

## Defining Intercomprehension: is a consensus essential?

### Resumo

Este artigo discute os tópicos: emergência, migração e transformação do conceito; definições de Intercompreensão (IC). Retomamos o trabalho da nossa tese de doutoramento sobre IC, aprendizagem de línguas e didáctica do plurilinguismo, e procuramos articular a revisão bibliográfica efectuada com algumas reflexões mais recentes sobre o conceito, tendo em vista contribuir para uma melhor compreensão do “percurso de vida” da IC e dos seus potenciais desenvolvimentos epistemológicos. Este trabalho está estruturado em 3 partes: síntese da revisão bibliográfica efectuada; apresentação da nossa definição de IC; e considerações finais sobre a necessidade de uma definição consensual e única de IC.

**Palavras-chave:** intercompreensão, educação em línguas, plurilinguismo, competência plurilingue

### Résumé

L'intention de cet article est de discuter l'émergence, la migration et la transformation du concept d'intercompréhension (IC) ainsi que les définitions qui lui sont proposées. Reprenant une thèse de doctorat sur l'IC, l'apprentissage de langues et la didactique du plurilinguisme, nous essayons d'en réviser les références bibliographiques, en articulation avec quelques réflexions plus récentes sur ce concept, ceci en vue de contribuer à une meilleure compréhension du « parcours de vie » de l'IC et à une idée motrice de développements épistémologiques. Ce travail est structuré en 3 parties : synthèse de la révision bibliographique; notre définition de l'IC; et réflexions à propos de la nécessité d'une définition consensuelle et unique de l'IC.

**Mots-clés :** intercompréhension, éducation en langues, plurilinguisme, compétence plurilingue

## Introduction

Intercomprehension and Plurilingualism have come to be closely linked, especially over the last 15 years (cf. Alarcão *et al* 2009). Therefore, in the present climate of plurality in which the Language Didactics finds itself, it is no wonder that the concept of Intercomprehension (IC), in particular in the various ways it is perceived by different researchers/authors, has taken on multiple forms. This plurality, though being synonymous of the richness and usefulness of the concept (cf. Melo & Santos 2008), nevertheless raises some issues in terms of an “intercomprehension” among those who rely on it to qualify different perspectives, which may or may not be the same. For this reason it is important to go back over some of the discourses of both past and present to clarify what is meant when we use the term “intercomprehension”.

This work takes up part of the content of our doctoral dissertation on intercomprehension, language learning and plurilingualism (Santos 2007). Moreover, we aim to articulate the review of the literature on the evolution of the concept and the proposed definition, with some recent speculations on this issue. In this way we hope to be able to contribute to the understanding of the evolution of IC and to map out perceived future epistemological paths. Our work is primarily meta-analytical and interpretative and is based on the analysis of written documents in order to find ideas and underlying notions for a “State of the art” approach to the concept of “intercomprehension”.

The first part of this article is a summary of the early literature on IC and how it can be interpreted in the light of the research carried out by the present author, who has identified 3 major lines of thought with regard to IC. In the second part, we outline our own proposed definition based on work related to the doctoral thesis. Finally, we conclude by offering some considerations about the need (or not) to reach an agreed definition of IC.

### 1. A Review of our work

Given the difficulty of finding a clear definition of IC, our first studies led us to consider it as part of the management competence of an individual’s linguistic-communicative repertoire, taking into account that this was one of the dimensions of his/her Plurilingual Competence (PC) (Andrade & Araújo e Sá 2003), which in turn would be broader and would cover that of IC. However, as our research work progressed, and, in particular, after the analysis of the

results of a classroom-based project, a question began to prevail: what new or special features would be brought to the field of DL, with IC understood as a competence?

The intervention and research project that we devised (Santos 2007<sup>1</sup>), based on the principles and methods of other works on IC, put a group of Portuguese secondary school learners in contact with linguistic data in different languages, and included tasks that drew on the activation of different skills: reading, understanding, translation, (meta) and (epi)linguistics, discursive, pragmatic, referential, strategic... We asked ourselves the question: which specific area had this “intercomprehension competence” fitted into? Could it be the management area of all these competences, containing all knowledge, attitudes and strategies? In that case what does strategic competence fit in? How can we distinguish them? Is there in fact an *intercomprehension competence* (Alarcão 2001: 63; Klein 2004: 408), or is its role taken up by PC? And once again, how can we distinguish them?

To help find some answers to these questions we proceeded to a new review of some of the literature available at the time about IC, in order to understand which positions scholars working in this field had taken.

As a result of this work, we have identified three main interpretations of IC, which we will now present.

#### 1.1 Intercomprehension seen as a communication strategy

In the wake of the work by Eco (1996) and Hermoso (1998), the term “intercomprehension” becomes important in the European educational and political context as a communication strategy which, at the same time, is hoped to be seen as an identifying characteristic of Europe. Likewise, the words of the French Minister of Culture – *Être Européen c’est parler dans sa langue et comprendre celle de l’autre* (Donnedieu de Vabres, in North 2006b) are taken by North as *très exactement la définition de l’intercompréhension* (2006b: 6), because they practically coincide with those of Peter Doyé (2005).

*Le fait de comprendre des langues sans les parler: chacun parle ou écrit dans sa langue, et comprend ou lit celle de l’autre* (Ploquin 2005) was therefore one of the main stimuli behind the emergence of various European projects on IC.

This understanding of the concept points to an essentially inter-relational process i.e. how individuals construct the interaction: intercomprehension,

<sup>1</sup> Research project financed by the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT).

in this context, goes back to the idea of inter-personal relationship/understanding.

IC seen as a communication strategy or “ideal” relationship between people is also frequently associated with the phenomenon that some authors refer to as “inter-understandability” between languages (cf. Meissner *et al.* 2004; Blanche-Benveniste 2006). In the same vein, Éloy presents us with a set of categories which allow us to assess the notion of “distance” between languages and includes the underlying category “intercomprehension”, which operates fully at what he considers “zero level” – *celui de l’indistinction en tant que langues: on considère généralement qu’il s’agit de variantes de «la même langue»* (Éloy 2004: 397). However, these categories also exist in the languages considered to be close in the family tree and will progressively begin to disappear as the distance between them increases.

IC seen as a communication strategy thus seems to be based on a quality or property of one or several languages, within a certain group or family. Being so closely linked with the concept (real or perceived by the individual) of proximity/distance between languages, this notion has been behind the majority of IC projects, given that they were constructed around families of languages (mainly Romance, Germanic and Slavic):

le fait que l’on puisse classer les langues en «famille» en fonction de leur origine signifie que les langues «descendant» de la même famille peuvent être «intercompréhensibles», c’est-à-dire que si les locuteurs des langues en question parlent leur propre langue, ils peuvent être compris par les autres (Beacco & Byram 2003: 37).

IC understood as a communication strategy is based, in short, on the defence of an ideal interaction, oral and/or written (cf. Klein, Meissner & Zybatow 2002), of mutual understanding between people, in particular among Europeans: *we are together here for two days to talk about mutual comprehension in Europe or intercomprehension* (Vlaeminck 1997); *la solution de l’intercompréhension constitue l’une des composantes sociales, linguistiques et culturelles du développement durable en Europe et dans d’autres régions du monde* (Castagne 2006: 17).

This communicative but also political ideal has been the focus of study and analysis in order to come up with possible ways of implementation which are both structured and socially and didactically convincing. This process leads to a branching of the concept with greater or lesser variations

since *s’il y a unanimité sur le principe, il est, en revanche, moins facile de comprendre ce qu’il veut dire et encore moins de le réaliser* (Vlaeminck *op. cit.*). Moreover, we believe that it is the search for this knowledge that allows other understandings of the concept of IC to emerge, such as those which we shall now present.

## 1.2 Intercomprehension as a method

One of the meanings that can be assigned to the term “intercomprehension” is that of a method of learning languages: *la méthode de l’intercompréhension*, according to North (2006b: 3). This arose from contexts in which this notion began to be investigated, i.e. the European projects which effectively aimed at promoting language learning, and in particular neighbouring languages. Thus the interpretation of IC as a method of learning focused initially on developing comprehension skills in neighbouring foreign languages (FL) at the expense of production skills (cf. Castagne 2007).

In this sense, IC is seen as a *méthode de compréhension des autres langues (romanes)* (DGLF 2006: 3), a method that you can learn by means of programmes developed under the projects concerned, designated as *méthodes pédagogiques d’intercompréhension (idem)*. Other authors, albeit within this same line of thought, prefer to adopt the expression “intercomprehensive methods”: *EuroCom[...]une méthode intercompréhensive pour l’apprentissage d’un deuxième ou troisième idiome de la même famille linguistique* (Klein 2004: 404).

As both a teaching and learning method, the priority given to skills development in related languages is justified, in particular, by the assumption that *l’appropriation d’une langue proche demande un investissement infiniment moindre que celle d’une langue éloignée* (Robert 2004: 502), and by the search for *une forme de plurilinguisme très pratique et très accessible, respectueux de l’identité européenne [...]: comprendre plusieurs langues de ses voisins européens, mais conserver autant que possible sa langue maternelle pour s’exprimer* (Castagne 2007).

These IC methods are presented as having the following advantages over ‘traditional’ FL teaching (cf. DGLF 2006):

- promotion of greater efficiency in communication, because by expressing themselves in their own language learners gain  *finesse dans l’expression* (p. 4) or the power to *conserver le sens des nuances* (Ploquin 2006: 18);
- speed of learning (an advantage particularly relevant to match the

challenge laid down under the auspices of the *Common European Framework of Reference* [Alves 2001]: the implementation of language teaching and learning methodologies that foster the development of partial competences);

- valuation of receptive skills, stimulating greater motivation and reducing inhibitions usually associated with the processes of production in FL;
- valuing previous knowledge, given that: *L'intercompréhensions s'appuie sur un fondement psycholinguistique très solide: l'interaction entre les facultés de l'homme et sa capacité d'exploiter les connaissances acquises antérieurement* (Doyé 2005: 9).

In North (2006b: 7; also in Gajo 2006), it is referred to not as an advantage but as a characteristic of the method given that it is seen as a convergent pedagogy, insofar as it relies on elements common to both languages concerned in the learning situation. In other words, these elements are common to the language that the individual starts from (usually the mother tongue – MT) and also to the language he/she wishes to understand. After that he/she progressively starts taking into account the differences between them and thus comes to grasp the language of the other person. This idea can also be found in Meissner *et al.* (2004), but here it is clearly interpreted as an advantage from a neuro-linguistic point of view and for this reason is seen as an aid to learning. In effect, according to studies used as reference by these authors, the processes of intra and inter language comparison create extremely high cerebral activity in the individual, a stimulation that would become even greater as a relationship between these processes and scenarios already stored in his/her memory has been established.

Along with the interpretation of IC as a learning method, we can see it emerge, albeit in a usually more subtle way, from the point of view of discourse, as a training objective or learning outcome: *nous nous sommes engagés dans une propre production de ressources en ligne pour l'entraînement à l'intercompréhension en langues néolatines dans les classes qui se situent entre la fin du primaire et le collège* (Bertolaja 2006: 14).

In this sense, IC – in particular within the same family of languages –, is seen as a possible answer to the challenges of plurilingualism, or perhaps more precisely, is assumed as the aim of an education in and towards plurilingualism, which in turn contributes to an individual's learning of foreign languages : *jouer la carte des familles de langues servirait à enraciner les élèves dans leur*

*identité linguistique tout en développant chez eux une conscience plurilingue qui, par la suite, leur serait extrêmement utile pour un apprentissage plus approfondi de l'une ou l'autre langue* (Ploquin 2006: 18).

This learning objective is nevertheless not without political motivation, as can be seen in Cassen's comments:

Si des États de langues romanes prenaient la décision de promouvoir ensemble dans leurs systèmes éducatifs respectifs des méthodes d'apprentissage de l'intercompréhension, ces langues pourraient conjointement acquérir un statut mondial de cohypercentralité avec l'anglais (2005).

Within this interpretation of IC as method we also include the view of IC as an educational-pedagogical approach, which, in the field of language education seeks to overcome the traditional understanding of languages as isolated disciplines which are learnt without taking into account previous knowledge of other languages or references to the MT (Llorente Pinto *et al.* 2002: 10).

Another feature of this approach is to place students, along with their skills and needs, at the centre of the educational process in languages (Rieder, Neuburg & Schindler 2002). In this way, and in line with constructivist thought, individuals actively engage in the construction of knowledge, which is both individual and adaptive (Geelan, 1997: 17), in the same way as PC (Andrade & Araújo and Sá 2003).

### 1.3 Intercomprehension as competence

We have seen already in IC projects how the setting of pedagogical objectives has often turned into the acceptance of an aim to develop receptive skills/competences in language learners.

In some texts, however, it is “intercomprehension” itself that is presented as a competence and which, in some cases is a specifically receptive competence. We ourselves shared this perspective for a while.

we will focus on the notion of Intercomprehension, taking it in its broader meaning: the receptive competence in an unknown language is to be seen, not only as the result of linguistic transfer (in-between languages of the same family), BUT (and especially) as the result of the transfer of receptive strategies in the framework of “a general interpretative process which underlies all communicative activity” (cf. the Intercomprehension Portfolio) (EU&I 2007).

This understanding of IC thus emerges as an (apparently) logical development of those meanings that were previously presented in that it is taken as a response, at the level of an individual's competences, to the challenge of communication facing European citizens (which we highlight here as it is also the European context in which the concept has been most worked on and discussed<sup>2</sup>):

La intercomprensión nos parece una de las soluciones a la comunicación y al encuentro intercultural entre europeos y entre españoles. Lo vemos como un enfoque enriquecedor e innovador [...], no sólo como una nueva competencia lingüística e intercultural, sino también como fuente de valores en el desarrollo de la identidad europea (Llorente Pinto et al., 2002: 3).

This competence is, according to some authors, a receptive competence related with the PC of the individual:

une compétence de compréhension des langues romanes apparentées peut développer un nouveau sentiment d'identité, en faisant comprendre qu'il existe en Europe une espèce de «super-langue» commune dont les réalisations sont assez faciles à dominer (Blanche-Benveniste, 2006: 10).

Also in this sense, IC is linked in certain texts, with the notions of «receptive multilingualism» (cf. Rieder, Neuburg & Schindler 2002; Klein 2004) or “extended receptive competence” (Alegre 1999), or *compétence de compréhension plurilingue* (Araújo and Sá & Melo 1: 1), or *heuristic and interpretative competence in any communicative code* (Capucho & Oliveira 2005: 12), or even close to a *multilingual receptive competence* (Klein, Meissner & Zybatow 2002). In these texts it seems that classifying IC as a competence has been explicitly avoided, but the discourse gravitates in this direction.

Simultaneously to this trend, however, this narrower understanding is being ‘contaminated’ by the first one that we introduced (IC as interaction/communication strategy) : *the process of developing the ability to co-construct meaning in the context of the encounter of different languages and to make use of this in a concrete communicative situation* (Capucho & Oliveira 2005: 14).

<sup>2</sup> Cf.: The present discussion has a specific civilization context. *The enlargement of the European Union is placing a new emphasis on language education* (Shopov 2005: 19).

In the same line of thought we find the distinction put forward by Doyé, between competence and performance:

Sous l'aspect de la performance, l'intercompréhension se décrit comme l'activité de personnes de langues maternelles différentes qui communiquent en s'exprimant dans leur propre langue et en comprenant la langue de l'autre. Du point de vue de la compétence, l'intercompréhension est la capacité de comprendre d'autres langues sans les avoir apprises (2005: 7).

Does Doyé mean that IC, from the perspective of the interaction, exists at the level of the interactive performances or speakers' productions, and that it is from the “internal” point of view of the individual, of his/her understanding, that the IC takes the form of a competence – when he/she hasn't learnt the language of the interlocutor?...

Having gone along, temporarily, with the notion of IC as competence, we can only question this perspective, as we did with ours. What exactly is this competence? How should we characterize it? Is it indeed a specific competence? So how should we articulate this idea with the one the same author uses in another moment of the same text?

l'idée d'une éducation à l'intercompréhension présuppose que l'enseignement peut faciliter l'acquisition de **compétences d'intercompréhension**<sup>3</sup>. (...) Aider les apprenants à acquérir des compétences d'intercompréhension signifie, pour l'enseignant, créer des conditions propres à faciliter le processus d'acquisition (Doyé, 2005: 10).

Is IC ONE competence, or are there several Intercomprehension competences (or capacities for Intercomprehension, as Álvarez & Tost 2005: 69 claim)?

Another variation that we found in the discourse on IC connected to the concept of competence is when it is referred to as “capacity”, which in this way avoids calling it “competence”, especially in situations where the latter is reserved for the notion of PC. For example in Andrade & Moreira *et al.* (2002) we see that IC is an indispensable component of PC, a component which encompasses an ability to establish bridges between languages and cultures and an openness and curiosity towards new communicative experiences. The establishment of these bridges will depend if the individual

<sup>3</sup> Highlighted by us.

has *transversal language skills* and *inter and intra-linguistic and intercultural and interdisciplinary transfer capabilities* (op. cit.: 6). The ability to build bridges between languages thus stems from the individual's possession and activation of transversal language skills and ability to transfer, that is, the ability to manage these competencies and capacities within a given situation. This is an interpretation that is similar to the one we ourselves defend, at a later stage. But the same question we raise concerning our own reflection we again ask about this one: where does strategic competence reside?

After this review and analysis of some of the available literature on IC at the time (early 2007), an issue concerned us: would it be possible to reconcile these different understandings? And with this conciliation, would it be wrong to leave aside one viewpoint in favour of another, when all of them were based on (and were developed by means of) in-depth research projects?

## 2. Contributions towards a clarification of the concept(s)

If our bibliographical review has served some use (we did not intend to be exhaustive, but representative of the available discourse), one of the most interesting aspects, from our point of view, was that it revealed that the three conceptions of IC presented, despite being clearly and readily identified, appeared to be so closely interconnected that sometimes they would appear in the same discourse concurrently. Of equal interest was the revelation that there were very few cases where authors clearly pointed to a definition of IC, more often opting for a flexible use of this concept and for its connection with related notions which also had multiple meanings.

The challenge we gave ourselves then was to find a clarifying formulation of the concept while drawing on all the interpretations presented, which was sufficiently broad to accommodate them and, simultaneously, sufficiently precise in order to be considered, on the one hand, endowed with identity and on the other, useful, given the diversity of work situations where you might want to put it into use. The question that guided our reasoning was: is it possible to have a definition that we can all identify with and which is the underlying basis of our "Intercomprehension" when we speak of IC?

The construction of the answer to this question began with an initial analysis/interpretation exercise: to identify the points in common between the 3 perspectives mentioned. We have found the following:

- IC is closely related to plurilingualism and has thus extended the scope of the concept (intra-linguistic; inter-linguistic within a family of languages; inter-linguistic and inter-family);
- the context that favoured the emergence and development of this concept is that of a Europe that wants to unite – in all its Diversity, which is being redefined, which seeks the construction of a broader identity shared by the different peoples belonging to it – but respecting the characteristics of each one, groups of people who are driven to reflect on the ways of communicating that they could (or should) adopt among themselves. This context gives the concept a political slant that cannot be neglected;
- it is also clear that IC is not a new phenomenon:

It has existed as long as humans have felt the need to understand and be understood in communication exchanges with other humans speaking another language than themselves. Neither is it a new phenomenon in the classroom. Pupils striving to learn a foreign language have always used whatever resources they had to overcome difficulties when dealing with the foreign language. What perhaps is a new idea, is that of mobilizing one's overall language competence in a more systematic way than before, by being encouraged by a teacher who acknowledges the significance of this capacity (Ulseth et al. 2002: 31);

- the relationship between IC and plurilingual communicative competence, which has been quite explicitly expressed has also gained wide acceptance;
- it is undeniable that IC becomes more powerful the greater the proximity between languages in question, even if they do not belong to the same language family, but equally, the more developed is the individual's ability to make comparisons and transfers between languages, in particular by recourse to his/her prior knowledge;
- IC inspires methodological practices and specific didactics.

Here is where the points most agreed on end. In the search for a definition of IC, how to deal with these and also with the differences?

Methodologically, we started by trying to clarify some concepts or more specific expressions that could help reduce the range of meanings to be included in our definition.

For the purposes of IC as “method”, we can reserve the term – which arose incidentally, in some texts – as «intercomprehension method (s)», defining them as: language learning methods (or methodologies) inspired on the basis of IC, which focus in particular on the development of the various skills that aid/promote it above all through activities of intra and inter-linguistic interfacing which encourage comparisons and transfers and the use of prior knowledge, in particular with regard to the linguistic-communicative domain. The implementation of these methods might take on variable outlines and focus on different skills, but it can be assumed that they emerge to serve a “didactics of intercomprehension” (Klein 2004: 411), in which the “pedagogy of related languages” (Robert 2004) will be one of the branches.

With regard to the competences that might be an aid to IC – an idea which is also seen in some of the studied authors –, we agree that there may indeed exist competences of a diverse character that, in a particular situation may lend it greater potential. But the analysis of our data, and a comparison with some of the results of several well-known projects, has caused us to consider that, in fact, all the competences in the linguistic-communicative, interactive, and even affective and learning domains, could be put at the service of IC, regardless of the understanding that we have of this notion, insofar as those situations do not have formats or parameters which are completely pre-defined: they also are at the same time plural and, above all, unique and unrepeatable. Which skills are most used and with what degree of proficiency, this will depend, we think, on the subjects concerned, their profiles and communicational objectives, as well as their contextual environment.

In our view, the connection of IC to the idea of a relation between individuals (or between an individual and some verbal data which, in any event, must have been produced by another participant...), in a universe of acceptance and assumption of multilingualism, would represent the most interesting perspective, the one which best responded both to the results of our research project as well as to the summary of readings that we did. We considered that on this basis we could construct an understanding of our key concept that would best respond to the challenges of the Didactics of Plurilingualism, on the one hand, and to the essence of the concept, on the other: inter-comprehension = understanding between individuals, who may not use, in a given situation, the same language or languages, but who still strive to communicate with each other, interact, orally or in writing, face to face or at a distance, co-constructing meanings.

By concentrating on the dimension of the inter-action/relationship we also believe we stress on the political nature of the concept (which is originally European but that can be extended the more we step outside European linguistic families), putting it at the service of respect for Plurality and Diversity as factors of sustainable development, achieved by the communicative practice of individuals who apply them in their interactions.

Which definition did we propose then for the notion of IC (Santos 2007: 542-4)?

We considered IC as the process of interaction (face to face or at a distance, synchronous or asynchronous) between individuals or between an individual and some concrete verbal data, in which the participants, conscious (and confident) of their capacities to deal with unknown verbal data, co-build meanings, reach an understanding, through recourse to their linguistic-communicative, discursive and acquisitional repertoire, achieved by the putting into action – according to the situation, a Multilingual Competence which in turn feeds on the events of this same interaction.

Decisive for the IC process to take place will be the existence of the willingness of the individual to interact with Otherness, more specifically to interact with the language or languages of the Other, by sharing their own language or languages, in a process in which the parties seek at the same time to understand and make themselves understood.

This interaction can be also established with verbal data whose creators are not present in the communication situation (for example with regard to written texts). In this case, IC will depend not only on the performance of the individual that seeks to understand, but also on the data, how they are presented, on the languages they call upon, or, to put it briefly, on the “dialogue” (the intercomprehensibility?...), that can be established between these verbal data and the individual, in a process in which the degree of “opacity” of the language or discourse is decisive for the possibility of intercomprehension to take place.

According to our understanding of IC, this will no longer be seen as a “competence” or “strategy”, to the extent that these are, in their diversity and complexity, the means which the participants use to construct it, in a context where plurilingual competence could come into focus by the fact that different dimensions of the participants’ repertoires management are involved. And if plurilingual competence supports, albeit not alone, IC, which in turn feeds the former by providing it with new data, which the individual, recognizing in every interaction a potential learning situation and in this way activating

his/her learning skill, this will become incorporated into their repertoires in such a way that they are available for any future occurrence.

Defining IC in these terms, we think that it can be:

- at the micro level – of the participants and their interactions, a communicative/interactive objective;
- at the meso level – of the education system, a learning objective, a guiding principle of the learning processes, reinforcing the awareness of the need to promote the development of the individual's plurilingual competence;
- at the macro level, by the context in which it emerges and gains prominence (the European Union, but also a world wishing to be better able to dialogue), a political, social and cultural objective.

## Conclusion

*Le concept de l'intercompréhension est l'une des idées les plus remarquables et les plus stimulants dans le domaine de l'éducation plurilingue. (Doyé, 2005: 7)*

Although dated and certainly limited, our work on the concept of IC has allowed us to outline, on the one hand, the lack of a consensus about a definition of the concept, and on the other the reality of a broader conceptual framework in language education which can accommodate the different perspectives in a reasonably coherent and articulate way.

We subsequently obtained similar results in a more detailed work of meta-analysis which allowed us to identify 3 transversal thematic dimensions to the various perspectives of IC analysed: *rapport au plurilinguisme; importance accordée à la prise de conscience; dimension pédagogique* (Melo & Santos 2008: 16). Despite the differences, we have found similarities in these dimensions close to those we had identified in 2007.

Given this state of the art, the question that we currently raise on the epistemology of the concept of IC is as follows: is it essential that language researchers/educators that are engaged in IC should find ONE common definition?

If, on one hand the existence of a single definition might reinforce the political, educational and research impact of IC, due to this conveying the idea that all those who advocate it “speak with one voice”; on the other hand, would we not risk rejecting different nuances and perspectives that are, after

all, the source of the usefulness and interest of this concept? Would a single definition serve the purposes and perspectives of all work on IC, regardless of the contexts in which they develop and are intended for?

A basis of common understanding is certainly essential. But the work presented here seems to suggest that it exists. It is certainly crucial that whoever writes about it should clarify their own understanding of IC or else how they stand with regard to the concept, without ignoring the fact that there are other possible positions/understandings and which are equally valid. This is something where we can all improve. However, “to crystallize” a concept that is intended to be at the service of values such as Diversity, Plurality and Multimodality seems to us to be a contradiction that may bring more disadvantages than advantages to the field of Language Didactics.

The challenge, however, remains and given the lack of a sure answer, we think that, at least, the strategy for action is in motion: a greater articulation and collaboration among all those who believe in Intercomprehension, made possible thanks to Redinter (*European network of Intercomprehension*; a consortium of 28 partner universities and 16 associated institutions that expressed their interest in and commitment to IC).

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