Cooperating And Innovating – Redinter, Working Together For The Implementation Of Intercomprehension Methodologies

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Abstract

During the last 20 years, several European teams have been working on the concept of intercomprehension and its applications to language, aiming at the development of multilingualism in the EU. From the theoretical point of view, the concept has evolved, and its scope has been specified and extended. Today, it is therefore well anchored on search results and concrete practices.

However, the academic dynamics of development of intercomprehension did not get the results that were expected in educational terms, either within the institutional framework or in formal or informal language learning practices, combined with the existing products. Despite all the work developed until 2008, intercomprehension was still unknown to the general public, and even to the majority of teachers of languages; it remained somehow enclosed in the academic spheres.

The common awareness of this fact lead to the creation of Redinter, a large network funded by the European Commission. It comprises 28 partner institutions from 12 EU countries and a group of associated institutions, that counts now 24 other institutions in Europe and South America.

The network aims primarily at a concerted work on deepening theoretical aspects of the concept and on developing its educational applications, at the creation of training courses adapted to new audiences, and at the institutional dissemination of the concept. The common action of all the teams offers a larger political and educational dimension to intercomprehension, bringing it far wider than the sum of actions carried out in isolation.

In this paper, I present the main achievements of this European partnership and show how the network is contributing to the application of innovative education and training strategies, methodologies and solutions.

1 Introduction

1.1 Europe: the need for multilingualism AND plurilingualism

In times of crisis, of economic disasters, of political questioning of ideological models, of wars and natural catastrophes, people need to find reassuring grounds for the construction of their social and personal identities, i.e. communities where they may develop their sense of belonging and sharing. Until nowadays, for most of us, Europe has played that role, since it constitutes simultaneously the place for unity and the motherland of diversities.

The European Union today is made of 495 million people, who speak 23 official languages in 27 countries. Most of them feel the desire and the need to build a new space for citizenship and a new powerful political and economic force in the globalized world.

Europe is, in fact, more than an economic or political space. There is a common cultural ground that enables us to imagine a humanistic Europe, a space where each citizen may share values and ideas, and at the same time find full respect for their own cultural specific identity (cf. Steiner, 2004) [1].

Europe is grounded on a common heritage, but it is also characterized by the diversity of the national cultures that compose its physical and mental space:

[...] the European ideal is founded on two inseparable conditions: the universality of shared moral values and the diversity of cultural expression; in particular, linguistic diversity for historical reasons is a major component as well as being [...] a wonderful tool at the service of integration and harmonisation."(Maalouf, 2008 : 8) [2].

The need to preserve its linguistic diversity is therefore fundamental for the construction of Europe. But how do Europeans communicate in this modern Babel?

In order to preserve multilingualism and develop citizens' plurilingual competences, which are vital to allow interactions among EU citizens, the EU Commission has implemented a strong linguistic policy, which is reflected in its educational linguistic policies. These policies have been developed for more than 10 years, and one should suppose that at least the new generations of Europeans are now plurilingual. However, in 2006, the results of Eurobarometer [3] reveal that "56% of EU citizens are able to hold a conversation in a language other than their mother tongue and 28% state that they master two languages along with their native language." 44% are monolingual. Moreover, a report on the diversity of language teaching in Europe shows that the learning of English is being strongly developed in most European countries, confirming the data of Eurydice Report (2005: 3) [4] that we quote:

The dominance of English is clearly apparent from primary school onwards and has been tending to increase for some years. […] in 13 European countries, learning English in compulsory education is mandatory, which logically leads 90 % of pupils to learn it ahead of any other language.

Are we aiming at uniform bilingualism or at diversified plurilingualism? Obviously, the problem is not that English is the most learned language, but the fact that in many cases it is a language which is imposed to the children in elementary school and presented as being the sole solution for the problems of international communication.

1.2 The role of English as a lingua franca – representations and facts

In 2004, De Swaan [5], reaffirms his statements against plurilingualism that he had largely developed in 2002 [6]: « In the general confusion of tongue, in which no indigenous language can predominate, English automatically imposes itself as the sole, obvious, solution ». However, other researchers show the evident dangers of such opinions. Frath (2010 :295) [7] explains :

Other languages are necessary if we really want an open global society. Languages are windows to other cultures and traditions, which in turn help us look at our own cultures with a more critical eye. The only use of English will turn other languages into provincial languages without influence and they will run the risk of becoming irrelevant. An English-speaking global village will only produce a semblance of community. Communication will take place, but at a low level with no in-depth understanding of cultural differences. We shall believe that "we are the world, we are the people" because we buy the same clothes, listen to the same music, watch the same movies, and drink the same lemonade. We shall think that another culture is just like ours but in another language. Yet if peace is to be a global goal of mankind, it is the differences which have to be understood and accepted. Such understanding is not within the reach of any lingua franca.

1.3 Other possible ways?

The need of alternative solutions seems thus obvious. Since the years 1990, this need has been recognized by the European Commission. Strong support was given to research and to pedagogical applications of innovative methodologies that may help to develop plurilingual competences with a maximum of efficiency and a minimum cost-effort relationship. These methodologies are generally denominated "the plurilingual approaches" and they aim at making the most of the individual linguistic abilities and knowledge in order to construct specific communication competences in several languages at the same time.

Intercomprehension is one of the most relevant approaches in this domain. In this paper, I will present the notion and show how it has been used and developed in the context of Redinter, a large European Network that gathers today 52 institutions worldwide. I will also try to demonstrate how the network is

contributing to the application of innovative education and training strategies, methodologies and solutions.

2 Intercomprehension

2.1 Background

The idea of plurilingual education gained new grounds once the term Intercomprehension (IC) was used to define a new form of communication in which each individual uses his or her own language BUT yet, understands that of the other. Before the `90s, the idea that a form of communication in which each person would use his or her own language and would be able to understand that of the other(s) (cf. Doyé 2005: 7) [8] was accepted by the common sense of all those who travelled through the world or by inhabitants of border regions (cf. Capucho, 2008) [9] but would not have been imaginable in the context of formal school learning. The innovative aspect of IC consists mainly in this idea of being able to understand a language in spite of not having learnt it before.

2.2 Definition

The concept of Intercomprehension has thus been under discussion for more than 20 years now. Several European teams have been studying it and its implementation in the process of language learning, in order to promote the development of plurilingualism in the EU. Definitions may vary, depending on the different insights of the diverse theoretical schools, or the direct pragmatic aim of specific applied research. In 2004, the academic group that was gathered by the project Eu& I defined IC as "[t]he process of developing the ability to co-construct meaning in the context of the encounter of different languages and to make pragmatic use of this in a concrete communicative situation" (Capucho, 2004) [10] or, in other words the process of co-constructing meaning in intercultural/interlinguistic contexts. The development of such a process will lead to the ability to understand, to a certain extent, one and/or several languages, by using existing language competences (plurilingual skills from personal life experiences).

2.3 Pluralities

The notion of IC has thus reflected the diversity of research teams. In fact, IC is not a methodology, nor a method in itself but a theoretical concept that shapes a large variety of approaches. It has been acknowledged (cf. Capucho and Pelsmaekers, 2008) [11] that there are presently three types of distinctive projects, which go from the multilingual reception to multilingual interaction and from languages belonging to the same family to a more general area, beyond the linguistic proximity. However, diversity does not prevent a deep consensus about the application of the notion to language learning, about its contribution to the development of plurilingual competences and, finally, about its importance in the process of construction of EU citizenship. As I have recently clearly assumed:

defender a IC significa assim defender a construção permanente de uma Europa democrática, defender uma cidadania abrangente, defender a tolerância e o respeito pela diversidade. Defender a IC é recusar um monolitismo imperialista linguístico, como consequente imposição de representações do mundo, da cultura e das relações pessoais e sociais que o acompanham. (Capucho, 2010: 110) [12]

3 Redinter

3.1 Starting…

In 2007, the Colloquium Diálogos em Intercompreensão gathered in Lisbon most of the academic experts in IC. During this international event, the efficiency of different approaches and the decisive

role of IC in the process of non-traditional language learning were successfully confirmed. Also, taking into consideration that the development of multilingualism in Europe is a must among the educational priorities of the 21st century, the institutions present in the colloquium have become aware of the necessity of joining their efforts in order to disseminate the didactic applications of the notion of IC in all the European countries. It was expected that these joint efforts should lead to the enhancement of their political and educational dimensions and, at the same time, they should provide the concrete results that have been awaited for more than 20 years. One of the most important outcomes of this colloquium was thus the possibility of establishing a European network with the purpose of studying IC. The proposal was warmly welcomed by all participants: out of 35 institutions present in the colloquium, 29 expressed their formal interest in participating as active or associated partners in the network. The name given to the project is REDINTER (Rede Europeia de Intercompreensão – The European Network of Intercomprehension).

3.2 Composition, evolution and objectives

When we started working together, the consortium was composed of 28 partner institutions and 11 associated institutions. A detailed work plan involving 7 working groups was established, in order to attain the following objectives:

- to develop and encourage the politics promoting IC in and among different language families and beyond related linguistic features, thus supporting the linguistic diversity in Europe as well as the multilingual learning at different levels: schools and universities, LLPs, initial and continuous teacher training, bilingual teaching/learning contexts, self-training,….;
- to identify and assess all the initiatives aiming (or having aimed) at the development of Intercomprehension and their impact upon the educational process;
- to find, devise and disseminate the information concerning the good practices in this domain in order to motivate the multilingual learning and to create the appropriate environment in terms of linguistic diversity learning, mainly by efficient use of technological means;
- to exchange and use the good practices concerning the development of the Intercomprehension process for learners with special needs (immigrants, illiterates, etc).

3.3 Action – achievements and difficulties

Almost three years later, it is possible to evaluate Redinter's achievements and reflect on the problems that had to be faced.
Generally speaking, the objectives of most of the working groups were attained:

- An extensive list of bibliography on IC has been produced and is now available on Redinter's site (www.redinter.eu);
- A complete list of Good Practices in IC has been identified and produced, containing precise data on each project. It is also freely available online;
- The state of the art on Training Courses (including courses currently available) has been done. Details on each course are given in the extensive list published in the Network's web site;
- According to the last data, the offer of training courses has doubled in the first 12 months of the project, if compared to the previous year;
- New projects on IC have been created, aiming at responding to the needs of specific professional audiences: PREFIC (which is being developed for the training of professionals of the "Cité des Métiers" in France, Italy and Portugal); CINCO (for professionals of social and educational associations for volunteers) and INTERMAR (for the training of naval and maritime professionals) have recently been proposed for EU support;
- Other actions have focused specific professional or social training – at the airport of Frankfurt, for librarians in France, for the European Workers Unions and soon in Spanish prisons… ;
- Redinter members participate in ILLIAD, a network aiming at studying the problem of Foreign or Second language learning for complete illiterates or functional illiterates and proposing effective solutions;

- A document on the social, political and economic advantages of IC has been produced and is being disseminated and presented to stakeholders;
- Researchers of different teams and "schools" have been gradually working together, conciliating different perspectives and approaches;
- Books and journals have been produced by joint efforts of the new teams;
- In September 2010, a Colloquium gathered around 60 researchers; its proceedings will come out very soon;
- The First number of the International Journal Intercompreensão-Redinter has been published (2010), as well as the online version of the same journal; the second number will soon be available;
- New institutions are continuously joining the network and presently Redinter counts 22 associated partners.

Little by little, the network is managing to develop general awareness of the need for plurilingualism and of the contribution of IC. Nevertheless, it is a slow process that will need continuous and persistent action. Innovation takes time to be integrated into people's minds and in educational systems.

4 Cooperating and innovating

Redinter is therefore an example of how cooperation between researchers, educators and stakeholders may contribute to construct innovation and change. If the world is characterized nowadays by the strength and the power of networks (cf.Castells 2007) [13], Redinter, the European Network of Intercomprehension, should honor the power that was socially conferred to it and show how innovation may be more than a simple utopia.

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