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INTERCOMPREHENSION – A MERE DREAM OR A NEW WAY OF LEARNING IN GLOBALISED WORLD?

ABSTRACT

Nowadays, due to the increased mobility of people and a rapidly developing global trade, a knowledge of more than one foreign language is indispensable. However, mastering several languages throughout a lifetime seems to be an unattainable goal. One of the possible solutions to this problem is the use of English for global communication. But owing to the fact that in the European Union, considerable emphasis is placed on preserving linguistic and cultural diversity, there is a need to increase intercommunication between people speaking different languages. The present paper discusses the concept of intercomprehension, which is recently proven to be the most effective approach to language learning. Its main aim is to encourage students to rely on the similarities that exist between languages belonging to the same family in order to be able to deal with comprehension problems. This concept focuses primarily on mastering receptive skills, which are crucial in the process of decoding the messages expressed in an unknown system. The paper also reports on the advantages of intercomprehension and methodology that could be applied to the process of developing each individuals' competence.

Key words: intercomprehension, EuroCom, multilingualism

INTRODUCTION

In today's globalised world, knowing more than one foreign language is a norm rather than an exception. According to Aronin and Singleton, monolinguals comprise a minority group in the European Union. The results of the survey conducted in 2011 published on Eurostat website, showed that 77% of EU residents aged 25-34 know more than one foreign language. Thus, the concept of *multilingualism* is considered to be one of the most crucial phenomena of the present age as it reflects constant transformations that we are experiencing in our communities.

In the multicultural European context, the concepts of plurilingualism and intercomprehension play a significant role. As emphasized by Grosjean, these two practices are so common that we can observe them in every country, no matter social class or age. This is why in order to prepare European citizens for the challenges of an ever changing world, greater emphasis should be placed on the educational panorama and models of multilingual learning. The current tendency is to encourage individuals to take responsibility for the process of developing their linguistic competences. The aim of promoting such autonomy is to make the learners aware of the fact that during their whole lives, they need to be able to construct the process of foreign language learning. It is crucial not only for individual purposes and interests, but above all, to be able to achieve success in the competitive job market.

ENGLISH AS A LINGUA FRANCA

Due to increased contact between countries and a multilingual situation in some parts of the world, people see an even greater potential in learning languages. However, at the same time, it is English that is commonly used as a *lingua franca*. Owing to the fact that in the European Union, there are 24 official languages, the only viable option is the use of this international language for global communication. On the other hand, English is so commonly used around the world that we fail to notice the fact that excessive reliance on it may be risky. Phillipson in the article *English, a Cuckoo in the European Higher Education Nest of Languages* raises the issue of the threat that the use of *lingua franca* poses for other European languages. The problem lies not only in their diminishing status, but also in marginalizing their speakers. As it was stated by Capucho, there are four major disadvantages connected with the use of English as a major international language.

- First and foremost, although English is perceived as an international language, there are still some people who have yet to fully master it. Thus, they are partially excluded from the "global communication".
- Secondly, it can lead to the situation where it will be difficult to maintain cultural variety in Europe. Language and culture are two aspects that are closely connected to each other. By learning other languages, people become more open and tolerant

towards other nations. What is more, this experience makes them more aware of their own culture and values.

- Another important disadvantage is the danger of linguistic imperialism. Using English may disrupt the balance in the European Union and cause dominance in such realms as economy and politics. Without the knowledge of several languages, there will be limited opportunity to co-operate with other countries and a dichotomy between included and excluded societies will be more prominent.
- Last but not least, it may lead to the decreasing in our cognitive capacities. Mastering foreign languages is said to positively influence our concentration, critical thinking skills, memory and attention span. Undoubtedly, using English as a *lingua franca* does not promote multilingualism and rather discourages people from learning other foreign languages.

Arguments listed by Capucho do not indicate that learning English has a negative impact on the lives of people living in Europe. As a matter of fact, being proficient in it is indispensable for certain purposes related to international trade or economic and political issues. However, what should be taken into account is the fact that relying solely on English significantly reduces our potential and makes it impossible for the intercultural communication to occur.

INTERCOMPREHENSION AS A WAY TO ACHIEVE PLURILINGUALISM

In the European Union, special emphasis is placed upon the preservation of the cultural and linguistic heritage of the countries that form them. Whereas it is not possible for the average citizen to master three or more foreign languages, there are several approaches that are aimed at making language learning as effective as possible. One of the most widespread nowadays is the notion of intercomprehension. This concept gained its popularity in 1990s. The pillars for the development of this concept were two disciplines: *third language learning* and *teaching of simultaneous language learning*. The former concept refers to the idea of making use of our prior experience in language learning in order to acquire other foreign languages. The latter discipline focuses on methodology fostering the process of learning two or more foreign languages simultaneously. The process is oriented towards the languages from the same family. The studies on *the third language* and *simultaneous language learning* significantly contributed to the process of development of the concept of intercomprehension.

The term intercomprehension refers to the ability to interpret and decode messages that are expressed in an unknown system. Capucho defined it as: *the process of developing the ability to co-construct meaning in the context of an encounter of different languages and to make pragmatic use of this in a concrete communicative situation*. The greatest advantage of intercomprehension is the fact that it can be used not only within one family of languages (e.g. Germanic or Romance), but that it can be applied into a much wider

context. As it was suggested by Robert, English is the language that can be used in order to understand languages belonging to the Romance branch.

The most important assumption of the notion of intercomprehension is that in order to be able to effectively communicate with people who speak different languages, it is enough to simply master competences in receptive skills. Thus, the concept focuses on setting realistic goals for each individual as it is impossible to speak and write in a foreign language without sufficient preparation and extensive practice. This is why receptive multilingualism is a perfect solution in the case of encounters with people speaking languages that belong to the same family. For instance, in Scandinavian countries, there is no need to use *lingua franca* as Swedish, Norwegian and Finnish are mutually intelligible. Speakers of those languages can easily communicate with each other without making much effort. As stated by Braunmüller, frequent exposure to different dialects and varieties of a language similar to our Mother Tongue, makes it easier for the learners to understand them.

INTEROMPREHENSION – POLITICAL, EDUCATIONAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL ADVANTAGES

The notion of intercomprehension is so widely popularized nowadays as it brings many advantages to the learners. Among the most crucial benefits, it is worth mentioning political, educational and psychological advantages.

From the political point of view, intercomprehension seems to be a perfect solution in the United Europe where special emphasis is placed on the idea of *unity in diversity*. According to Doyé, the only way to ensure that all languages have equal status is to enable people to speak the language they know best – their Mother Tongue. Certainly, the use of English as a *lingua franca* contradicts the basic principles of the European Union to preserve language diversity and prevent from marginalizing languages of minority groups. Promoting intercomprehension is perfectly justified in this situation – by acknowledging the fact that languages are related to each other, we become more aware of the fact that boundaries between the European countries are conventional and we can easily traverse them.

Another advantage of the concept of intercomprehension is connected to psychological aspects of students' faculties. Every human being is equipped with the ability that enables him to comprehend and interpret messages that are expressed in unfamiliar systems. The only prerequisite for this to take place is to make use of the different types of knowledge that are at our disposal. Due to the fact that all of us have some experience in language learning, the process does not require any special training. As it was stated by Klein and Stegmann, there are nine types of knowledge that we can use in order to be able to decode messages expressed in an unknown system. The most crucial include:

- 1) **general knowledge**, which refers to encyclopedic facts, such as naming the capital city of China or the president of the United States;

- 2) **cultural knowledge**, which refers to the learners' attitudes towards other cultures and other factors that influence the process of interpreting messages in a foreign language, for instance generalizations and stereotypes that we have about other nations;
- 3) **situational knowledge**, which postulates that apart from the message itself, we need to pay attention to the person who delivers the speech, the place in which the situation takes place and the time in which it occurs;
- 4) **behavioural knowledge**, which concentrates on the kinesthetic patterns that accompany verbal utterance, such as body gestures, posture and movement;
- 5) **pragmatic knowledge**, which is closely connected to the situational knowledge and focuses on the purpose of the text or utterance;
- 6) **graphic knowledge**, which refers to the writing system of a language such as capitalization or punctuation marks;
- 7) **phonological knowledge**, which pays attention to the fact that there are no European languages that share the same sound system, but some similarities in the pronunciation of certain consonants and vowels can be observed, for instance in English and Spanish;
- 8) **grammatical knowledge**, which enables the learners to make use of grammatical systems they have already mastered in order to acquire new elements of a foreign language;
- 9) **lexical knowledge**, which constitutes one of the most important domains in the entire classification, it raises awareness of the existence of internationalisms and true cognates, which significantly improve the process of foreign language learning.

Those nine types of knowledge certainly play a crucial role in the notion of intercomprehension as they help individuals to deal with ambiguities that they encounter when trying to interpret texts and utterances in a language that they do not fully understand.

Last but not least, intercomprehension has a solid pedagogical foundation. Doyé emphasizes the fact that it is the competence that can be developed at school. However, there are several principles that teachers should implement in order to facilitate this process, including:

- a) **motivation**, which forms an essential basis for the development of intercomprehension. It relates to encouraging students to make use of already acquired knowledge in order to decode messages expressed in the target language. The key to increasing their motivation is to make them aware of the fact that they have certain competences at their disposal that can be used for these purposes.
- b) The second principle concerns **autonomy**. It places emphasis on the need to guide students in the process of developing intercomprehension competence, but at the same time promoting their independence. In order to make the process more effective, it is essential for the teacher to offer support in the case of some problems, but at the core of the entire process should lie the students' autonomy.
- c) **Methodology** is a factor that focuses on the need to employ activities that are suitable for the students' stage of development. What should be taken into account in

this process is the necessity to monitor learners' progress and pay special attention to the areas that need improvement.

- d) The last factor concerns **intercultural education**. It postulates that language and culture are so closely connected to each other that it is not possible to teach them in isolation. In other words, the development of intercomprehension competence should be accompanied with intercultural education.

THE EUROCOM PROJECT

The benefits of intercomprehension have been greatly heightened in Europe by the EuroCom Project. The main aim of this is to promote language learning among the speakers of Slavonic, Romance and Germanic languages. A good command of any of them enables learners to master others of the same family. For instance, a speaker of Dutch has easy access to Swedish as both languages are descendants from the same origins. Thus, prior experience in learning Germanic languages significantly accelerates the process of acquisition of another language of the same branch.

Intercomprehension emphasizes the fact that no European language is unknown territory for people speaking any language from the Indo-European family. Consequently, we do not start the process of learning a foreign language from scratch. This fact positively influences our motivation as our prior experience can help us in this situation.

There are three main branches of languages in the European family: Germanic, Slavonic and Romance. This division gave rise to the projects launched in Europe, which accentuate common origin of these languages. The first one – Intercomprehension in Germanic languages online (IGLO) started in 1999. It focused on the analogies in seven languages: Danish, Dutch, English, German, Icelandic, Swedish and Norwegian. As the name suggests, the main purpose of it was to create the programme showing similarities and differences within the Germanic branch of languages to facilitate the process of intercomprehension.

The second project is based on the kinship among Slavonic languages. EuroComSlav assumes that such languages as Czech, Polish, Slovak, Serbian or Russian are mutually 'intercomprehensible'. In this project, special emphasis is put on internationalisms, sound correspondence and similarities in syntactic structures.

The last and the most developed project concentrates on Romance languages with French, Spanish, Italian and Portuguese, among others. This group includes wide variety of languages of Latin origin. As it was heightened by Clua, what distinguishes EuroComRom from other projects is the fact that it positively views the multilingual situation in Europe. Additionally, it acknowledges the importance of minority languages such as Catalan and Romanian.

A METHODOLOGY USED IN THE PROCESS OF TEACHING INTERCOMPREHENSION

The concept of intercomprehension generates a great deal of heated debate. Because of the fact that it is based on many theoretical principles, it seems that it is difficult to use it in real life situations. However, as multiple examples around the world show, it is quite a common practice nowadays.

As Hufeisen and Marx claim: *It seems that learners do not use their previous language and strategic knowledge automatically, but rather have to be made aware of parallels and transfer possibilities between languages, as well as to be introduced to potentially useful techniques of how to use and employ previous foreign language learning strategies.* This is why in order to promote the competence in intercomprehension among the students, it is necessary to raise their awareness of the knowledge they possess. In other words, they need to be able to recognize analogies that exist between the language they know and the new one. This process consists of two stages: discovery of the similarities in such spheres as: phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics and the process of recognition of internationalisms – loanwords that have similar form and meaning in several languages.

The process of discovering the similarities between languages is significantly influenced by our prior experience in language learning. The more languages we know, the easier it is for us to establish a hypothesis about the new system. In order for the positive transfer to occur, students need to be able to draw analogies between the language they know and the new one. At the center of the entire process lies interlinguistic comparison, which is especially useful in the process of deducing the meaning of the text or utterance.

Optimised deduction technique used in the concept of intercomprehension was illustrated in the figure 1. It intends to explain various mental activities that readers go through in order to comprehend the text in the language they have not studied before. Firstly, it assumes that students need to be aware of the fact that every text is situated in the particular context and has a specific form. Without even reading it, we are able to state whether it is a newspaper article, a poem, a letter or administrative document. The second step in the optimized deduction technique refers to the rapid reading of the text to get the general meaning of it. Undoubtedly, the most helpful for the overall understanding of the text is the title, which can provide us with the general idea of it. Apart from this, the reader should pay attention to the first and the last paragraph as those two passages are usually the most informative. At this stage, it is important to focus only on the main idea expressed in the text. It is not advisable to translate each and every vocabulary item we do not understand and analyze grammatical structures that we have not seen before.

In the next step, readers identify international vocabulary in order to grasp the gist of the text. Then, they should be able to deduce the meaning of the remaining words and phrases on the basis of the context. For instance, if they encounter in the text word *airport*, they need to be able to delimit the number of possible verbs that can be combined

with this noun. Another way of coping with such ambiguities is to try to form a hypothesis about the new linguistic system. What is particularly useful in this situation is the ability to infer from the context specific functions that each element fulfils in the sentence. On the basis of the order of the nouns, verbs and other parts of speech, readers can then determine which of them is the subject, predicate or complement.

Optimised deduction technique does not guarantee total understanding of the content of the text. However, at this stage, the most crucial element is to be able to grasp the general meaning of it. If the readers are not fully satisfied with the level of understanding of the text, at the end of the process, they can simply look up the unknown words in a dictionary.

Undoubtedly, the knowledge of the steps that readers go through in the process of decoding the meaning of unknown text is necessary for developing their intercomprehension competence. The more texts we read in the foreign language, the more skillful we are at inferring a main idea expressed in it.

THE SEVEN SIEVES

EuroCom is based on the strategy of the Seven Sieves. This technique can be applied in all the projects launched in Europe: EuroComRom, EuroComSlav and IGLO. The metaphor of seven sieves was used by McCann, Klein and Stegmann¹ in order to illustrate the human potential to acquire languages. They compare the learners to prospectors who seek gold. The students' task is to find familiar elements in the new material by passing it through the Seven Sieves. This division into seven fields makes the process of comprehending the message more organized. The sequence of the sieves starts from the most obvious elements moving to the areas that require more practice on the part of the learner.

The First Sieve concentrates on the recognition of International Vocabulary. As stated by Moreno Bandera,² there are about 5000 words that most people recognize no matter what nationality they are. This vocabulary has mostly Latin and Romance roots and has similar form and meaning in different languages. International vocabulary includes such words as: *blog*, *coffee*, *hotel* and *tennis*.

The Second Sieve raises the students' awareness of the existence of PanRomance Vocabulary, which is of the utmost importance for the learners of any language from the Romance branch. It is estimated that there are about 500 Latin words that are still in use in Romance languages.³ Those vocabulary items mostly include common nouns such as *bread*, *moon* or *blood*.

¹ W.J. McCann, H.G. Klein, T. Stegmann, *EuroComRom...*

² P. Moreno Bandera, *Los Cognados en Inglés y Español como recurso en el aula de ELE*, Universidad de Málaga 2013, at <<https://www.mecd.gob.es/dam/jcr:7af98a70-e511-4842-af8a-05555f1efb15/memoria-master-paloma-moreno-pdf.pdf>>.

³ W.J. McCann, H.G. Klein, T. Stegmann, *EuroComRom...*

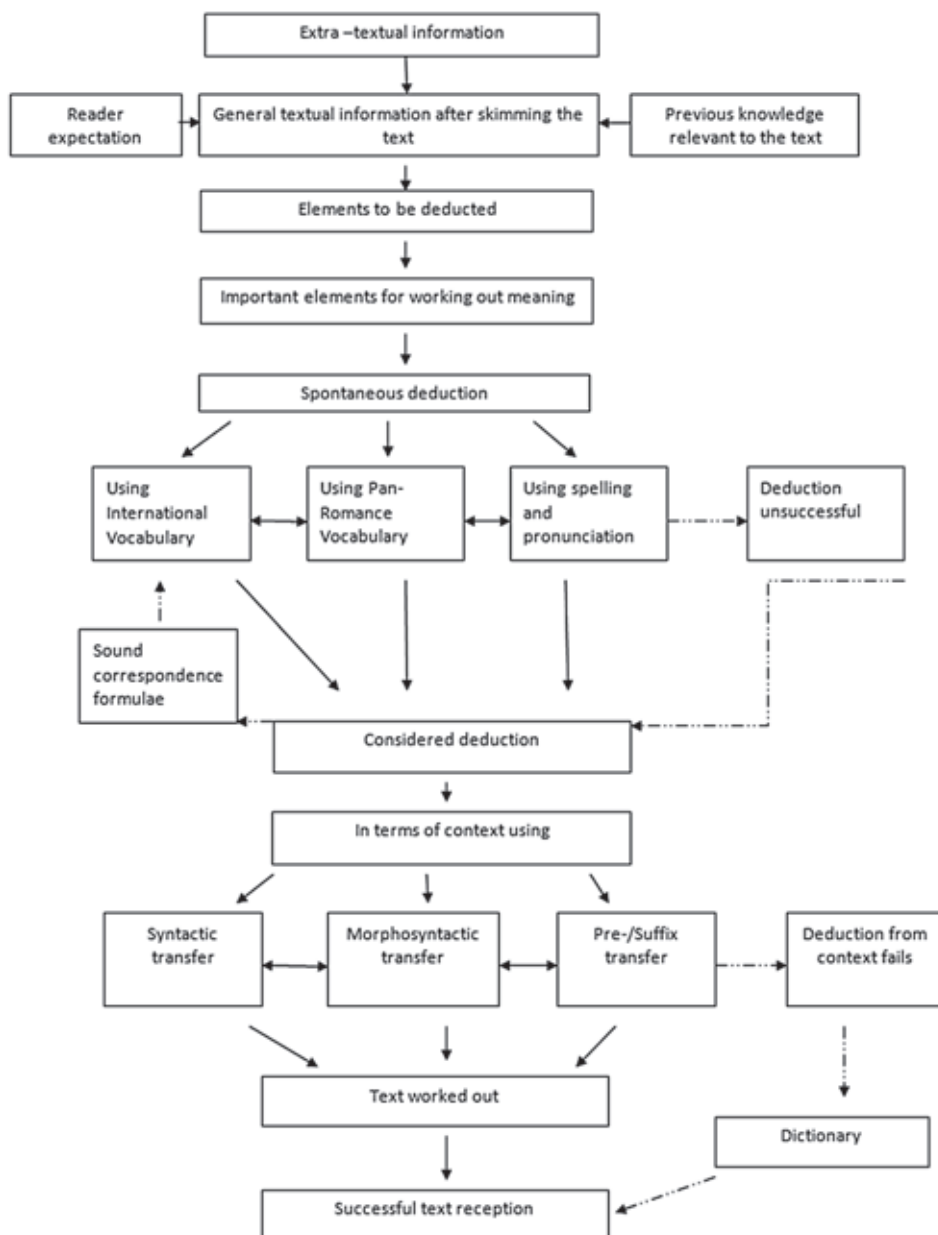


Figure 1. Schematic overview of optimized deduction model in EuroComRom project.

The Third Sieve focuses on the sound correspondences that exist in languages belonging to the same family. Due to certain phonetic changes those languages have undergone, it seems challenging for students to notice those analogies in their Mother Tongue and target language. However, the main aim of this sieve is to teach learners how to identify and recognize sound correspondences in both languages.

With the Fourth Sieve, emphasis is put on spelling and pronunciation. In most European countries, the same letters are used to represent the majority of sounds. However, there is no universal rule that would explain certain spelling patterns in order to enable students to recognize lexical correspondences in two languages.

The Fifth Sieve looks at syntactic structures that are similar in languages belonging to the same family. It is primarily concerned with the positioning in the sentence of such parts of speech as nouns, verbs, adjectives etc. It helps the learners in inferring from the context functions that those words serve in the text. In many European languages, word order in the sentence is fixed, for instance the first position is held by subject and the second by verb. This pattern may significantly optimize students' reading comprehension capacity.

The Sixth Sieve is primarily concerned with morphosyntactic elements in one family of languages. For instance, EuroComRom helps the learners to recognize grammatical words or word terminations in Romance languages. In that way, learners are able to identify morphological elements used to form plural or verbal forms.

The Seventh Sieve, which constitutes the last element in this categorization, focuses on affixes. They are divided according to their position in reference to the stem into prefixes and suffixes. In the case of Romance languages, it is estimated that they are about 40 of them that were derived from Latin. According to Clua,⁴ the majority of those affixes are used internationally, which makes it even easier for the learners to separate those suffixes and prefixes from the stem. Undoubtedly, not all the roots will be clearly understood by the students. However, understanding the meaning of affixes can provide them with the general meanings of those vocabulary items.

CONCLUSION

Intercomprehension is undoubtedly one of the most efficient attitudes to language learning. By relying on the kinship that exists between certain groups of languages, it is possible to easily master reading and comprehension skills. What plays the most important role in the process of intercomprehension is the use of transferential strategies such as deduction, analogy and forming hypothesis about the target language.

The greatest advantage of the concept of intercomprehension is the fact that it does not impose one particular language that should be used for international communication. Instead, it acknowledges the fact that all the learners have some prior experience in language learning, which can serve as a starting point in the process of acquisition

⁴ E. Clua, "Intercomprehension and Catalan..."

of foreign language. This fact positively influences their motivation and willingness to learn foreign languages.

Apart from solid theoretical foundations, intercomprehension is also pedagogically well-founded. This factor contributed to the widespread use of this approach and its application in the context of formal school learning.⁵

In conclusion, it seems that intercomprehension significantly improves the process of acquisition of foreign languages. As it was once stated by Smith: *One language sets you in a corridor for life. Two languages open every door along the way.*⁶ Undoubtedly, intercomprehension can help us to achieve this aim.

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⁵ F. Capucho, *Intercomprehension...*

⁶ F. Smith, *To Think. In Language, Learning and Education*, s.l. 1992, p. 13.

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