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MARIAPIA D'ANGELO

## Teacher Training in Intercomprehension between Related (Minority) Languages: English, German, and Cimbrian

### *Abstract*

In recent decades, European language policy guidelines have been recommending plurilingual approaches in foreign language (FL) teaching, which share the common intent of enhancing and engaging the learners' entire linguistic repertoire. By using previously learned languages, students can benefit from positive interlingual transfer and cross-language inferencing, thus improving FL learning outcomes, language learning awareness, motivation, and identity development. One such approach is Intercomprehension between Related Languages, which has inspired the development of digital teaching materials in English, German, and Cimbrian – a critically endangered minority Germanic language nowadays spoken in the linguistic enclave of Luserna, in the province of Trento (Italy). This article outlines the methodology underpinning the developed teaching materials, focusing on teacher training, which required the involvement of both curricular FL teachers and staff of local institutions dedicated to safeguarding the minority language.

### *Keywords*

Cimbrian, Minority Language Teaching, Intercomprehension between Related Languages, Deutsch als Fremdsprache (Daf), English as a foreign language (EFL), Pluralistic Approaches to Language Teaching.

Structured and continuous language policy interventions have been implemented for the promotion and preservation of regional/minority languages all over the world (Hinton 2011), such as those for Hawai'i (Warschauer 1998), and recent European programs among others for Frisian and Gaelic (European Commission *et al.* 2019: 14-16). These efforts generally target languages with significant numbers of speakers and involve the inclusion of minority languages in school curricula to reverse the language shift (Fishman 2001) by facilitating multilingual early language transmission. The role that educational systems can play in the revitalization and preservation of the minority language (ML) has always been crucial and is deeply related to adequate teacher training, the lack of which has been mentioned as the primary cause for failure in the curricular inclusion of endangered languages (Hinton 2001: 349).

In the case of some ML teaching projects for the promotion of historical minority languages in Italy, inadequate teacher training together with the use of methodologically unsound teaching materials have been observed (Marra 2021, Santipolo 2022). Italy has various historical minority languages which are protected by national and local regulatory frameworks and are spoken in communities that are highly diverse in terms of the number of speakers and language teachers. For instance, Ladin and Friulian communities have sufficient ML teachers, while the Germanic enclaves scattered around the Alpine region lack them (Iannaccaro 2010), particularly among the Cimbrian community.

The Cimbrian ML has its origins in the 11th century and still retains a strongly archaic character due to its geographic isolation, which has protected it from the influence of linguistic developments of the German language from across the Alps<sup>1</sup>.

As one of the most ancient MLs based on German, Cimbrian has garnered significant interest from scholars in various research fields, embracing comparative philology, dialectology, linguistics, and sociolinguistics (Bidese 2010). It was once widespread from the Trentino region to the Venetian provinces of Verona (Cimbrian of the Thirteen Municipalities) and Vicenza (Cimbrian of the Seven Municipalities)<sup>2</sup>, spoken by tens of thousands of people (Cordin 2023). Cimbrian has recently been classified by UNESCO as a “definitely endangered” ML (UNESCO 2010), with only about 1000 people identifying themselves as part of the Cimbrian minority group, according to the last Census data from the province of Trento in 2011. Currently, Cimbrian is spoken only in the linguistic enclave of Luserna, where about 260 people live. Even there, the Italian language has gradually replaced the ML, which is only very rarely passed on to the younger generations in the families. Furthermore, the depopulation of Luserna has progressively led to the dismantling of social structures – like in other mountain villages of the Alps –, including schools. The increasingly small number of Luserna students have then been included in larger school clusters, where the ML barely finds recognition in educational curricula, being perceived as unimportant compared to the study of other FLs, such as German or English. In addition, Italian as a standard language is the sole language of communication among pupils, who have an unexpected multilingual repertoire.

It is worth noting that in recent years, there have been some notable efforts in the Cimbrian *corpus planning*, which represent an indispensable step towards its possible inclusion in school curricula. Unlike for other historical Italian minority languages, grammar books have been written for the Cimbrian language of Luserna (Tyroller 2003, Panieri *et al.* 2006, Panieri 2007), as well as a freely available online dictionary<sup>3</sup>. All these efforts have laid the foundation for the development of teach-

<sup>1</sup> For a description of the peculiar characteristics of the Cimbrian language we refer to Bidese (2021).

<sup>2</sup> In the Venetian Region, natural intergenerational transmission of the language has ceased, but thanks to the efforts of local cultural associations, Cimbrian varieties are still able to survive through initiatives such as language courses, also possible thanks to recently published grammar works (Panieri 2022).

<sup>3</sup> <https://zimbarbort.istitutocimbro.it>.

ing materials, which can also benefit from the initiatives undertaken by local cultural institutions, which throughout the years have funded a variety of endeavors to increase awareness and advocate for the linguistic and cultural legacy of the minority group<sup>4</sup>. These initiatives encompass documentation, language courses, summer camps, periodicals, and a news program broadcasted via satellite (D'Angelo 2010, 2023). However, there may still be some room for improvement when it comes to ensuring that teachers are fully equipped to teach ML effectively with learning materials tailored to young learners' needs.

This paper aims to illustrate the general objectives and methodology of the *Intercomprendiamo* project (§2) intending to preserve the Cimbrian language, and also the unique characteristics of the school context of intervention (§ 1), regarding the involvement of both the curricular FL teachers and the staff of the local organizations responsible for the protection and promotion of the Cimbrian language (§ 3). Last, the next steps of the project will be presented (§ 4) from which a positive impact on pupils' motivation to learn and practice the ancient Cimbrian language is expected.

### 1. *The targeted school context*

Children from Luserna along with children from neighboring villages attend the "Scuola Primaria Lavarone", which has implemented a Cimbrian Language Project since 2006. It provides 20 hours per year per class on anthropological disciplines in the Cimbrian language, plus a significant number of German hours per week (from 7 hours in the 1<sup>st</sup> year to 5 hours in the 5<sup>th</sup>). According to the project description provided on the school's website<sup>5</sup>, the Cimbrian teacher can intervene in making comparisons and parallels between the two languages during the German classes. In addition, English language is taught one hour per week in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> grades and two hours per week in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grades along with one hour of music in English in the 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, and 5<sup>th</sup> grades.

Following recent studies (Decarli 2019), however, not all parents from the Luserna community – and even less so those from other villages – welcomed the teaching of Cimbrian very favorably. In addition, due to the lack of ML teachers, the local Lower Secondary School (6<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> grades) no longer provides tuition for the Cimbrian language. It merely offers classes in English and German, and for one hour per week, the subject of Art is taught in German, as a part of a CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) module. To bridge this gap in Cimbrian language teaching, the target audience of our project is the sixth-grade class of 15 stu-

<sup>4</sup> The Cimbrian Institute in Luserna has established a fruitful partnership with distinguished scholars from various Austrian and Italian universities to develop an invaluable web platform. This platform boasts a vast collection of videos, audio files, literature, music, and ethnographic texts that serve as excellent resources for language teaching materials. Moreover, the platform is regularly updated in four languages - Cimbrian, Italian, German, and English (<https://www.istitutocimbro.it/en/>).

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.icfolgarialavaroneluserna.it/struttura/scuola-primaria-lavarone>.

dents, to whom an online questionnaire was administered before the start of classroom activities (translated into English here, see appendix).

The results revealed a situation of marked multilingualism: along with Italian and the local variety of Italian dialect, the pupils reported speaking the historical Cimbrian ML at home and with their friends (only two pupils from Luserna) and other languages, such as Macedonian, Ukrainian, Swedish, and English<sup>6</sup>.

As part of our research project, we found it pertinent to inquire among the pupils about the similarity between the languages taught in school and Cimbrian. Upon questioning, it was observed that all pupils perceived a resemblance to German, while none of them noted any likeness to English. In this regard, we also noticed from the activities later carried out in the classroom, that unfortunately the pupils had not been accustomed to a contrastive metalinguistic observation even between German and Cimbrian, an aspect that could be enhanced in the FL hours in elementary school.

## 2. *Theoretical-methodological framework and aims of the project*

The *Intercomprendiamo* (let's 'intercomprehend') project, which represents a first in the Italian school setting, consists of developing language learning material to teach the historical ML together with modern languages, according to pluralistic approaches in language teaching. These approaches, despite the diversity of methodologies adopted, involve several varieties of language, such as foreign, regional, minority and migration languages, and share the common intent of enhancing and engaging the learners' entire linguistic repertoire. This is also in line with the European language policy guidelines, which emphasize the value of utilizing various language proficiencies among learners as a means of facilitating multilingual communication and plurilingual comprehension, even at the basic proficiency levels (Council of Europe 2020: 123-125). By leveraging their current language knowledge, learners can effectively grasp the meaning of texts in languages they have not yet explored. The *Framework of reference for pluralistic approaches to languages and cultures* (Candelier *et al.* 2012) defines and exemplifies standards for pluralistic approaches, that is Awakening to Languages, Integrated Didactic Approaches, Intercultural Approaches, and Intercomprehension between Related Languages (hereafter IC). The latter involves working on two or more languages that belong to the same family and can be utilized for languages that the learner is either proficient in or has learned as a FL. One of its fundamental assumptions is to heighten learners' awareness of 'transparencies', namely the morphological, syntactic, lexical, phonic, or graphic similarities that exist between languages. Students learn to exploit any kind of knowledge acquired during previous language learning to understand texts in never-studied languages of the same family. IC therefore emphasizes

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<sup>6</sup> It's worth mentioning that one pupil did not attend the same elementary school as her classmates as she had previously lived in Sweden and thus had no prior knowledge in ML.

the importance of enhancing prior linguistic, pragmatic, procedural and cultural knowledge, and its transferability (Doyé & Meißner 2010). Since the late 1990s, innovative adult education projects have been created in various countries (Bonvino 2015) and recent empirical studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of IC in terms of the increase in language awareness, language skills, language learning skills, and motivation (Bär 2010; Meißner & Morkötter, 2009).

It was above all the potential for increased motivation which determined the choice of this approach as the theoretical-methodological framework of the *Intercomprendiamo* project. Previous sociolinguistic and sociological studies (Decarli 2019, Cordin 2023) have detected a notable regression in the intergenerational transmission of Cimbrian, as well as a lack of interest in the curricular inclusion of Cimbrian shown by parents from the Luserna community, but even more so by those in other villages.

Through the choice of progressively more complex texts, the *Intercomprendiamo* learning materials focus on discussion of language contrasts and similarities, as well as activities for raising multilingual language awareness at lexical, grammatical, and phonological levels. Building on the results conducted in other school settings (Hülsmann *et al.* 2020), the project aims to promote among learners both language awareness aimed at the strategic use of all known languages, but also awareness of their modes of comprehension.

Ultimately, the course aims to show how the Cimbrian language can be used by pupils to talk about topics close to their world and no longer only about the lives of their grandparents in mountain communities. This historical ML is now being taught alongside modern languages and, more importantly, it has been presented as a “language bridge” rather than a subject that detracts time and resources from the study of other languages deemed more pertinent for the learners’ future educational and professional paths (D’Angelo 2023: 77).

### 3. *Stages of team training*

In our targeted school context, the stakeholders are diverse and the participation of non-school actors alongside school actors, as well as the local organizations responsible for safeguarding ML in addition to the pupils, their parents, and teachers (Dwyer *et al.* 2018, Hornberger & De Korne 2018). The team involved in all phases of the project is therefore made up of both members of the local organizations as well as FL teachers. The former were involved in creating of the teaching materials, while the FL teachers were responsible for checking the compatibility between the lexical domains of the texts used and the content of the curricular programming in FLs, also concerning the CLIL module in German, as well as deciding the length of the chosen texts and the time to be devoted to each activity.

The entire team then participated in the experimentation with the materials produced. The creation and testing of the teaching materials constituted the core of the three-stage training program for the FL teachers and ML native speakers.



In the first stage, during three meetings, online and in-person, the IC methodology was introduced, and the participants practiced with the units of a volume for joint teaching of six Romance languages, including Italian<sup>7</sup>. The adoption of a training mode based on the principle of learning by doing was deemed to be preferable, considering the heterogeneous education background of the team members.

In the second stage, the eight teaching units were prepared and at the same time a questionnaire was distributed to the sixth graders (see Appendix). All the units consist of three worksheets written in the various languages of the project, each of them beginning with a text that is designed to be both read and listened to by the pupils so that the pronunciation of the words may facilitate their recognition based on the languages the children already know. Each text is then followed by comprehension exercises, which are formulated in the three languages to maintain consistent engagement across the class. The exercises involve multiple-choice answers, whose options mainly consist of 'transparent' lexical units, allowing all students to easily infer their meaning by drawing on their prior knowledge.

In the third stage, which is still ongoing, the developed teaching units are being tested with the children in the presence of one of the two FL teachers and the Cimbrian language expert<sup>8</sup>, during a two-month education project. Teachers were also made aware of the importance of beginning the lessons with a collective in-class reflection on the topic addressed, especially through the appropriate use of paratextual elements which help in activating learners' expectations regarding the text contents before engaging in reading and listening.

#### 4. *Next steps and future research*

In the months to come, the final writing of the units will be carried out based on feedback from pupils, as well as additional feedback from teachers. Subsequently, the prepared resources will be published, and at the end of the project, students will again be given a questionnaire on their language repertoire, as well as a proficiency test. For English and German languages only, a control group from a neighboring middle school not attended by members of the Cimbrian community will also be tested.

Assuming that the project is received favorably by the different stakeholders, as it seems to have been so far, materials based on similar pluralistic approaches will be developed for seventh- and eighth-grade students next year. Implementation of learning materials based on Intercomprehension between Related (Minority) Languages leads to several research questions about the validity of the IC approach for the transmission of the endangered ML, and about possible advantages for learn-

<sup>7</sup> This is the PanromnIC volume (Benavente Ferrera *et al.* 2022), whose structure inspired that of the materials in the *Intercomprendiamo* project.

<sup>8</sup> Andrea Nicolussi Golo, in charge for the Cimbrian language at the local government agency "Magnifica Comunità degli Altipiani Cimbri", translator of many works in Cimbrian and co-author of the *Intercomprendiamo* teaching materials.



ers' general linguistic education. Should the results of the *Intercomprendiamo* project prove beneficial, the methodology adopted could also find application in the teaching of other MLs, for which a normalization process like that of the Luserna Cimbrian variety has already been initiated.

The teaching of MLs can contribute to the building of effective plurilingualism, understood both as an opportunity for cognitive and linguistic development and as a set of knowledge and skills in different languages associated with comparison to various cultures. Plurilingualism, much more than before, is now seen as a helpful resource in various areas of teaching and language learning as long as teachers are given the appropriate training, which should be considered as an explicit mandate for the revision of current university curricula (Cognigni 2020, Potts & Cutrin Schmid 2022).

## *Appendix*

### Questionnaire

1. Which language do you use daily at home?
  - ☐ Italian
  - ☐ German
  - ☐ English
  - ☐ Cimbrian
  - ☐ dialect
  - ☐ other: \_\_\_\_\_
- 2.a If you answered that you speak a language other than Italian at home, with whom do you speak it? (e.g. I speak Cimbrian with my maternal grandparents, French with my mother, etc.) \_\_\_\_\_
- 2.b Which language(s) do your parents speak when talking to each other? \_\_\_\_\_
- 2.c What language(s) do you speak with your friends? \_\_\_\_\_
- 3.a What do you do best in English? (5 is the maximum 1 the minimum)
  - ☐ understand an overheard text
  - ☐ understand a written text
  - ☐ write
  - ☐ speak
  - ☐ translate into Italian
- 3.b What you do best in German?
  - ☐ understand an overheard text
  - ☐ understand a written text
  - ☐ write
  - ☐ speak
  - ☐ translate into Italian
- 3.c What you do best in Cimbrian?
  - ☐ understand an overheard text
  - ☐ understand a written text
  - ☐ write

- ☐ speak
  - ☐ translate into Italian
4. During primary school, which language did you study the most? (3 is the maximum, 1 is the minimum, you can also give several languages the same number)
    - ☐ English
    - ☐ German
    - ☐ Cimbrian
    - ☐ ...
  5. Have you ever been to an English-speaking country? If yes, for how long and on what occasions?
  6. Have you ever been to a German-speaking country? If yes, for how long and on what occasions?
  7. In your opinion, Cimbrian is more similar to (you can also select more than one answer):
    - ☐ German
    - ☐ English
    - ☐ Italian
    - ☐ Trentino dialect
    - ☐ other: \_\_\_\_\_
    - ☐ other: \_\_\_\_\_
  8. Why? \_\_\_\_\_

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