

Compensatory Learning Strategies

Sarah JERVIS
Université de Strasbourg
sarah@jervis.ca

RESUME.

In response to the first theme of the conference *Intercomprehension : plurilingual competences, corpus, integration*, this communication aims to answer the question: What skills are involved: language, cultural or intercultural, communicative, professional, or technological? It is based on the findings of my master's dissertation which explored the subject of whether students develop or use compensatory learning strategies in intercomprehension when their mother tongue is not from the family of languages being studied. It explores the role of the working language of the intercomprehension workshops as well as language learning strategies within the context of discovering and applying intercomprehension strategies. This communication also addresses the role of the group in the transfer of existing knowledge.

RESUME.

En réponse au premier thème du colloque *Intercompréhension : compétences plurielles, corpus, intégration*, cette communication vise répondre à la question : Quelles compétences sont en jeu : langagières, culturelles ou interculturelles, communicatives, professionnelles, technologique ? La communication prend en compte les résultats de mon mémoire de master 2 qui traitait le sujet des locuteurs de langue maternelle non-apparentée à la famille de langues étudiée en intercompréhension et s'ils ont recours aux stratégies compensatoires distinctes des locuteurs natifs d'une langue apparentée. Elle explore le rôle de la langue de travail dans les ateliers d'intercompréhension ainsi que les stratégies d'apprentissage de langue étrangère dans le contexte de l'emploi de stratégies d'intercompréhension. Cette communication aborde également le rôle du groupe dans le transfert de connaissances existantes.

KEYWORDS : communication, intercomprehension, mother tongue, strategy, transfer,

MOTS-CLES : communication, intercomprehension, langue maternelle, stratégie, transfert

The communication *Compensatory Learning Strategies* as presented at the international conference *Intercomprehension: plurilingual competences, corpus, integration* in Grenoble, France from June 21 to 23, 2012 aimed to answer the question of the first theme of the conference: What skills are involved: language, cultural or intercultural, communicative, professional, technical? It is based on the findings of my master's dissertation which explored the subject of whether students develop or use compensatory learning strategies in intercomprehension when their mother tongue is not from the family of languages being studied. The compensatory learning strategies that I observed this sample group employing stemmed from two principle areas: the role of the group and the place of the working language of the workshops. From these two areas a number of skills naturally developed namely cultural, intercultural and communicative ones.

The context of my study took place over the course of an internship at the University of Reims, France, where I was able to participate in and observe a Romance language intercomprehension workshop. The working language of the workshop was French and all the participants including the leader spoke it as a foreign language. The majority of the participants' mother tongues were not related to the Romance family, namely: English and Chinese. The remaining participants spoke Brazilian Portuguese and Romanian natively. Furthermore, the workshop leader had not only studied intercomprehension herself but was also trained in the approach. The workshops were being conducted in a way that encouraged the participants to employ and test the various intercomprehension strategies.

As many know, the strategies that intercomprehension sets about to develop include identification of transparent words, making hypotheses, predictions and associations between words and knowledge and using the context of the documents either audio or textual. Other learning strategies include thinking out loud or verbalizing, and transferring knowledge between languages. Many of these strategies can be referred in terms of transfers as well as low-level to high-level cognitive strategies (Meissner, 2007 ; 4) (Harmegnies et Piccaluga, 2008 ; 171) (Degache et Masperi, 1995 ; 6). E. Castagne himself refers to using semantic inference to guess the meaning of seemingly opaque passages (Castagne, 2005 ; 5).

While it was possible to either observe or discuss these specific strategies with the participants of the workshop, there was more going on in terms of strategies and learning than they were unaware of. The setting of the workshops provided the group with a secure learning environment that was conducive to testing and using intercomprehension and learning strategies. C. Degache confirms that the student's relationship with the teacher, language, culture and other students all play a role in the effectiveness of the learning environment (2000 ; 6). The role of the group in the effectiveness of intercomprehension training is thus not to be overlooked; it was between participants that I observed many additional skills and strategies forming. The friendly, relaxed ambiance of the workshops clearly gave each individual the chance to try multiple possibilities without pressure, allowing them to overcome difficulties and identify transparent structures (Castagne, 2005 ; 15). As the workshops advanced the participants were not afraid to ask each other for translations and meanings or to reference previous material that might help another work through a passage. This group dynamic diffused the pressure to perform well as participants supported each other. On the whole, the individuals were not concerned about only finding the correct answer or translation; they allowed the others the time and space to test strategies and work through the problems and the others, in return, made an earnest effort. There is no other way to describe this than respect for others. Each participant and the leader showed respect for the learning and deduction process of each individual.

Intercomprehension is based on using a learner's existing knowledge and skills as a starting point. As the workshop leader was trained in intercomprehension, she aimed to encourage the participants to use their existing knowledge in order to develop their linguistic competencies and clarify language learning strategies. The concept of transfer also applies to the group as well. Participants are able to use others' knowledge and reflections to find meaning in the passages such as when participants think out loud, repeat passages again or share their reasoning after finding the solution. The other participants I observed benefited from this vocalization and were able to transfer the information directly within the same text. In addition, the skill of intercultural communication developed during these vocalisations in more than one way. Once the participants realized that the group was a resource, they began to listen to each other more actively. When the students saw that their thoughts and knowledge were valued by the other participants and useful to the overall objective of working through the text, they openly started to share more of their experience and knowledge with the others within the context of the text being worked on. When the participants saw that their knowledge and experience was valuable to the others, they opened up and shared more and more coming full circle. This group interaction fostered a sense of teamwork with respect for the individual as the sessions progressed; intercultural and communicative skills were an added benefit, only possible in a group setting.

Despite the confidence that the participants put into the group as a resource and the leader to help guide them through their various difficulties, the biggest difficulty of the students of a non-related mother tongue remained facing the unknown. This was reported in many forms: being unfamiliar with the family of languages or confusing them, inability to identify transparent words, inability to understand the translated word in the working language of the workshops (French), needing to review previous vocabulary extensively before the workshop or being unfamiliar with grammatical terms to break down the passages. Also, participants expressed frustration at being able to understand something intuitively but being unable to put it into words in the working language or simply not understanding the cultural signification of the text.

Accepting the unknown is one skill that foreign language learners are familiar with whereas monolingual learners may be more unsettled by this feeling. When confronted with new information, especially in the working language, the participant of the non-related mother tongue must decide, or evaluate, whether it is essential to know or not – asking themselves, should I try to use the intercomprehension strategies to understand this point or should I really just ask for help from the leader because I do not understand? Once the learner asks for the help, they can always come back to the intercomprehension work. The leader will likely attempt to get the participant to employ intercomprehension strategies when the participant asks for more information. If during this period these strategies do not clarify the meaning, the leader may provide a synonym to allow the learner to grasp the general sense of the sentence. However, as general meanings do not always suffice when learning a foreign language, students then may interrupt the class and insist upon knowing the more detailed explanation of the new information

or they may decide to accept a synonym and the general sense of the sentence and move on; the latter option may or may not later provide them with an intuitive reference when later confronted with the information again.

This operation is an example of students falling back on language learning strategies when faced with unknowns in intercomprehension. Furthermore, it is in constantly determining the relevance of new information that the participants of non-related mother tongues develop communicative skills. As E. Castagne points out, intercomprehension classes are not foreign language classes and unless the participants ask, they will not be provided with detailed definitions or explanations (2002 ; 9). Participants must be conscientious of their place in such a class in relation to the other learners; it is an intercomprehension class and everyone is in the intercomprehension mindset. Hence, these learners are faced with the double task of learning the strategies and apprehending a language they may not fully master. These students compensate by evaluating the pertinence of new information for both their foreign language learning and their intercomprehension learning and then deciding whether it is worth disrupting the class to ask for supplementary information. They progress at a different rhythm and with a subset of objectives and the ability to accept this situation contributes largely to their progress. The conscious ability to switch between studying intercomprehension and improving their foreign language is a strategy for success.

A learner's outlook on the situation is, lastly, one of the compensatory learning strategies that I encountered during the interview process. Participants of a non-related mother tongue must manage this double task and accept finding themselves in a situation where they are at a disadvantage in comparison with participants of related mother tongues. A positive outlook and learner philosophy were two keys to success. These participants had to accept that they work slower and less efficiently compared to the other students, accept that they have a lot of difficulties and are often wrong, accept their own learning pace and rhythm and have trust in the workshop leader. In the end, the participants concluded that they know it takes time to learn a language and that you have to keep working on it and manage the difficulties as they come. The Chinese students all said that the workshop was a great place to keep working on their French and this mindset helped them advance in French and in intercomprehension too. At the end of the day, they were there to learn whether it was intercomprehension or French as a foreign language.

Overall the intercomprehension workshops resulted in the development of additional strategies and skills. The team spirit and group mindset led to respect for the individual and intercultural skills. Through group transfer, participants were able to see firsthand that their knowledge and experiences were valuable to the other participants working on the same text ultimately leading to the development of improved communication skills. Participants whose mother tongue is unrelated face the double task of constantly evaluating the pertinence of the information however improving their ability to communicate within a group as choosing when to

speak and interrupt is a part of communication. Finally students used language learner philosophy allowing for greater management of the unknown and handling difficulties.

These ultimately led to the most ideal kind of learning - active learning. The participants all concluded that no matter what the individuals background, with a related mother tongue or not, everyone in the workshop was there to learn. Each workshop was a new opportunity to improve their French as a foreign language and everyone in the group had to be prepared and present during the time together, in other words, active. The added results in this sample group were active, social learning with a team mindset, respect for others and the development of effective communicative and intercultural skills.

Bibliography

- Castagne, E. (2002). Comment accéder à l'intercompréhension européenne : quelques pistes inspirées de l'expérience EuRom4. In Actes du congrès international *Deutschen Romanistentag in München*, oct 2001, intitulé *Ein Kopf – viele Sprache: Koexistenz, Interaktion und Vermittlung*, Aachen, Shaker-Verlag, série 'éditions EuroCom' n° 9, pp. 99- 107. <http://logatome.eu/publicat/Munich2001.pdf>
- Castagne, E. (2005). Le programme 'InterCompréhension Européenne' (ICE) ou comment utiliser la linguistique contrastive pour mieux se comprendre en Europe. <http://logatome.eu/publicat/Leipzig2003.pdf>
- Degache, C. & Masperi, M. (1995). Pour une dissociation des objectifs. Un programme d'enseignement / apprentissage de la compréhension des langues romanes : Galatea. In M. Candelier (ed.), *Jalons pour une Europe des langues*, *Lidil n°11*, Grenoble : PUG, 141-159. www.galanet.eu/publication/fichiers/dc-mm1995.pdf
- Degache, C. (2000). La notion de "stratégie" dans l'espace interdidactique. In J. Billiez, C. Foerster, D.-L. Simon (éds.), *La didactique des langues dans l'espace francophone : unité et diversité*, Actes du 6è colloque ACEDLE. Grenoble. 147-159. <http://www.galanet.eu/publication/fichiers/dc2000.pdf>
- Harmegnies, B. & Piccaluga, M. (2008). Aux sources de l'intercompréhension. In V. Conti & F. Grin (eds.), *S'entendre entre les langues voisines : vers l' intercompréhension*. Chêne-Bourg, Suisse : Editions Médecine et Hygiène, 169-195.
- Meissner, F. (2007). Didactique du plurilinguisme et développements scolaires. In F. Capucho et al. (éds.), *Diálogos em Intercompreensão*. Lisboa : Universidade Católica Editora. [http://fss.plone.uni-giessen.de/fss/fbz/fb05/romanistik/didaktik/Mitarbeiter/mitarbeiter_meissner/meissner/externe-veranstaltungen/meissner_lisboa-preprint.pdf/file/Meißner_Lisboa%20\(preprint\).pdf](http://fss.plone.uni-giessen.de/fss/fbz/fb05/romanistik/didaktik/Mitarbeiter/mitarbeiter_meissner/meissner/externe-veranstaltungen/meissner_lisboa-preprint.pdf/file/Meißner_Lisboa%20(preprint).pdf)