

## HOW ABOUT INTERCOMPREHENSION (IC)? IC AS A COMPLEMENT TO TEACHING LANGUAGE UNDERSTANDING

Delia Lungu<sup>1</sup>, Laura Cizer<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Navigation and Ship Transport, Faculty of Navigation and Naval Management,  
Mircea cel Batran Naval Academy, 1 Fulgerului Street, Constanta, Romania  
Phone: (040) 241-626200, E-Mail: ar21delia@gmail.com, <http://www.anmb.ro>

<sup>2</sup>Department of Electrical Engineering and Electronics, Faculty of Marine Engineering,  
Mircea cel Batran Naval Academy, 1 Fulgerului Street, Constanta, Romania  
Phone: (040) 241-626200, E-Mail: lauracizer@yahoo.co.uk, <http://www.anmb.ro>

**Abstract.** *This paper aims to provide teachers and learners of foreign languages (particularly English) with information concerning intercomprehension. It constitutes another approach to language learning which greatly assists multilingualism. It also aims to guide the first steps of anyone interested in this concept by explaining what IC is - highlighting research, and revealing the available resources to develop it (mostly online). At the same time, it will finally advocate for the introduction of this concept into existing European education systems.*

**Key words:** *intercomprehension, multilingualism, foreign languages, language diversity*

### 1. WHAT IS INTERCOMPREHENSION (IC)?

The context in which the concept of IC has been developing is based in language policies of the European community which favor multilingualism, with principles of diversity in culture, customs, beliefs and languages lying at its core and with linguistic diversity as a social reality. The Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (2000) advocates respect for linguistic diversity in article 22, and article 21 prohibits discrimination based on language grounds. The Treaty of Lisbon (2007) stipulates the protection and development of our European cultural heritage.

IC refers to a speaker's ability to understand a language in a given context without previously having studied it formally. It is the ability of someone to understand other people speaking or writing in a related language mostly based on resemblances to their native one. So, IC is a communication technique involving using your language when talking with someone speaking in mother-tongue, who replies in this since they cannot answer otherwise. Also, IC is a communication method demonstrating a new approach to language teaching/learning. It avoids using a third language between people speaking related languages.

The term 'IC' has been used by the European Union (EU) to identify advanced language users' ability to access other languages. It is true that a certain reluctance to learn more than one or two additional languages has been manifested over the years, mainly due to prejudices against multilingualism and the effort of learning something new. Other issues which hinder motivation are: feelings of being de-skilled; too old to learn foreign languages, a lack of talent for languages; possible linguistic muddling; lack of opportunity to practice or fear of making errors before an audience.

Although these attitudes might seem unconvincing, IC is in line with the basic principles of European education, and the following are reasons why it should be considered. It:

- does not involve effort to understand languages;
- relies on the already existing but untapped competences;
- uses first/second language knowledge to help related language comprehension;
- focuses on oral or written receptive competences;
- develops *partial* pluri-lingual competences which are easier to acquire;
- complements traditional didactics regarding the teaching of foreign languages;
- triggers motivation to learn many foreign languages (related or not related).

The discursive capacity is best represented by Christian Ollivier (2006) in terms of:

- textual dimension (textual genres and layouts, rules regarding cohesion and coherence);
- linguistic dimension (phonetics, vocabulary, morphosyntax);
- situational dimension (social and cultural component, interactional and pragmatic components).

These dimensions are interrelated and fully support the discursive competence which includes such components as strategic, cognitive and affective components.

## 2. IT'S IN THE NEWSPAPERS! (BUT NOT ONLY)

IC has been promoted through workshops recorded in French newspapers - *Le Monde Diplomatique* (2005) or *Liberation* (2011). Françoise Ploquin, one of the pillars of the Association for Promoting Intercomprehension (APIC), points out a *family spirit* regarding the practice of IC, which is not only expected but also becomes possible and easier to acquire within family related languages.

For a Romance language speaker, the other languages of the same family instantly become more transparent. The same thing occurs for speakers of Slavic languages (Russian, Polish, Czech, Serbian, Croatian and Bulgarian) and the Germanic ones (English, German and Dutch). This idea is fully understood by the Scandinavians who have been practicing it for a long time: Danish, Norwegian and Swedish speakers understand each other while conversing in their native languages (Ploquin 2005).

During a workshop introducing IC, Françoise Ploquin showed that within the Latin families (French, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, Romanian, Occitan and Catalan) understanding may function well even if these languages had not been previously studied.

Along the same line of being able to grasp meaning in a language that had not been studied at school, (Garcia 2010), and Pierre Janin (2010), special advisor to the French Ministry of Culture, led another IC workshop when some 20 participants experienced 'the miracle' of easy comprehension.

In 2012, in the Quebec *Forum Mondial de la Langue Française* (2012), Françoise Ploquin, the chairwoman of APIC, explained how IC works and its advantage in helping learners of foreign languages to better understand them. Teaching a foreign language includes four competences: (first receptive ones – *listening* and *reading* skills, then productive ones – *speaking* and *writing*). In general, teachers deal with the four of them and learners reach a good language level after 600 hours. However, with IC starting from the reading comprehension learners can go a long way in only 50 hours since they set their own rhythm. Moreover, the reader accesses the meaning of the text based on previous knowledge from their native language or other languages (Nadeau 2012).

IC publications are generally available on the sites dedicated to the method (see the list below). An extended bibliography is available at: <http://redinter.eu/web/books/>.

## 3. HOW AND WHERE TO PRACTICE IC

Although not exhaustive, the list below is an attempt to review the various resources that enable training in IC.

Name of project	Competences	Languages	Target	Tools
1. Babelweb	Written (oral)	Romance	Adults	<a href="http://www.babel-web.eu/">www.babel-web.eu/</a>
2. Chainstories	Written	Romance	Children	<a href="http://www.chainstories.eu/">www.chainstories.eu/</a>
3. Cinco	Written (oral)	Romance	Adults	<a href="http://projetocinco.eu/38">projetocinco.eu/38</a>
4. Eu&I	Written (oral)	Romance, Germanic, Other	Adults	<a href="http://www.eu-intercomprehension.eu/">www.eu-intercomprehension.eu/</a>
5. Euromania	Written (oral)	Romance	Children	<a href="http://www.euro-mania.eu/">www.euro-mania.eu/</a> and textbook
6. EuroComRom	Written (oral)	Romance, Germanic	Adults	<a href="http://www.eurocomprehension.de/">www.eurocomprehension.de/</a> textbook and CD
7. EuroRom5	Written (oral)	Romance	Adults	<a href="http://www.eurom5.com/">www.eurom5.com/</a> textbook and CD
8. Fontdelcat	Written (oral)	Romance	Adults	<a href="http://ice.uab.cat/fontdelcat/">ice.uab.cat/fontdelcat/</a>
9. Galanet & Galatea	Written (oral)	Romance	Adults	<a href="http://www.galanet.eu/">www.galanet.eu/</a>
10. ICE	Written (oral)	Romance Germanic	Adults	<a href="http://logatome.eu/ice.htm">logatome.eu/ice.htm</a>
11. Iglo				
12. InterCom	Written (oral)	Bulgarian, German, Greek, Portuguese	Adults	<a href="http://www.intercomprehension.eu/">www.intercomprehension.eu/</a>
13. Interlat	Written (oral)	Romance	Adults	Textbook, CD
14. Intermar	Written (oral)	Romance, Germanic, Slavic, Baltic	Adults	<a href="http://www.intermar.ax">www.intermar.ax</a>
15. Itinéraires romans	Written (oral)	Romance	Children	<a href="http://www.unilat.org/DPEL/Intercomprehension/Itineraires_romans/fr">www.unilat.org/DPEL/Intercomprehension/Itineraires_romans/fr</a>
16. Europe Ensemble	Written and oral	Romance, Germanic, Other	Adults	<a href="http://www.europenseemble.eu/">www.europenseemble.eu/</a>
14. Limbo	Written and oral	Romance	Adults	<a href="http://www.unilat.org">www.unilat.org</a>
15. Lingalog	Written (oral)	Romance, Germanic, Other	Adults	<a href="http://lingalog.net/dokuwiki/accueil">lingalog.net/dokuwiki/accueil</a>
16. Romanica Intercom	Written (oral)	Romance	Adults	<a href="http://www.romanicaintercom.com/">www.romanicaintercom.com/</a>

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

Developing skills across languages suggests a certain methodology that focuses on acquiring strategic competences. In the process of learning a language, IC is based on the dissociation of two distinct linguistic competences involving *comprehension* (reading, listening) and *production* (speaking, writing), although this would not be supported by transactional communicative theory which views the message sender and receiver in an interacting system within the whole process (Bartlund 1968).

The receptive competence is favored and taught; so IC is about learning to read or listen to other languages, and most often than not, the exposure is to several related languages simultaneously since they bear lexical, syntactical, cultural resemblances which allow the learner to acquire a global linguistic competence. Experiences with IC have shown that this method quickly removes inhibitions that block the access to languages and also the productive competence – initially not tackled in the learning process. However, learners show their eagerness to speak spontaneously and not because they *have to*, and it is this fundamental approach that makes all the difference and contributes to the success enjoyed by this method.

Drawing a parallel between the traditional way of learning languages and the use of IC, the former targets oral and literate comprehension and expression, whilst the latter only focuses on spoken and written understanding. Traditionally, knowing a language is an objective whereas with the IC method it is one of the many possible outcomes, and importantly engages learners' entire knowledge regarding their native language or other language(s). This allows learner autonomy – reason enough to consider IC as a complementary tool for learning languages more effectively and successfully.

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