; and the teachers can inform their pupils about the most important ones between the pupils' native tongue and the target language easily.

In so far, work in the phonological domain is typical of all assistance given by intercomprehension teachers. With just a little help the learners can approach a (spoken or written) text with much higher chances of understanding it than without.

viii. Grammatical knowledge

On the basis of previously acquired grammatical systems, learners make assumptions about the grammatical structures and formulae used in a given text. In the case of languages of the same family, they can, with some justification, assume that the grammatical structures applied correspond to some degree to the structures of previously learnt languages. If for example they encounter a text divided into smaller units by the use of periods or pauses, they can hypothesize that these units represent sentences containing subjects, predicates and adjuncts, and - going one step further - that the sub-units carry the same or similar structural meanings. Here again the intercomprehension teachers' function is to make their pupils aware of grammatical similarities between the languages in question, but also to admonish them to exploit these similarities with caution, because corresponding structures and morphosyntactic formulae might carry very different meanings (see also Klein and Stegmann 2000).

ix. Lexical knowledge

Two kinds of prior lexical knowledge can be applied by learners who approach a new language:

- a) the knowledge of international vocabulary and
- b) the knowledge of vocabulary that the mother tongue (or another previously learnt language) have in common (see also Klein and Stegmann 2000).

Re a): All European languages except Finnish and Hungarian belong to the Indo-European group and therefore possess a common core of syntactic structures and vocabulary. Most of the so-called international vocabulary is of Greek or Latin origin or stems from later derivations of these two classical languages. On average, adult Europeans have 4000 of these easily recognizable words at their disposal. They vary in amount and distribution from language to language, but even such languages as Finnish and Hungarian, which belong to the Uralian Group, contain quite a number of these international words. An awareness of the great size of the international vocabulary in their own language can certainly bring intercomprehension learners an enormous benefit.

Re b): Within the three big language families learners can profit from the affinity of the languages concerned. There is a great Pan-Romance vocabulary, a rich Pan-Germanic vocabulary and a considerable Pan-Slavonic vocabulary that can be exploited. To make their pupils aware of the existence of the respective vocabulary in the family to which their language belongs, to show them how they can use it for the understanding of texts in new languages and at the same

time warn them against the so-called false friends, is the task of the Intercomprehension teacher in the lexical domain.

5. Conclusion

In their introduction to the *Guide for the Development of Language Policies in Europe*, the authors use a most helpful visualization: they speak of a continuum of attitudes and approaches to the educational requirements of the new political situation in Europe.

‘Policy responses to multilingualism lie between two ends of a continuum of attitudes and approaches: on the one hand policy for the reduction of diversity, on the other the promotion and maintenance of diversity.’ (*Guide for the Development of Language Education Policies in Europe*, p.7)

The continuum model is so revealing because it puts all the different approaches to plurilingual education in perspective by using one and only one criterion: the estimation of diversity. Because of this simple logical device this model is also very enlightening in the special context of the present study. It permits us to view the different programmes to which this study refers from a single perspective and allows us to evaluate them by asking the following essential question: do the *lingua franca* programmes and the intercomprehension programmes serve to reduce or to promote diversity?

The answer is clear:

The proponents of the *lingua franca* approach are simply not interested in maintaining diversity, and diversification in language education is not their concern. As long as their programmes work in the sense that they contribute to facilitating communication between great numbers of people, they are satisfied. They are pragmatists and their approach is down to earth: there is this one language that everybody uses and understands, and this is a great achievement in their view. However, they neglect the cultural dimension of language learning and teaching and therefore their programmes contradict the principles of the Council of Europe’s language education policies.

The proponents of the intercomprehension approach, on the other hand, are concerned with the kind of communication between those many people that have to get along with each other in the future. They think that just the ability to communicate linguistically does not sufficiently equip young people for their manifold interactions in 21st century Europe, and therefore are not willing to detach language learning and teaching from the general task of intercultural education. In particular, they wish to maintain this continent’s linguistic and cultural diversity by diversification programmes in language education; and they are convinced that the implementation of intercomprehension programmes are a good way to pursue this aim.

6. Open questions

The discussion about the possibilities and chances of success of intercomprehension is still in full flow and it would be inexpedient to deny that

there are still a few important questions to which no satisfactory answers have been found so far. The most urgent of these questions are the following two:

- a) the scope and degree of understanding that can be reached through intercomprehension;
- b) the implementation of intercomprehension in the curricula of educational institutions.

Re a): The essential question is this: is intercomprehension suited only for understanding the gist of texts and utterances in unknown languages or does it enable learners to go beyond this goal and comprehend texts and utterances in the often required depth and detail?

It seems doubtful that this question can be answered on a general scale. The attainable scope and degree depend on quite a number of factors that have to be taken into consideration, such as:

- the proximity of the languages in question,
- the educational background of the learners,
- their verbal intelligence,
- their motivation.

With respect to the first factor it seems plausible to assume that a detailed and thorough understanding is very well attainable between languages of the same family. But whether this goal can also be reached by learners that have to cross borders from one language family to another, we do not yet know. This is a question that cannot be answered by theoretical reflection. Empirical research is needed, and to undertake such research is the main purpose of the projects described earlier.

Re b): The arguments presented above against the use of a single language as a *lingua franca* are not to be understood as indirect arguments against traditional foreign language teaching altogether. The Council of Europe has recommended the governments of its member states to ensure that all pupils have the opportunity to study more than one foreign language during their school time. If this recommendation is put into practice, the danger that one of the languages studied might dominate all the others is strongly reduced.

Therefore the proposals of an implementation of intercomprehension in existing school curricula should not be seen primarily as attempts to restrict the predominance of certain privileged languages, and by no means as an attack on traditional foreign language teaching. The advocates regard it as a complement, not as an alternative to the mainstream of language education (McCann 2003, 7), and this raises the question of an appropriate implementation. Several options are possible.

Intercomprehension could be introduced as a guiding principle in any existing language course. The guideline would then be to accompany the traditional teaching of languages by a continuous reflection on how the specific knowledge and competence in particular languages could be used as a basis for the understanding of further languages. This would be an application of the classical idea of exemplary education (Doyé 1999), - exemplary in the sense that the

actual acquisition of one language is taken as an example for language learning in general and in our case with special emphasis on receptive competence.

The second option would be to implement intercomprehension as a course of its own. The *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* proposes a few scenarios that can also be taken as models for the design of curricula with an intercomprehension component. These scenarios vary in the number of languages studied, the aims and contents of the courses and the order in which they are offered. The curricular implementation of the teaching of intercomprehension would, of course, depend on the specific constellation of these factors in the country, region or school concerned. As it is impossible to delineate all the scenarios, we have to content ourselves with just two examples.

Example 1: A school offers two language courses, one for the primary level and one for the secondary level. But – as the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* suggests – the aim of the first course is not the gradual development of communicative competence in a particular language, but language awareness, i.e. ‘a general consciousness of linguistic phenomena’. Such a course is ideally suited for the integration of intercomprehension. The promotion of a general language consciousness could be linked with the practical development of the general interpretative faculty of the learners, which is the essential element of intercomprehension. By organizing their basic language courses in such a way, schools would lay a solid foundation for all future comprehension activities of their pupils.

Example 2: A school offers courses in three foreign languages, one at the primary level and two at the secondary level. The third of these courses could be replaced by a course in intercomprehension, in which the pupils – instead of learning one further language up to the level of communicative competence – acquire the strategies needed for the understanding of texts and utterances of any new language they might encounter in the future.

Epilogue

The author of this study would like to conclude his presentation by a quotation from one of the most prominent supporters of the idea of intercomprehension, Umberto Eco, - a quotation that might also serve as a small exercise in the practice of intercomprehension for all those readers who have never learnt Italian.

Il problema della cultura europea del futuro non sta certo del poliglottismo totale, ma in una comunità di persone che possono cogliere lo spirito, il profumo, l’atmosfera di una favella diversa. Una Europa di poliglotti non è una Europa di persone che parlano correntemente molte lingue, ma nel migliore dei casi di persone che possono incontrarsi parlando ciascuno la propria lingua e intendendo quella dell’altro, che pure non saprebbero parlare in modo fluente, e intendendola, sia pure a fatica, intendessero il ‘genio’, l’universo culturale che ciascuno esprime parlando la lingua dei propri avi e della propria tradizione (Eco 2000, 19).

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