

Framing a Methodology for Intercomprehension

Claudia Mewald*

Abstract

This paper presents the development of a theoretical framework which aims at supporting the development of a methodology of intercomprehension for young and teenage learners in multilingual settings. The context of this work is the ERASMUS+ project PALM, which brings about authentic texts created by 6-15 year-old learners in eight languages: their first and additional ones. The texts and accompanying learning materials presented on a platform are expected to bring about language acquisition within the authentic virtual environment of the target group.

Theoretische Grundlagen für eine Interkomprehensionsdidaktik

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Beitrag präsentiert eine Reihe theoretischer Grundlagen, welche die Entwicklung einer Interkomprehensionsdidaktik für junge Lerner und Lernerinnen in mehrsprachigen Lernsettings geleitet haben. Diese Arbeit ist im Rahmen eines ERASMUS+ Projekts PALM begründet, welches authentische Texte von 6-15-jährigen Autoren und Autorinnen in acht Sprachen präsentiert. Diese Texte stehen gemeinsam mit Lernmaterialien auf einer interaktiven Plattform zur Verfügung. Die Verwendung der Plattform soll zum Spracherwerb in einer authentischen, virtuellen Lernumgebung anregen.

Keywords:

Intercomprehension
Multilingualism
Virtual learning environments

Schlüsselwörter:

Interkomprehension
Mehrsprachigkeit
Virtuelle Lernumgebungen

1 Introduction

Our globalized world is characterized by linguistic and cultural diversity as well as migration. This becomes increasingly visible in and around metropolitan areas but also in rural regions, where mobility and technology pave the way for globalization. Teachers are affected by this rapid development facing increasingly diverse learner groups, their educational requirements and multifaceted demands. Therefore, teacher education and development should draw attention to beneficial ways of exploiting linguistic and cultural diversity. Moreover, they should promote the targeted use of all language resources at the learners' disposal as an important task of 21st century education (Herdina & Jessner, 2000). Moreover, educational systems should acknowledge that language education is especially important for people whose linguistic resources create barriers in their access to education or vocational qualifications.

However, teachers must not be left on their own with the challenges of increasingly heterogeneous classrooms. Strategies to share learner languages as scaffolds for intercomprehension, the meaning making between languages, are therefore at the heart of teaching 21st century classrooms. They are also the goal of PALM (Promoting Authentic Language Acquisition in Multilingual Contexts), a European project funded through ERASMUS+ Key Action 2¹.

* Pädagogische Hochschule Niederösterreich, Mühlgasse 67, 2500 Baden. E-mail: claudia.mewald@ph-noe.ac.at

2 Promoting Authentic Language Acquisition in Multilingual Contexts

The Erasmus+ project PALM wants to enable authentic language acquisition in a virtual learning environment. Moreover, authentic communicative exchange between multilingual learners should be encouraged in face to face as well as virtual encounters. To accomplish this endeavour, six higher institutions of teacher education (HEIs) collaborated with four schools in the compilation of authentic multimodal texts produced by 6-14 year-old learners for authentic purposes. The original texts are presented on a platform², where language learners find tasks and materials in addition to the authentic reading and listening input.

Material production was carried out by teacher trainees in collaboration with tutors and experienced teachers³. It was based on a corpus developed from the authentic input texts and made use of analyses thereof. In the past, learning and teaching materials for young learners and teenagers had never been developed exclusively with the help of a corpus based on written and oral texts generated in real communicative exchanges of the target group. In PALM, the learners engaged in text production in their lessons and free time to share them with peers who were learning their languages as new languages. Pupils recorded oral presentations and experiments in subject matter lessons, produced stories, essays, book reviews, or blogs. Thus, text production was a real-life activity with a meaningful purpose. This contextualisation of writing or speaking made output oriented teaching of the classroom language an authentic procedure. In addition to work done in the classroom, technology enhanced information exchanges and language ambassadors' meetings created real-life scenarios for authentic multilingual communication.

3 Intercomprehension

Learners of diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds collaborate in genuinely multilingual settings. Most classroom work, however, hardly ever makes use of the learners' multilingual potential. Instead, it avoids plurilingual tasks which consider the use of the target language and all the other languages at the learners' disposal to keep up the hegemony of the monolingual classroom, emphasizing the adult native speaker model as a norm, a child can never meet. Thus, teachers often argue, the usually imperfect learners' first languages should not be used in the classroom. This seems a waste of resources taken into consideration the benefits the acknowledgement and use of the individual learners' languages may have. This benefit could be accomplished, if the input and/or explanations for tasks were provided in the languages the learners can comprehend fully or nearly fully in addition to the classroom language. Follow-up tasks done in collaboration with learners who do not share specific information provided through the input would carry all learners back to the target language.

Thus, tasks which allow for more than one language in the input and that make use of the shared languages in the classroom for the output create plurilingual encounters and natural information gaps that make the subsequent exchanges and the collaborative compilation of knowledge in the target language a natural process of mediation (Feuerstein & Rand, 1975).

3.1 Multilingual learners

Multilingual learners have acquired two or more languages at similar or varying levels. Few people are equally well equipped in all the various languages they understand or use in real life. Teachers have to be aware of this diversity and recognise that learners may be able to comprehend aural input but struggle with it in its written form, particularly if it is presented in an unfamiliar script. In the same way, multilingual people have also developed a varying capability of making sense of spoken or written texts in and across languages they have not yet fully acquired or studied through intercomprehension. Detecting and understanding strategies which aid intercomprehension will help teachers in their support for learners to become more effective in their comprehension and communication. This includes the use of English as a lingua franca, i.e. English as a common language, between speakers whose family languages are different.

Plurilingual discourse occurs, when people use two or more languages in one conversation for the purpose of effective communication. When pupils use their acquired languages to understand the unfamiliar languages of their peers and to communicate with them, they are translanguaging. This process requires intercomprehension and it works best when the learners have learnt to do this consciously.

Doyé (2005, p. 7) suggests that intercomprehension does not demand the ability of verbal production in the target language. He thus differentiates between intercomprehension competence, the capacity to understand

other languages without having studied them, and intercomprehensive performance during which people use their own languages and understand those of the other.

Therefore, intercomprehension can be an alternative to the common use of a lingua franca. Through exploiting previously acquired knowledge, skills and strategies and employing extralinguistic features such as background knowledge, knowledge of the world or visual support we can make sense of languages we have not (yet) studied. This process is highly individual and dynamic in its development.

4 A Framework for Intercomprehension Methodology

Teachers can support intercomprehension in many ways. They can create learning designs that make intercomprehension possible through allowing variation in the use of languages in their lessons. This can be done through providing the opportunity for learners to draw on input in their family languages in addition to the input in the classroom language or through making use of technology and the dictionaries, glossaries, thesauruses and translation tools modern media offer. If teachers encourage variation in language input and strategy use, support awareness for and sensitivity to language needs, or scaffold learner autonomy, they establish the necessary conditions of learning (Marton, 2015) that accelerate a multilingual acquisition process.

At the same time they encourage the development of intercomprehension competence. Through intercomprehension, teachers help pupils to “acquire the strategies needed for the understanding of the texts and utterances of any new language they might encounter in the future” (Doyé, 2005, p. 20). However, this can only be achieved if the various languages the learners own are given attention in the learning process and if teachers make intercomprehension explicit.

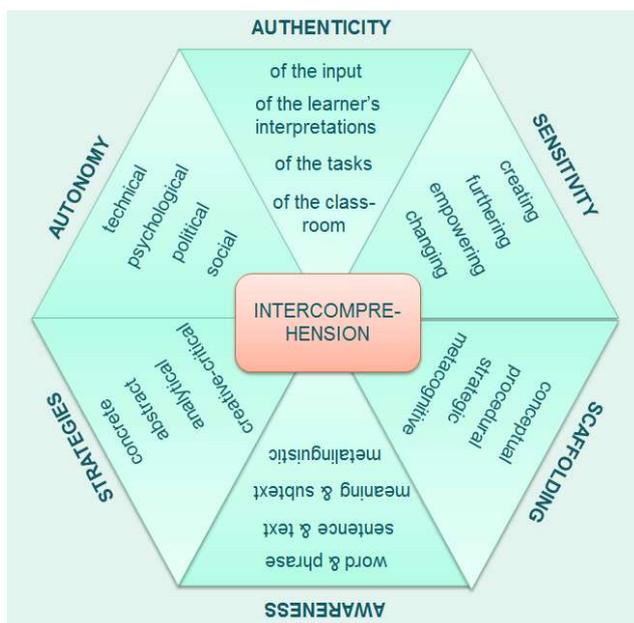


Fig. 1: A Framework for Intercomprehension Methodology

As shown in Figure 1, a framework for intercomprehension methodology (FRINCOM) relies on the following elements:

- authenticity of input, task, and classroom situation
- scaffolding of learning at conceptual, procedural, strategic, and metacognitive level
- awareness for multilingual potential at word & phrase, sentence & text, subtext, and metalinguistic level
- sensitivity to cultural and personal predispositions that is creating, furthering, empowering, or changing relationships
- autonomy in learning and personal language development that operates at technical, psychological, political and social level
- strategies that foster meaning making within and across languages at concrete, abstract, analytical as well as creative-critical level

The interplay of these elements is supposed to be crucial for the effectiveness of intercomprehension methodology although not all of them will be present in every learning situation. In fact, teaching and learning will draw on a combination of these elements depending on learner needs and the demands of the learning situation.

4.1 Authenticity

Children usually enter school with a reasonably sound command of their family languages and with a well-established ability to infer meaning from aural input without understanding every word. They have learnt to interpret meaning from additional clues such as body language, facial expressions, sound and tonality and are able to make use of their knowledge of the world (KOW) to exploit limited language resources effectively. Subconsciously they mix or adapt language they have picked up as they communicate with each other and they are inventive in creating their own languages. In their families they have experienced individual members speaking different language varieties such as dialects, sociolects or idiolects. Many families even use different languages. Thus, most homes provide plurilingual language environments and so do playgrounds. The proximity of initial language acquisition shapes children's attitudes towards new languages: They have retained a positive, relaxed, and unharmed self-reliance that language learning should utilize. Taylor (1994) sees the classroom as a new and authentic place for language development. Other researchers support this position if skill-getting (Rivers & Temperley, 1978), pre-communicative activities (Littlewood, 1992), and language-learning activities are kept authentic. Breen distinguishes four types referring to the authenticity of the language classroom. He mentions the authenticity of input data, the authenticity of the learner's own interpretations of the input, the authenticity of the tasks conducive to language learning, and the authenticity of the actual social situation of the language classroom (Breen, 1985, p. 58).

Most authentic texts produced for first language readers or listeners are likely to be too difficult to comprehend for learners of a new language. Therefore, teachers use texts or materials originally produced for younger children or simplified texts. In real life, however, input is not necessarily simplified and as already mentioned, children are used to filling gaps in comprehension to make meaning from what they hear or read.

Reading or listening to language by peers usually provides more comprehensible input because of the similarities in lexical range. If the input comes from peers who are first language speakers of that language, this may create different challenges. However, in authentic communication the shared KOW and topical interest usually support successful exchanges. Moreover, consciously or subconsciously used strategies can also support comprehension.

4.2 Strategies

If learners are asked to make meaning from texts in new languages, they usually activate prior experience and knowledge. The most intuitive strategies learners employ in this process, mostly subconsciously, is to watch out for words or phrases that are similar in meaning, pronunciation and/or spelling: cognates. However, helping learners create awareness for and establishing their strategic use of cognates in certain languages creates associations which will support the comprehension of input and the readiness to produce output. International words have similar effects on understanding and fluency. Many of these words and phrases are readily available and understood. Making learners familiar with cognates and international words is therefore recommended (see Appendix). This seems particularly important in topic areas related to technology or interactive computer games that include linguistic components. Strategies making use of visual and additional auditory clues to understand what is going on in a text are employed similarly naturally. Pictorial clues, body language, and facial expression support comprehension equally effectively as the conscious discernment of tonality or mood. Paralinguistic strategies of this kind draw on the use of *"verbal signs to express ideas, emotions and intentions ... [and] other norms of behaviour to serve the purpose of conveying information"* (Sarıçoban & Aktaş, 2011, p. 151) as well as situational experience (Doyé, 2005).

Cultural knowledge, however, can aid or obstruct intercomprehension. Depending on its direction, cultural knowledge and experience may lead to stereotypes and false generalizations, or to shared social practice in which to participate is considered attractive. The learners' diverse cultural understandings are important in the development of their intercomprehension. Teachers therefore need to know about and understand their learners' cultural backgrounds to be able to reveal the differences and similarities in their social and cultural behaviour. Acknowledging the learners' cultural diversity and knowing about cultural facts and practices in their communities can aid teaching and learning. When specific activities or events in the learners' cultures are similar

to those in the target language societies, learners can make helpful associations. If their social and personal lives differ significantly, culture shock needs to be bridged. Thus, awareness for what is possible in certain cultures and sensitivity for the impossible is important.

Intercomprehensive behaviour, which operates subconsciously, and intercomprehension competence can benefit from conscious strategy use. For example, pragmatic knowledge about text types and their social functions will support the responsiveness for content that will follow. As soon as learners are able to identify familiar words and gain overall understanding of a text, they can apply strategies related to selective attention to understand concrete information that is explicit and easy to identify or spot, especially if there is visual support. As soon as they understand gist and specific information at micro level, learners can be encouraged to identify detailed information in a context. This requires careful attention or reading to differentiate important detail from supporting information (Urquhart & Weir, 1998). Depending on their readiness, learners may need different variations of scaffolding when tasks require careful attention.

Teachers, who highlight cognates and international words, add pictures to crucial points which cannot be inferred, and show learners how to discern important detail and supporting information through fleshing out differences, scaffold intercomprehension effectively.

4.3 Scaffolding and autonomy

At first glance, scaffolding and autonomy may look like contradictory components because the former makes the learner dependent on the teacher's or the material's help, while the latter aims at independence. Acknowledging learning as a dynamic process, varied with every single learner (Herdina & Jessner, 2000), requires linking scaffolding with learner autonomy as important and supplementary elements of multilingual learning. Teachers working with linguistically diverse learners have to personalise and to differentiate learning appropriately to cater for all learner needs. Making learning meaningful for a linguistically and culturally diverse group of learners, however, goes beyond identifying topics of interest. Fostering intercomprehension asks teachers to provide scaffolds so that every single learner can make their own connections and develop a personal understanding of what they are expected to learn. This includes careful analyses of what individual learners already know and availability of the necessary scaffolds to understand and learn based on the information gained. Teachers cannot possibly do this for a whole class. Therefore, learning materials and tasks providing opportunities for self- and peer-assessment and information about what could be done next plus the necessary resources are necessary scaffolds in heterogeneous settings.

Additionally, materials in learner languages, technology to provide translations, as well as dictionaries are needed in multilingual settings. Intercomprehension works best when learners have opportunities to reflect on what they understand, how they understand it and what they need to do next to understand more. Teachers need to use varied approaches and materials that open up different ways how learners can approach text and how they can make meaning from them. This may include variation in multimodal input, supported by visuals, subtext or annotations in a lingua franca. Input in a learner's strongest language supports prior contextual and content understanding which will aid comprehension in the target language. Scaffolding intercomprehension can never be seen as a finished process resulting in a lesson plan that will be followed rigorously. Instead, effective planning for intercomprehension must be considered a dialogic and dynamic process in which goals, activities, and materials are varied according to learners' reactions and needs. What looks like a messy process is in reality a structured approach based on a resourceful programme that requires learner autonomy. Without diagnostic material including a component of immediate feedback that enables learners to select objectives that relate to them and their ability to do this independently, intercomprehension cannot work effectively. Learners have to be enabled to identify suitable learning material themselves, make use of it independently, observe their own behaviour and assess their performance themselves and/or together with peers, to eventually select new objectives and materials to carry on.

Only learners who are developing self-direction in such learning scenarios will learn to re-adjust and select simpler or more challenging material according to informed decisions based on evidence of successful or failed comprehension. The following scaffolds are considered useful in a methodology for intercomprehension:

- visualisation
- annotated input texts (margin notes, word banks, glossaries...)
- digital texts with the opportunity to use on-line dictionaries and thesauruses
- video input subtitled in the target language, the shared Lingua Franca or the individual learner's strongest language with the opportunity for repeated input
- highlighted texts with margin notes and summaries

- glossaries

Teachers are important supporters of scaffolds and guides towards self-direction in this process. Intercomprehension, however, is such a unique process for every single learner, that autonomy is a crucial component in a methodology in support of it.

4.4 Awareness and sensitivity

Creating awareness in learners about their competences and what they can achieve in their languages is motivating. Encouraging them to make use of all their linguistic and pragmatic resources to cope with new requires strategies and autonomy. The super-teacher who is able to sense all connections their learners are making at a certain moment does not exist. Reading their minds lies in the learners themselves: To become aware and sensitive to learning opportunities and meaningful connections between their languages is essential in becoming autonomous.

Nevertheless, it is the teacher's task to convey that intercultural communication is mutually compassionate, respectful, tolerant and collaborative. Teachers should be aiming at transcultural education which differs from intercultural education in that it intends to create a transformed cultural understanding and shared new cultures rather than parallel worlds of two or more cultures next to each other.

Sensitivity closes the circle to the other elements in the FRINCOM. As much as all elements are important in the process of developing comprehension, they will not succeed in creating understanding within, between, or across languages and cultures unless there is sensitivity for the self and the other selves in plurilingual discourse. Sensitivity is the overarching element which transcends the others in that any work in language education that does not contribute to the learners' development of identity fails its purpose. Sensitivity is directly linked to the emergence of self-concept and the construction of identity through language education.

5 Summary

The elements of FRINCOM can be abbreviated in three "As" which create a mnemonic: AS important AS peace and AS security. This memory aid intends to refer to the overarching goal of the project that wants to give producers a voice in publishing their authentic work. Its users, on the other hand, are hoped to pick up their peers' messages and make them their own in creating new text from materials that accompany the scripts. Scaffolding through lexical notebooks and gamified activities (see Chapter on Lexical Notebooks in this collection of conference proceedings) are thought to help create the security learners need to engage in creative text production early in their language learning process.

Security is important in any learning process (Kang, 2005). It comes through guidance that helps learners see where they are going from the beginning, how they will get there, and what they can do if they get diverted on their way. Clearly defined and comprehensible goals signify "where", strategies demonstrate "how", and scaffolding through virtual sources or teacher's help is the "what". The more self-directed learners are, the faster they will be in getting the necessary support. This, however, requires goal-oriented diagnosis and feedback to establish the necessary feeling of security about the situation, because "any teaching method is most useful when there is plenty of prompt feedback about whether the student is thinking about a problem in the right way." (Hattie, 2012, p. 88)

Speed is a crucial element for the effectiveness of feedback. Self-directed and collaborative learning scenarios thus rely on self- and peer-assessment based in criteria aligned with the learning goals. Together with helpful hints that make language awareness conscious, goal-oriented, immediate feedback encourages the process of developing intercomprehension. If learners know that the mental connections they have made were correct and successful, they will be encouraged to use them in new situations, even if the guidance or scaffolding is not present. Without awareness all the other elements can certainly be applied, but they will not create understanding between languages or sensitivity for the many meanings a text conveys, be they linguistic, cultural, personal, or social meanings. Concluding, authenticity needs to be mentioned as the core element of the framework. It overarches all the other elements through creating language and language learning situations with a real need for communication and use. It makes learners create meaning through and within all the linguistic resources they possess.

This contribution started with the claim that linguistic and cultural diversity as well as migration are prominent characteristics of our globalized environment. It will be concluded in the hope that sufficient und

successful intercomprehension will support the awareness that a globalized and peaceful world depends on “people who can communicate, each speaking his own language and understanding that of the other, but who, while not being able to speak it fluently, by understanding it, even with difficulty, would understand the “spirit”, the cultural universe that everyone expresses when speaking the language of his ancestors and of his own tradition.” (Eco, 1994, p. 292)

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Appendix

Basic International Wordlist

http://simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Basic_English_international_wordlist

Ogden’s International Word List

<http://ogden.basic-english.org/intlword.html>

International Internet Words

<http://www.basic-english.org/21/internet.html>

21st century basic English International Words

<http://www.basic-english.org/21/intword.html>

Foreign words and phrases in English

<http://en.oxforddictionaries.com/explore/foreign-words-and-phrases>

English Cognate Words understandable to Spanish, Portuguese, French and Italian speakers

<http://www.cognates.org/pdf/cognated-oklahoma-academic-vocabulary.pdf>

Cognates in the Cambridge P.E.T. (Preliminary English Test) Vocabulary List – CEFR B1

<http://www.cognates.org/pdf/cognated-cambridge-preliminary-vocab.pdf>



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² <http://www.palm-edu.eu>

³ The Cypriot team also engaged learners in material production.