

# MOSAIC

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THE JOURNAL FOR LANGUAGE TEACHERS  
Founded in 1993  
by ANTHONY MOLLIKA

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vol. 14 n. 1 2023

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MILAN 2024

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The Journal for Language Teachers

vol. 14 - 1/2023

ISSN 1195-7131

ISBN 979-12-5535-423-9

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La pubblicazione del seguente volume è stata possibile grazie al contributo finanziario della Società Italiana di Didattica delle Lingue e Linguistica Educativa (DILLE)



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Largo Gemelli 1, 20123 Milano | tel. 02.7234.2235 | fax 02.80.53.215

*e-mail:* editoriale.dsu@educatt.it (*produzione*); librario.dsu@educatt.it (*distribuzione*)

*web:* libri.educatt.online

Questo volume è stato stampato nel mese di dicembre 2024  
presso la Litografia Solari - Peschiera Borromeo (Milano)

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## Verbal misunderstandings and cultural misunderstandings. Language teaching and communicative competence: towards (and through) inter-comprehension

### *Abstract*

As recently remarked by Benucci (2022: 157), inter-comprehension, or approaching the process of language teaching in a multilinguistic and multilingual view, “rappresenta una modalità operativa fondamentale e potenzialmente fruttuosa all’interno della gestione dei contesti ‘svantaggiati’. (...)”. The need to identify this dimension also arose as a result of the difficulties caused by what Chick (1990) had defined as intercultural misunderstanding, that is, a failure of the communicative process for which all participants would be responsible. However, if it is true that misunderstandings in communication are mostly related to the different ways in which speakers conceptualize reality from their respective cultural, social and linguistic models, an approach based on inter-comprehension - that is, on the need to implement a common space in which making languages already known a tool for approaching to, and integrating with, the target language, can help to scale down the frequency and negative consequences of such mistakes. The aim of the paper, through the analysis of some case studies from contexts of teaching Italian as a second language to adult learners, is to show concrete examples for teachers of creating a functional and incentivizing inter-comprehensive environment for learners. A brief theoretical premise will be followed by the faithful illustration of some phases from a teaching experience in progress, where the positive results obtained by the students thanks to the tools of educational inter-comprehension also represent a ‘spur’ to create training paths for teachers that duly take into account these tools and this dimension.

### *Keywords*

Intercomprehension, language teaching, Italian as a second\foreign language, Multilingualism, Adult learners.

### *1. Preliminary thoughts: old and new arising questions*

Inter-comprehension, or the possibility offered to learners to draw on a previous linguistic and cultural heritage, even if only partially known, with the aim of encouraging the learning of a target foreign language (Benucci 2012 and 2022: 158 ss.), is not a ‘new’ theme in the composite panorama of reflections on linguistic education processes. Furthermore, the concept of inter-comprehension also refers, quite directly, to that of interconnection, introduced by Ronjat (1980),

with a first historical reference to the linguistic situation of the Roman Empire, in order to ‘point out’ the ancient, wrong practice of considering dialects of the same territory as separate entities, not interconnected or ‘interconnectable’ with each other and, then, with the ‘official’ language, when actually one could already speak of inter-comprehension in the context of commercial exchanges at that time. What the inter-comprehensive theory has in recent times underlined and brought to the attention of teachers, researchers and trainers, is the importance of “sfruttare le similitudini tra lingue di una stessa famiglia e legittima(re) l’importanza delle conoscenze parziali in quanto risorse indispensabili per apprendimenti e conoscenze maggiormente puntuali”. (Benucci 2022: 158; see also Cognigni 2015).

This contribute actually starts from a series of questions about the transversality of intercomprehension in the specific context of foreign languages:

1. To which languages can the concept of an inter-comprehensive approach (which in fact might allow to speak of a true inter-comprehensive linguistics) be applied?
2. How, and how much, does skills transfer contribute to the efficiency of the concept of inter-comprehension in language learning?
3. What characteristics should materials and curricula for teaching in the inter-comprehensive mode possess?
4. What training for teachers and facilitators can be set from an inter-comprehensive perspective?
5. What, if any, future scenarios open up for inter-comprehension in migration? (adapted from Benucci, 2022: 186).

From this perspective, it is also not wrong, in our opinion, to refer to another dimension, which has been mentioned for an equally long time among the possibilities for updating educational linguistics: the intercultural dimension, into which inter-comprehension evidently falls when it offers, as a means of eliminating misunderstandings and facilitating the process of approaching a foreign language, and its cultural substratum, the chance, for students and teachers, of referring to elements of the source language and culture or, alternatively, of ‘other’ cultures (and languages) previously learnt. An approach to the development of communicative competence based on inter-comprehension can actually help to reduce the frequency and the negative consequences of intercultural misunderstandings, which are otherwise more difficult to resolve, even by the teacher (cf. Chick 1990; Balboni 2007).

## *2. Possibilities for the realization of inter-comprehensive teaching paths: case studies from Italian as a second foreign language*

Among the widest advantages, for foreign language teachers, of using an inter-comprehensive approach there is, undoubtedly, the possibility of using it despite factors such as different age, levels of proficiency, and specific needs and interests of learn-

ers: in other words, the tools of inter-comprehension prove to be easily adaptable to learners of all ages, with knowledge of the target language and culture varying from non-existent to levels of literacy and autonomy, however moved by the need to learn the a wide amount of forms and contents of the target language. If a limitation can be found, it concerns the sometimes very large distance between the native language (or of the languages known already) and the target language (cf. Benucci 2022): in such cases, the use of the inter-comprehensive dimension may appear difficult, unresolving and lacking in motivation. Fortunately, it is not very frequent for this to happen, given the dominant presence of English and, likewise, the linguistic background of many learners or even their knowledge, even at an elementary level, of languages such as French, Portuguese or Spanish, which allow the creation of a 'bridge' to the target language.

The addressers of the observed courses, part of a SAI (System of Reception and Immigration) project, were men and women over 18 from Afghanistan, Tunisia, Palestine, Ivory Coast, Nigeria, Pakistan and Iran, almost all of whom were holders of international protection, with histories of migration that were not always easy and with different levels of study, ranging from illiteracy in their mother tongue to higher degrees of education (including university). The students learn Italian as a second language, but they know (or more precisely speak) other languages, which according to Nayab's (2022: 166-72) classification we have defined as 1. *selected* (mother tongue or other language of which they have relative mastery); 2. *active* (language of which they have a functional and productive knowledge, especially at the level of oral interaction); 3. *dormant* (languages they have learned at school or during the transfers that make up their migratory history, and which in a certain sense are a 'dormant' knowledge, that is, present almost at an unconscious level, with a need to be activated through specific inputs): languages that, at different levels, allow them to create an inter-comprehensive dimension towards Italian as a second language, a dimension that has in turn become a fundamental tool in the teaching-and-learning path.

## 2.1 Work in the classroom: verbal misunderstandings, cultural misinterpretations and 'inter-comprehensive metamorphosis'

Verbal misunderstandings and cultural misinterpretations in the classroom context are inevitable, since every culture is so dense with its own linguistic and extra-linguistic signals (cf. Balboni 1999: 26-28) that it does not always allow those involved in the interaction to recognize them as more or less proximate cultural references and, consequently, to productively and respectfully direct communicative actions: it is this unawareness that generates linguistic and (perhaps even earlier) cultural misunderstandings (Chick 1990). Some of these misunderstandings have inspired peculiar reflection in students. For example, during the final part of a lesson for A- and A1-level learners, which had focused on Italian cuisine and kinds of food, the following happened:

## Case 1

Student A: Oggi torno a casa prima! Mia moglie cucina la pasta...

Teacher: Allora chiama tua moglie e dille «butta la pasta perché sto arrivando!»

Student A: (...) Maestra ma perché “butta la pasta”? Cosa mangio poi?

The student's perplexed reaction to an expression which is evidently related to the regional variety of Italian used within the class (cf. Dardano 2015) makes one reflect on the fact that “buttare la pasta” (like the analogous “calare”) is an element that, while appearing immediately improper in its written form, is commonly accepted in the colloquial speeches of Italian as a L1 (according to what Serianni (2006) called a norm dictated by usage).

Let's now show a second example:

## Case 2

Teacher: Oggi controlliamo i compiti che avete fatto a casa!

Student A: Maestra io dimenticato compiti casa!

Student B: Come altra volta!

Student A: Domani io porto compiti, sicuro!

Teacher: Sì, buonanotte!

Student B: Perché dici Buonanotte? È bella giornata iniziata adesso!

The student seems genuinely perplexed about the use of a formula which is familiar, but is here used in a different meaning from the one he knows; the greeting “Buonanotte” used when the day has just begun is an example of lexical inappropriateness, if looked at from the normative point of view; but it's very frequently used (disbelief expressed in an ironic key about the concretization of an event), in the language of everyday life and communication among native speakers of Italian. Similar misunderstandings show up very frequently in the process of teaching Italian, given also the peculiarities related to regionalisms; however, the inter-comprehensive space suggests to use them as a ‘bridge’, as an elementary and ‘friendly’ vehicle for the transition from knowledge in L1 (or other foreign language already known) to the target language.

With reference to the two cases taken as examples, the teacher attempts a transformation of the ‘anomalous’ forms into an inter-comprehensive key:

a) – Teacher (smiling): ...mangi la pasta, tranquillo. «Buttare» e «Calare» la pasta in italiano si usa per dire più velocemente «mettere a cuocere, a cucinare». È più semplice.

– Student: Ah, meno male. Se butto pasta, a casa mia, io butto in spazzatura, difficile trovare subito altra in negozio!

b) – Teacher: Esattamente. «Buonanotte» per dire che è una cosa impossibile, come la notte in pieno giorno. In italiano si usa spesso.

– Student: Ah... Come quando in inglese dico “quando volano i maiali ...sì?”

– Teacher: Esatto.

Such a clarification also gradually has made it possible in later stages for students to make an independent use of the newly presented meanings.

Another example of cultural misunderstanding has been found in the spontaneous feedback of a Nigerian student, who had been living in Italy for 6 months at the times the course was being given :

Case 3

- Student: Maestra, oggi salutato mia vicina di casa...
- Teacher: Bene, che cosa hai detto?
- Student: Io detto ‘Buongiorno signora’ e lei risposto me ‘Buongiorno, cosa cucini oggi a pranzo?’ Maestra, italiano strano, tutti pensa solo a mangiare!

Food is widely used as a linguistic and sociocultural binder among native speakers of Italian, but it is ‘not so obvious’ to learners of Italian as a second or foreign language; on closer inspection, what in Italian may be considered a way of expressing interest and desire to start a communication, in other cultures may be interpreted as a signal of intrusiveness. The inter-comprehensive space is useful precisely to transform the content of misunderstanding into a tool for linguistic and cultural cooperation. In this specific case, the inter-comprehensive intervention was articulated as follows:

- Teacher: ...la tua vicina ti ha chiesto cosa mangi per pranzo perché vuole parlare con te, ma siccome non ti conosce bene, e siccome in Italia parlare di mangiare ‘è una bella cosa’, ti ha chiesto questo.
- Student: Capito...domani allora chiedo io lei cosa mangia (...)

The last case of this first part concerns inter-comprehension dealing with multiple foreign languages already known at the same time. Taking the learning unit on school materials and the location of objects in space as an example, inter-comprehension played a very relevant role. The main objectives were to recognize the vocabulary dealing with school tools, to place objects in space and to recognize actions which suited to the classroom space. The creation of the inter-comprehensive dimension between distant languages was made possible by similarities – though occasional – between groups of sounds or between individual phonemes, that enabled students to reach a plausible level of comprehension, which otherwise would have been severely limited precisely by the profound differences between the languages represented (French-Persian/Farsi-Swedish). The learning unit included at first the introduction of the names of objects and people (*studenti*, *maestra*, and so on) inherent in the classroom environment and, since the use of articles had not yet been introduced, the use of cardinal numbers to allow an initial quantitative determination of those objects (*due studenti*, *un insegnante*, etc.). Through the rhythmic scansion of the pronunciation of numbers and the proxemic use of “counting on the hands” (although, compared to Italian and Western culture in general, the Arabic world makes counting start not from the thumb but from the little finger), a preliminary understanding was reached in an intuitive key, which served as a forerunner for the inter-comprehensive dimension (De Carlo 2014).

The next step saw the introduction of prepositions of place, which enabled inter-comprehensive ‘embeddings’ between the known languages and the target language. With reference to prior knowledge of French, for example, the Italian prep-

osition *dentro* became *dantro*, by vowel transposition from the French form *dans*. A similar episode involved the preposition *su*, which was instead well understood due to its strong assonance with French *sur* (whose consonantal ending, not being too intense in pronunciation, could be elided without difficulty by the students). For Persian farsi, inter-comprehension found foothold in an assonance, albeit remote, with the English word *above*: *above/ bâlâ*. A singular case involved the same Italian preposition in the learning process of an Iranian student with a history of previous migration to Sweden: starting with the Swedish *upp*, with clear reference to the English form *up*, he tried to render it into Italian with *Appa* (creating coincidence between grapheme and pronunciation and adding a final vowel (a very common end of many Italian words)), thus creating an example of lexical inter-comprehension, or of inter-comprehensive lexicon.

A separate mention deserves, perhaps, the so-called “Bonjour case,” which involved a “senior” learner from one of the observed classes, with a higher level of education, but with no knowledge of any other language except Persian/farsi. This learner, taking from his already well-defined receptive skills, after a phase of only listening to the languages spoken by his classmates (with a clear predominance of French), began to use that language, which ended up becoming for all intents and purposes a principle of inter-comprehensive space, as he brought back excerpts of the French language studied in Afghanistan. *Bonjour* is, specifically, the word the student chose to use for his first approach with the teacher: an appreciable attempt to communicate in a language known to his interlocutors, which in turn can be interpreted as a manifest desire to get to learn, and communicate, in the target language.

## 2.2. Outside the classroom: inter-comprehension and the autonomous management of communicative events

Image 1 – Preliminary activities as shown in the classroom (<https://ww2.ac-poitiers.fr>)

**LA FRUTTA E LA VERDURA**

**1. LEGGI E RETROVA** - Leggi le descrizioni e sottolinea -in verde la forma -in rosso il gusto e -in blu gli aggettivi stagionali. Poi, trova il frutto o l'ortaggio corrispondente alla descrizione e scrivi il nome sull'immagine.

L'ALBICOCCA L'ARANCIA	IL PEPERONE LA ZUCCHINA	IL POMODORO L'ANGURIA	IL FUNGO IL LIMONE	LA CILIEGIA LA MELANZANA	IL KIWI L'UVA
 È una verdura primaverile o estiva. Sono rossi ed esistono diversi tipi (piccoli, grandi, rotondi, allungati...)	 È una verdura primaverile o estiva molto amara. È lunga e viola. Si usa molto in Sicilia per cucinare.	 È un frutto estivo dolce e succoso. È molto grande e può essere rotonda o ovale. È rossa dentro e verde fuori.	 È una verdura autunnale. Si raccoglie nei boschi, soprattutto quando piove. Può essere lungo o corto, grande o piccolo. È marrone.	 È un frutto invernale, dolce, ma anche un po' aspro. È arancione e rotondo.	 È un frutto invernale un po' piccolo e con un sapore acido. È marrone fuori e verde dentro. Ha tanti semi neri.
 È un frutto primaverile molto dolce, ma acido se non è maturo. È arancione, ovale e ha un grande nocciolo dentro.	 È un frutto autunnale. Può essere chiara (bianca, gialla) o scura (rossa, viola). Questo frutto serve a produrre il vino.	 Questo frutto appartiene alla categoria degli agrumi. È possibile trovarlo tutto l'anno. È di colore giallo ed è molto aspro.	 È una verdura estiva. Possono essere gialli, verdi o rossi. A volte sono piccanti, a volte sono dolci.		

**2. Completa la tabella con gli aggettivi che hai sottolineato**

FORME	GUSTO	STAGIONE
•	•	•
•	•	•
•	•	•
•	•	•
•	•	•
•	•	•
•	•	•
•	•	•
•	•	•

**3. ESPRESSIONE ORALE** - Ora scegli un frutto o una verdura che è presente nella tabella e fai indovinare i tuoi compagni. Usa la prima persona del singolare e utilizza gli aggettivi che hai imparato per la descrizione (forma, gusto, stagione e colore).  
*Esempio: Sono grande e rotonda. Sono rossa dentro e verde fuori. Sono dolce e succosa e mi piace l'estate. Chi sono?* (ANGURIA)



students, in which the tools of the inter-comprehension demonstrate their actual usefulness:

Case 4: At a fish and meat stall

- Seller: Buongiorno! Di cosa hai bisogno?
- Student: (using mimics and gestures) «1 chilo cichino, 2 agge, mezzo chilo mussle».
- Seller: ... (clearly doesn't understand)
- Student: ... cichino, «coccodè coccodè»
- Seller: Pollo! (pointing at the chicken)

Remedial strategies have gone into action: the student integrates elements of onomatopoeia and proxemics to the verbal speech structures (cf. Balboni 1999 and 2007) and tries to find a foothold in the known languages, and actually makes the message comprehensible to the seller (who manages to decipher the words *agge* (very similar to *egg* in English, evidently known to him, too, to some extent) and *mussle*, because there are areas in Italy where mussels are called muscles). For *cichino*, the explanation is slightly more articulate: the term used is a construction that comes from Swedish, italianized into a masculine singular form through the use of the inflectional morpheme *-o*: thus *cichino* = Italian *pollo* (on closer inspection, also similar to English *chicken*).

### 3. Possible first conclusions

The reflections shared here move, as it has been said, from some preliminary questions dealing with the possibility that developing a language teaching process in an inter-comprehensive environment constitutes a facilitation and an important incentive in learning a foreign language, as well as a concrete aid for the teachers to the creation of a fruitful and 'serene' environment. To some of these questions, the experience with Italian language mentioned above has, to some extent, provided an answer. While it is true, for example, that inter-comprehension exploits the concept of a "bridge language," that is, a language that is used to approach the understanding of the target language in an easier way (Scheitza, Visser 2020), the answer to the first question ("to which languages can the concept of an inter-comprehensive approach be applied?") may well be that this approach lends itself more than adequately to the gradual establishment, either through teacher or direct student reflection, of connections between known and unknown languages, even when they are profoundly dissimilar to each other, though the greater difficulties where critical situations are present (such as illiteracy already in the mother tongue, or exclusive knowledge of an L1 with no common ground with the L2 nor with other 'permissible' languages) remain. Similarly, while it is true that inter-comprehension requires, as a primary tool for the teacher, at least a previous basic knowledge of structures and content of already known languages and of the target language, it is also true that training students to identify similarities between different languages means keeping their comprehension skills as well as their receptive skills trained, which – as urged by the second question recalled in the opening – thus reassert their main

role in the process of language teaching and learning, despite the main development of productive skills led on for a long time.

In the inter-comprehensive space, the learner is the center of the teaching action and, among the various roles the teacher is asked to play, there is that of facilitator of learning. For this reason, the learner's stages of autonomous work should be supplemented with moments of discussion and metalinguistic as well as meta-communicative reflections (cf. Abbaticchio 2022) with the teacher, who should be trained to preliminarily identify, already in the planning stage, the linguistic issues that can be solved in the space of inter-comprehension (cf. Benucci 2022; De Carlo 2011); and to propose paths to reach the solutions in an inductive way. Therefore, teacher training in inter-comprehension (a central question among those put at the beginning) also passes through what De Mauro (2018) had called a democratic and, in a sense, 'enlarged' language education: alongside equal dignity, each language in turn possesses an apparatus of skills (metalinguistic, communicative, pragmatic ones) that undoubtedly simplify the creation of an inter-comprehensive space.

Finally, a first answer to a last, troublesome question ("What future scenarios are opening up for intercomprehension in the field of migration?") is perhaps to be found in Benucci's words, according to which inter-comprehension "(...) rappresenta una modalità operativa fondamentale e potenzialmente fruttuosa per operare all'interno della gestione dei contesti svantaggiati, gestione fortemente segnata dalla frammentazione e dalla dispersione delle esperienze e delle buone pratiche realizzate. La creazione di uno spazio comune tra politica e scienze del linguaggio all'interno del quale sentirsi compresi rappresenta una importante opportunità per l'inclusione, l'integrazione e l'affermazione individuale." The experience of teaching Italian as a second language within a pathway of reception and integration (linguistic, social, economic, cultural one) of people with painful experiences concretely shows the effective usefulness of the inter-comprehensive dimension in such a teaching environment and, consequently, the appropriateness of providing specific training paths for teachers, already starting from university education (Cognigni 2015). Inter-comprehension was born, evidently, to relate above all to problematic contexts: but this does not exclude that also in other, more ordinary teaching contexts, it allows fruitful and concretely recognizable evolutions on the part of learners, in terms of linguistic knowledge, mastery in communication and full integration in the new environment to which they belong.

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