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52 Who can benefit from training in receptive language skills?

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People can be trained to acquire specifically receptive (or “intercomprehensive”) language skills. This means that people can learn how to understand what is said or written in a foreign language without necessarily being able to speak or write that language, provided it is closely related to at least one language they are already familiar with. This kind of training was first suggested by the 17th-century mathematician and philologist Pierre Besnier, who considered that languages should be seen as a continuum, and argued that they are therefore best learned through comparison. Nowadays, intercomprehension training is still largely based on exploiting linguistic similarities between related languages: the aim is to develop learners’ ability to elucidate the meaning of semi-transparent words (see table).

Today, a whole array of pedagogical resources, including textbooks and audio material, exist for intercomprehension training in Romance (in particular French, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish, Romanian and Catalan), Germanic (in particular Dutch, German, Swedish, Norwegian, Icelandic, Luxembourgish and Faroese) and Slavic languages (in particular Czech and Slovak). Nevertheless, their use in schools remains very marginal, and when they are used it is generally due to the strong personal commitment of a handful of teachers. This might be because the intercomprehensive approach is usually presented either as ancillary to mainstream language teaching or as a subtype of integrated language teaching making use of documents written in several closely related languages (see Escudé 2008), without really identifying who can *most* benefit from it and what *particular* needs it can address.

What does research tell us?

For mobile people who are going to settle in a new country, language learning is an important step towards inclusion, although it is generally a difficult and time-consuming experience. The development of *receptive* language skills cannot be an end in itself but it can be a useful stepping stone to more comprehensive language learning, including *productive* speaking and writing skills.

Given that acquiring receptive skills requires much less time than learning to speak, this approach allows learners to make *quick progress* and keep the *motivation* to continue learning. Furthermore, providing learners with a set of useful tools for the comprehension of the new linguistic environment allows them to become relatively *independent* in a short time, depending on the language distance between their languages and the host language. This can lead to a feeling of empowerment, which is especially important when there is reduced self-respect due to the learner’s dependent status. Intercomprehension also facilitates *smooth and gradual inclusion* into the new language and society, postponing the stress often linked to speaking a foreign language.

Illustration and evidence

We interviewed ten Italian adoptive families who were welcoming a child who did not speak Italian. The parents emphasized the importance of giving the children linguistic “clues and inputs”, not only to prompt development of the host language but also to help them become familiar with the new environment. Many parents pointed out how useless and sometimes even counterproductive it was to force the child to speak Italian.

Several parents even saw school as a hindrance to linguistic and social inclusion because it was focused exclusively on the child's lack of productive language skills, ignoring that some children spoke a language allowing mutual intelligibility (such as Spanish with respect to Italian) and could follow the curriculum at their age level.

They enrolled him in the first grade despite the fact that he was eight years old and then I stuck to my point and I said, "No, no, you enrol him in the second grade", and they said, "We cannot because he cannot talk and he cannot write".

One parent told how his Spanish-speaking daughter kept silent at school for three months because she thought the school staff were unable to understand her. This kind of situation could easily have been avoided if the teacher had taken into account the mutual intelligibility of the child's first language and the school language.

The teachers understood, but they did not make the effort that we made to understand, so our daughter felt a bit lost.

Our study thus found that intercomprehensive skills were spontaneously used in private settings to smooth the cultural shock caused by mobility, whereas they were often overlooked in public and professional settings, such as schools.

Policy implications

The following measures should be considered.

1. Start language training and testing for incoming mobile learners by focusing on receptive skills, adopting an approach that is both welcoming and conducive to the acquisition of productive skills.
2. Offer language training in receptive skills to teachers and social workers involved in the reception of allophones, allowing them to develop a rough understanding of a wider range of the languages they encounter, instead of learning only a few of them in depth.
3. Encourage teachers and classmates to value the linguistic knowledge of incoming allophone children, which can enhance their own language awareness.
4. Help incoming children integrate into local schools by encouraging them to use the knowledge they already have in their acquired languages (for instance by means of approaches that teach through a foreign language of instruction such as integrated intercomprehension).

References and further reading

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FROM TRANSPARENCY TO OPACITY (based on Castagne, 2007: 161)

Direct transparency	Indirect transparency		Opacity	
	Subtype 1	Subtype 2	Subtype 1	Subtype 2
there is a recognisable equivalent lexical item in L1	suggests a lexical item in L1 whose meaning is inaccurate but similar enough to assist comprehension	there is an equivalent lexical item in L1 but its form may not be immediately recognisable	does not suggest any lexical item in L1	suggests a lexical item in L1 whose meaning is misleading
universidade (PT) universidad (ES) università (IT) université (FR) university (GB) universiteit (NL) Universität (DE)	umbrella (GB) ombrelle (F)	miljoen (NL) *million million (F)	zolder (NL) grenier (F)	alcune (I) ?aucune quelques (F)