

# Intercomprehension in Theory and Practice: Teaching and Learning Plurilingual Competence in a European Context

**Claudia Polzin-Haumann**

Saarland University, Germany

**Christina Reissner**

Saarland University, Germany

## *Abstract*

*Plurilingualism and multilingualism have long been central to human interaction. However, in the context of increasing global mobility, digital communication and ongoing migration, they have gained renewed importance. This article examines some aspects of language diversity and plurilingual teaching and learning in Europe. It situates current European language policies as pivotal in fostering plurilingual competence and intercultural understanding through education. The discussion foregrounds exemplarily the pluralistic theoretical and didactic model of intercomprehension, defining its core principles and summarizing central concepts. It highlights digital and social learning environments and shows the importance of the human factor for successful plurilingual education. In this way, the article addresses pressing issues in language education and the impact of language policy, as well as the role of (language) teaching practices in overcoming communication barriers and fostering relationships across languages and cultures. These topics are of great importance in both the European and American contexts and beyond for successful transcontinental communication and relationship building.*

**Keywords:** *Intercomprehension, intercomprehension resources, plurilingualism, plurilingual practices, plurilingual resources, European language policy*

## **Multi- and Plurilingualism in Europe: History, Policies, Practices, Research. Introductory Remarks**

Language diversity is a phenomenon that runs through human history, even though it is often portrayed as a characteristic feature of today's societies. Language contact and multilingual communication have, nevertheless, been defining features of human interaction for a very long time and in various historical, geographical and social contexts (see Pavlenko, 2023; Franceschini, Hüning, & Maitz, 2023). However,

international exchange and human mobility have changed significantly, especially in recent decades. Worldwide trade relations and information exchange via digital media shape global communication. Migration caused by war, economic factors or climate change, leads to new contact situations (languages, peoples, cultures) and impacts national, regional and local contexts. Multilingualism and multiculturalism are therefore, more than ever, an integral part of everyday life. While these phenomena apply in principle to all societies, each respective circumstance is, of course, influenced by time, space and socio-political conditions. In this article, we focus on the European context and discuss experiences and findings within this specific linguistic landscape (Polzin-Haumann & Reissner, 2025).

What is specific to the European context is its political commitment to the phenomena addressed in this paper. Since the 1990s, languages, language learning, multi- and plurilingualism (i.e., languages on the societal level and languages at the level of individual speakers, cf. Polzin-Haumann, 2025) have been at the center of language and education policy efforts by various European stakeholders. For instance, the *European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages* (cf. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/european-charter-regional-or-minority-languages>; <https://rm.coe.int/1680695175> for the text), adopted in 1992 by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe and entered into force in 1998, is a convention for the protection and promotion of languages used by traditional minorities. Regional or minority languages are considered as parts of Europe's cultural heritage; their protection and promotion contribute to the building of a Europe based on democracy and cultural diversity.

Although the social aspect (*multilingualism*) is at the forefront of the Charter, there are many other key documents that address individual plurilingual competences as foundational for the path towards mutual understanding and comprehension among Europeans. First, the *Common European Framework of Reference* understands plurilingualism as a single, comprehensive communicative competence (CEFR, Council of Europe, 2001). The framework programmatically defines:

[...] the plurilingual approach emphasizes the fact that as an individual person's experience of language in its cultural contexts expands, from the language of the home to that of society at large and then to the languages of other peoples (whether learnt at school or college, or by direct experience), he or she does not keep these languages and cultures in strictly separated mental compartments, but rather builds up a communicative competence to which all knowledge and experience of language contributes and in which languages interrelate and interact. In different situations, a person can call flexibly upon different parts of this competence to achieve effective communication with a particular interlocutor. (CEFR, 2001, chapter 1.3)

The aim of this document was to make language acquisition, language use and language competence transparent and comparable for learners and educators by formulating different levels of competence. Gradually, it became the basis for the development of curricula, guidelines, textbooks and qualifications in European language work. While the CEFR ultimately provided instruments for a *measurement*

of competences in single languages, it remained in an additive view of language learning and use. The *Companion Volume* (Council of Europe, 2020) introduced new descriptors for, among other things, “plurilingual competence” and “pluricultural competence,” thereby advancing a rather integrative perspective on language learning and use.

Another important document entirely dedicated to this integrative perspective is the *Framework of Reference for Pluralistic Approaches to Languages and Cultures* (FREPA; Candelier et al., 2012). The term *pluralistic approaches to languages and cultures* refers to didactic approaches which use teaching and learning activities involving several (i.e. more than one) varieties of languages or cultures (<https://carap.ecml.at/en/>). The framework covers the didactic approaches of awakening to languages, intercomprehension between related languages, the intercultural approach and the integrated didactic approach, all of them fostering plurilingualism and/or -culturalism in their own right (ibid.).

The importance of multi- and plurilingualism and the need to promote them, is beyond question. European language policies are, as shown, generally conducive to fostering multi- and plurilingualism and have gradually been integrated into curricula and syllabuses, as well as into the classrooms. However, the extent of integration varies greatly from country to country and region to region. Overall, multi- and plurilingualism, and especially the teaching and learning of plurilingual competence, has become a central research field, especially in recent decades. Contributing to this growing momentum, the focus of this article is on the intercomprehension approach in theory and practice, highlighting two aspects extremely important in today’s world: individual learning in the digital space and social learning in the school community, along with the respective associated questions of knowledge transfer. Overall, we will outline the ways in which the human factor is a *conditio sine qua non* [an indispensable condition] for plurilingual learning and teaching.

### ***Intercomprehension in Theory***

Within the plurilingualism research landscape, *intercomprehension* is a pivotal concept. This section first provides the theoretical underpinnings of intercomprehension, defining its core principles and summarizing central concepts prior to introducing the widely used *EuroCom-approach*.

#### ***Defining Intercomprehension: Key Concepts and Principles***

Intercomprehension is a multifaceted concept that can be understood from various perspectives, ranging from a natural phenomenon and practice of multilingual communication to an instructional approach for language acquisition (Polzin-Haumann & Reissner, 2025). At its core, intercomprehension refers to the ability of speakers of closely related languages to understand each other without having explicitly learnt the other’s language(s). Following this perspective, intercomprehension is a natural, spontaneous practice within plurilingual communication activities that allows speakers to co-construct meaning (Capucho, 2018). This phenomenon exploits the shared or similar linguistic features of the involved languages, e.g. lexical phenomena or grammatical structures, to facilitate mutual understanding.

Based on this principle, intercomprehension can be developed into a methodology and approach for learning and teaching foreign languages, by systematically familiarizing learners with the relevant linguistic foundations and the techniques and strategies to be applied (Polzin-Haumann & Reissner, 2020; 2026). *Intercomprehension didactics* is the most widely used plurilingual teaching concept in Germany, and the subject of the largest number of empirical studies conducted in the field to date (Bredthauer, 2018). It has been elaborated intensively for the family of the Romance languages—e.g., French, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese—(cf. e.g. Meißner, 2004; 2010; Meißner & Senger, 2001), as well as for the Germanic language group—e.g., German, English, Dutch, Swedish—(Hufeisen & Neuner, 2005; Hufeisen & Marx, 2014). Recent studies also include other languages, e.g., native/family languages, but otherwise remain in line with the fundamental principles of Intercomprehension didactics (see Korb (2024) for a very comprehensive study with a longitudinal perspective).

### *Cognitive Processes in Intercomprehension*

Intercomprehension involves a range of cognitive activities focused on developing strategic competences. It can be trained and further developed by raising awareness about strategies for recognizing linguistic structures, e.g., the meaning of single words, phrases or even complete sentences (Polzin-Haumann & Reissner, 2025), as well as—on a meta-level—awareness about how these strategies work in one's own learning process. Put in a somewhat simplified way, the first case is referred to as *language awareness*, and the latter as *language learning awareness* (Bär, 2009). Both concepts involve complex (meta-)cognitive, psychological, and emotional processes that have not yet been fully researched.

Many researchers concur that the key element for successful intercomprehension is transfer (e.g., Doyé, 2003; Meißner, 2004). Transfer can take place on different levels and in many different forms (Reissner, 2007). Bär (2009) presents a typology that is helpful in determining the transfer process more precisely. It distinguishes between the type, the direction, the scope, the domain and the category, each with several subcategories. At the metacognitive level, Meißner & Senger (2001) speak of a transfer of learning experiences. “Thus, the transfer-based approach mobilizes both declarative and procedural transfer resources” (Polzin-Haumann & Reissner, 2025, p. 438).

It should be emphasized that intercomprehension is not merely the passive reception of language, but rather an active and highly dynamic process that draws on many transfer resources and takes place on many different levels. Cognitive strategies such as inferencing and hypothesis testing (for an example, cf. Polzin-Haumann & Reissner, 2020), strategic application of both linguistic knowledge and transferable elements from one's own linguistic repertoire and world knowledge, including situational and pragmatic elements (Doyé, 2005, p. 14; Reissner & Penth, 2023), make it a highly complex process that is difficult to fully assess for the development of learning scenarios due to its many interconnected factors. Descriptors for the assessment of intercomprehension competence have been developed within the European project EVAL-IC (cf. [www.evalic.eu](http://www.evalic.eu)).

In summary, intercomprehension contributes to the development of diverse,

interacting skills that often cannot be clearly distinguished from one another. The same applies to the resources and references that learners activate in a highly individual manner when working according to the intercomprehension principles. The next section will elaborate on what has been outlined so far by presenting a concrete intercomprehension concept, based on the Romance languages' linguistic transfer inventories.

### *The EuroCom Concept*

The EuroCom concept was initially developed for the Romance language family, with the work *EuroComRom – Die sieben Siebe: Romanische Sprachen sofort lesen können*, published in 2000 (for the English version see McCann, Klein & Stegmann, 2002). Subsequently, it has been extended to the two other major European language groups, the Germanic and the Slavic languages. EuroCom axiomatizes findings on cross-linguistic phenomena from various disciplines, applying a transversal perspective across language families (Polzin-Haumann & Reissner, 2025, p. 438).

The EuroCom approach is primarily concerned with the receptive dimension of communication, focusing on written and oral comprehension. It aims to build solid foundations in reading comprehension, which then can serve as a basis for developing further competencies (Reissner & Penth, 2023). The overarching goal of EuroCom is to foster plurilingual competence by systematically building bridges across linguistic boundaries, encouraging learners to use their prior knowledge on all levels (cf. supra) and reflect on their own languages and their (language) learning strategies as well as on the role of languages and plurilingualism in general (Reissner & Penth, 2023).

A cornerstone of the EuroCom approach is the framework of the *Seven Sieves*, a compilation of declarative linguistic resources, categorized according to practical application aspects for language comprehension and learning, providing the basis for inter-lingual transfer. They encompass lexical, grammatical, morphological, morpho-syntactical and syntactical, as well as graphic and phonic correspondences (for a more detailed description see Polzin-Haumann & Reissner, 2025). *Inter-lingual* refers to transfer within languages of the same language family. Nevertheless, experience shows that inference techniques can also extend beyond individual language families. The important point is to familiarize learners with skills and strategies for dealing with linguistic elements that are unknown or perceived as foreign (Polzin-Haumann & Reissner, 2018).

In sum, the *Seven Sieves* can be understood as a toolkit for optimized inference, enabling learners to infer meaning and structure within and across the whole Romance language family. The transfer may range from a word or a suffix to entire texts in previously *unknown* languages (Polzin-Haumann & Reissner, 2020) and permits the construction of meaning, and thus the understanding of the text or statement in question. What does this mean in practice for multilingual (language) learning? The following sections will address this issue by examining two selected examples.

## Intercomprehension in Practice

### *The Virtual EuroComCenter: Fostering Autonomous Plurilingual Learning and Knowledge Transfer in a Digital Environment*

The virtual EuroComCenter ([www.eurocom.uni-saarland.de](http://www.eurocom.uni-saarland.de)), currently available in German and planned to be fully accessible at the beginning of 2026 for Anglophone and Francophone users, emerges as a freely accessible digital learning environment, combining a training and learning portal with comprehensive digital information. Its core mission is to promote European multi- and plurilingualism through innovative, autonomous learning experiences designed to maximize the users' individual linguistic repertoires and to work on their attitudes towards languages and language learning.

The EuroComCenter facilitates a dynamic interplay between theory and practice. The platform not only explicitly addresses the mechanisms of interlingual transfer of knowledge and skills, but at the same time offers interactive opportunities to gather first experiences with the concept by means of interactive tasks, including the specific inventories encompassing the whole Romance language's family (Reissner & Penth, 2023). Users are independently experiencing how the approach works and understand what optimized deduction, the central transfer-based intercomprehension strategy underlying the EuroCom-concept, means in practice (<https://www.eurocom.uni-saarland.de/basiswissen/das-optimierte-erschliessen/>). As a central element, users are introduced to the toolkit of the linguistic transfer inventories of the Seven Sieves (<https://www.eurocom.uni-saarland.de/7-siebe/>; cf. supra).

Each of the *Seven Sieves* is accompanied by a training room where the learners can work with several Romance languages. The aim is to understand the underlying theoretical contents explained (e.g., grapho-phonetic correspondences) by discovering them in practice. There are various task formats: preparatory tasks facilitate familiarization with the texts and topics before the actual reading, tasks accompanying the texts support the concrete exploration work, and at the end, users can test what they have learned and if their understanding was correct. Finally, reflection tasks improve retention and optimize the learning process; by means of a learning log, learners can train autonomous learning skills and evaluate their learning progress effectively (<https://www.eurocom.uni-saarland.de/basiswissen/logbuch/>).

The design of the EuroComCenter is built upon several pillars, including methodological chapters that articulate the research background underpinning its digital content. These chapters, informed by established research, explain key concepts such as learner autonomy and self-regulated learning, language awareness and others (<https://www.eurocom.uni-saarland.de/basiswissen/>). The platform further encourages learners to deepen their theoretical understanding through a commented bibliography that summarizes relevant research, as well as a glossary that provides accessible explanations for technical terms. In line with contemporary research in intercomprehension and pluri-/multilingualism, the EuroComCenter also digitally presents insights into multilingual school projects and offers field-tested teaching materials (<https://www.eurocom.uni-saarland.de/schulprojekte/>

materialsammlung); see also Polzin-Haumann & Reissner, 2020).

Serving as a digital gateway to the intercomprehension concept and the diverse activities at Saarland University, the EuroComCenter offers resources for both scientific research and the practical application of autonomous plurilingual learning in a digital setting. It targets a wide audience of learners of all ages and levels – from individuals aspiring to acquire reading skills in multiple languages simultaneously to those engaged with intercomprehension from theoretical or applied perspectives (e.g., language teachers). The platform's design adheres to modern cognitive principles, employing a concise visual interface and intuitive graphic elements that streamline navigation and conceptually reinforce the presented content.

In addition to appealing to a wide range of target audiences, digital learning environments also allow for flexibility in terms of the individual learning path taken. Thus, the EuroComCenter supports the principles of autonomous and independent learning. Users are granted complete freedom to navigate the content at their own pace, unbound by a fixed progression. This empowers users to decide the order in which they wish to engage with subject areas or learning units, thereby personalizing their learning path. While offering this flexibility, the platform also provides concrete instructions for users who prefer more guidance, ensuring they have a clear path through the content. Doing so, the digital environment actively supports self-defined learning paths, promoting the learners' autonomy. The digital logbook allows users to systematically review and reflect on their personal learning strategies and progress, conceptualizing their learning path through the proposed material as a reflective travel diary (cf. Korb, Polzin-Haumann & Reissner, 2025).

### **Plurilingual Learning in the Classroom**

The aforementioned principles of multi-/plurilingual language learning raise various questions: What do they mean for institutional language learning? In how far could these principles be combined with *traditional* approaches? To do so, teachers should be familiarized with them, but how can this knowledge transfer be implemented?

Empirical studies on the effectiveness and conditions for success of multi-/plurilingual language teaching and learning are still required. To date, there are few empirically based concepts for integrating multilingual teaching into the training and continuing education of language teachers in order to prepare them to incorporate the multilingual resources of their students into their teaching (see Korb, 2024). In this section, we will examine several aspects of these questions referring to examples anchored in the German-French border region, in Saarland, Germany, where scientific scenarios of multi-/plurilingual learning and teaching have been developed, piloted, tested and evaluated for over 20 years.

Since 2009, students in different French and Spanish BA- and MA-programs in the department of Romance Languages and Literatures at Saarland University are introduced to the theoretical framework of the pluralistic approaches and particularly to intercomprehension. They are familiarized with the *Seven Sieves* and learn how to apply them in order to develop their receptive competences in the Romance language family. A particular format has been introduced for initial language teacher training: courses that include school projects on European multilingualism

and plurilingual education, with a focus on Romance languages. In these projects, theory (intercomprehension, the transfer inventories of the *Seven Sieves*, principles of plurilingual learning, etc.) and teaching practice are directly linked.

Students are first familiarized with the theoretical backgrounds of plurilingualism and plurilingual education; in a second step, they develop and realize their own plurilingual teaching activity in selected project schools. The activities are critically monitored and afterwards scientifically evaluated. From the students' point of view, these activities encourage them to perceive and utilize their individual linguistic and cultural resources. Doing so, they learn to comprehend ostensibly unfamiliar languages and foster their critical reflection on language(s) and language learning. The in-service teachers of the respective classes are also involved. Thus, we can observe knowledge transfer on three levels here: first, through students transforming what they have learned in theory into practical scenarios, second, through bringing in-service teachers in contact with *new* ways of teaching in their usual working environment, and third, the exchange between university and schools, i.e., between academia and daily places of learning. The successful integration of the multi- and plurilingual approaches into classroom settings directly addresses the desiderata mentioned above.

To consolidate and expand these activities and to systematically foster plurilingual teacher training, by building on the rich experience gained until then, the Institute for Languages and Plurilingualism (ISM) with a Teaching-Learning-Laboratory (Lehr-Lern-Atelier, LLA) was funded at Saarland University in 2017. The LLA is conceived as a research and meeting space and engages diverse audiences, including pupils, pre-service and in-service teachers, and researchers across various language-related disciplines (e.g., STEM-subjects) and nationalities. The activities include university courses, school projects, seminars and workshops on multi-/plurilingualism, plurilingual language learning and teaching, and concepts derived from multi- and plurilingual research and methodology (cf. Knopf et al., 2025).

The ISM is dedicated to theory-practice transfer in many different formats. This is facilitated by close collaborations with regional scientific and educational partners, ensuring a robust integration of research and practice throughout the educational continuum. The LLA's operational model also involves regular partnerships with numerous primary, secondary, and vocational schools within Saarland. Beyond regional schools, collaborations extend to learning laboratories in other disciplines, political stakeholders such as the Ministry of Education and Culture and the Saarland State Chancellery, and teacher training institutions (e.g., INSPÉ in Sarreguemines/France) in the so-called Greater Region, a border region in the heart of Europe formed by parts of Germany, France, Luxembourg and Belgium (<https://www.granderegion.net/en/>) (for more details, see Korb, Polzin-Haumann & Reissner, 2025, pp. 473–477).

The geographical closeness of the French language (official language in Lorraine/France, Luxembourg and Belgium) explains the role of French in the developed multi-/plurilingualism scenarios; at the same time, the educational efforts are embedded in an unquestionably authentic multilingual reality. Although the activities of the LLA also include training on how to promote linguistic and cultural diversity with digital media, the focus is on multi- and plurilingualism, (foreign)

language teaching and learning, and the methodology of neighboring languages and border regions, reflecting its commitment to a contextualized plurilingual education in a given multilingual space (see Knopf et al., 2025; Korb, Polzin-Haumann & Reissner, 2025, p. 476).

## Synthesis and Outlook

The aforementioned examples illustrate the potential of the intercomprehension approach for multilingual learning in both digital environments and concrete multilingual spaces with their historically, politically, socioculturally, and economically shaped linguistic landscapes and specific profiles and requirements for teaching, learning, and languages. However, the approach also has further potential, in that it affects learning *as a whole*. Transferring prior knowledge to new situations, moving from the familiar to the unfamiliar, combined with inference strategies, exploration, and hypothesis formation, are fundamental cognitive processes that are beneficial not only for language learning but for learning processes in general. Experience shows that recognizing familiar elements in unfamiliar languages has a significant impact on language learning motivation. Success in understanding presumed unknown languages promotes self-confidence and trust in one's own abilities and leads to a positive attitude toward future language learning processes (Korb, 2024; Polzin-Haumann & Reissner, 2018). By analogy with the above conclusion, these findings should also apply to fields other than languages.

Whether learning individually in a digital space or learning in a community, in both cases the focus is on important human characteristics. The intercultural, affective, and emotional components cannot be captured in automatic translation or other AI-generated services. Sooner or later, language learning processes are linked to social and cultural encounters and learning processes. Plurilingual communication and intercultural communication are closely related. In this sense, by affecting the way somebody deals with linguistic (and cultural) foreignness and otherness, the intercomprehension concept contains important transversal elements (*soft skills* or *transferable skills*) for lifelong learning.

Looking at language learning from a broader perspective, it is at the core of all learning. Therefore, it is an overarching, transversal educational task. It is particularly important to consider the pluralistic realities of our time and their importance for social cohesion and peaceful neighborhood relations. Over the past years, a variety of approaches have been developed including comprehensive, holistic concepts for dealing with and promoting plurilingualism. Of particular note are the works on the comprehensive language curriculum, *Gesamtsprachencurriculum* [*Integrated Language Curriculum*] (Hufeisen, 2011), and the multilingualism curriculum, *Curriculum Mehrsprachigkeit* [*Multilingual Curriculum*] (Krumm & Reich, 2013). The intercomprehension approach integrates into these holistic concepts completely, as it is aimed at the systematic cross-linking and networking of language knowledge and language skills. Unfortunately, however, the sustainable implementation of such comprehensive models is still the exception in the European educational systems, to date.

Overall, teaching plurilingual and intercultural skills is essential, particularly in today's world. Living together in peace in Europe and beyond can only be

achieved by developing and teaching strategies for overcoming foreignness and misunderstandings. There is no question of the importance of anchoring both aspects more firmly than before in foreign language teaching. As demonstrated, cross-linguistic work based on the concept of intercomprehension can contribute significantly to this development, by introducing new principles and skills into foreign language teaching. For this, the human factor will continue to play a decisive role in language teaching and learning.

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