Guide to Intercomprehension: Understanding across languages

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adapted from *Eurom5 Intercomprehension* (<http://www.eurom5.com>)

The primary objective of intercomprehension is to develop an approximate understanding of second-language texts that is progressive and refined with practice. These techniques, which can be used by students who have studied Spanish or any Romance language (e.g., French, Italian, Portuguese), allow language learners to achieve a greater degree of independence. Given the high number of cognates between Spanish and English, the techniques work well for these two languages as well.

Most second-language readers get stuck and obsessed with words they don’t know, and they just give up. The mindset required to make intercomprehension work is:

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| Focus on what you know and what you can guess;  forget about what you don’t know. |

**1. What is the genre of this text? How do you know?**

* Look for the characteristic elements of a letter, essay, newspaper/web article, opinion column, song lyric or poem, literary text.
* Make a prediction about what kind of information is typically communicated in the genre you’ve identified.

**2. Look at any images, pictures, logos, or graphs that accompany the text.**

* What can you infer from the images?
* What feelings, mood, or tone can you infer from the pictures?
* Do you recognize any institutional logo, flag, or other symbols that would help you predict the content of the text?

**3. Based on what you have seen so far, and the title of the text, make a hypothesis about the main idea.**

* Start by reading the text or a portion of it, such as a group of sentences or a short paragraph, **without** stopping at every word you do not understand.
* Guess like crazy! See if the sentences you are reading fit with your hypothesis about the main idea.
* Accept that you may only have an approximated understanding for some time.
* Assume that each text is really only about one main topic. This will free you up to use your imagination to fill in gaps in understanding.

**4. Listen to the text.**

* Read the text aloud (or at least some phrases/sentences), or even better, have a partner read it out loud to you (and take turns).
* By listening, instead of reading silently, one can more easily infer meanings and contexts based on intonation, such as questions. Also, pronunciation may reveal similarities between words in different languages that are obscured by spelling.

**5. Use the “transposition technique”.**

* Write down a few sentences that you think represent the main ideas of the text. Having them in front of you will help you keep track of the progression of ideas in the text as you move through it.
* Don’t try to translate from Spanish to English! Just write a paraphrase of the idea that demonstrates the extent to which you have achieved general comprehension.

**6. Look for “transparent zones”.**

* These are parts of the text that have very similar words (sometimes identical, or easily recognized cognates), similar morphology (i.e., word structure, *biblioteca* contains “biblio-” = book), or syntactic arrangement (subject+verb+object).
* To improve on this technique, try dividing words and/or sentences in recognizable parts.

**7. Use “phantom words”.**

* Phantom words can aid in intercomprehension by substituting a “possibility” for a word that you do not understand.
* For example, in the sentence, *El director xxxxxó el contrato*, **xxxxxó** is the word you don’t know. The **-ó** ending tells you it is an action he did in the past (preterit). What would logically fit into the sentence, given the overall meaning of the paragraph or text in general? Here are some possibilities to try out:

El director [signed] el contrato.

El director [issued] el contrato.

El director [revoked] el contrato.

* The key here is to feel free to guess—you have to let go of getting the precise word, and just try to make some sense of the phrase. Practice a lot and keep trying!
* Finally, ENJOY the process of understanding a little bit more each time you read or listen in your new language.

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