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The benefits of the Intercomprehensive Approach for Students with Specific Learning Difficulties: preliminary data of an experimental study[1]

Abstract

Intercomprehension is one of the Pluralistic Approaches to Language Teaching supported by solid scientific research (for an overview: Bonvino, Jamet 2016). Despite the similarities between intercomprehension and strategies for inclusive language education, the efficacy of this approach in the presence of language disorders is largely unexplored at an empirical level.

This paper aims to fill this gap through the presentation of the research design of a pilot study conducted by the ELICom Research Group at the University of Parma within a workshop of intercomprehension between Romance languages, in which learners with Specific Learning Disorders also participate. The aim of the research is to investigate some psycho-dynamic aspects involved in language learning, such as the participants' sense of self-efficacy, language anxiety and strategic competence.

Keywords

dyslexia – intercomprehension – inclusion – language anxiety – self-efficacy – learning strategies – bimodal input presentation

1. *Literature review*

Intercomprehension (henceforth IC) between related languages is one of the four pluralistic approaches to languages and cultures developed in the last decades of the XX century, i.e. "didactic approaches which use teaching/learning activities involving several (i.e. more than one) varieties of languages or cultures" (Candelier et al. 2010). In IC, several languages of the same linguistic family are studied in parallel and with a specific focus on receptive skills: in a communicative situation it can occur that interlocutors understand each other even though they are speaking different languages.

[1] Paragraph 1 was written by P. Celentin; paragraphs 2, 2.1 and 2.2 by A. Ghirarduzzi; paragraphs 2.3 and 3.4 by S. Benavente Ferrera; paragraphs 3, 3.1, 3.2 and 3.3 by M. Daloiso. The remaining sections were written by the authors together.

IC has developed various teaching methodologies and techniques which are based on 5 common principles:

1. in the context of an individual IC teaching program, more than one language can be developed simultaneously;
2. developing partial competences is normal (Council of Europe 2001; 2020);
3. the focus is put on understanding and mutual comprehension: speakers need to adapt to each other (different levels or varieties of language, different kinds of text, etc.);
4. language is analyzed first inductively, and later more explicitly (only if necessary);
5. the development of strategic and metacognitive competence is central.

IC learning welcomes and aims to develop transferable, interdisciplinary skills, particularly collaboration, communication, learning strategies, creative thinking and an analytical attitude (Candelier et al. 2010).

In recent years, research interests have expanded to the challenges of oral IC (among others: Jamet 2009; Cortés Velàsquez 2015). However, written IC has remained the most investigated modality since the 1970s.

Until recently, the centrality of the written text in IC has been seen as an obstacle for certain types of students, in particular for those who have Specific Learning Difficulties (henceforth SLDs)[2].

Celentin (2020; 2021), in a comparison between the theoretical principles of inclusive language education (henceforth ILE) and those proper to the IC approach, identifyed the following points of convergence:

1. interest in the development of metaphonological competence;
2. priority of meta-strategic expertise;
3. core role of motivation;
4. effort to contain language anxiety;
5. use of compensatory tools;
6. development of learner autonomy.

In the research project presented in this paper, we focused principally on points 2,4 and 6. For a critical review of these points see Daloiso (2023). For an overview of the affinities between the teaching of IC and ILE see Benavente, Celentin (in press).

[2] SLD are a heterogeneous group of disorders of neurobiological origin affecting the learning and use of basic skills (reading, writing and calculation): the disorders are connected to one another and are linked to other more general deficits concerning oral language comprehension and linguistic expression (Cornoldi 2007). According to the Italian legislation (Law 170/2010, Decree 5669/2011), SLDs include: dyslexia, dysorthography, dysgraphya and dyscalculia. Insights on the linguistic, cognitive and psychological obstacles encountered by these students in learning a L≠1 and on the theoretical and methodological principles developed to support learners can be found in (among the most recent) Daloiso 2017; Kormos 2017; Cappelli and Noccetti 2022.

2. *Research design*

In this section, the research design will be introduced, in particular: the educational context in which the study was developed, the participants who make up the study sample and finally the research questions, the methodology and the instruments used to gather the data.

2.1 Educational context

The data discussed in this paper are part of a pilot study which was conducted by the four authors of this paper, who are members of the ELICom Research Group (University of Parma), within the context of an experimental IC workshop organized by the group at the University Language Centre during the academic year 2021/2022 and which took place in the spring of 2022. More specifically, this workshop revolved around IC between Romance languages and was open to all the students enrolled in the University of Parma. The workshop was part of a wider educational project (started during the a.y. 2018/2019) which aims at supporting language learning (in particular English) among undergraduate and graduate students with SLDs. Therefore, even though it was open to all students, the workshop was created with the aim of promoting the IC approach as a form of language learning enhancement among students with SLDs and also to test its effectiveness in this specific context.

The workshop lasted approximately two months (from 30th March to 1st June), and was entirely conducted online. Most of the activities were carried out during synchronous meetings (for a total of 20 hours). About 1/3 of the workshop (10 hours) took place asynchronously, with the students being assigned group tasks to perform on the digital platform of the University of Parma; these activities were intended as "bridge activities" (Celentin, Benavente Ferrera 2019) in between one synchronous meeting and another.

As normally happens in the IC approach, all the activities were based on multilingual communication: the main tutor used Italian and the dialect of Parma as communication languages, whereas all the participants exploited their language repertoire by using one or more romance languages, including dialects. As concerns the written inputs, a variety of different texts were selected (songs, narrative texts, informative texts, etc.), and from a variety of languages: Italian, Catalan, French, Spanish and Portuguese. Activities based on these languages were carried out with the assistance some language experts who joined the tutor during the synchronous meetings.

2.2 Participants

20 students took part in the IC workshop, but only 12 of them signed the informed consent to be part of the research. These 12 were divided into 2 sub-groups: the "+SLD group" was made of 5 participants (2 females and 3 males) with SLD with an average age of 24.2; while the "-SLD group" was made of 7 participants (5 females and 2 males) without SLD with an average age of 25.5. The two groups are compa-

rable both in terms of age and multilingual repertoire, which includes all the main European languages normally learnt in school and sometimes also Italian dialects. Nonetheless, the -SLD group is more heterogenous than the other as regards both the type of Degree Course attended by its members and their language background. In fact, three of them are enrolled in the Degree Course of Modern Foreign Languages, which could be associated with a greater interest and aptitude for language learning. Moreover, this group is less homogeneous even as concerns native languages, with two participants having an L1 other than Italian and one participant being bilingual.

In the light of these considerations, and from a classroom-based research perspective (which does not always allow for the respect of some parameters of the classic research design), the -SLD group cannot be considered a proper control group. For this reason, the two sub-groups are to be considered as sub-components of the same experimental sample.

2.3 Research questions, methodology and instruments

The general research goal is to experiment IC in class groups in which there are students with SLDs. The specific research goals aim at exploring the effects of IC in the potential common areas with ILE. Figure 1 shows the research questions, their related research hypotheses and the complete set of research instruments used.

To be able to cross-reference quantitative and qualitative data, the data collection was made with the use of different tools with a different degree of internal structuring. Some instruments were administered both at the beginning (T1) and at the end (T2) of the IC workshop, with some minimal variations, to allow for a comparison between the incoming and outgoing profiles of the participants.

Fig. 1 – *Research questions, related hypotheses and specific research instruments*

RQ1: Does IC improve the sense of self-efficacy[3] (henceforth SE) of students +SLDs and -SLDs in reading comprehension activities in L≠1?
• RH1.1 IC improves the sense of self-efficacy of -SLDs and +SLDs learners. • RH1.2 Through IC, the gap in the sense of self-efficacy between +SLDs and -SLDs learners decreases.
RQ1 specific tools: – RS1.1 Questionnaire on the sense of self-efficacy related to reading comprehension to be administered at T1 and T2. – RS1.2 Semi-structured interview

[3] According to the Self-Efficacy Theory (Bandura 1977), people can make a difference through their actions. If learners believe they can achieve the desired effects through their actions, then they will be more motivated to carry out activities or persist in the face of difficulties.

RQ2. Does IC reduce reading anxiety[4] in +SLDs and -SLDs learners in reading comprehension activities in L≠1?

- RH2.1 IC reduces reading anxiety of -SLDs and +SLDs learners.
- RH2.2 Through IC, the reading anxiety gap between -SLDs and +SLDs learners decreases.

RQ2 specific tools:

– RS2.1 Questionnaire on language anxiety related to reading comprehension to be administered at T1 and T2.
– RS1.2 Semi-structured interview.

RQ3. Does IC have an impact on meta-strategic skills in the +SLDs group?

- RH3.1 IC brings advantages to meta-strategic skills for +SLDs learners.

RQ3 specific tools:

– RS3.1 Questionnaire based on Oxford's Strategy Inventory for Language Learning[5] (henceforth SILL) to be administered at T1 and T2.
– RS3.2 Oralization of an unknown text and Think Aloud Protocol[6] (henceforth TAP) to be administered at T1 and T2.

RQ4. Does the enhacement of the ability to recognise similarities between related languages developed through IC (bimodal input presentation[7]: reading and reading-while-listening) improve reading comprehension in L≠1 for +SLDs and -SLDs learners?

- RH 4.1 IC improves comprehension of written input for -SLDs and +SLD learners.
- RH 4.2 Through IC, the gap between -SLDs learners and +SLDs learners in reading comprehension activities decreases.

[4] Foreign language anxiety (Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope 1986) is considered a negative emotion that can interfere with language learning, especially when learners experience frustration to the point of feeling incompetent or even useless. In this research project we will deal with reading anxiety, the strong negative emotional reaction to reading.

[5] The questionnaire "Strategy Inventory for Language Learning" was developed by Oxford (1990) to measure the use of language strategies and determine their relationship to other factors, such as age, gender, proficiency, learning style, and culture.

[6] Think-aloud protocols involve participants thinking aloud as they are performing a set of specified tasks. Participants are asked to say whatever comes into their mind as they complete the task. This gives observers insight into the participant's cognitive processes.

[7] Research on input presentation and L≠1 acquisition suggests that language input mode can play a crucial role when learning a L≠1. Bahrani, Nekoueizadeh (2014) emphasized the relevance of input presentation because it provides the possibility for learners to process, learn and acquire the L≠1. Chang (2009) investigated the effectiveness of using a bimodal mode (reading while listening) as opposed to the unimodal input mode (listening only) in the English Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. Webb, Chang (2015) investigated the effectiveness of the bimodal mode in English vocabulary acquisition.

RQ4 specific tools:
- RS4.1 Text Delivery Preference Survey -Tx (at the end of every reading activity).
- RS4.2 Questionnaire to detect the degree of objective comprehension of the text -Tx (at the end of every reading activity).
- RS4.3 Anecdotal card for detecting the individual perception of comprehension.

3. *Results and discussion*

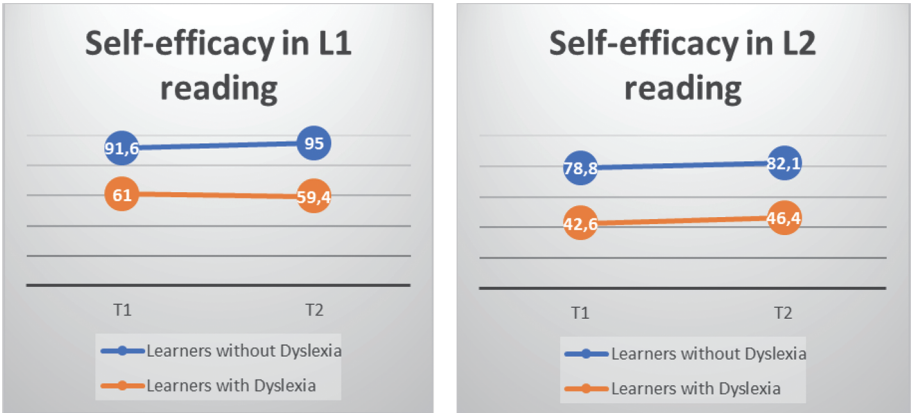
This section is devoted to the discussion of the research outcomes. In each sub-section, specific data are presented which are relevant to answering each research question.

3.1 Self-efficacy (SE)

Fig. 2 shows that at T1 participants with SLDs scored significantly worse in SE tests. Particularly, their scores are 30 points lower than their peers in L1 reading and even lower (35 points) in L2 reading. The answers to each item of the questionnaire reveal that -SLDs participants considered themselves good L1 readers (9.3 out of 10 points), with excellent decoding (9.6) and phonological skills (8.5). Conversely, +SLDs learners perceived themselves as poor L1 readers (6.1) with difficulties in decoding (4.8) and phonological skills (5.2); during the interviews, they also shared painful school experiences which affected their self-image.

While not reducing the overall gap, the experiment slightly affected both groups' SE. However, since +SLDs participants only improved their L2 reading SE scores, our analysis will focus on this area.

Fig. 2 – *Pre-test and post-test SE variations*



Regarding L2 reading, at T1 -SLDs learners considered themselves good L2 readers (7.6) with good grammatical competence (8.7), global comprehension skills (8.8) and syntactic awareness (8.5). Slightly lower scores were found in morphological

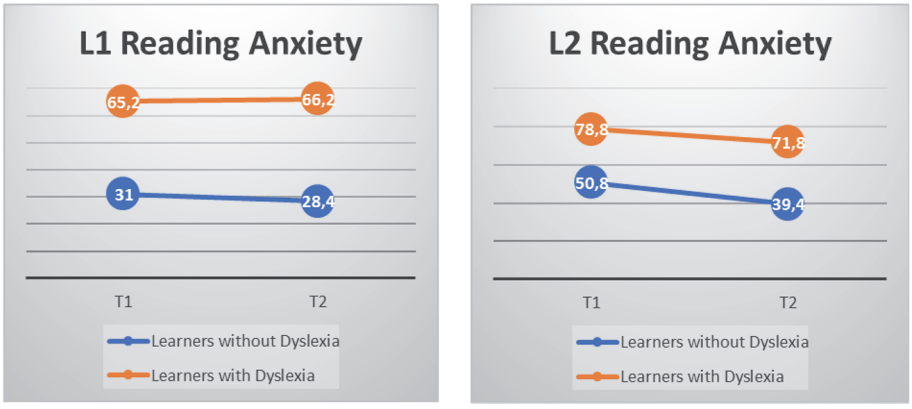
awareness (7.2), phonological processing (7.3) and analytic comprehension skills (7.5). Interestingly, these "weaknesses" are precisely the ones which improved by 0.5 points at T2.

On the other hand, +SLDs learners considered themselves very poor L2 readers (4.4), with extremely low decoding skills (2.6), orthographic awareness (2.8), phonological processing (3.0) and grammatical competence (3.6). The only item of the questionnaire above 6 was the one related to resilience (6.8). Moreover, the interviews revealed that these learners privileged a word-by-word approach to reading comprehension with a great emphasis on bottom-up processes (i.e., decoding). The IC experiment improved their self-perception as L2 readers by 1 point (5.4), as well as their sense of SE in their weaknesses by 0.8-to-1.6 points. Notably, decoding scores increased by 1.6 points and resilience by 1.8 points.

3.2 Reading anxiety (RA)

Fig. 3 shows how perceived RA in L1 and L2 changed throughout the experiment. +SLDs participants showed higher levels of RA than their -SLDs peers. The gap is even bigger in L1 reading, probably due to dyslexia-related issues with literacy. Standard deviation is quite high in both groups, which indicates that the levels of RA across the two groups are not homogeneous. The experiment did not have much of an impact in L1 RA, but it did lower L2 RA. Notably, while the gap between the two groups at T2 is still relevant, standard deviation within the +SLDs group was significantly reduced, which indicates that L2 RA homogenously decreased across this group.

Fig. 3 – *Pre-test and post-test RA variations*



Regarding L1 RA, at T1 +SLDs participants defined themselves anxious readers (6.6 points out of 10), unlike their -SLDs peers (2.8). These scores remained unchanged at T2. At T1, the activities causing greater anxiety were reading aloud (7.2), test-taking (7.2), and decoding one's own notes (7.0). Interestingly, at T2 a steady decrease of L1 RA in reading aloud (-1.4) and test-taking (-1.2) was detect-

ed; however, the overall score did not change significantly because the scores of other items were slightly higher at T2. In reference to L2 RA, at T1 +SLDs participants perceived themselves as more anxious (7.6) than their -SLDs peers (5.0), but at T2 these scores decreased by approximately 1 point in both groups. The peaks of L2 RA in +SLDs learners correspond to activities typically affected by a reading disorder, such as reading aloud (8.8), fast decoding (8.6), and test-taking (8.8). Interestingly, at T1 both groups show high levels of anxiety in activities somehow related to IC, such as reading a text in an unknown dialect, or reading a multilingual text, but at T2 in both groups such scores decreased significantly. Notably, at T2 +SLDs learners felt more confident in reading a multilingual text (-2.0) and decoding an L2 text (-2.0).

3.3 Strategic competence

Strategic competence was investigated by administering the SILL questionnaire and a TAP activity before and after the experiment. Due to the great quantity of data collected, this section will only focus on +SLDs learners.

The SILL data show that, at T1, these participants perceived themselves as "average strategy users" (29.7 points out of 50), with a slight increase at T2 (32.8). Although the distribution of these scores is not quite homogenous across this group (standard deviation: 5.7 at T1 and 6.1 at T2), all in all the group perceived some improvement in their strategic competence, particularly in the capacity of "using foreign words in different ways" (+1.0) and "splitting words into parts to reconstruct their meaning" (+1.35).

However, the learners' performances during the TAP activities revealed some difficulties in applying these strategies in an IC context. For instance, most participants approached text transposition by reading the text aloud, although this practice was not encouraged either during the course or during the task administration. This approach proved ineffective as it caused major decoding errors. Here are some examples related to the pre-test TAP, which was based on a Galician text: poseu (*posúe*), carmelita (*camelia*), cremento (*crecemento*), plata (*plantas*), expetos (*expertos*), afitados (*afastados*). These errors, which are clearly due to a reading disorder, prevented some participants from accessing the text meaning.

Moreover, at T1 most learners translated the text sentence by sentence, while no-one opted for a silent skimming reading before trying to transpose it. At T2, while this tendency was still prevalent, some learners, after unsuccessfully trying to read the text aloud, opted for other strategies, such as subvocalization or silent reading. The change of strategy, which can be interpreted as a positive effect of IC, enabled these learners to easily identify the topic of the text, as well as detect similarities between the unknown language and some languages of their repertoire.

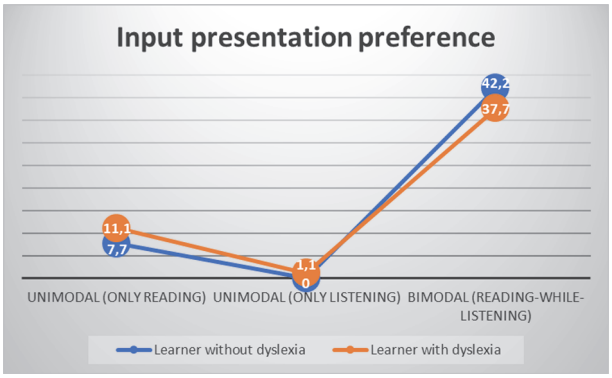
In conclusion, while the learners' perception of their strategic competence did improve throughout the experiment, the outcomes of the TAPs do not fully support the idea that these learners are able to activate it in an IC task.

3.4 Bimodal input presentation

Learners' perception of the effectiveness of bimodal input presentation was investigated by presenting each IC reading activity through two input modes. After a first silent reading (unimodal input), listening followed, allowing a second reading-while-listening (bimodal input), with the aim of measuring the degree of understanding in both input presentations. Both the degree of effectiveness of unimodal and bimodal input presentation and learners' input preferences were detected.

Figure 4 shows a clear preference towards bimodal input in both -SLDs and +SLDs learners. Nonetheless, a percentage of -SLDs participants (7.7%) preferred unimodal input (only reading) and even among +SLDs peers there is a small percentage of preferences towards the unimodal only-reading input (11.1%) and an even lower percentage (1.1%) of preference towards the unimodal only-listening input.

Fig. 4 – *Unimodal and bimodal input presentation preference*



Input presentation effectiveness in IC reading comprehension was investigated with three IC reading activities. Activity 1 presented five texts on the same theme in different languages: L1 (Italian) and L≠1 (French, Spanish, Catalan and Portuguese). Task 2 involved the introduction of a new text in L≠1 (Catalan) and task 3 of a new text in L≠1 (Portuguese). Each text was presented twice through both unimodal and bimodal input.

Figure 5 shows that bimodal input is perceived as being more effective for both +SLDs and -SLDs participants and for all IC reading tasks administered. Although scores did not increase homogeneously in either group with the bimodal input presentation, interestingly scores increased in tasks 2 and 3 for both groups of participants.

Fig. 5 – *Bimodal input efficacy on L1 and L≠1 reading comprehension activities*

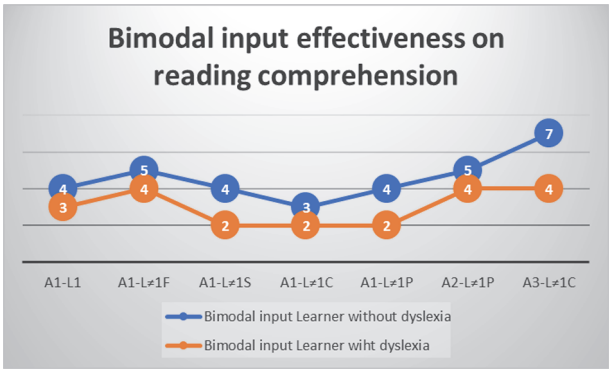
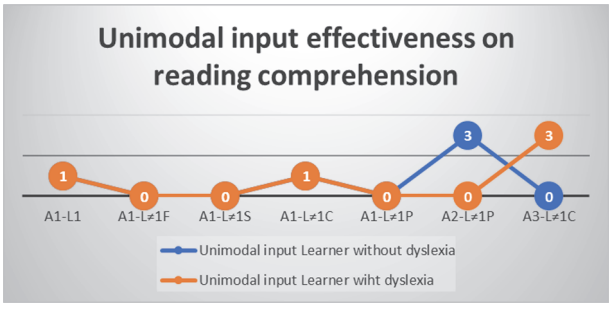


Figure 6 shows the poor effectiveness of unimodal input for both groups of participants, +SLDs and -SLDs. Only in task 2 does a -SLDs participant confirm their preference for unimodal input (reading only) and in task 3 does a +SLDs peer prefer unimodal input (reading only).

Fig. 6 – *Unimodal input efficacy on L1 and L≠1 reading comprehension activities*



In conclusion, participants seem to have consolidated their preference towards bimodal input presentation through the experiment and they have gained confidence in its effectiveness in IC reading comprehension activities. +SLDs participants' scores increased slightly over the course of the experiment but nevertheless always remained lower than their -SLDs peers' scores.

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