

INTERCOMPREHENSIVE APPROACH AND INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE EDUCATION

First results of a pilot study at CLA Parma

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ABSTRACT • The similarities between the intercomprehensive approach to language teaching and inclusive language education have been studied for some years, but there is currently no speculative research or laboratory experiments that can validate their convergences. During the a.y. 2021/2022 members of the ELICom research group of the University of Parma began an experimental research project at the Language Center in a course of intercomprehension between Romance languages. This course, open to all, saw among the participants a large number of students with special learning needs allowing for the implementation of a pilot study aimed at detecting some aspects considered particularly significant. First results suggest that the intercomprehensive approach may have positive effects on the psycho-cognitive profile of this type of learner and that bimodal input is effective for all kind of students.

KEYWORDS • Intercomprehension; Inclusive Language Education; Specific Learning Disorders; Self efficacy; Language Learning Strategies.

1. Introduction

Intercomprehension (henceforth IC) on the one hand and Inclusive Language Education (henceforth ILE) on the other are two highly topical lines of research in the field of Educational Linguistics. Despite the interesting convergences between some aspects of the IC and the theoretical and methodological principles for inclusive language teaching, at present there are neither systematic theoretical reflections on the subject nor empirical studies aimed at understanding if and to what extent the IC approach can have beneficial effects in the presence of Learners with specific needs, although interest in this issue is beginning to emerge (see Celentin 2020 for a comparison between IC and inclusive language teaching; Leone and Fiorenza 2021 for an experimentation in primary school). This contribution aims to take a first step to fill this gap, presenting the data of a pilot study conducted in 2022 by a team of scholars belonging to the ELICom Research Group (Inclusive Language Education and Communication) at the University of Parma as part of an IC laboratory carried out at the University Language Center, in which some students with Specific Learning Disorders (henceforth SLD) also participated. At the time of

¹ The authors have co-written the present essay. Paola Celentin wrote paragraphs 1, 2 and 5, while Susana Benavente Ferrera wrote paragraphs 3 and 4.

writing, a replication of the experiment is already being studied, in order to allow the refinement of the experimental design and the systematic collection of data on this type of learner. This contribution aims to illustrate the research design, its application to the first experimental group of learners, as well as some data collected in the field.

2. Intercomprehension and Inclusive Language Education: State of the Art

2.1. What is Intercomprehension?

In language teaching four pluralistic approaches to languages and cultures have been developed. This term refers to “didactic approaches which use teaching/learning activities involving several (i.e. more than one) varieties of languages or cultures” (Candelier et al. 2010). These approaches share some characteristics (Candelier et al. 2010), as the psycholinguistic dimension (which allows the learner to build on her/his existing knowledge, whether this is of a linguistic nature or not, in order to develop new skills), the linguistic dimension (in which the learner is encouraged to consider linguistic phenomena in a holistic way, instead of learning isolated language points, which leads to a better understanding of how languages work in general), the psycho-cognitive dimension (in order to allow the learner to detach himself from his L1 and enter into other languages more easily) and the socio-linguistic dimension (which favours the recognition of linguistic and cultural diversity, and as a result, a better integration of non-native language learners, whether these are immigrants, or speakers of ignored or unpopular regional languages).

Those approaches are:

- the *éveil aux langues* (awakening to languages) which is a sub-category of the *Language Awareness* approach that confronts the learner with a number of languages, especially those which are not the mission of the school to teach (Candelier et al. 2010);
- the *intercultural approach*, which takes the development of cultural understanding and the ability to use cultural knowledge to facilitate communication as primary goals for language learning, along with the development of language competence and linguistic awareness and which has had some influence on language pedagogy (Liddicoat 2004);
- the *integrated teaching of languages*, which aims to help students to establish links between a limited number of languages taught within the school curriculum in order to facilitate learning and to optimize the relationships among the languages used (and how to learn them);
- the *IC between related languages* (mainly between Romance languages, but also between Germanic languages and Slavic languages) in which several languages of the same linguistic family are studied in parallel and with a specific focus on receptive skills.

In a communicative situation, thanks to IC, interlocutors are able to understand each other even though they are speaking different languages.

The exchange may be written or oral, face to face or at a distance, synchronised or unsynchronised (Bonvino and Jamet 2016). In practice, in this form of plurilingual communication, each person understands the language of the others and expresses himself in the language or languages which (s)he has mastered, thus establishing equality in the dialogue, while at the same time, developing different levels of knowledge of the languages in which the interlocutors have receptive competence (that is understanding), and not productive competence.

With the diversity of the aims and adopted techniques, the various IC methodologies tend to be identified by the following principles which constitute the minimum common denominator of teaching (Bonvino and Garbarino 2022):

- plurilingual approach, as IC ability can be developed simultaneously in more than one language in the context of just one teaching program;
- recourse to partial competences as indicated in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe 2001;2020);
- focus on understanding, in which the learners are required to become aware of the way it is necessary to express themselves in order to be understood; adapting to each other, to the different ways languages work, to different levels of language, and to different kinds of text;
- analysis of the language conducted first in an inductive way, and later more explicitly; development of strategic and metacognitive understanding and competence.

The dominant trends in the methodology of language teaching are distinguished by avoidance and fear of L1 interference, research on direct access to L \neq 1² objectives, the refusal to support learning with students' previous knowledge because of the fear of 'false friends' and other sources of mistakes, (such as fossilization and L1 transference etc.).

IC learning instead welcomes all these characteristics as strengths and also aims at the development of transferable, interdisciplinary skills, particularly collaboration, communication, learning strategies, creative thinking and an analytical attitude (Candelier et al. 2010).

Although in recent years research interests have expanded to the challenges of oral IC (among others: Jamet 2009; Cortés Velásquez 2015), written IC has remained the most investigated modality since the Nineteen seventies.

2.2. Intercomprehension and Specific Language Disorders

The fact that the IC approach pays close attention to the decoding of the written text leads us to questions regarding the types of students who could follow a path of IC, in particular when it comes to learners who show weaknesses in reading-writing. Much ILE concerns the teaching of foreign languages in the presence of SLD, a heterogeneous group of disorders of neurobiological origin affecting the learning and use of basic skills such as reading, writing and calculation, which are associated between them and with other more general deficits concerning oral language comprehension and linguistic expression (Cornoldi 2007). For further information on the linguistic, cognitive and psychological obstacles that these students encounter in learning a foreign language (LS) and on the theoretical methodological principles developed to support learners in the internalization of the language, numerous recent studies can be consulted (among the most recent studies: Daloso 2017; Kormos 2017; Cappelli and Noccetti 2022).

Celentin (2020; 2021) makes a comparison between the theoretical principles of ILE and those that distinguish the IC approach, identifying numerous points of convergence, which we list below.

- Metaphonological competence
- Meta-strategic expertise
- Motivation
- Containment of language anxiety
- Use of compensatory instruments
- Autonomy

²According to Celentin (2019) by L \neq 1 we refer to all languages that are not L1 for the speaker.

We will concentrate below on the points of convergence investigated in the research project. For a critical review of this point see Daloso (2023).

2.2.1. *Metaphonological competence*

Several studies confirm the role of phonological awareness as a prerequisite for learning to read and write (see, for example, Castles and Coltheart 2004, Melby-Levrag, Halaas Lyster and Hulme 2012, Deacon 2011). The importance of this aspect is underlined by one of the best-known theories (Stanovich 1988) which connects the failure in reading and writing in learners with dyslexia to the lack of development of metaphonological competence. In fact, among the corrective interventions for linguistic requirements, Daloso (2015) underlines the importance of preliminary interventions for its recovery or enhancement both in L1 and in L≠1 for learners with or without learning disabilities. There are two types of phonological awareness interventions (Morais 1989):

- informal interventions: opportunities that arise both in everyday life environments and in domestic practices that intentionally aim to favor an implicit exposure of the child to the sounds of the language (songs, rhymes, word games) and to a global type of acquisition, typical of the preschool age;
- formal interventions: structured educational practices aimed at enhancing learners' ability to pay attention to the phonological aspects of the language (discriminating sounds, attributing a different sound value to them, manipulating them in different sequences and contexts).

According to the IC approach between related languages it is unnecessary to introduce orthography and phonology because it is believed that the close proximity of the systems is spontaneously perceivable by adult learners, even if they are beginners. A rigorous and exhaustive contrastive presentation of orthography and phonology could demotivate learners if it is imposed by tutors unless it is required by learners.

- Within the same language family, three teaching practices of IC can be adopted to address the differences between orthographic and phonological systems in related languages:
- have an audio recording of the texts to exploit on the one hand a progressive approach to writing and speaking and on the other the reinforcement of understanding given by the bimodal input (visual and audio);
- activate the phonological filter so that the learner is able to perceive the new sounds through the filter of his own language (probably incorrectly) because paradoxically this mitigates the difficulties and these associations are frequently constructive;
- support reading and understanding only when students encounter terms or passages which hinder their progress and comprehension of a text, taking into consideration their source language. The IC process is related to the student's ability to translate and guess.

In the field of intercomprehensive teaching, only recently have studies been conducted which are dedicated to the development of phonological awareness among learners who take advantage of the intercomprehensive approach (Escoubas Benveniste 2016). Certainly, the oral and written comprehension work on texts in languages not known by the learner constitutes a strong stimulus for phonological competence or, as suggested by Escudé (2014) for the development of 'hypothetical phonology' which allows learners of intercomprehension courses to access the phonetics of the languages studied more quickly. IC teaching pays great attention to prosodic phenomena in general and to problems of segmentation and cohesion in particular. The verb-tonal method is adopted which goes from the global to the particular. First of all, an attempt is made to

identify intonations, fragmentations and syntactic limits followed by tasks aimed at promoting the perception of the accent in the language (recovery and discrimination intervention) and at identifying the difficulties that the accented structure can cause (Baqué, Le Besnerais and Masperi 2003).

2.2.2. Meta-strategic expertise

The IC approach shares with ILE the aim of developing the strategic dimension of the learner. IC goes beyond the mere understanding of several related languages and promotes, as Capucho (2008) points out, “the development of the ability to co-construct a sense, in the context of the meeting of different languages, and to make pragmatic use of it in a concrete situation of communication” mentioning the fact that the understanding of a text in IC is the result of the activation of (meta)cognitive and collaborative strategies. Also from the ILE perspective, (meta)strategic skills appear as key tools because they make the learner aware of his/her strengths and weaknesses and more autonomous as it allows him/her to deal effectively with learning.

Students with SLD present limited ability to access the meaning of a written text, even if the difficulties are attributable to various causes (Daloiso 2013), and poor awareness of their own cognitive resources, which leads to the use of inadequate strategies to deal with the written text. These learners fall into the category of ‘inexperienced readers’ who are characterised by (Klingner, Vaughn and Boardmann 2015):

- a passive approach to the text: all contents are placed on the same level, because in reality there is no reading objective;
- a focus on decoding rather than on the meaning of what is being decoded;
- difficulty formulating hypotheses about the text;
- use of a single reading mode, usually linear and sequential;
- difficulty in exploiting contextual, cotextual and paratextual clues;
- a poor awareness of one’s level of understanding (the student does not realize that (s)he is not understanding);
- difficulty in organizing and summarizing the contents of a text they have read.

From the perspective of ILE, the basis for building an expert reader is found in the recovery of strategic and meta-strategic competence. Targeted work on the recovery of these skills must necessarily be oriented to the needs of the learner and aimed at the development of her/his autonomy. This type of didactic intervention therefore shifts the didactic focus from the text to the learner by proposing reader-oriented activities and not on the content of a particular text in order to promote in learners’ awareness of the strategies they are using or can implement to understand a text and address the critical issues. Each exercise will be accompanied by a higher-level reflection to formalize and systematize the strategies used for understanding. For an examination of the differences between the text-oriented and the reader-oriented approach to understanding, see Daloiso (2015).

IC has a strong metacognitive value in the acquisition of the main comprehension strategies, which are applicable to all languages and which allows for greater autonomy and emancipation of the learner in language learning (Garbarino 2015). First of all, the IC learner acquires a strategic competence called “knowing how to learn” by the CEFR (Council of Europe 2001;2020) which the FREPA (Candelier et al. 2010) sets out in detail in various sections (“Knowing how to observe/analyze”, “Knowing how to identify linguistic elements”, “Knowing how to make comparisons”, “Knowing how to use what one knows in one language to understand or produce in another language”). The Référentiel de compétences de plurilingual communication en intercompréhension (REFIC 2019) also presents the descriptors of knowledge, know-how, strate-

gies and attitudes to be developed in a IC learning path. Certainly, the IC approach places great importance to the acquisition of specific strategies and meta-strategies for understanding based mainly on analogy, approximation (or ‘tolerance of ambiguity’), association, transfer, inference, metalinguistic activity (Degache and Melo 2008, De Carlo 2015, Bonvino and Garbarino 2022). Factors that can influence the choice of strategies by learners in IC contexts have been identified by Chazot (2012). Among them we can mention:

- the attitude of the learner that will facilitate his/her ability to adapt actions to the characteristics of the context and the task to be performed. This ability includes the level of tolerance of ambiguity that allows learners to accept and manage a partial understanding of the text (see Celentin 2019 for an in-depth analysis of individual factors and affective factors, or personality traits, that affect learning);
- the level of competence of the learner in alternating repetition, translation and transfer from L1 (typical of a basic competence) with inference (associated with an intermediate or advanced level of competence);
- the level of metacognitive awareness, i.e. the learner’s ability to reflect on her/his own learning process and on the use of strategies.

For an in-depth analysis of plurilingual reading strategies, see Fiorenza (2020).

Since IC learners are stimulated to acquire strategies and metastrategies and develop those traits of an expert reader (active approach to the text, formulating hypotheses and exploiting contextual, cotextual and paratextual clues, alternating reading modes, high awareness of one’s own level of comprehension) which are part of the specific interventions for the recovery of strategic and metastrategic competence in learners with SLD, we can presume that learners with SLD are among the students who could derive benefit from an IC-based approach to learning.

2.2.3. *Autonomy*

A learner is able to take responsibility for her/his own learning as she/he gradually proceeds from a position of dependence to one of independence, from a non-autonomous state to an autonomous one (Holec 1981). Autonomy is therefore the result of a process. Once again, this process is affected by variables linked to individual and affective factors of the learner (sense of self-efficacy regarding one’s ability to learn, attitudes towards language learning, attribution of one’s success/failure in learning, self-regulation and willingness to be autonomous) but also environmental factors linked above all to the role of the teacher who, if interested in promoting the development of autonomy in her/his students, has moved away from the traditional orientation of her/his role (Holec 1987). See Scharle and Szabó (2000) for an examination of the role of the teacher considered on the continuum between the traditional teacher-centered approach and the more autonomous student-centered approach.

In the IC approach, as already seen, it is central to acquire cognitive and metacognitive strategies that allow learners to control the way they face plurilingual tasks and deal with the linguistic dimension (Celentin and Benavente Ferrera 2019). By focusing on how language systems work, students can draw parallels to language systems they already know and gain more independence in their learning by developing, among other things, the skill of deduction. On the other hand, the right to approximation (Blanche-Benveniste 2005; EuRom4 1997; EuRom5 2011) and partial understanding of texts, typical of the IC approach, frees learners from the idea of achieving a given result thus leading to autonomy and an increase in learner motivation.

Also, in the context of ILE, the importance of acting on processes to promote autonomy in learners is underlined. A learner with SLD benefits both from metacognitive teaching which provides her/him with metastrategies to deal with the difficulties encountered in the learning process

and from the principle of psychological empowerment which is inspired by the learner-centred approach (Nunan 1988), i.e. a language teaching approach that intends to make the student an active and responsible subject of their own learning path (Menegale 2009) and which stimulates “self-regulation” (helping learners to set goals, make decisions, monitor their own actions and emotions, evaluate the adequacy of the results obtained and the choices made) (Zimmerman 2000) facilitating the integration of cognitive and emotional dimensions in the learning process.

2.3. Convergences in teaching practices between ILE and didactics of IC

In order to grasp the affinities between the teaching of IC and ILE, we report in the following diagram (Table 1) the steps of planning a recovery intervention for a student with SLD, flanking boxes with references to techniques used in IC teaching (Bonvino and Jamet 2016).

| | PLANNING A RECOVERY INTERVENTION FOR A STUDENT WITH SLD | COMPREHENSION OF A TEXT IN IC |
|---------------------------|--|--|
| PHASES | ACTIONS | TECHNIQUES |
| Pre-reading (planning) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - create a concrete and motivating context - bring out the students' past knowledge and experience about the text - formulate a precise reading objective - make predictions about the text | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - choose authentic and motivating texts for the students - exploit the linguistic background - let understand the global meaning |
| Reading (technical phase) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - read aloud for the students or have them read silently - make students think explicitly about the lexicon | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - use audio tracks or have a native speaker read - use the ‘ghost word’ when there is an unknown word - use lexical and morphosyntactic sieves |
| Post-reading (reflection) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - focus on the content of the text or on the strategies used by the students to get them understood - systematically categorize comprehension strategies | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - systematize linguistic intuitions - make students ‘think aloud’ (‘think aloud protocol’ or TAP) - use lexical and morphosyntactic sieves |

Table 1: Comparison between the steps of a recovery intervention for a student with SLD and those of text comprehension in an IC approach.

In the IC approach, language skills are worked on separately and the effort made to improve one skill can have positive consequences on others. According to Caddéo and Jamet (2013: 29) “Pour preuve, dans le cas d’élève en difficultés, par exemple, les *diagnostics* se font plus précis (troubles de l’écriture, trouble de la lecture, trouble de la parole, etc.) et le travail de renforcement

n'est mené que sur une compétence. [As proof, in the case of students in difficulty, for example, the *diagnoses* are more precise (writing disorders, reading disorders, speech disorders, etc.) and the reinforcement work is carried out only on one skill]”.

We also highlight, methodologically, the role of L1 in L≠1 learning. In the IC approach, the teacher acts as an intermediary between the text and the learner using the learner's L1: if the teacher used the target language, the learner would have to manage several levels of knowledge, which would delay the teacher's intended exercise and shift the objectives.

The use of L1 at the beginning of learning is reassuring, facilitating (the learner remains in a state of observation of the functioning of languages, but begins to acquire knowledge likely to be used when working on production) and thoughtful, because by discovering the functioning of other languages, the learner rediscovers his/her L1. The level of knowledge of L1 is a key factor in inference processes.

For students with SLD, being able to use their L1 both in the process of understanding the text and in the process of linguistic analysis and reflection means being able to take advantage of a multitude of linguistic experiences whose potential they are often unaware of. The exploitation of this knowledge allows for an increase in motivation and the improvement of metacognitive strategies, for the benefit of global language education.

3. Research Design

This contribution aims at illustrating the research project launched at the University of Parma to try to investigate the possible benefits of the IC approach in learners with SLD.

In particular, we will present the research design, its application to the first experimental group of learners, as well as some data collected in the field.

The activation of an experimental laboratory of IC between Romance languages at the Linguistic Center of the University of Parma in the A.Y. 2021/2022 was part of the educational project undertaken by the University of Parma in the A.Y. 2018/2019 for linguistic support (mainly to learn English) of university students with SLD. Although the laboratory was open to all students, it aimed at the experimentation of the IC approach in the field of linguistic enhancement and the development of support strategies for language learning in the presence of SLD. In the A.Y. 2022/2023 a new edition of the laboratory has been activated confirming the possible stable inclusion of this training proposal in the educational offer of the Linguistic Centre.

The birth of the IC laboratory has permitted the launch of the study illustrating in this paper.

3.1. Research Aims and Questions

The general aim of the study is to experiment the use of IC in class groups in which there are students with SLD.

The specific research goals intend to investigate the effects of IC with respect to potential common points with ILE.

The research questions aim at exploring both the psycho-cognitive effects and the methodological aspects related to IC in the presence of SLD.

3.2. Research Questions and Hypothesis

For the aims of the research, the research group elaborated a set of five questions. For each Research Question (RQ) one or more Research Hypothesis (RH) have been elaborated.

3.2.1. The complete set of Research Questions and Research Hypothesis

RQ1: Does the IC improve the sense of self-efficacy of students +SLD and -SLD in reading comprehension activities in L \neq 1?

- RH1.1 IC improves the sense of self-efficacy of -SLD and +SLD.
- RH1.2 Through IC, the gap in the sense of self-efficacy between +SLD and -SLD decreases.

RQ2. Does the IC reduce language anxiety in +SLD and -SLD in reading comprehension activities in L \neq 1?

- RH2.1 IC reduces language anxiety of -SLD and +SLD.
- RH2.2 Through IC, the language anxiety divider between -SLD and +SLD decreases.

RQ3. Is the IC way of ‘overcoming’ differences between graphophonological systems of languages also effective for +SLD?

- RH3.1 The free comparison with the phonological form is also effective for +SLD.
- RH3.2 +SLD with musical training are advantaged in addressing graphophonological differences compared to -SLD with no musical training.

RQ4. Does the IC’s meta-strategic work on Romance languages also benefit distant languages such as English?

- RH4.1 The IC brings advantages in learning all languages. The advantage is greater for +SLD.

RQ5. Does the IC’s way of enhancing the recognition of similarities between related languages improve reading comprehension in L \neq 1 for +SLD and -SLD?

- RH5.1 IC improves comprehension of written input for -SLD and +SLD.
- RH5.2 Through the IC the gap between -SLD and +SLD in reading comprehension activities decreases.

In this article we will focus on the research work related to questions RQ4 and RQ5, which is the survey carried out on the effectiveness of strategic enhancement work and the relationship between input presentation methods and written comprehension.

3.2.2. The meta-strategic work

The existing literature on SLD (Daloiso 2017; 2021) underlines the importance of acting more on processes than on content, to make students increasingly autonomous in their language learning path, even when the level of competence is neither high nor homogeneous. Some studies refer to psychological empowerment, which is the support that teachers should give students so that they acquire control and responsibility as concerns their language learning. The strategic dimension of learning is therefore central for both the IC and for an ILE.

In both cases, the key role of text comprehension strategies is particularly emphasized. These strategies are in fact often lacking in learners +SLD and require specific interventions.

3.2.3. Input processing

Among the evidence-based principles for the building of Language Learning accessibility, multimodality stands out (Klingner, Vaughn and Boardman 2015): it consists of acting on the non-verbal components of communication, offering learners multiple ways to understand process and produce language, so as to enhance the stronger processing channels and compensate for the weaker ones. Students +SLD, in order to compensate for the difficulties deriving from the reading-writing disorder, can use audiovideo resources or ‘human readers’ or speech synthesis software.

In IC these strategies are resources available to the whole class and not only to students with specific difficulties. It is therefore expected that IC will naturally activate compensation strategies in +SLD students and have a positive effect on word recognition and comprehension of written texts in unfamiliar languages.

3.3. Research Instruments

To be able to cross quantitative and qualitative data, the data collection was made with the use of tools of different types and with a different degree of internal structuring. Some instruments were administered both at the beginning (T1) and at the end (T2) of the IC laboratory, with some minimal variations, to make a comparison between the incoming and outgoing profiles of the participants.

3.3.1. The complete set of research instruments (RS)

Cross Tools

- RS0.1 Initial qualitative questionnaire
- RS0.2 Final qualitative questionnaire

RQ1 Specific Tools

- RS1.1 Quantitative questionnaire on the sense of self-efficacy specific to comprehension of the text (T1 beginning - T2 end).
- RS1.2 Focus group on self-efficacy (semi-structured interview)

RQ2 Specific Tools

- RS2.1 Quantitative questionnaire on the sense of linguistic anxiety specific for text comprehension (T1 beginning - T2 end).
- RS1.2 Focus group on language anxiety (semi-structured interview).

RQ3 Specific Tools

- RS3.1 Text Delivery Preference Survey - Tx (with each administration).
- RS3.2 Anecdotal card on requests for graphophonological clarifications.
- RS3.3 Oralization of an unknown text and TAP (T1 beginning - T2 end).

RQ4 Specific Tools

- RS4.1 Language strategy questionnaire (T1 beginning - T2 end).
- RS3.3 Oralization of an unknown text and TAP (T1 beginning - T2 end).

RQ5 Specific Tools

- RS3.1 Text Delivery Preference Survey - Tx (with each administration).
- RS5.2 Questionnaire to detect the degree of objective comprehension of the text - Tx (with each administration).
- RS5.3 Anecdotal card for detecting the individual perception of comprehension.

In this article, we will focus on the tools used for research questions RQ4 and RQ5.

3.3.2. Research Tools used for RQ4

To investigate the RQ4 question, an adaptation of the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) (Oxford 1989) was used to understand the participants' global self-assessment on their strategic competence. For the purposes of the present research, a small core of items concerning strategies more consistent with what happens in the written IC process has been isolated (Candelier 2010).

Together with SILL, a think aloud protocol based on the L1 sense transposition technique

inspired by the EuRom5 methodology (Bonvino, Fiorenza and Pippa 2011) was used. The participants were asked individually after a preliminary reading, to carry out an approximate “translation” of the text into the target language and were asked at the same time to verbalize thoughts, difficulties, hypotheses and the strategies implemented. In T1 and T2, texts in different languages were used, Galician and Ladin respectively. Both tools were administered to the entire sample, but for the purposes of this contribution we will only consider the responses and performance of the participants +SLD.

3.4. Pilot Study Sample

The first step of the research was the realization of a pilot study.

Out of the 20 students who took part in the IC laboratory, 12 signed the informed consent for adhesion to the research; 5 of these are +SLD.

For the purposes of the research, therefore, the sample consists of 12 participants divided into two subsamples.

The -SLD group consists of 7 participants without learning disabilities (5 female students and 2 male students), with an average age of 25.5 years. Through the administration of an initial cognitive questionnaire (RS0.1), key data were collected to understand the composition of this sub-sample. Regarding the field of study, only three out of seven participants (two females and one male) are language students, one studies Economics, another Veterinary Medicine and another one studies at the Conservatory. Finally, one of the females is no longer a student but is already in a working context.

The linguistic repertoire of this sub-sample was also investigated. Four of the participants declare to have only one L1 (three Italian, one Catalan and one Polish), two consider their L1 to be not only Italian but also dialect (Reggio Emilia dialect, Lucanian dialect) and one participant declares to be bilingual (Italian and German). In relation to L₂ with which they have come into contact, the repertoire is very varied and includes other dialects (Calabrian, Venetian, Emilian, Apulian, Abruzzo dialect, Sicilian and Neapolitan), other Romance languages (Spanish, Portuguese, French, Italian, Romanian) and languages outside the Romance family (English, German, Russian).

The +SLD group is formed, instead, by 5 participants with a diagnosis of SLD (2 female students and 3 male students), with an average age of 24.2 years. The +SLD group is more heterogeneous than the -SLD group. All +SLD students are Italian mother tongue (and two of them also dialect speakers) even if their linguistic repertoire is very different and includes both foreign languages (English, French, German) and dialects (Emilian dialects, Parmesan, Bergamo dialect, Neapolitan, Romanesco and Apulian). No one is enrolled in the Foreign Languages and Literature course. Their fields of study are different (Education, Gastronomic Sciences, Food Science, Geology and Social Services), but they have all attended at least one linguistic improvement course in English, conducted in Italian. In addition, all but one attended a course in language learning strategies. This group therefore cannot be considered a real control group. For this reason, the two groups will be considered as sub-components of the same experimental sample.

3.5. Research Schedule

The phases that led to the realization of our pilot study have been as follows.

From December 2021 to February 2022: Elaboration of the research design

- Literature review
- Formulation of questions and research hypotheses

- Elaboration of research tools
 - Instructional Design (Experimental course)
- From March to June 2022: Experimentation (20 hours, 8 meetings)
- Administration of research instruments (T1)
 - Carrying out intercomprehensive activities
 - Administration of research instruments (T2)
- From August to September 2022
- Data analysis

4. First Results

4.1. First Results about Strategic Competence (RQ4)

In this phase we have processed the data relating to a nucleus of 10 items of the SILL questionnaire related more directly to the IC processes.

1. I reflect on the relationships between what I already know and the new things I learn in the language I am studying.
2. I use foreign words I know in different ways.
3. First, I skim a passage (I read it quickly), then I go back and read it carefully.
4. I look for words in my own language that are similar to new words to learn.
5. I try to find recurring structures in the new language.
6. I find the meaning of a word by dividing it into parts I know.
7. I try not to translate word for word.
8. I summarize the information I hear or read in the new language.
9. To understand unknown words, I make assumptions.
10. I read the new language without searching for each new word.

Since the scale of values used by the SILL ranges from 1 to 5, the maximum score is 50 points, which would correspond to the profile of a subject who declares to use all the proposed learning strategies very frequently (see Table 2).

| RS4.1 Language strategy questionnaire (T1 beginning - T2 end) | T1 | | T2 | |
|---|------------------|-----------------------|------------------|-----------------------|
| | AVERAGE SCORE | STANDARD DEVIATION | AVERAGE SCORE | STANDARD DEVIATION |
| +SLD | 29,7 | 5,7 | 32,8 | 6,1 |

Table 2: Average score and standard deviation of the outcome of the administration of some items of RS4.1 at T1 and T2 to students +SLD.

At T1, the +SLD group scored an average SILL score of 29.7 points, with a standard deviation of 5.7 points; at T2 there was an increase in the average score, which rose to 32.8 points, with an almost stable standard deviation (6.1 points).

The global figure that comes out from Table 3 suggests, therefore, that the +SLD group perceives an improvement in its strategic competence at the end of the IC path.

| RS1.1 STRATEGIC COMPETENCE IN L≠1 | GROUP +SLD AVERAGE SCORE | | VARIATION |
|---|-----------------------------|-----|-----------|
| | T1 | T2 | |
| ITEM 2 - I use foreign words that I already know in different ways. | 2 | 3 | +1 |
| ITEM 4 - I look for words in my own language that are similar to the new words I am required to learn | 4,25 | 3,5 | -0,75 |
| ITEM 6 - I find out the meaning of a word by dividing it into smaller parts I can recognize. | 2,25 | 3,6 | +1,35 |

Table 3: Average score and variation of the outcome of the administration to T1 and T2 of some items of RS1.1 to students +SLD.

This improvement is generalized and records the greatest peaks in the ability to reuse foreign words in different ways (item 2) and in morphological decomposition (item 6); surprisingly, however, there is a decrease in item 4, which concerns the use of L1 words for the purpose of understanding another language, a strategy promoted and legitimized in IC activities.

We can say that the IC has improved the +SLD group's perceptions of their strategic expertise.

The analysis of the transposition tasks in L1 carried out at the beginning and at the end of the teaching experience (RS3.3) (cf. (1), (2), (3)), highlighted two relevant aspects. On the one hand discrepancies emerged between the strategies declared by the participants and those actually implemented during the proposed L1 transposition activity. On the other hand, it was possible to confirm that some practices (in particular the tendency to read aloud and to translate word for word) negatively affected the participants' ability to understand the text (see (4)).

(1) BTI (+SLD)

Non mi devo fare prendere dal panico, devo leggere bene e lentamente, se una parola non la capisco, vado avanti con le parole per dare un senso al discorso e poi cercare di capire quale sia la parola.

I don't have to panic, I have to read well and slowly, if I don't understand a word, I go ahead with the words to make sense of the speech and then try to understand what the word is.

(2) BFG (+SLD)

Ho imparato che alla prima lettura non devo focalizzarmi subito sulle singole parole, ma devo comprendere il senso generale del testo.

I learned that at first reading I don't have to focus on the single words right away, but I have to understand the general meaning of the text.

Two -SLD profiles follow which reveal the same attitudes of +SLD students regarding the acquisition and conscious use of strategies.

(3) AAD (-SLD)

Non è un problema se non capisco tutte le parole quando leggo perché riesco a comprendere il senso globale del testo. Ora ho più risorse per farlo.

It is not a problem if I do not understand all the words when I read because I can understand the overall meaning of the text. Now I have more resources to do it.

(4) ARC (-SLD) (transcription of T2 interviewer)

Si tratta del profilo più consapevole dell'efficacia dell'approccio meta strategico alla comprensione ma di fronte al testo in ladino si lancia nella lettura ad alta voce e alla traduzione parola per parola prima di provare a fare una lettura globale. Di fatto si blocca.

This is the profile most aware of the effectiveness of the meta strategic approach to comprehension but in front of the Ladin text (s)he launches into reading aloud and word-for-word translation before trying to make a global reading. In fact, (s)he freezes.

Some trends common to the +SLD group emerged in the approach to transposition of text into L1.

Almost all the participants of the +SLD group approached the text to be transposed by starting to read it aloud; this approach -which is not even a practice of IC- proves to be ineffective, causing important decoding errors as the reading disorder prevents the students from activating their lexical baggage in L1.

Not everyone can activate the phonological filter: in this example the student (5) can understand that 'Xapón' is 'Japan', but after a few lines he does not understand that 'xeografía' is 'geography'.

(5) BFD (+SLD)

Galicia poseu (text: posúe) as características óptimas para o cultivo da carmelita (text: camelia). Un clima húmido, temperaturas suaves e solos fértiles e acedos fan que o cremento (text: crecemento) o destas plata (text: plantas) sexa espectacular e sorprenda a expetos (text: expertos) de todo o mundo. As camelias chegaron a Galicia a finais do século XVIII, procedentes de países afastados (text: afastados) como China e Xapón.

Nun principio instalacion (text: instaláronse) nos xardíns dos pazos e casas señoriais da nobreza galega, pero co tempo introduzio (text: introducíronse) nos xardíns e terreos, tanto públicos como privados, de toda a nosa exeo grafia (text: xeografía), ata converter Galicia nun referente internacional no cultivo e produción desta planta. Na actualidade a comunidade atesoura case 8.000 variedades diferentes de camelia.

Galicia has the optimal characteristics for the cultivation of camellia. A humid climate, mild temperatures and fertile, acidic soils make the growth of these plants spectacular, surprising experts around the world. Camellias arrived in Galicia at the end of the eighteenth century, from distant countries such as China and Japan.

At first, they were installed in the gardens of the palaces and stately homes of the Galician nobility, but over time they were introduced into the gardens and grounds, both public and private, throughout our geography, until Galicia became an international benchmark in the cultivation and production of this plant. At present the community treasures almost 8,000 different varieties of camellia.

4.2. First Results Input administration

As concerns the degree of comprehension, the analysis of the data collected (see Figure 1) about the preference of input administration shows that students both in the group +SLD and in the group -SLD prefer bimodal input (reading and listening).

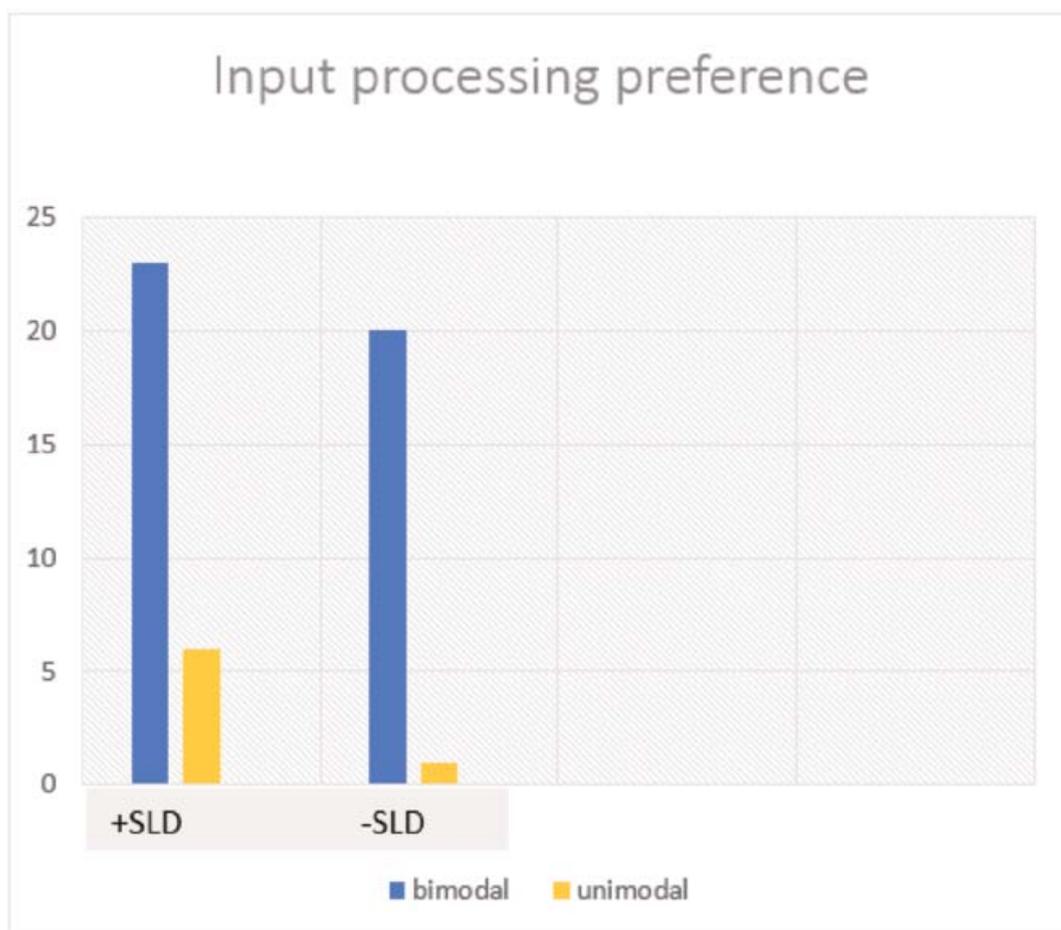


Figure 1: Outcomes of RS3.1 administration to investigate text administration preferences.

The results of text-related comprehension exercises (RS5.2) demonstrate the effectiveness of bimodal inputs. However, in the -SLD group one profile stands out for their clear preference for unimodal input (personal silent reading) in the comprehension of all provided texts (we mean texts in all the languages employed), whereas in the group +SLD only one preference for unimodal input was observed which concerned the comprehension of a text in L1 (native language).

In the final qualitative questionnaire RS0.2, some participants (see (6) and (7)) of both groups pointed out the effectiveness of bimodal input for comprehension.

(6) CR (-SLD)

Ogni volta che la lettura di un testo veniva seguita dall'ascolto, questo facilitava la comprensione. Whenever reading a text was followed by listening, this facilitated comprehension.

(7) DGF (+SLD)

Avere il testo e l'audio a disposizione della lingua romanza che si sta ascoltando, reputo che aiuta molto alla comprensione.

I think having the text and audio available for the Romance language you are listening to really aids my understanding.

5. Conclusions

Overall, the results of the pilot study suggest that the IC approach may have positive effects on the psycho-cognitive profiles of this type of learners. However, in view of the small number of participants in the pilot study, confirmation of the research hypotheses will have to wait for the results of the replications of the study, which will be conducted in the coming years.

At the time of preparing this paper, a replication of the experiment is already being studied, in order to allow for the refinement of the experimental design and the systematic collection of data on this type of learners.

In the perspective of a replication of the experiment, it will be necessary to:

- introduce a partial review of some of the tools and procedures used for data collection;
- reword some items that turned out to be ambiguous;
- guide participants more strictly in the compilation of the questionnaires and in the correct interpretation of the proposed value scales.

We would like to end with an extract from the transcription of the RS3.3 administered to a student +SLD at T2. This extract (8) lets us see how the IC approach can be felt as natural and spontaneous also by students with reading difficulties.

(8) BFG (+SLD)

Molto interessante l'intercomprensione, molto bello! È un approccio che paradossalmente usavo anche prima alle superiori, quando tentavo di capire il francese usando l'italiano... anche se non capivo tutto, in maniera inconsapevole facevo intercomprensione. [Intervistatore: E il fatto di sapere che è una strategia vera e propria che effetto le fa?] Wow! Mi sono ingegnato in un modo che andava bene! A spanne ci arrivavo e adesso che so che non è un'eresia ma ha delle basi trovate da persone che hanno studiato queste cose da anni... quindi dico, wow! Ed è divertente! È un meccanismo particolare, e ti fa pensare a quanto strano è l'essere umano... ma in senso positivo!

Intercomprehension is very interesting, very nice! It is an approach that paradoxically I used even before in high school, when I tried to understand French using Italian... Even though I didn't understand everything, I unconsciously made intercomprehension. [Interviewer: And the fact that knowing that it is a real strategy, what effect does it have?] Wow! I worked in a way that was fine! I got there and now that I know that it is not a heresy but has the basis found by people who have studied these things for years ... So I say, wow! And it's fun! It's a peculiar mechanism, and it makes you think about how strange the human being is... but in a good way!

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