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Reading intercomprehension, partial results of a case study

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Abstract

The present paper contains partial results of a research into Reading Comprehension, based on a case study with eighty-eight respondents. The questions were written in Romanian and the task was to underline the words they were able to understand and provide an answer to demonstrate their ability to decode the message. The translation and/or the answer could be given in English, French, Dutch, Italian, Spanish or German. The material provided is divided in five sections. A total higher than 50% will prove that intercomprehension is a possibility of communication at the reading level.

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1. Introduction. Respondent profile

The present paper analyses the answers and draws conclusions based on a survey that had as starting point one of the definitions of inter-comprehension “understanding between individuals, who may not use, in a given situation, the same language or languages, but who will still strive to communicate with each other, interact, orally or in writing, face to face or at distance, co-constructing meanings” (Santos, 2010, p. 29). It starts from the assumption that people speaking different languages can have at least limited understanding of an unknown language, no matter what group of European languages they belong to or have knowledge of. The written text is a type of communication whose creators are not present and which is called in the analysis to our survey Reading Intercomprehension. The target language chosen for this study was Romanian. Ten questions were given to 88 speakers of different languages. The answers to these questions have been analyzed in pairs in five articles written up to now.

The people questioned ranged from 18 to 60 year old, men and women with different levels of education: housewives, workers, students, teachers, economists, engineers, freelancers and so on. They come from different continents, covering almost all countries and languages. The languages spoken by the people answering the questions are: English, French, Bulgarian, Russian, Spanish, German, Catalan, Albanese, Greek, Dutch, Italian, Chinese, Polish, Czech, Turkish, Danish, Swahili, Arab, Berber, Swedish, Malaysian, Ukrainian, and Hungarian. Most of them know or speak English, French and Dutch at various levels, from beginners to native speakers.

The instructions for the questionnaire were written in English, French and Dutch, for a wider coverage: ‘Read the following question, underline the words you can understand and write the translation into one of the following languages: English, French, Dutch, Italian, Spanish or German. If you can understand the question, give a short answer in one of the abovementioned language, or in Romanian’. All respondents were asked to mention the country of origin and the languages they know (or they assume to know).

As the study tested reading comprehension, the respondents could only read each question without being given the possibility to listen to it being pronounced aloud. This is an important aspect of the study because the respondents could only rely on identifying graphic similarities between Romanian and the language they chose to answer in.

2. Analysis of questions

Ten out of twenty questions of the questionnaire were chosen based on the criterion of form and vocabulary to be analyzed first.

To meet the criterion, one choice was represented by very simple interrogative sentences that were supposed to follow certain conditions: length, clarity, words from the core vocabulary and a message to be easily understood. The questions were formulated in such a way that it would contain words having as few diacritics as possible in order not to make the sentences too complicated for the respondents. This category is represented by the following five questions given in Romanian as in the survey, and for a better understanding of the study we give the English equivalent of the sentences:

1. ‘Care este culoarea ta preferată?’/ ‘What is your favourite colour?’
2. ‘Unde mergi în concediu, la munte sau la mare?’/ ‘Where do you go on holiday, to the mountains or to the seaside?’
3. ‘Care este hobby-ul tău?’/ ‘What is your hobby?’
4. ‘Cu ce mijloc de transport vii la școală?’/ ‘What means of transport do you use to come to school?’
5. ‘Preferi să mergi la teatru, la operă, la balet sau la cinematograful?’/ ‘Do you prefer going to the theatre, the opera, the ballet or the cinema?’

The second set of sentences chosen to meet the criterion was intended to be the opposite of the first one. These questions are longer and they contain words with diacritics, so it is more complicated to be understood and answered. The next five Romanian interrogative sentences, also translated into English, make the ‘difficult’ part of the reading comprehension survey for the respondents:

6. ‘Cu ce îți place să călătorești, cu mașina, cu trenul, cu avionul sau cu vaporul?’/ ‘How do you prefer to travel by car, train, plane or ship?’
7. ‘Te uiți la reclame la televizor?’/ ‘Do you watch advertisements on television?’
8. ‘Ești căsătorit(ă), necăsătorit(ă) sau divorțat(ă)?’/ ‘Are you married, unmarried or divorced?’

9. 'Ai mâncat vreodata mămăligă cu brânză?/ Have you ever eaten polenta and cheese?'
10. 'Ce crezi că e mai ușor să înveți într-o limbă străină, să scrii sau să vorbești?/ What do you think is easier to do in a foreign language, to write or to speak?'

The first sentence is not very difficult to be understood but it is long and contains three words with diacritics, among which the verb is essential for getting the meaning of the sentence. The third question contains only one word with no diacritics although it is a basic sentence asking for information about the status of the person. The word 'divorțat(ă)' meaning 'divorced' might be recognized by people who speak English and French. The vowel placed in brackets at the end of each complement indicates the feminine. The fourth question contains words with diacritics, there is no international word, and, in comparison with the others, the type of food mentioned is traditional, and as far as we know it is specific to the Balkans. The last sentence asks for an opinion and it is one of the longest interrogatives which may be an obstacle for the respondents. There are also many words with diacritics (that sound differently when they are pronounced) and it is difficult for people to make connections to what they know from their native languages or heard in another language.

3. Analysis of the answers

The answers to the questions were divided into several categories: *no answer* (corresponding to the first segment of the pie chart – *blue* colour), *wrong answer* (corresponding to the first segment of the pie chart – *brown* colour), translation of some words (corresponding to the first segment of the pie chart – *yellow* colour), *translation of the whole question* (corresponding to the first segment of the pie chart – *pink* colour), *right answer* (corresponding to the first segment of the pie chart – *green* colour). Each category will be analyzed separately in order to establish connections between Romanian and the languages they answered in (or the native languages that influences their answers). In the end, conclusions will be drawn as to whether they were favourable or not to intercomprehension according to the higher or lower percentage of right answers or correct translations. The statistics for each question and for each category can prove the initial presumptions true or false.

3.1. The Statistical Analysis of the First Set of Questions

For the first set of interrogative sentences the answers were divided into five groups, as mentioned above, each showing the percentage of the recipients who performed the task in a certain way or failed to understand.

The *first question*: 'Care este culoarea ta preferată?/ 'What is your favourite colour?' is formed of five words, out of which the word 'culoare' is essential for holistic understanding. The percentages demonstrate that 19% of the recipients (the first two slices) could not perform the task while 62% of the recipients succeeded in eliciting the meaning either by translation or by an appropriate answer.

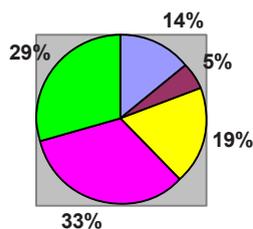


Figure 1. First question

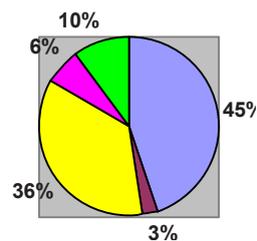


Figure 2. Second question

The *second question*: 'Unde mergi în concediu, la munte sau la mare?/ 'Where do you go on holiday, to the mountains or to the seaside?' is a bit longer in Romanian version. Our opinion is that *mountain* and *sea* are the key words in understanding the message of the question. The rest of the words could be guessed from the context. The first word could be easily guessed too, because a question like this one usually begins with a wh-question word. The percentages demonstrate that 46% of the recipients (the first two segments) could not perform the task while 16% succeeded in understanding the meaning. The segment corresponding to the group of people who recognized at least one word from the interrogative sentence is almost double in comparison to the segment from the first interrogative

sentence, due to the fact that the second sentence is longer and there are about twice as many words to be recognized.

The *third question*: ‘Care este hobby-ul tău?’ / ‘What is your hobby?’ has 4 words out of which the English, or rather international word, ‘hobby’ is the key word in understanding the message of the question. The rest of the words could be guessed from the context. The first word could be easily guessed too, because a question like this one usually begins with a ‘wh’-question word. If we add the percentage of the people who translated the sentence with those who gave correct answers to it, we are going to obtain the very high percentage of 70%. The percentages demonstrate that only 10% of the recipients (the first two segments) could not perform the task. Figure 3. Third question

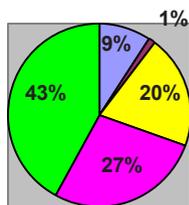


Figure 3. 3rd question

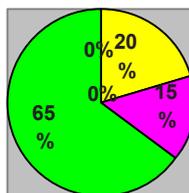


Figure 4. Fourth question

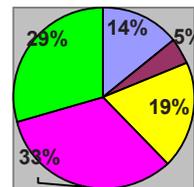


Figure 5. Fifth question

The *fourth question*: ‘Cu ce mijloc de transport vii la școală?’ / ‘What means of transport do you use to come to school?’ is easily understood as long as it has two words that were generally recognized: *transport* and *school* which reduced the percentages of the recipients (the first two segments) could not perform the task to 0%. That was one of the best percentages (66%) for the respondents who came up with an adequate answer to a question.

The *fifth question*: ‘Preferi să mergi la teatru, la operă, la balet sau la cinematograful?’ / ‘Do you prefer going to the theatre, the opera, the ballet or the cinema?’ is the longest one from the first set of interrogatives, although it contains words that can be internationally recognized. The task was correctly performed by 62% of the recipients who translated the whole sentence or offered a correct answer. According to the answers received the only part of speech more difficult to be understood correctly was the verb *to go*. The percentages also demonstrate that 19% of the recipients (the first two segments) could not perform the task.

3.2 The Statistical Analysis of the Second Set of Questions

For the second set of interrogative sentences we used the same type of pie chart, the same division into five segments and exactly the same colours so that the differences, if any, can be spotted easily.

The *sixth question* ‘Cu ce îți place să călătorești, cu mașina, cu trenul, cu avionul sau cu vaporul?’ / ‘How do you prefer to travel by car, train, plane or ship?’ is one of the longest interrogative sentences of the survey. The percentages demonstrate that 69% of the recipients (the first two segments) could not perform the task probably due to the difficulties in spotting and understanding the verbs.

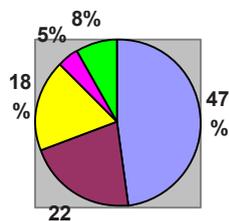


Figure 6. Sixth question

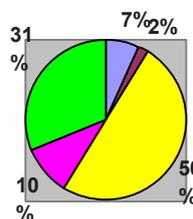


Figure 7. Seventh question

The *seventh question* ‘Te uiți la reclame la televizor?’ / ‘Do you watch advertisements on television?’ proved to have been understood better than we expected due to the words ‘reclame’ and ‘televizor’ that were recognized by

almost all respondents except for 9% who did not recognize any word or gave wrong answers. This denotes the fact that they could not understand the meaning of the sentence and could not provide a proper answer for the question.

The *eighth question* 'Ești căsătorit(ă), necăsătorit(ă) sau divorțat(ă)?/ Are you married, unmarried or divorced?' can be considered as being difficult because four words out of five have diacritics. The task was correctly performed by 39% of the recipients who translated the whole sentence or offered a correct answer. According to the answers received the only part of speech more difficult to be understood correctly was the verb. The percentages also demonstrate that 34% of the recipients (the first two segments) could not perform the task.

The *ninth question* 'Ai mâncat vreodata mămăligă cu brânză?/ Have you ever eaten polenta and cheese?' refers to a type of traditional food from Romania and the Balkans area. The percentages demonstrate that 90% of the recipients (the first two segments) could not perform the task. For this particular question the percentage shows that the sentence was too difficult to be understood even for speakers of Romanic languages.

The *tenth question* 'Ce crezi că e mai ușor să înveți într-o limbă străină, să scrii sau să vorbești?/ What do you think is easier to do in a foreign language, to write or to speak?' is a long question asking for a conclusion, made of 16 words, none of them easily understood, consequently the percentages demonstrate that 76% of the recipients (the first two segments) could not perform the task.

4. Conclusion

From the above statistical analysis, we can conclude that for the first set of sentences, in our opinion the easy one, the reading intercomprehension can be a channel that could be used both to communicate and to learn (or even teach) a foreign language by comparison with another one. The proper answer was provided by at least 52% and the most 90% of the recipients, in some instances 100% if we count those who translated at least one word so that we can consider that they understood part of the meaning. The great majority of people could understand simple sentences, containing international words that facilitate the whole meaning of the sentence. In this particular situation intercomprehension was possible. Using basic vocabulary and many international words we could presumably understand each other speaking our mother tongue.

From the same the statistical analysis, we can conclude that for the second set of sentences, initially considered the difficult ones, reading intercomprehension can be used as a way of written communication if the sentences do not contain many signs or diacritics specific for a certain language, that alter the pronunciation of the letters, and the readers have a certain level of education so that they can make connections between their language or the languages they know and the new language. The more languages a person knows, the easier it will be for them to understand an oral or written text in another language.

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