

Intercomprehension in primary school: discovering languages and constructing knowledge

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This article discusses the potential value of developing pupils' intercomprehension skills at elementary school. This development construes Europe as a plurilingual and intercultural space in which the linguistic and cultural identity of each community finds its place. However, the construction of Europe also faces the challenges of assuring communication among people of different languages, promoting participation in an expanded community, and discovering other cultures in a perspective of mutual knowledge.

The strategies of intercomprehension can serve the purposes of discovering plurilingualism and promoting comprehension skills among speakers of different languages, specifically among speakers of languages belonging to the same family.

The proposals that are presented and discussed in this article originate from the *Euromania* project, a Socrates/Lingua project directed at the development of the intercomprehension skills of pupils within the group of Romance languages. The project's learning materials aim, on the one hand, at developing pupils' intercomprehension strategies in association with the learning of various school subjects; in this way, the mobilization of intercomprehension skills acquires an immediate purpose by serving the process of learning those subjects. On the other hand, the operations performed by pupils in order to reconstruct meaning convert their strategies into learning tools.

Neste texto discutimos as potencialidades de desenvolver a capacidade de intercompreensão dos alunos, desde cedo, no ensino básico. Este desenvolvimento justifica-se pela integração num contexto de construção da Europa como espaço plurilingue, onde a identidade linguística e cultural de cada comunidade é reconhecida e valorizada. Contudo, nesse espaço também se colocam desafios para assegurar a comunicação entre as pessoas, a participação numa comunidade alargada e a descoberta das outras culturas numa perspectiva de mútuo conhecimento.

As estratégias de intercompreensão podem servir propósitos de descoberta do plurilinguismo, da capacidade de compreensão existente entre falantes de diferentes línguas, designadamente entre falantes de línguas pertencentes à mesma família.

As propostas apresentadas têm origem no projecto *Euromania*, um projecto Socrates/Lingua dirigido para o desenvolvimento da capacidade de intercompreensão dentro do grupo das línguas românicas. Os materiais do projecto *Euromania* procuram desenvolver as estratégias de intercompreensão dos alunos em associação à aprendizagem das diversas matérias escolares. Deste modo, a mobilização da competência de intercompreensão ganha uma finalidade imediata. Por outro lado, as operações desenvolvidas pelos alunos para aceder à reconstrução do conhecimento transformam essas estratégias em instrumentos de aprendizagem.

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Intercomprehension

One of the aims of Europe is to construct an intercultural community in which people from different regions can interact according to the needs of their economic, social, and personal lives and in which their identity is not threatened by those needs. This goal generates two types of challenge with regard to language policy: on the one hand, it is necessary to assure linguistic communication among people from different regions and countries; on the other hand, it is equally necessary to recognize linguistic diversity as a means of preserving cultural identity. Intercomprehension can be seen as a strategy for answering both challenges.

According to a recent definition of the concept, which has been consolidated in the last few years, intercomprehension can be understood as the process of communication in which participants use their own language and comprehend what is said or written in the other language (Alves, 2007; Alves & Mendes, 2006; Capucho, 2002; Capucho & Oliveira, 2005; Castagne, 2006, 2007; Doyé, 2005, 2007; Hermoso, 1998; Melo, 2004).

People activate intercomprehension in situations where they need to access the meanings expressed by a speaker or writer although they do not share a common language. In order to achieve comprehension, they mobilize a plurality of linguistic and non-linguistic resources and strategies. Intercomprehension relies on a 'general interpretative faculty,' which is not limited to the processing of linguistic elements: 'Intercomprehension has a very solid psychological foundation. It rests on the interplay of man's faculty for language and his ability to exploit his previously acquired funds of knowledge' (Doyé, 2005, pp. 9–10). When the message is conveyed in a linguistic system that the individual understands, both linguistic and non-linguistic factors interact in the construction of meaning. Communicative success results from the combination of many dimensions of knowledge, with non-verbal components playing an active role in the interpretative process and influencing the way the linguistic elements are interpreted.

When the message is expressed in a language the individual is not familiar with, the interpretative process is activated. However, in this case, he or she cannot rely on linguistic information and must mobilize non-linguistic elements to a much greater degree in order to achieve comprehension: 'The difference lies in the fact that in the second case the individual has to rely on other funds of knowledge than in the first' (Doyé, 2005, p. 10).

There is a diversity of elements that can support comprehension. Doyé (2005, 2007) specifies and organizes these into a large set of categories of knowledge: general knowledge; cultural knowledge; situational knowledge; behavioral knowledge; pragmatic knowledge; graphic knowledge; phonological knowledge; grammatical knowledge; and lexical knowledge. This classification shows the variety of knowledge components that contribute to communication and interpretation. However, some of the categories are hard to separate when analyzing specific communicative situations (for instance, pragmatic and situational knowledge are very close, as Doyé himself says), and other categories, although conceptually separable, are strongly interrelated (situational and behavioral, for instance).

The categories can be aggregated to take an account of various common features. Thus, Capucho and Oliveira (2005) aggregate intercomprehension factors on three dimensions of discursive competence: linguistic; textual; and situational, each with its own components. The linguistic dimension includes the formal components of language (phonology, lexis, semantics, morphology, and syntax). The textual dimension includes both verbal (text genres, sequence types, cohesion, and coherence processes) and non-verbal knowledge (layouts, formats, and iconic or prosodic components). The situational dimension is composed of the sociocultural, interactional, and pragmatic components.

Both models (that of Capucho & Oliveira, 2005 and that of Doyé, 2005) foresee some role for modes of representation and communication other than language, but the components they refer to are still connected with language: Doyé explicitly refers to graphic knowledge and Capucho and Oliveira refer to the role of layouts and iconic or prosodic components. The role of other modes of representing and communicating (images, gesture, gaze, movement, etc.) remain implicitly associated with components such as the pragmatic, interactional, behavioral, etc.

Adopting a semiotic perspective, we may explicitly consider a model that includes all the different modes of communication that are mobilized in a situation of intercomprehension. This multimodal approach will emphasize the interrelations among different modes and the functions that other modes acquire because of the fact that in a situation of intercomprehension one of the modes, language, can only be mobilized to a rather limited extent.

In this article, we organize the diversity of the knowledge that supports intercomprehension into three dimensions: (1) content knowledge, which consists in the knowledge about the world that individuals have encoded and can express in linguistic form, generally in their mother tongue, but also in languages they have learned; (2) situational knowledge, which refers to the objectives to be reached and to the behaviors to be adopted in a specific situation; and (3) representational knowledge, which concerns the different modes of representing meaning that individuals can activate. As said earlier, this organization is based on a semiotic view in which content has some level of autonomy from the mode of expression; consequently, it can be conveyed through different modes. Indeed, different kinds of modes are usually activated in communication and the expression of meaning (Jewitt, 2006; Jewitt & Kress, 2003; Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996). The modes used are those that individuals have access to on the basis of their particular development and are available to them in a specific situation.

Representational knowledge is linked to the possibility of mobilizing different modes to convey content. These multimodal resources include language, gesture, posture, gaze, image, etc. If, in habitual situations, multimodality is already present in the process of constructing meaning, its role increases in situations where participants must appeal to intercomprehension. This happens because the addressee must rely to a greater extent on the non-verbal dimension, and also in these situations, specifically in face-to-face communication, speakers tend to adopt behaviors that reinforce non-linguistic elements, making them more salient, in order to achieve comprehension of the message they want to convey. Moreover, in a situation of intercomprehension, speakers generally adapt their speech, including linguistic factors, to the needs of the interlocutor, through elements such as pace of speech, intonation, lexical choices, syntactic complexity, and the use of foreign words that they believe the interlocutor can comprehend. The adoption of such facilitative

strategies is not limited to speech. In the case of written documents, the burden of comprehension does not have to be exclusively shouldered by the reader: when authors know that the intended readers will have some difficulty in language comprehension they can adopt specific linguistic strategies, extending facilitative strategies to different modes of representation than simply written discourse, namely graphic and visual communication, where this is possible.

The potential of intercomprehension has been related to the domains of cultural identity and citizenship, as well as that of language learning.

As for the domain of cultural identity, intercomprehension acknowledges the cultural and linguistic identities of different communities. By developing receptive skills in intercomprehension, people can gain access to other cultures and societies. In this way they become aware not only of linguistic and cultural diversity, but also of the strategies that allow them to overcome the difficulties of communicating in a multilingual context.

The strategy of intercomprehension is especially fruitful in the case of geographical areas in which we can find different languages from the same family, as is the case in Europe, with the Romance, Germanic, and Slavic language groups. Within the space occupied by each of these groups, regional languages find their own place, standing side by side with national languages and contributing to the identity of the people of those regions.

When people want to transcend the immediate obstacles to communication that are caused by the lack of a shared language, they discover the potential of intercomprehension. They mobilize their inter-linguistic knowledge (between their own language and the other languages), as well as the resources of the multimodal and situational components. In the European Union context, this contributes to promoting a culture in which individuals do not view themselves only as citizens of their own country, but also as citizens of Europe.

Intercomprehension can support the dimension of European citizenship. Various facts related to intercomprehension contribute to this dimension: the fact that individuals can situate their language in a continuity of linguistic features and in a network of relationships among languages; and the facts that they can understand other languages and that they can be understood by a large number of people from other countries when using their own language. To promote the conditions under which intercomprehension can develop is to create the basis for enhancing European citizenship awareness and participation in initiatives beyond the dimension of the individual's country.

As for the domain of language learning, intercomprehension can be activated during the process of learning foreign languages. In order to activate intercomprehension, pupils can participate in communicative situations where this capacity is applied, they can become aware of the dimensions they mobilize, and of the strategies they use in those situations. In addition, both discursive and linguistic awareness are promoted through the process of language learning: awareness of sociocultural, interactional, and pragmatic factors of the situational dimension; awareness of the characteristics of text genres which go beyond a particular language, on the textual dimension; and awareness of the formal properties of different languages (with their similarities and differences), encouraging pupils to transfer linguistic knowledge (lexical, inflectional, syntactic, etc.) from one language to another as an important intercomprehension strategy. The similarities and differences between the learners' own language and the other languages of the same family promote their linguistic

awareness. The increase in their knowledge of other languages creates a network of relationships among languages that will support language learning and intercomprehension.

As we detailed at the beginning of this article, intercomprehension mobilizes other 'funds of knowledge' besides linguistic competence in the target language that is being learned, in order to support the learner's participation in communicative situations. These funds of knowledge are part of discursive competence, but they typically remain in the shadow, or in the background, while linguistic competence is predominant in the process of language learning and meaning construction. In intercomprehension situations these emerge and become salient, thus promoting the learner's awareness of them and their contribution to the process of meaning-making.

Intercomprehension strategies are designed to create a pathway to meaning. In the language field, learners form hypotheses, exploiting the network of linguistic elements they have access to. But, in the non-linguistic domains, learners also have to form hypotheses and establish relationships, in order to make sense of the data that are presented to them. Without access to meaning through linguistic representation, learners have to reconstruct the route to meaning by combining linguistic and non-linguistic information.

Given the challenge of making meaning through the dimensions of discursive competence, intercomprehension can be understood as a learning tool in the domain of language. But another question follows: Can intercomprehension also function as a knowledge tool, outside the domain of language learning?

An affirmative answer would create a meaningful context in which to mobilize intercomprehension strategies as a learning tool at school, not only for purposes of language learning, but also to construct knowledge in other school disciplines. In this way, the goals of discovering cultural or linguistic identity and promoting intercultural communication would be linked to the process of knowledge construction that takes place at school.

In the following sections, we will discuss the scope of intercomprehension strategies in the domains referred to here with reference to the proposals of the Euromania project.

The Euromania project

Euromania is a Socrates/Lingua project, developed in the five European countries with Romance languages (France, Spain, Italy, Portugal, and Romania). The Euromania project targets the development of pupils' intercomprehension among Romance languages, associating this with the learning of subjects at elementary school (more specifically, ages 8–11). The main goal of the project is to produce didactic modules in different subjects (science, mathematics, history, and technology).

The innovative aspects of the Euromania project lie in the fact that it is directed at pupils in the first forms and that it is not restricted to the field of language, but seeks to develop abilities in intercomprehension, integrating these with the process of learning the other subjects. The link to the learning of school subjects emphasizes the dimension of knowledge construction, in addition to the objective of promoting the development of pupils' intercomprehension abilities (Escudé, 2007).

The proposals of Euromania are close to the strategies of content and language integrated learning (CLIL). In the CLIL approach (Coyle, 2007a, 2007b; Marsh, 2002; Marsh & Langé, 1999; Marsh & Maljers, 2001), a curricular subject (history,

social sciences, or other) is taught through the medium of a language other than that normally used in the class. Frequently, in a CLIL context, teachers are specialists in the discipline and also fluent speakers of the target language, being either bilingual or native monolingual speakers. Teachers of foreign languages work in partnership with CLIL colleagues in order to support language learning. Euromania does not present such an in-depth immersion in the other language. However, it can serve as an introduction to learning through other languages in contexts where it is not possible to completely apply the CLIL approach, because a teacher of other curricular subjects who is also fluent in the intended foreign language is not always available.

According to the strategy adopted, the content to be learned is presented through documents in different Romance languages. In this way, pupils are confronted with the need to solve a linguistic and multimodal puzzle in order to construct the intended knowledge. The starting points of the project are: (a) the need to deal with the linguistic diversity that is presented to them will activate the pupils' abilities in intercomprehension; (b) in order to attain the intended knowledge they will have to perform operations such as forming hypotheses about the content that is being expressed and trying to validate these hypotheses; and (c) the linguistic diversity present can be directed to developing linguistic awareness and consciousness, which, in turn, will sustain and extend the pupils' skills in intercomprehension.

The learning materials are available on the project's website: <http://www.euro-mania.eu>. The structure of the modules includes different sections: (1) the first section, 'Look and Find out', presents a set of six documents concerning the content that must be learned; each of these documents combines text and image, and is presented in a different language (the five languages of the countries mentioned and an additional regional Romance language, such as Occitan or Catalan); (2) the next section, 'Think and Explain', is devoted to verifying and validating the hypotheses formed in the preceding section; the main points of content to be learned are systematized; this section is presented in the pupil's own language; (3) the third section, 'Go Further', extends learning to new aspects of content; (4) the final section, 'Let's travel through our languages', is essentially linguistic; it is intended to increase language awareness through observation of the same text in different languages (other than the pupil's own language) and to deepen metalinguistic knowledge about Romance languages, focusing the learner's attention on the expression of certain linguistic parameters (number, gender, past, future, definite/indefinite, negation, etc.) in those languages.

Euromania thus includes the three dimensions of linguistic intercomprehension, knowledge construction, and metalinguistic knowledge development. At this point, experimentation with the modules has made it possible to gather information about how teachers and pupils deal with the materials on these three dimensions and about the operations they perform while working. In this article, we present a general overview of the main aspects that emerge on each dimension.

The data used to construct this overview resulted from the researcher's direct observation during classroom implementation of Module 1 of the project and from the analysis of the participants' interaction. The title of this module is *The mystery of 'mormoloc'* (a Romanian word meaning tadpole), and it is a science module, whose topic/subject matter is the phenomenon of *metamorphosis*. In order to obtain a corpus for analysis, four of the implementations were audio and video recorded, making it possible to transcribe the verbal and other dimensions of interaction between teacher and pupils and among the pupils themselves.

The task involved pupils of the fifth form; at that stage the topic of metamorphosis appears in the Portuguese science curriculum. Each pupil received a booklet (Module 1 of the project) with documents and exercises specific to that Module. The pages of the booklet included space for writing the answers. The teacher conducted the whole process, presenting the materials, putting questions, eliciting comments, clarifying doubts, distributing tasks, and establishing when to progress to a new section or task. He addressed the pupils in the language of the class, i.e. Portuguese. The activity occupied the class for 90 minutes, the usual duration of classes in most subjects. At the point where the task took place, the pupils had not yet learned the topic of metamorphosis (although it would also be interesting to perform an implementation of the project materials to classes whose pupils already had learned the content; in that case the materials could re-activate content knowledge and this could support the process of meaning-making from documents in other languages; in the case of the present implementation, we were interested in the operations that were performed in order to construct content knowledge based on those specific materials).

The records of the four sessions were transcribed, identifying the interventions of the teacher and those of the pupils. After transcription, they were submitted to the analysis of particular aspects.

In the case of the aspects focused upon in this article, the analysis consisted of identifying discourse occurrences in the corpus related to the three dimensions under consideration: (1) *linguistic intercomprehension* – sequences focusing on the comprehension of other languages; (2) *metalinguistic dimension* – sequences revealing language awareness or metalinguistic consciousness; and (3) *knowledge construction* – sequences corresponding to operations aiming to construct knowledge directed to the topic that was being learned (metamorphosis). The sequences that were identified in relation to each dimension underwent exploratory analysis and were confronted in order to find common points and to establish categories.

Discovering languages

Linguistic intercomprehension

Since intercomprehension can be seen as the general capacity to mobilize the wide range of knowledge we referred to earlier, we will now consider the linguistic dimension of intercomprehension, i.e. the relationships between the elements of different languages that are established while working with the Euromania materials.

In the process of meaning-making, during the task implementation, classroom participants first tried to establish the level of comprehension that has been attained through the initial reading of the documents presented in other Romance languages. The following question from the teacher to the pupils or among the pupils themselves keeps occurring: ‘Did you understand anything?’. Then, when the answer was negative or unsatisfactory, the teacher conducted the process of activating the strategies which, by mobilizing the other ‘funds of knowledge,’ could give access to meaning. When the answer was affirmative, the teacher frequently resorted to the process of making explicit the resources pupils used in order to reach comprehension. In both cases, the record of verbal interaction shows that the pupils’ first concern was to establish linguistic correspondences between the words of the other Romance languages they found in the documents and their own language.

This process relies basically on formal (namely orthographic) similarities preserved in cognate words. But the process also reveals the differences in the forms and, to some extent, the orthographic features of the other language. The fact that pupils can have access to the same text written in different languages (as is the case in the section 'Let's travel through our languages') makes it possible for them to compare the different forms that originate from the same Latin word, and to note that a particular language sometimes adopts an alternative path, not based on the same Latin root.

One problem that pupils found when dealing with formal similarities is the specific case of false friends. Usually, it was the teacher who made it explicit that in a particular case they could not rely on the similarity of the other language's word with a specific word in their own language. However, in other situations, when they had the same text in different languages, pupils were able to reach the right solution by considering the forms in other languages. Although the first attempt usually involved considering the similarity of forms, the semantic conflict that arose and the way pointed out by other languages guided pupils to a solution of the problem. For instance, the Italian word 'prato' (meadow) has the same form as the Portuguese word 'prato' (dish), and this fact led the pupils to translate Italian 'prato' as Portuguese 'prato'. However, and not only semantically speaking, 'meadow' is more adequate in the particular context of Aesop's fable 'The Frog and the Ox, and the pupils also had access to the Spanish word 'prado,' which is the same as the Portuguese 'prado,' pointing them in the right direction.

Thus, by considering the relationship among the forms in different languages, pupils can acquire knowledge about the similarities they may expect within a family of languages, namely as a result of common root words, but also the different solutions each language of the family has adopted. Learning to notice the root similarities of the words can be a significant step toward reaching intercomprehension.

Metalinguistic dimension

The metalinguistic dimension can exhibit different levels of consciousness and use of metalinguistic words. The level of linguistic awareness (Bonnet & Tamine-Gardes, 1984; Brédart & Rondal, 1982; James & Garrett, 1992; Sim-Sim, 1998; Titone, 1988) is activated when people pay attention to linguistic units and to the relationship these units establish within the communicative situation they are linked to. It does not imply linguistic descriptions or analysis and the discourse it generates about language can be supported by everyday terms used to refer to it.

Intercomprehension promotes language awareness. This dimension comes into play when pupils are trying to identify the other languages; when they are noticing similarities and differences between languages; or when they are discussing the adequacy of translation proposals. These manifestations of awareness became salient during the experimentation with the Euromania materials. They are part of a linguistic culture in which people are alert to linguistic diversity and view themselves in relation to the languages of that diversity. This is a small but fundamental step. It is the starting point toward creating the will to discover the other languages and also the identity, culture and history they are each linked to.

As we said, besides activating language awareness as a result of dealing with documents in the other languages, the Euromania learning materials include a dimension of metalinguistic knowledge. The linguistic relations that arise when

pupils encounter the different languages may be explicit and systematic, reaching the level of metalinguistic consciousness. The module this study refers to focussed on the grammatical content of number (singular/plural). The activities challenged the pupils to discover the way the different Romance languages express plurality. In the case of Portuguese pupils, they managed to notice the presence of the morpheme -s in other languages besides Portuguese. When asked why they knew that a group of forms (which includes the Portuguese word *rãs*, the Spanish *ranas*, the French *grenouilles*, but also the Italian *rane*, or the Romanian *mormolocii*) were in the plural, they answered 'because some of them have an -s at the end' ('*Porque há umas que têm um -s na ponta*'). Some pupils noted that this criterion does not apply to all the forms: 'I was going to say that too, but there is also *mormoloc* and *mormolocii*, and they don't have any -s.' ('*Eu também ia dizer isso, mas depois há «mormoloc» e «mormolocii», não têm nenhum -s*'). Although the linguistic solution was not reached without the assistance of the teacher, the pupils noticed the existence of similarities and differences between the linguistic forms of Romance languages.

The proposal of the Euromania project is, then, a double one: in the first place, the materials give the pupils an opportunity to discover that they can activate their intercomprehension abilities in relation to the other Romance languages; secondly, they attempt to enhance these abilities by developing conscious knowledge about the range of grammatical features pupils can find in these languages.

The project's method is not to provide a grammatical description of Romance languages. The pupils are challenged to reach the intended knowledge through observation, trying to discover how linguistic relations such as number, gender, tense, etc. are expressed in the material presented. The purpose is not to get a grammatical description from pupils either. Instead, they must consider the linguistic data, noticing differences and similarities. This makes it possible for pupils, with the teacher's guidance when necessary, to associate certain formal features to a specific language or group of languages.

Constructing knowledge

One of the innovative aspects of the project we emphasized here is that the modules are associated with specific content included in the school curriculum. Thus, one of the challenges pupils face is to grasp or reconstruct that knowledge although the documents are not presented in their own language or in a language they are familiar with.

The operations performed in order to access meaning through intercomprehension are not restricted to the linguistic dimension, i.e. the search for correspondences between the languages. Usually, when access to meaning is not transparent through linguistic means, the operations performed start at a deeper level and mobilize non-linguistic elements, i.e. other modes of representing meaning that are part of representational knowledge referred to above. Thus, multimodal literacy (Jewitt, 2006; Kress et al., 2005) arises as a means of constructing knowledge. In the case of the Euromania modules, besides language, the other prominent representational modes are images (pictures), schemes, and the graphic dimension of written language (page layout, typefaces, etc.).

One of the first steps the pupils try to take in order to gain access to meaning is *topic identification*. This identification will activate specific funds of knowledge,

making it possible to construct hypotheses about the knowledge that is conveyed in the module as a whole and in the specific documents.

We referred above to the need felt by teachers and pupils to establish a point of departure concerning the level of comprehension pupils initially reach as a result of the first contact with the materials. When the answer to the question ‘Did you understand anything?’ is unsatisfactory, it is the task of topic identification that usually follows. The teacher leads this process, directing pupils’ attention to the linguistic elements that may be accessible to them or to the relevant non-linguistic items, namely the elements of the images that, in most cases, accompany the text.

En route to topic identification through the images, pupils are frequently asked to identify ‘participants’ (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996), i.e. the image elements they can name. The most visually salient participants are likely to be the topic of the relevant discourse that they are intended to understand. This topic and the discourse sometimes constitute an approximation to the text that accompanies the image. The text itself can also give salience hints to establish correspondences by presenting the key words in a format such as bold or italic.

After topic identification (and selection) the next step to knowledge construction, when the transparency level of the text in the other language is not sufficient, is the formulation of hypotheses about the content. One way for the teacher to get at these hypotheses is *to elicit comments about the topic*. This can be done by ‘reading images’ and making explicit relationship that can be found in the visual representations the pupils have before them. The balance between the image and the accompanying text is constant, as the comments pupils produce are viewed as possibilities for text content.

In this process of content elicitation, pupils often activate and express previous knowledge and personal experience about the topic. This kind of knowledge is also viewed as a basis for accessing the content expressed in the document. The teacher usually makes an effort to link pupils’ descriptions and narrations to the document’s content, thus trying to activate the relevant content knowledge.

To sum up, when the pupils face the challenge of intercomprehension in the construction of knowledge, they go through several steps to meaning-making, instead of accessing it in their own language. They deconstruct content, activate previous knowledge and experience, get support from other representational modes, and form hypotheses, considering the objectives to be reached in a specific situation. These operations are not just added to the process of knowledge acquisition. They take part in this process, through mobilization of the three dimensions of knowledge that we have considered: content knowledge; situational knowledge; and representational knowledge.

Concluding remarks

The Euromania project proposes the activation of intercomprehension in elementary schools, aiming to promote awareness of European plurilingualism at early ages and to develop pupils’ abilities to deal with communicative situations in which plurilingualism is present.

The similarities that remain among languages belonging to the same family, as is the case with Romance languages, represent a potential for comprehension. This potential can be capitalized to enhance participation in common projects and to promote interaction between people speaking those languages. The education

systems can play an important role in the development of pupils' intercomprehension skills. This could be done in the framework of foreign language teaching. However, foreign languages are as a rule taught in isolation, without giving the pupils the panorama of a whole family of languages. Thus, the development of intercomprehension strategies is still primarily the result of individual experience of contact with several languages.

As a pathway to the development of intercomprehension, Alves and Mendes (2006, p. 217) propose that 'a discipline of language awareness before students would choose, or not, to further acquire and investigate specific linguistic features and competences in one single foreign language, might be considered'.

The method that Euromania proposes is not restricted to the domain of intercomprehension per se or to the domain of language learning. It associates the discovery of the other languages with the learning of other subjects (sciences, mathematics, history, and technology). This association creates a meaningful context within which to mobilize intercomprehension, providing an immediate purpose, and linking it to the learning activities that in the normal course of events take place every day at school, from the first grades onward. One relevant consequence of this perspective is that intercomprehension strategies become a learning tool in relation to these domains.

Euromania can also be adopted as a way to discover different languages and to get pupils to engage in different ways of attaining knowledge construction. Our analysis of the interaction taking place during classroom activities revealed that when pupils are faced with the challenges of constructing meaning through intercomprehension, they activate a set of cognitive operations: they try to deconstruct content into its elements and relations, try to interpret different communicative modes, activate previous experiences and knowledge, put forward some hypotheses, and try to make explicit the intention of the author. Besides the contact with other languages, these operations are valuable as learning tools.

Euromania focuses on the elementary school. This is a stage at which pupils can already discover languages and gain awareness of linguistic features. Beyond the basic levels, the pupils will extend their learning of foreign languages and develop their metalinguistic knowledge concerning their L1 language and the other languages. This strengthens the resources they can mobilize in order to discover the features of the languages and to strengthen the network of languages that they can understand to a certain extent. If the experience of intercomprehension is extended and pursued at levels beyond the elementary school, the pupils will be able to benefit from those resources and familiarize themselves with other languages. As a strategy of knowledge construction adopted in subjects other than languages, the intercomprehension experience can develop pupils' capacity to understand information conveyed in other languages. This ability is required more and more in a wide range of professions. Using the potential of the Internet, in association with Euromania, pupils can get used to dealing with information in a wider range of languages.

Additionally, we must consider that our pupils have different experiences of plurilingualism. While some children live in multilingual communities or have access to a lifestyle that provides frequent contact and interaction with people of other language communities through travel, other children are still restricted to their original regions. These pupils have limited opportunities to discover the potential of communication that resides in the languages belonging to the same family despite the

differences among them, and to use their intercomprehension capability as a basis to develop the sense of belonging, with full citizenship, to a larger community. The role that is attributed by the Euromania proposals and materials to the elementary school as a context of learning provides those pupils who do not experience it in their daily life meaningful access to intercomprehension.

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