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GETTING TO GRIPS WITH INTERCOMPREHENSION.
THE NAVAL ACADEMY CASE STUDY

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Abstract. *Intercomprehension (IC) – at its simplest: a form of communication in which each person uses his or her own language and is also able to understand that of the other(s) – is a concept that originates in contrastive linguistics and constitutes a research field with a view to implementing within the Languages – Culture Didactics.It has been at the core of several research projects since the '90s, and as of 2011 the team of researchers within Intermar (a European Cooperation Project funded by the EU Commission's Lifelong Learning Programme, under Key Action 2 of the Transversal Programme, coordinated by Prof. F. Capucho at Universidade catolica in Viseu, Portugal) has been trying to encourage IC practice within the maritime community by offering a blended 60-hour course of uniquely designed modules containing learning materials and collaborative tasks. The course was piloted in 8 Naval and Maritime Academies involved in the project (among which the Naval Academy of Constanta) during the academic year of 2012 – 2013. This paper gives a description of the first module of the course – Ice-breaker. Introduction to Intercomprehension Module – that was piloted at our institution and outlines its results.*

Key words: *Intercomprehension, Intermar, learning materials, blended course*

1. INTRODUCTION

Intercomprehension (IC) originates in contrastive linguistics and constitutes a research field which, back in the '90s, witnessed profound changes with a view to implementing Culture Didactics within language teaching. As this new discipline developed, the notion of IC branched out through different research projects on the topic.

If the first projects essentially revolved around the interlinguistic aspects of IC and IC among family-related languages, in the last years IC extended and encompassed other language groups as well, taking interest in interlinguistic, extralinguistic and intercultural dimensions equally.

The idea (and necessity) of introducing this concept to teaching and learning Maritime English (ME) led to INTERMAR. Co-financed by the European Commission, this project takes under its umbrella 18 institutions including European maritime colleges, both merchant marine and naval, as well as universities with a language training component, working together in order to develop and disseminate this concept in the maritime field.

The creation of a site was also deemed proper for IC specialists to post their results and activities and share their points of view and scientific opinions. This is how INTERMAR was born in 2011, as a dialog between languages and cultures, with the purpose of addressing issues regarding plurilingual approaches onboard ships. On this platform, teachers and learners alike will find uniquely designed modules focusing on themes relevant to

maritime students making use of IC in Romance Languages, Germanic Languages, Baltic Languages and Russian, Intercultural Awareness and Maritime English. Modules contain task-based learning materials, many set in a maritime context. Teachers' guidelines are also available. Assessment tools are provided to evaluate the learner during the entire process and at the end of each language module. Blended 60-hour courses, where the above-mentioned modules were used in accordance with the specific needs of each institution, were piloted in 8 naval and maritime academies during the academic year of 2012 – 2013; among them the Naval Academy of Constanta, Romania.

2. MODULE DESCRIPTION

As advertized on the platform, the first module – Icebreaker - An Introduction to Intercomprehension for Maritime Students – consists of a large number of tasks and activities that involve using several languages that have not been previously studied. The aim is to try to *use* these languages anyway, very much like the one that has to do when working in an international environment. The key is to *listen* and *look* carefully.

The very purpose of this course module to allow students (and not only them) to discard "phobias" of unknown languages, and to give them the taste of many languages, and to demonstrate that they can understand something – almost every time….

The module contents are actually several scenarios as follows: *A mind map and a map of the Med – Plan the route – Buying provisions – Sailboat terms – Country talk – Understanding directions – A normal day – It's all Greek to me – Choosing hotels online – Introducing oneself – Holidays in Sochi.*

The situation that has been imagined to get it all started is the following: *You will get on board a yacht for a cruise of the Mediterranean Sea with some friends from other maritime academies in Europe. The better you get to know each other the more fun it will be. This time you will not only use the English language. Why?* At this point, students are invited to have a look at the mind map on the concept of IC and discuss their own experiences of it and give examples from their own life. Next, they have to consider the following situation: *You are invited to go on a cruise for three weeks from Faro to Sochi with some 30 other students from the maritime academies in Europe. You have to perform all kinds of duties on board but there will be lots of spare time.[...] You will prepare yourself mentally a little for what is to come by visiting a few web pages in the local language of a few of the destinations that you choose. How difficult will it be to understand the local language? Scan the web pages and make qualified guesses of what a word here and there might mean.*

After choosing one of the destinations for a closer study, they had to (1) type its name in Image Search on the web and select five pictures, go to the web pages selected of the pictures and see if they could understand something about the image in question; (2) go to the Wikipedia page of the destination in the *local language*, scan the webpage for 5 minutes and write down a few key words from what they understood; (3) go to Google Maps or Google Earth and have a closer look at the town to see if there were any names of streets, squares, or other features that they could understand, collect a list of such words and prepare to show them in class; (4) check the present weather and the forecast (using the links provided); (5) check the sports links (as it is good to know something about sports for conversation's sake); (6) check the AIS (http://www.marinetraffic.com/ais/)

to see where other ships are in the vicinity; (7) go to http://www.surfmusic.de/, select a radio station from the country in question and listen to the songs in the local language and to the commercials in order to get some idea of what they sang/talked about; (8) prepare to present their results (including pictures) to the classmates and say what they (think they) know about the destination based on their IC; and (9) finally, and most importantly, *reflect* on their own ways of using the language(s).

The other activities within this module will not be detailed, only a preview of them will be provided by referring to the **type of task** (search for and select information, distinguish languages, distinguish familiar words in languages, construct meaning in languages, follow orders, oral reception, decode Greek, written reception of tourism usage, send an email/ navigate on the Russian Gmail interface, look through apartment advertisements in Russian), **type of input** (maps, texts, layout cues, sound files, pictures, product names, qualities, quantities, and price, lists of words from nine different languages, videos of a person giving directions, short commands and prosody, examples of daily routines, short texts, websites with menus, texts and pictures, videos and transcriptions with blanks, snapshots of Gmail pages in Russian, snapshots of advertisement boards in Russian), **contents** (geography, meteorology, popular culture, names of food products, familiar maritime words, how to find an address, directions, normally adverbs and very simple and frequent verbs in the imperative, numbers and daily routines, tourism words, basic information on maritime students, online advertisements that offer apartments for rent), and **communicative functions** (written reception, written reception in very high context, oral reception, decoding body language, making sense of an unknown language in familiar contexts). Since nearly all activities direct students to different links in order to complete tasks, computers and Internet connection are required; however, printed alternatives are possible.

3. INTERPRETATION OF RESULTS

The present paper outlines the results following the **Ice-breaker. Introduction to Intercomprehension Module (IIM)** piloted at the Naval Academy in Constanta during December 2012 and delivered to 48 students in the 1st and 2nd year at both the Merchant Navy and Navy Faculties, majoring in Navigation. All students have quite good command of general English and are familiar with maritime and military terminology respectively.

Prior to being provided with the materials in the IIM, our students were introduced to and also demonstrated the concept of IC and finally referred to the project website: www.intermar.ax for further information. Students experimented with IC by themselves under their teachers' supervision. They were also instructed to fill in the **Learning Portfolio** at the end of the course since it was intended as an important tool in assessing their learning process and the course materials. The results will be interpreted in terms of the learning process and course materials.

4. LEARNING PROCESS

The scenario this module is based on was highly appreciated; the students enormously enjoyed the idea of a virtual voyage to a port in a country of their choice. However, their choices in terms of ports proved certain reluctance to languages that are not related to Romanian since they were drawn to countries such as Italy, Spain, France and Portugal,

favoring Romance languages over languages such as Greek and Russian whose alphabets apparently put them off. Nevertheless, the few students who undertook the challenge of discovering the two languages mentioned above had a positive experience and were glad to identify letters in the Greek alphabet in formulas they had used in mathematics, physics and even chemistry; as for the use of the Cyrillic alphabet the site www.translit.ru was of great help in decoding several Russian words that thus became clearer to them and eased their understanding of the messages. In the same line of thought, in the final activity of this module – Adventures in Sochi – in which they practically had to deal with the Russian language, meaning was deduced from images, videos, use of numbers and most importantly, familiar layout of sites since Russian interfaces are similar to English/Romanian ones. Other activities/tasks that were popular among our students and worth mentioning included: searching for images to grasp info about different places, using the Google Earth program and AIS (helpful in their future jobs), and reading weather forecasts and sports news, listening to music. The task they enjoyed the least was **Buying provisions** partly due to the fact that they were asked to look for no less than 20 products which seemed too demanding; by contrast, they would have liked to have a 'budget' to stay within.

Upon this module completion, the students were able to draw several conclusions on **IC** and **IC strategies** by themselves. First of all, they discovered that they were able to understand a lot in an unknown language (which boosted their self-confidence) and that it is important to know that you can understand people whose languages you do not know and who could understand you when addressing in your language. Second of all, they realized that they unintentionally had accumulated a series of words (information) in other languages by putting to use such IC strategies as word resemblance/associations and visuals which eventually made them learn/memorize words in another language faster.

In terms of **major difficulties**, students pointed out the myriad of tasks and sites that they were directed to in order to perform all the activities. To this, our students' limited internet access (since most of them are enrolled in a military institution) added up. They also reported not having been at ease with the Cyrillic alphabet, and therefore, such activities involving the use of it became time consuming and somewhat mind boggling. At the same time, they acknowledged that more exposure to this alphabet could be part of the solution to their problem.

5. COURSE MATERIALS

Our students appreciated the fact that the materials included interactive tasks that had been clearly formulated, cleverly presented and generously detailed, offering a lot of information in order to facilitate task accomplishment. The materials were adapted to their learning needs and motivations, and helped them gain perspective and learn new things about themselves and the surrounding world.

6. CONCLUSION

All in all, IC has been well received and commended by the students (see previous report on Romance Intercomprehension Module). Being in contact with so many languages at a time fascinated them as it was something "new, different and diverse", a

new approach to several European languages in which they discovered a considerable quantity of words that resemble to Romanian or English (languages that they do know). Moreover, when confronted with whatever language they will – as one student so nicely put it – "know what to do", that is to resort to their newly acquired intercomprehensive skills. Finally, they expressed their eagerness to experience IC 'live' by using forums and chats to communicate with students from the other naval and maritime institutions involved in the INTERMAR project.

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