

Approaching an unknown language without anxiety thanks to plurilingual discovery

by Catherine Amélineau
and João Barata



This article describes the approach adopted by a group of instructors from Languedoc-Roussillon (France), who have been experimenting with a new method of language learning called plurilingualism, based on work done by two academics. The objective is to give people confidence in approaching a new foreign language, whether their aim is simply mutual understanding or using the method as a launch-pad for a future learning process. The authors discuss two experiments in training French applicants for EVS (European Voluntary Service under the European Union's Youth Programme) in Romance language countries. They describe the methodological choices made and the teaching tools used (developed by the group at the research stage). The results of these experiments lead the authors to envisage broader application of the method.

Introduction

How can the still well-established tradition of training a polyglot elite be abandoned and conditions be introduced so that all Europeans can open up to new languages throughout their lives? This concern also exists in the field of international activities. Project managers, youth leaders and young people themselves often encounter linguistic difficulties. Having to contend with an unknown language may be a barrier to mobility (exchanges, EVS, etc.). Simultaneous, comparative discovery of a number of languages in the same family can be a good way of overcoming the problem. That is the challenge discussed here.

The method described in this article is based to a large extent on German and French academics' work on plurilingualism (EuroComRom and Eurom4 - see the appendix), which Catherine Amélineau (a mass education and youth policy adviser at the Montpellier regional and département Directorate for Youth and Sport), in co-operation with Catherine Ballin of Peuple et Culture - Languedoc-Roussillon, proposed adapting to target groups and activities in the youth and mass education sectors. Following research activities in the field of international exchanges and languages in 1999 and 2000 with eight instructors, we ran two experimental training courses (in 2001 and 2002), both primarily aimed at plurilingual discovery of the Romance languages.

NB: The examples cited below (italics) are drawn from those experiments. We define the term "plurilingualism" as simultaneous contact with several languages for learning and training purposes (unlike "multilingualism" which refers to the co-existence of a number of different languages for instance within the same country).

The main objective was to facilitate mutual understanding, which can be summed up as: "I write or speak to you in my language, you reply in your language, and we

understand each other." We adopted the following framework for our theoretical and practical work:

Target group: primarily people with no proficiency in a language other than their mother tongue or who acquired a language long ago but have not had occasion to use it since leaving school.

Main objective: acquisition of partial foreign language skills, with initial emphasis on reading comprehension, and possibly later partial oral comprehension.

Chosen languages: Spanish, Italian and Portuguese. With the practical methods already developed, the conceptual tools at our disposal related to languages in the Romance family (i.e. derived from Latin), in particular the above three. Further reasons for this choice were the closeness of the countries concerned and the existing international links. We also considered it appropriate to highlight communication languages other than English with a view to European exchanges, in particular with the Latin countries.

Testing ground: we considered that training French young people having applied for EVS offered the best trial conditions, such as strong motivation to acquire knowledge of the host country's language and culture and the possibility of immediately putting foreign language skills into practice.

I Method

A - Fostering and experimenting certain attitudes

1 - Realising that we already know a lot

- Our native language is a basic vehicle for learning any other related language.
- People may already have had occasion to rub shoulders with other cultures (family members, childminders, friends, travel, lengthy periods spent abroad and so on).
- They may also have studied one or two other languages at school.
- Some people, such as members of immigrant communities or children of mixed marriages, may already be bilingual.

2 - First convincing ourselves that we can understand

Example: Proposing reading material in Romanian might seem strange. Yet, after four days' plurilingual discovery our volunteers got to grips with a Romanian newspaper article without asking any questions and understood virtually everything.

3 - Opening our ears and minds

- Familiarising oneself with the same language spoken with different accents makes it possible to gain a better command of the language's basics without being "caught out" by specific accents.





For someone who already understands Spanish, one way of being less destabilised by a Portuguese accent is to eliminate almost all the "che" sounds so that it is easier to distinguish familiar words.

Example: To train volunteers not to become used to only one pronunciation, we arranged for people with different accents to read the texts of the exercises. We also invited young foreigners living in France to talk to the trainees, saw a film in the original language, and so on.

- It is not because our mother tongue accustoms us to certain things, that they are necessarily best. It is important that we should also be able to appreciate certain foreign turns of phrase or sounds that we may find more expressive than those used in our own language.

④ - Using different gateways

This means being aware that there is never only one approach to understanding and speaking another language and experiencing another culture, depending on our individual backgrounds and the knowledge - even non-linguistic - we have already acquired.

B - The pedagogical principles of the method

① - A learner-centred approach

The method is based on cognitivist or constructivist theory. Learners enhance their knowledge themselves by comparing and pooling experience with their peers. The instructor is more a "facilitator" or a resource person. (Editor's note: Readers might be interested in following up on the subject of methodology by referring to Miguel-Angel Garcia Lopez's article in this edition of Coyote).

Examples: Knowledge acquired during a day's work is "capitalised" by the trainees themselves and validated by the instructors (on wall posters), for use throughout the training course. Paper copies of all exercises, whether oral or written, are distributed to all participants at the end of the exercise.

② - The possibility of simultaneously discovering, and comparing, three foreign languages, using one's native tongue as an aid to understanding

Europe has many languages, and it goes without saying that a language cannot be learned in three days. That is why the recommended method focuses on several languages at once and is primarily a heuristic one. It shows that:

- knowledge of one language can be put to good use in approaching another. For instance, the fact that differences from the mother tongue (in grammar, syntax, accentuation, etc.) have already been identified when learning a first foreign language can mean that the learner is less at sea with another foreign language, particularly where the languages belong to the same family;

- it is easier than one might think to approach several languages at once, resulting in time-savings;

- we become more open-minded if we do not confine ourselves to discovering a single language.

We noted that, with a change of attitude, it was possible to envisage using Italian as an aid to understanding Spanish, through both the similarities and the differences between the two languages (systematic identification of plurals, doubling of letters more frequent in Italian than in Spanish, etc.), rather than perceiving knowledge of Italian as a potential hindrance.

⑤ - The method is first and foremost aimed at general understanding of a written text

Understanding a foreign language is normally easier than making a productive effort in that language. Since the objective is mutual understanding, it is enough to concentrate on receptive competence alone, without obliging students to write or speak the foreign language.

Furthermore, as the aim is merely to understand the general drift of a document or dialogue, there is no systematic, detailed translation of texts, and we advise against using dictionaries.

Reading understanding is often easier than oral understanding, since an accent may add to learners' difficulties (although pronunciation may sometimes be the key to understanding meaning). Learners also need far less time to think things through when confronted with a written text.

④ - A method drawing on the close links between language and culture

Language must be separated from its system as such, since it is an ideal means of approaching culture.

- It is all the easier to grasp specific features of a language when we are given a cultural explanation for them. For example, the names of the days of the week or of months and polite forms of address (such as use of "tu" and "vous" in French) may have their origins in tradition, temperament or a way of life.

- Discovering a language is also possible through cultural experience (taking an interest in a country's music, cuisine, films and so on). Someone who habitually listens to foreign songs will, for instance, assimilate certain expressions (often phonetically) and will thereby acquire keys to understanding the language.

We required our instructors not only to speak the languages of the countries concerned, but also to have lived in one of those countries for a sufficient length of time. The team accordingly included an instructor of Portuguese origin, who also knew Spain, and one from Argentina, who had formerly been a volunteer in Italy. They were present throughout the training course. The volunteers stressed the benefits of this in their appraisals of the course, since it meant they could obtain immediate answers to any questions they might have.

⑤ - A pro-immersion method

The aim is to make learners "greedy to know", without having to concern themselves with the language's structure (grammar, vocabulary, syntax) from the outset. All the work they do to enrich their knowledge is based on an immersion process. We believe that this makes learners capable of subsequently drawing on their knowledge according to their needs and the situations they encounter abroad and, thereby, adapting to the language and culture of the country in question.

C - Methodological choices

① - Use of the "sieving" technique devised by EuroComRom

(We refer here to the "sieves" described in Appendix 1) [Editor's note: A sieve is basically a tool for separating big bits from little bits - in the kitchen you use it for making sure that the flour you use is as fine as possible; in the garden a sieve can be used for separating soil from stones.]



Here the sieve is used as a metaphor, showing how to identify different elements of a language.]

This technique allows a systematic approach to a text in a foreign language.

- To begin with, universally recognised words are identified (cf. the first sieve).
- Then we extract what the text has in common with other known languages - similarities in syntax and vocabulary (cf. the second and fifth sieves).
- We also listen to recordings of all written texts, so as to identify phono-graphic correspondences (sounds, pronunciation, spellings), and ensure that the most frequent of these are assimilated (cf. the third and fourth sieves).
- Likewise identification of similarities, spotting differences between languages (suffixes, prefixes, link words, etc.) is a valuable exercise, since it provides essential clues to understanding meaning (the sixth and seventh sieves, plus the "miniportraits" of languages).

NB: The method does not seek to cover everything. Where a clue identified helps to understand meaning in the majority of cases, that is enough for it to be accepted, even where exceptions exist.

② - Daily "reformulation" as a means of building knowledge

Knowledge extracted from the course work is pooled every evening and copied onto large sheets of paper that are posted on the walls and remain on display throughout the training course. The following kinds of knowledge are picked out:

- cultural knowledge (cf. the first and second sieves),
- lexical and morphological knowledge (cf. the sixth and seventh sieves),
- grammatical and syntactic knowledge (cf. the fifth sieve),
- phonetic knowledge and phono-graphic relations (cf. the third and fourth sieves).

This assessment process makes it possible not only to highlight knowledge already acquired, but also regularly to refer back to it. In this way, a sort of "survival kit" is gradually put together.

③ - Viewing trial-and-error as something positive

We believe that making mistakes is part and parcel of the learning process. An intelligent effort may still result in an error - it is only essential that learners be encouraged to correct their mistakes themselves, thereby increasing their awareness. We think there is a need to eliminate fear of error, which often holds people back from taking the leap of making contact with a new language.

II The product as it stands at present

A - Folder of exercises with an audio CD

We have devised exercises, corresponding to six levels of progress, the main aim of which is to make learning fun. They encourage observation and comparison and are designed to give the impression that learning is easy. The comprehension exercises (reading and oral) are based on EuroComRom's seven sieves. They come with pedagogical information sheets.

All of the exercises are recorded on an audio CD, so that learners can link the written and oral versions of all the texts or documents on which they work. The recordings also

offer an opportunity to hear different pronunciations (at least three different voices are used for the recordings in each language).

It is naturally very important not to use the exercises on their own, but only as part of the recommended method with its chosen methodological and pedagogical approaches.

B - Training of French applicants for EVS in Latin countries

① - Typical training course

A five-day course combining discovery of three languages, intercultural aspects and everything to do with EVS. By making language discovery the backbone of the training course, we went beyond the specifications we had been given.

② - Appraisal tools

Apart from the traditional means of appraisal, we have devised two types of appraisal specifically designed to assess language proficiency. In particular, we propose an appraisal after one month's EVS experience in the host country. The instructors contact volunteers by phone and, speaking in the host country's language, ask them to answer questions on their linguistic integration.

When appraising the volunteers who attended the training course in April 2002 we noted that the majority of them had made use of the techniques they learned during training. Even those who initially had no knowledge of the host country's language were able to understand the questions. Others, who had been somewhat sceptical about the method, since they already spoke Spanish and were doing EVS in Barcelona, stated that they found Catalan easier to understand than they would have thought.

III Prospects

A - Target groups

The method was initially conceived and produced for a target group with little knowledge of foreign languages. However, during our two trial training courses, given the recruitment conditions, we were obliged to accept trainees with different levels of language proficiency. Despite these disparities, the method worked well thanks to our instructors, who succeeded in adapting it. We consider it preferable to avoid such non-uniform groups of trainees. Nonetheless, the method can be adapted to different target groups (in terms of speed of progress, the number of languages chosen, the emphasis placed on oral comprehension, etc.).

We now wish to test this type of plurilingual discovery approach with a group solely made up of disadvantaged young people (such as those targeted by short-term EVS). With our approach it should be possible to motivate and satisfy young people in this category, known to be against formal learning experiences, which for them are sometimes a reminder of past failure.

B - Opening up at the transnational level and extension to other languages

We intend to invite some partner foreign instructors to participate in a future training course for French EVS volunteers, so they can adopt and adapt the method for use in their home countries. Establishing a network of people applying

the method in the Romance language countries would be a means of further developing it. It is not possible to transfer the method as it stands because it was designed for French-speakers, but it can nonetheless be adapted for use with another mother tongue as "bridge language".

We also think that our approach, like that of EuroComRom (see Appendix 1), can be extended to languages other than those used in our experiments, and to the Germanic and Slav language families.

Our objective now is to implement the plurilingual discovery approach even with languages that are not related. The method's strength in fact lies in the open-mindedness and change of attitude it brings about.

C Broadening to any activity having an international aspect

The method could bring advantages in other contexts such as:

- youth exchanges, when preparing groups for contact with their partners' language or for linguistic workshops during exchange visits or international youth camps;
- training youth leaders, who often state that they experience linguistic difficulties, more so in fact than young people;
- training of mentors or persons responsible for monitoring the linguistic aspects of young volunteers' activities (in the context of EVS).



APPENDIX

Summary of the EuroComRom sieves

Stegmann and Klein built their theory on the basis of seven sieves, corresponding to a gradual process of deduction of meaning and identification of keys to the languages studied.

First sieve

Focusing on easily recognisable international vocabulary (proper names, geographical terms, famous people, etc.). NB: The Romance languages are favoured, as this vocabulary primarily draws on Latin-Romance bases.

Second sieve

Identifying specific common vocabulary - the pan-Romance vocabulary (about 500 Latin words are still included in the elementary vocabulary of the Romance languages).

Third sieve

Recognising sound correspondences (philological study of the Romance languages has made it possible to provide learners with all the sound correspondence formulae, which take little effort to assimilate). Example: nuit in French corresponds to noche in Spanish, notte in Italian and noite in Portuguese, just as lait in French corresponds to leche in Spanish, latte in Italian and leite in Portuguese.

Fourth sieve

Identifying spelling and pronunciation conventions in each language (90% of the letters used are the same in all the Romance languages, and the method's authors have drawn up a table showing the differences).

Fifth sieve

Noting that syntactic structure is virtually the same in all the Romance languages (there are nine basic sentence types): the individual languages have few particularities, which can quickly be recognised.

Sixth sieve

Using a tool to identify the lowest common denominators of different grammatical words or word endings (e.g. how to recognise the first person plural, gender, etc.). Since these morphosyntactic elements are the most common elements in any text, being able to recognise them is particularly rewarding.

Seventh sieve

Using a list of the most common prefixes and suffixes in the languages studied.

References:



1) EuroComRom

This is available in German and English from the publisher Shaker Verlag and on line (www.shaker.de)

Horst G. Klein, Tilbert G. Stegmann, [William J. McCann]

EuroComRom - Die Sieben Siebe

Romanische Sprachen sofort lesen können

EuroComRom - The Seven Sieves

How to read all the Romance Languages right away

(German version ISBN 3-8265-6947-4, re-edited in January 2000; English version ISBN 3-83-22-0437-7, published November 2002)

The book gives a detailed explanation of the seven sieves with tables of examples in each language (six are covered: French, Italian, Catalan, Portuguese, Romanian and Spanish). "Miniportraits" of each of these languages help to supplement the learner's understanding. These are concerned with the principal particularities that distinguish each language from the others.

A CD-ROM has been developed containing the basic module making it possible to acquire receptive competence in a Romance language using the seven sieves. A demonstration version in German can be consulted on the web site <http://www.fernuni-hagen.de/SPRACHEN/cont/7Siebe>.

To make the EuroCom method accessible internationally, work on two initial adaptations of the seven sieves for use with other starting languages - Romanian and Italian - has been completed. Adaptations into English, French, Catalan, Portuguese and Polish are at a very advanced stage, and other versions (Spanish, Occitan, Dutch and Greek) are being prepared (to be issued in 2003). The results of this work are published in a special series - Editiones EuroCom. The same model can also be applied to the Germanic and Slav language families (cf. Klein, Horst G. (2002) "Où en sont

les recherches sur l'eurocompréhension?" (the state of research into Euro-understanding in proceedings of the EuroCom Congress held in Hagen, Editiones EuroCom, vol. 8, Aachen).

All relevant information, including an introduction to the method in several languages, can be found on the web site <http://www.eurocom-frankfurt.de> (in "Language choice").

2) Eurom4

Claire Blanche Benveniste and André Valli

"Eurom4, simultaneous learning of Romance languages", Universities of Lisbon, Salamanca, Rome and Provence, publisher La Nuova Italia, 1997

This method consists of a book in four languages (Spanish, French, Italian and Portuguese) and a CD-ROM.

It was developed as a result of a project carried out by a group of linguists from four European universities (Salamanca - Spain, Rome - Italy, Lisbon - Portugal and Aix-en-Provence - France). By combining their linguistic and psycho-linguistic knowledge with observation of students over a four-year period in each of the countries concerned, they were able to develop a method, which was put on the market in 1997. This project was supported by the EU's Lingua programme.

The method consists of exercises in the four languages and a comparative grammar, focusing solely on difficulties encountered in understanding written texts. It is of proven effectiveness, enabling acquisition of four languages in 24 sessions, each lasting 1 1/2 hours, subject to the following conditions:

- the method is aimed at an adult audience of business executives, whose mother tongue is one of the four languages studied;
- the sole objective is global, passive understanding of written texts;
- the texts proposed are newspaper articles on common European themes (the concept of "shared knowledge").

Contacts addresses:

catherine.amedineau@jeunesse-sport.gouv.fr
pecei@wanadoo.fr

