

## **9 Research instruments for exploring strategy use in the context of an intercomprehension in Germanic Languages (IGL) course**

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### **1. Introduction**

This paper reports on one aspect of a current research project on Intercomprehension in Germanic Languages (IGL) for Spanish-speaking adults at the School of Languages of Cordoba State University. It will focus on the collaborative design of research tools for gathering relevant information about the use of language learning strategies, which students deploy to simultaneously develop reading comprehension skills in English, German and Dutch. The context is an IGL course that will be taught in the second half of 2016 to Spanish speaking adults with some knowledge of English (A1/A2 level in the CEFR), which is used as a bridge language.

### **2. Theoretical framework**

#### **2.1. Key constructs**

The concept of intercomprehension refers to the ability to communicate in languages of the same linguistic family without the need for full mastery of all of them. Degache (2006) defines this phenomenon as a special case of plurilingual-exolingual communication which is characterised by the asymmetry of the interlocutors' linguistic competences and the use of diverse codes in the interaction. Another definition is

provided by Capucho and Oliveira (2005), who see it as “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” (p. 14). We agree with Möller and Zeevaert (2010) who characterise intercomprehension as “the reading comprehension of texts in languages one has not studied formally through knowledge of other foreign languages of the same linguistic family”. This project aims at developing partial competences, as defined in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages; more specifically, it aims at the development of reading comprehension in Germanic languages (German and Dutch), through the knowledge of English, which acts as a bridge language.

Research on intercomprehension has demonstrated how receptive knowledge of one language can be developed on the basis of knowledge of another language, belonging to the same linguistic family (Stoye, 2000). The European project EuroComGerm (Hufeisen & Marx, 2007), as part of the EuroCom project, focuses on the development of reading comprehension in one or more typologically-related languages, by making learners aware of their existing linguistic capital, which accounts for what they need not learn when embarking on the process.

Intercomprehension is based on a key concept, *transfer*, which is the human ability to apply previous experiences and knowledge into new contexts. Within the framework of intercomprehension this process has also been called “optimised deduction” (Jessner, 2008). It can be operationalised by applying the method called the *Seven Sieves*, a construct which was first developed by Klein and Stegmann (2000) for intercomprehension in the Romance languages. This construct is based on the metaphor of the learner as a gold seeker, looking for gold (i.e. comprehension of unknown languages) by sieving the texts s/he is confronted with through seven different filters. These are seven different inter-linguistic transfer bases that any reader with a knowledge of a linguistically related language can apply in order to read a text intercomprehensively. Those transfer bases are: (1) cognates (internationalisms and pangermanisms); (2) phonetic correspondences; (3) spelling and pronunciation relationships; (4) morphology; (5) function words; (6) morphosyntax, and (7) syntax. The first four bases account for similarities at the lexical level; the last three, at the syntactic level (Hufeisen & Marx, 2014).

An interactive model of reading constitutes another important angle of the theoretical underpinning of this project. Bertele (in Hufeisen & Marx, 2007), who presents one such conceptualisation of reading, describes the product of the reading process as a mental model which results from the interaction between and among the different stages of the bottom-up and the top-down processes involved in reading.

## **2.2. Research into strategy use**

During the last thirty years, research on Language Learning Strategies (LLS) has developed and refined different tools with the purpose of investigating the mental processes at play while learners understand, remember and use a new language. Some of the problems inherent in strategy research are related to the fact that, on the one hand, strategies are not directly observable, since they constitute mental processes which are internal to the learner. On the other hand, the use of strategies varies according to individuals, tasks, learning conditions and time.

Researchers have attempted to refine the instruments designed for exploring LLS and the ways in which such tools are used so as to minimize their limitations. According to White, Schramm and Chamot (2007), there has been an ongoing concern to acknowledge the weaknesses of self-report instruments created and used to access learners' mental processing. In relation to qualitative data collection procedures, studies on LLS carried out in varied contexts have gathered data by means of varied tools such as retrospective interviews, self-report questionnaires, observation, diaries, dialogue journals, e-journals, recollective studies, computer tracking and, verbal reports, in particular, think-aloud protocols. Instruments designed for exploring LLS can provide important insights into strategy research when two or more methods are used in combination, in order to triangulate the data and increase the validity and reliability of the study.

Retrospective interviews were one of the earliest techniques used in LLS. They are still considered valid tools due to their flexibility, which allows the interviewer to obtain clarification and elaboration from learners, thus tapping into unexpected areas of inquiry. Although they seem to have certain limitations, self-report questionnaires are said to be the most frequently used and efficient method for determining learner's

strategies (Chamot, 2004; Cohen, 1998; Oxford, 1996). One such tool was developed by Oxford (1990a) and used in multiple studies worldwide: the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL).

Nonetheless, the potential limitations of self-report questionnaires are threefold. One limitation for the reliable data collection is the possibility that learners may fail to understand or accurately interpret the strategy description in each item of the questionnaire. A second limitation lies in the fact that learners may claim to use strategies that they have not actually employed. The third restriction can be found in the limitations of the learners' memory capacity. In other words, if the self-report questionnaire is of a broad nature, addressing strategy use in general, learners may fail to recall the actual strategies they have deployed in the past. This limitation can be overcome by basing the self-report questionnaire on a particular task that students have recently completed. This is the way one of the instruments has been collaboratively designed for this study.

During the last decades, introspective tools, such as written diaries, logs, and journals, have also gained a place as useful instruments which, complemented by interviews, profiles and questionnaires, can provide valuable insights for research into LLS. Observation and think-aloud protocols have also been used extensively in strategy research projects. According to White et al. (2007), pre-and post-actional think-alouds can provide valuable information on the strategies learners intend to use before a language task and how they assess these strategies after the completion of those tasks.

The means used to carry out research into LLS have mainly considered strategies as relatively stable internal processes inside learners' minds and have paid little attention to the influence of the context; that is, the situated experience of learners. An alternative approach views the use of strategies as the result of learners' cognition and the mediation of certain communities. Burns (1999) advocates collaborative action research as a promising approach for learner strategy research, due to its participatory quality and inclusiveness of researchers and teachers working together with a common research goal.

### **3. Methodology**

For our research programme, three different research instrument types have been developed for tapping into strategy use in the context of an IGL course taught to Spanish speaking adults who can use English as a bridge to the development of reading comprehension abilities in two languages of the same linguistic family, namely German and Dutch. These instruments are: two different self-report questionnaires, an observation checklist and ethnographic field notes; these tools will be described below. The course will be taught in the second half of 2016 and will employ materials specially developed for the purpose.

The materials were developed by members of the research team during the research periods 2012-13 and 2014-15. “Interger. Manual de Intercomprensión en Lenguas Germánicas para Hispanohablantes” (Lauría de Gentile, Merzig, Trovarelli, Van Muylem & Wilke, 2016) constitutes the first coursebook of its type in Latin America.

The process of developing those materials was based on principles of materials design grounded on the latest results of research into Second Language Acquisition. The criteria for text selection and elaboration employed and the types of tasks designed within a pre-, while- and post- reading framework are also based on the latest research on reading comprehension and intercomprehension (Lauría de Gentile, 2013).

The design of research instruments to explore the strategies employed by readers in the IGL course is based on the hypothesis that the mental process learners go through can be inferred or presupposed by their behavior. Three different instrument types have been designed to elicit information on the subjects’ reading strategies. The first is a self-report questionnaire, of which there are two versions: one will be administered on completion of particular self-assessment tasks included in the materials and the other one will be given to learners after the course has finished. The latter will collect information as to the learners’ beliefs on their perceptions as regards performance and strategy use. Although the gathering and processing of data through such instruments is less demanding or labor-intensive, their design implies a meticulous selection of items to include in questions, and requires piloting and revising questions before they are actually used to collect data.

The second instrument, which is currently being designed and which will be piloted during the first two classes of the IGL course, is an observation checklist. This tool is one of the different procedures that can be used to collect information on students' actual performance in class. According to Richards and Farrell (2011), *seating charts* can be used to code the number of times students interact or participate with other students or with the teacher. Another instrument for observation is the *field notes*, which consist of briefly describing in note form key events that occur throughout the lesson and can work similarly to an ethnographic narrative. A *narrative summary*, on the other hand, is a written summary of the lesson that tries to capture the main things that happened during its course. Finally, a *checklist* is a form of observation system which allows observers to code the data and it contains a list of different features of a lesson, which the researcher will complete while observing it.

In our study, the observation checklist contains three columns. The first one refers to each stage of the IGL lesson, following the pattern that each unit of the book displays. The second one contains several instances of possible observable behaviours that students may show and which may serve as possible evidence of the use of cognitive, meta-cognitive and socio-affective strategies. The third column provides space for comments that the observer may make regarding observable behaviour not accounted for in the first two columns. This instrument will be used every class by two independent observers who will collect data related to two different students each. In other words four students' behaviour will be the focus of observation every class.

There is a third research tool that has been thought out by members of the research team in our monthly meetings. It is an instrument that will consist of ethnographic field notes. This will entail writing down every occurrence in the class, from what is said by teacher and students to what gets done throughout the lesson. This data collection procedure will be employed by a third observer every IGL class, with the intention of triangulating the data obtained this way with the information on strategy use gathered by the application of the observation checklist described in the preceding paragraphs.

#### **4. Expected results and concluding thoughts**

Strategy use is in most cases unobservable and this poses difficulties for the researcher interested in exploring language learning strategies (LLS) used during the process of reading. One of the aims of the present study is to overcome such limitation by employing varied methods. In this way, we will be able to triangulate data obtained through the application of the different tools and thus obtain reliable information on strategy use in the context of an IGL course.

In our current research project, it turned out to be quite a challenge to design the research tools that will be employed to collect data on learners' use of reading strategies in German and Dutch through English. The research team not only had to decide which instruments could be more effective in terms of gathering reliable and useful information, but also take into account how to select the subjects to be observed in every class and what to do if a particular subject misses a class. After various group meetings, the team have finally agreed on the use of two different self-report questionnaires, an observation checklist and ethnographic field notes, which were considered to be particularly suitable to get an insight into the use of strategies in the context mentioned.

The use of four different data collection procedures will enable us to triangulate information gathered by self report questionnaires on learners' beliefs on their use of strategies and data obtained by observing and describing visible learners' behaviour. This will allow for the elaboration of a taxonomy of strategies deployed by Spanish speaking students with a knowledge of English in the context of an IGL course, in which English serves as a bridge language.

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