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61 How can intercomprehension be used in professional contexts?

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A major challenge facing public and private institutions in Europe is how to handle a great diversity of multilingual communication settings, including work. Research in language economics shows that a high level of English is not necessarily enough and that skills in other foreign languages can be handsomely rewarded because they provide added competitive edge (e.g. Grin, Sfriddo & Vaillancourt 2010). Alternative solutions for companies operating in a multilingual context involve recruiting native speakers, using professional interpreters and translators, and providing in-house language training. Alongside these well-known strategies, the potential of intercomprehension remains largely underexploited, be it in its oral or written form.

What does research tell us?

In professional contexts, the use of oral intercomprehension has been observed in face-to-face encounters, both between close collaborators (Ribbert & ten Thije 2007) and in informal encounters (Klaveren & De Vries 2012). A number of advantages have been claimed for this mediation mode, especially in contexts involving teamwork. Whenever colleagues speak (or have sufficient knowledge of) cognate (that is, relatively closely related) languages, these common linguistic competences can be used in order to save time, avoid mental fatigue and convey mutual cultural understanding.

In professional contexts involving documents written in foreign languages, the use of intercomprehension is fairly widespread, especially when it is combined with the use of dictionaries or translation tools. Written receptive skills prove very profitable for two main reasons.

First, they allow maximum flexibility, as with a little training it is perfectly feasible not only to attain a high-quality understanding of cognate languages, but also to retrieve information from documents written in less closely related but contact languages (Castagne 2007). Second, they involve no direct costs and may reduce the need for interpreting and translation services. A simulation of internal communication between European institutions and member states suggests that the implementation of intercomprehension among MEPs and European officials, as an alternative to a model based exclusively on interpreting and translation between *all* the official languages of the EU, would significantly reduce the number of translation pairs, allowing member states to save several million euros (Grin 2008) while promoting multilingual practices.

Illustration and evidence

In order to explore intercomprehension in professional settings, we conducted a study of 10 former postgraduates of the University of Reims Champagne-Ardenne who had been trained for two years in receptive skills in at least three Romance languages (Italian, Spanish, Portuguese) and three Germanic languages (German, English and Dutch). Nine out of ten of the participants reported using written intercomprehension most often in combination with the use of a dictionary. However, only a few participants said they used their intercomprehensive skills for oral documents, and this only in private contexts.

Thus, even professionals who have been trained in receptive multilingualism tend not to use these skills in oral contexts.

This suggests that the professional use of oral intercomprehension is not yet considered a true alternative to strategies such as a lingua franca. One possible solution might be to encourage professionals to explicitly agree on the mediation strategies they can use, for instance by briefly telling each other about their respective language repertoires when they begin to work together.

Policy implications

In view of this, policymakers might want to consider the following measures.

1. Encourage and help professional organisations to set up pilot projects that foster the use of intercomprehension, both for dealing with written documents and in face-to-face interactions within teams.

2. Professional organisations should provide individual training in interactional intercomprehensive skills for staff involved in multilingual teams and in written receptive skills for staff members who are frequently confronted with documents produced in mutually intelligible or already partially known languages.
3. Include training in intercomprehensive skills for multilingually and interculturally oriented job profiles.

References and further reading

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RESPONDENTS' ANSWERS TO THE QUESTION: "FACED WITH A DOCUMENT IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE, WHICH STRATEGY DO YOU USE?"

- try to understand the document through intercomprehension
- ▨ search for an equivalent document in L1
- consult a dictionary
- ▨ resort to translation or interpretation services

