

Rassegna Italiana di Linguistica Applicata

BULZONI
EDITORE


Anno LIV

Settembre-Dicembre 2022/3
ISSN 0033-9725

Rassegna Italiana di Linguistica Applicata 2022/3

Quadrimestrale di ricerca linguistica e glottodidattica
Anno LIV – Numero 3, 2022

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Rassegna Italiana di Linguistica Applicata

Quadrimestrale di ricerca linguistica e glottodidattica

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3/2022

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ISSN 0033-9725

© 2023 by Bulzoni Editore S.r.l.
00185 Roma, via dei Liburni, 14
<http://www.bulzoni.it>
e-mail: bulzoni@bulzoni.it

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HOW HAS INPUT CHANGED?
REFLECTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS
FOR INTERCOMPREHENSION

Abstract

Since EUROM5 was published, several technological developments which impacted language acquisition and learning occurred. Easy access to information through digital devices and the widespread use of social media have changed the nature of linguistic input. Traditional means of communication have had to adapt to changes by moving to digital platforms which render them more interactive. In this article I reflect on these developments in relation to linguistic input and on the implications for intercomprehension. If fundamental notions – including the centrality of input – are still highly relevant, learning how to manage multifaceted information to develop language learning-related strategies is even more crucial than in the past. I include some proposals on how modern digital means can develop intercomprehension and stimulate interlinguistic reflections.

1. Introduction

Les phénomènes d'intercompréhension sont graduels: ils s'échelonnent selon les régions traversées et peuvent, de proche en proche, se diffuser sur de grandes étendues. Ils peuvent au contraire être bloqués très vite par des raisons culturelles et des sentiments d'appartenance à des communautés distinctes.
Blanche-Benveniste, Claire (2008: 63)

Within today's dynamic and fast-moving society Claire Blanche-Benveniste's words are probably more meaningful than they were in 2008, when they were published. This is because the renowned linguist, already at the time, had highlighted the potential of intercomprehension (IC), underscoring the strengths of "an integrated teaching/learning approach whereby students learn multiple related languages simultaneously for receptive purposes by using linguistic affinities and transfer" (Larsen Freeman 2018: 61). Linguis-

tically-diverse exposure can lead to better linguistic awareness and stimulate reflections on similarities and differences in comparison with previously-known languages, including one's mother tongue/s. Today, digitally-mediated communication¹ offers easy access to different languages, whether related or unrelated, through linguistic input characterised by brief and attractive messages and this copious exposure which occurs through digital devices could be relevant to develop IC competences.

Besides paving the way for numerous initiatives and providing opportunities for critical reflection among linguists and educators, Claire Blanche-Benveniste's several seminal works also led to the publication of *EuRom4, metodo di insegnamento simultaneo delle lingue romanze* (Blanche-Benveniste *et al.* 1997) and then to the renewed version, *EuRom5. Leggere e capire 5 lingue romanze*² (Bonvino *et al.* 2011) in which the IC methodology was further developed and put into practice. In the ten years or so that have passed since the publication of the latter work, unprecedented changes have been witnessed in terms of opportunities to access languages through input available via digital devices. Multimodality also offers opportunities to generate personal texts in support of images and videos, as in the case of memes (e.g. Fiorentino 2019) and fansubbing (Bolaños García-Escribano 2017). Conciseness and synthesis are among the characteristics of digitally-mediated texts, also because verbal communication is accompanied by visuals, with the latter generally given more prominence than the former. One of the assets of audio-visual input therefore lies in its multimodality, as comprehension may be cognitively scaffolded through non-verbal (e.g. visuals) and verbal (e.g. subtitles) means³. This is also the case within guided settings, including schools and language courses where the media are used as resources and the input which results from them – whether authentic or modified for didactic purposes – is a purposely- chosen tool, adapted according to learners' needs (Webb 2015; Chun *et al.* 2016; Kessler 2018).

Blanche-Benveniste, however, also warned that the potential of IC to render learners well disposed towards languages and language learning can “be blocked quickly” because of “cultural reasons”, for example through

¹ This nomenclature which has recently gained ground (Unger 2020) today flanks others, such as computer-mediated communication (Herring 2004) and/or discourse and CALL (computer-assisted language learning) and MALL (mobile-assisted language learning).

² This publication will be referred to as EuRom5 henceforth.

³ Mayer provides cognitive foundations to support the claim that “people learn more deeply from words and pictures than from words alone” (Mayer 2009: 47), as part of his Cognitive Theory of Multimedia Learning.

prejudices towards different linguistic communities: evidence of this is readily found in several circumstances in today's multilingual and multicultural societies, one example being documented in Muchura-Theuri & Obuya (2018)⁴. This can be counteracted if IC techniques and strategies are also used to gain awareness of cultural implications and to appreciate the value of diversity. This is also the case when digitally-mediated communication become accessible to users of online materials who only read and understand their local language/s and to whom content on the web may be inaccessible unless they learn how to retrieve information in another more widespread language or in a variety which may be similar to their own vernacular, as suggested in Chavula & Suleman (2020).

Since digitally-mediated communication is so common nowadays, with social media rendering it highly pervasive, and considering that IC is also aimed at attaining learning skills that can be applied to different types of authentic texts, in this contribution I put forward some considerations on how input via the media has changed and I reflect on how these are relevant to IC. In doing so I base my reflections on the premise that developing IC skill-sets is a gradual and continuing process and that obstacles can easily arise if cultural misconceptions and prejudices surface, as Blanche-Benveniste herself suggested.

2. *From 'traditional' input to audio-visual input*

Forty years ago, Larsen-Freeman (1983: 89-90) drew linguists' attention to the potential of authentic input directly from the media by reporting the case of a speaker of Dutch who learnt German L2 by listening to radio programs regularly. This represents one of the first cases in which language acquisition as a result of media exposure is documented, albeit anecdotally. It is also relevant insofar as IC is concerned, because the claim that German was 'learned' via radio is explained on the basis of typological proximity and mutual intelligibility between the speaker's L1 and the L2. The meta-cognitive strategies that Larsen-Freeman refers to, as in listening selectively

⁴ This research is based on communication difficulties faced by immigrant traders in one of the largest markets of Nairobi, known to host traders from the wider East African regions. A subject interviewed in the study, for example, says this: "When I talked to the local traders here, they found the Swahili I spoke different from theirs due to accent and they ridiculed me. That made me shy away from talking to them and I was very uncomfortable" (Muchura-Theuri, Obuya 2018: 4).

and predictability, which rendered the input ‘simplified’ contextually, helped the learner heighten his intrapersonal linguistic skills. Besides the above experience concerning radio, there are several examples of how ‘traditional’ television viewing, notwithstanding its unidirectional input, led to an increase of linguistic competences in different countries. Findings of studies carried out in different contexts, summarised in Caruana (2021), clearly show that authentic audio-visual input led to foreign language acquisition. There is also evidence of cases in which foreign languages were acquired after direct exposure via the media, in some circumstances even in the complete absence of formal learning.

Technological developments have now created a scenario wherein media viewing habits, especially among the younger generations, change continuously. Besides the widespread availability of different video and audio genres and the ease of access to them⁵, there is the option to choose between different languages, for example by opting for original versions versus dubbed or subtitled ones. Translation tools are widely available too. This enables users to engage more directly with the media than in the past, when input was largely unidirectional and generally limited to one’s native tongue, possibly together with a handful of other languages. Possibilities of direct interaction among users, whether synchronously or asynchronously, have increased especially through social media, in which immediate communicative needs are accomplished through short written or audio-video messages, generally accompanied by symbols and images. This, of course, represents a major shift with respect to the traditional oral-aural audio-visual input, such as that received via TV, radio and fixed telephony.

A feature of digitally-mediated communication is its constant change, referred to as “shifting sands” in the 2022 Digital Trends survey by Deloitte. This survey reports how, especially among younger generations, the attraction for streaming-video on demand is determined by its content. This also in consideration of social media, which has “evolved dramatically” and “deliver(s) finely tuned and personalized feeds of images, video, music, news, gaming, and shoppable media to billions of users, all lit up by social networking and provided for free”⁶. Popular entertainment today is also char-

⁵ Although access to the digitally-mediated communication is widespread, there is also a significant digital-divide which may have also been accentuated by Covid-19 (Lai, Widmar 2021).

⁶ <https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/industry/technology/digital-media-trends-consumption-habits-survey/summary.html>, access date 30/01/2023. Deloitte’s 16th annual digital media trends survey was fielded by an independent research firm in December 2021 and employed an online methodology among 2,000 U.S. consumers.

acterised by “global content”, as it aims to be made available to people of different languages, cultures and geographical contexts. Suffice to point out that US audience figures on streaming metrics published by The Nielsen Company (US)⁷ place *Squid Games* (originally in Korean) and *Money Heist* (Spanish) among the most popular TV series of 2021. Disney movies *Luca*, *Moana* and *Coco* were among the most widely-viewed full-length movies of 2021. Although these are originally in English, they are set in specific contexts, respectively Italy, Polynesia and Mexico, and cultural and linguistic features of these geographical regions are central to the storylines. Global film and TV streaming services and online retailers are among the ‘big winners’ of Covid-19, and this has increased the demand for translators who can provide subtitles, dubbing and product descriptions in different languages⁸.

These changes are so rapid and extensive that it comes as no surprise that there is often a significant gap between formal language learning – especially within schools – and the type of linguistic input that individuals, especially those in the younger age brackets, are exposed to regularly during their free time. This includes both L1s and foreign languages because in instructed settings both are often decontextualised (Lee, Park 2019; Lee 2022). Moreover, although there are numerous studies on the use of technological devices and platforms for language teaching and learning purposes, it seems that these are generally not fully exploited for this⁹. For example, Zhang, Zu (2021) provide an exhaustive review of 41 academic works, published between 2009 and 2020, the main topic of which focussed on the effectiveness of different multimedia input modes in promoting L2 learning, having selected these from among over 400 publications which dealt broadly with computer-assisted language learning. The results of this

The survey was also fielded in the United Kingdom, Germany, Brazil and Japan in December 2021 and January 2022. All data from the global markets were weighted to be nationally representative.

⁷ <https://global.nielsen.com>, access date 30/01/2023.

⁸ <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20201230-why-are-we-learning-languages-in-a-closed-world>, access date 30/01/2023.

⁹ See for example, the review by Persson & Nouri (2018) of 54 articles on mobile assisted second language learning, published since 2010 and earlier works on computer-assisted language learning (e.g. Schmid 2017). In addition to these a specific example is provided by Ledesma & Sandoval (2020), who cite several studies dedicated to enhancing language learning through modern devices but then reveal that technological resources available to 9-11-year-olds attending a school in Southeast Mexico are not used for English L2 learning purposes.

review showed that “multimedia input was mostly used to enhance vocabulary learning, followed to a lesser degree by listening comprehension, reading comprehension, and grammar learning” (Zhang, Zu 2021: 11). Digitally-mediated communication could potentially go well beyond these, as it could involve developing skills and competences which extend to “cultural learning”, as suggested by Kukulska-Hulme, Lee (2020) in relation to mobile assisted-language learning.

While developing these skills by using extensive texts is an important goal, today it is also necessary to understand the extent to which digitally-mediated audio-visual input can help to acquire them. This input may be relevant to IC methodology because IC requires meta-cognitive strategies which approach the pedagogical competence of ‘learning how to learn’, which is similar to *savoir-apprendre*, the ability to learn, to observe, to participate in new experiences, while incorporating new knowledge and competences into prior existing ones. In fact, Bonvino, Cortés Velásquez (2016) explain that being able to read real-life texts simultaneously in different languages requires

work based on attention, on comparison and on a mobilisation of all linguistic competences and also exploiting the L1 [...] a reader become plurilingual if s/he learns to make the most of all his/her repertoire [...] the learner is invited to interact with the text through all the competences derived from the knowledge of the L1, of regional varieties, of the knowledge of other languages in his/her repertoire (Bonvino, Cortés Velásquez, 2016: 114).

Therefore, within a scenario wherein input from the media has evolved significantly, the potential of digitally-mediated communication can also be exploited for IC purposes, as I attempt to exemplify in the next section. My main objective is to reflect on the implications for IC in relation to digitally-mediated linguistic input, in particular to show how information mediated through modern means of communication could be useful to develop IC competences.

3. *Using digital multimodal means for IC purposes: some examples*

Texts used for IC are generally authentic and they are based on universal topics which are cognitively familiar to learners. In EUROM5, for example, they are sourced from online newspapers with the purpose of providing simultaneous contact between Romance languages to favour transversal learning, leading to transferable comprehension strategies. In their reflections on IC methodology, Bonvino, Cortés Velásquez (2016: 114) explain

The example in Image 1 is based on materials in English and in Spanish, therefore languages which are less typologically close than the Romance languages included in EUROM5. In this case, Twitter can be used by first exposing a speaker of English just to the Spanish version of the advert. IC processes can be activated by referring to the image and by identifying cognates (e.g. *mantenerse* = maintain; *fresco* = fresh; *colores* = colours; *neutros* = neutral). These could help to formulate an initial hypothesis on the message being conveyed which can then be confirmed, discussed and analysed further. Needless to say, IC methodology makes use of other cues in order to reflect further on language use, for example by exploiting non-verbal stimuli. Hence the use of accompanying images is a clear added value, as also is carrying out similar tasks with other Twitter co-texts, including advertisements of the same brand or of similar items.

More exhaustive and guided analyses on Image 1, which ideally would require specific guidance from a teacher who has the required formation in the implementation of IC methodologies, could lead to reflections on differences in noun phrase formation (*el calor del verano* / the summer heat) and word order (*colores neutros* / neutral colours). The use of discourse markers (*of course/por supuesto*), as features that are used regularly especially in informal settings and which therefore appear in language varieties used on social media, including Twitter, could be underlined explicitly to point out their usefulness in everyday conversation. Harnessing the potential of the access to languages that we have at our fingertips, also by explicating how this authentic input can lead to better linguistic awareness and competence, is an aspect that can be exploited via digitally-mediated communication stimuli based on short texts which are placed in an easily-recognisable communicative context. Such texts, of which Twitter is one example, can be conducive to developing IC competences.

3.2 Online headlines and back-translation

IC methodology, among other objectives, highlights similarities between typologically related languages and heightens metalinguistic awareness (Fiorenza 2019) to render a ‘good reader’ plurilingual. While positive results have been achieved as far as IC between Romance languages is concerned (Benucci 2015; Bonvino, Jamet 2016), it may be interesting to investigate further whether reading strategies acquired by learners could be applied to languages which are not necessarily typologically as close, as already hinted above by referring to the example concerning Spanish and

English. For example, Maltese¹¹, a Semitic language written in Latin characters, could be subject to further investigation in relation to IC with Romance languages, especially Italian¹². This could occur via online stimuli, as through the Internet one may access languages which otherwise might be difficult to retrieve, thereby representing another example of how this ease of access to information could help develop IC competences also by acting as a ‘bridge’ between languages that are not necessarily typologically very close.

Maltese, for example, could represented a gateway for speakers of Italian and other Romance languages to gain IC competences which could be applied to Arabic and its varieties as, over the years, it has adopted several Italo-Romance lexemes in its vocabulary, especially in the noun, adjective and verb categories. The following headline, taken from an online newspaper¹³, just like in the case of EuROM5 materials, could lead to an IC problem-solving task with Italian native speakers who have no knowledge of Maltese, or indeed any other Arabic language. The context on which the news item in Image 2 is based is clear, because Leonardo’s masterpiece is present both in the images and in the title, *Raġel liebes ta’ anzjana jipprova jivvandalizza l-Mona Lisa*, (‘A man dressed as an old lady tries to vandalise the Mona Lisa’):

¹¹ While admitting my bias on this, because Maltese is my mother tongue and I acquired Italian throughout my childhood, I have often observed how Italians who reside on or visit the island of Malta express their interest towards my language. This often starts because they readily identify lexical similarities between Italian and Maltese. I refer anecdotally, for example, to the curiosity of some colleagues when they listened to the aeroplane announcement in Maltese even before setting foot on the island, namely the invitation to fasten their safety belt, Maltese *ċinturin tas-sigurtà*, Italian *cintura di sicurezza*.

¹² Maltese is the only language in Europe in which a Semitic stratum is productively integrated with Italian and English adstrata. It is heavily characterised by diachronic and synchronic contact, wherein, for example, terms of sectorial use are often drawn either from Italian or from English and integrated, even morphologically, into the language.

¹³ <https://newsbook.com.mt/ragel-liebes-ta-anzjana-jipprova-jivvandalizza-l-mona-lisa/>, access date 30/05/2022.

Raġel liebes ta' anzjana jipprova jivvandalizza l-Mona Lisa

Minni Mark Camenzuli - 30 ta' Mejju 2022 11:29 AM



Image 2. Online news in Maltese.

In this case the first IC steps would be similar to those included in EuROM: these would include identifying the cognate noun *anzjana* (It. *anziana*, ‘old lady’) as well as the verb stems *prova* (It. *provare*, ‘to try’) and *vandalizza* (It. *vandalizzare*, ‘to vandalise’). Other words in the headline, (*raġel*, ‘man’; *liebes*, ‘dressed’; *ta’*, ‘of’; *l-*, ‘the’) are incomprehensible unless one knows Maltese or Arabic, but learners could then be asked to seek other online headlines in Maltese in which they could identify, for example, the preposition *ta’* and other prepositions of Arabic origin and to try and understand the meaning of them from the context. This is one of the strategies that could help them bridge the gap with Italian, as identifying frequently used grammatical terms of Arabic origin in Maltese, (including prepositions, conjunctions, pronouns etc.), and learning their meaning could then lead to better comprehension of noun phrases. The ease of accessibility to online tools can, therefore, lead to a rapid retrieval of other headlines in Maltese through which such grammatical terms can be identified.

In addition to this, learners could be asked to translate the headlines using online tools and to reflect on the versions provided, ideally with the help of an expert of IC methodologies, as this task requires specific guidance. Google translate, for example, gives the following translated version, which is somewhat imprecise: “An elderly man tries to vandalize the Mona Lisa”. Exposing both the usefulness and the limitations of such tools could help learners gain further awareness of their use.

A further step could then be to use online back-translation procedures through which a translated version is re-translated into the original language.

This process is exemplified in these three sentences, (1) is an original online newspaper headline in Italian¹⁴, (2) is an online translation of it into English and (3) is an online re-translation of (2) into Italian:

- (1) *San Lorenzo, clochard accoltellato per un pugno di riso: presi gli aggressori*¹⁵
- (2) *San Lorenzo, homeless man stabbed for a handful of rice: I took the attackers*
- (3) *San Lorenzo, senzatetto accoltellato per una manciata di riso: Ho preso gli aggressori*

The original headline in (1) is a topicalised sentence, in which the location of the event (San Lorenzo) is placed in the first position, followed by a concise description of the event itself. The conclusion of the incident is separated from this sentence by a colon, after which a participial form *presi* ‘captured’ precedes the semantic patients, *gli aggressori* ‘the aggressors’. The online translation (2) interprets *presi* as the simple past tense (*passato remoto*), as this form is a homonym of the past participle and translates it as ‘I took’. The back-translation in (3), in which the present perfect (*passato prossimo*) *ho preso* is reproduced, would lead a proficient speaker of Italian to understand that something is amiss in (2). This back-translation technique, another feature of digital resources which is easily accessible, can lead to further reflections on online translations and be the object of tasks in which multiple languages are used to add more translations and thereby discuss and reflect upon similarities and differences.

3.3 TikTok

TikTok is another popular platform of content creation: according to DataTrek Research¹⁶, TikTok saw the biggest surge on Google search in a span of 90 days in April 2021, surpassing other popular social networks like Facebook, Snapchat and Twitter. Because of this spike, it was dubbed “the breakout social media platform of the Covid crisis”¹⁷. The use of TikTok as opposed to all other social media is especially significant among the Gen-

¹⁴ www.repubblica.it, access date 23/05/2022.

¹⁵ Translation: A homeless man/tramp was stabbed for some rice: the aggressors were captured/arrested.

¹⁶ <https://www.datatrekresearch.com>, access date 23/05/2022.

¹⁷ <https://www.ypulse.com>, access date 23/05/2022.

eration Z, i.e. those born between the late Nineties and early Noughties. The following example¹⁸ illustrates its possible relevance to IC:

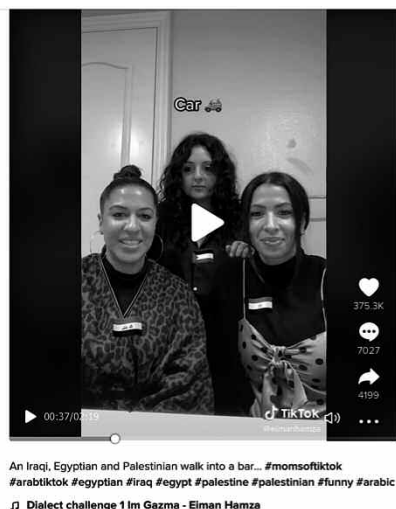


Image 3. Varieties of Arabic on TikTok.

Image 3 is taken from a TikTok upload in which three women of Iraqi, Egyptian and Palestinian nationalities, compare their respective varieties of Arabic by saying some words in each one of them. This video racked up 7,207 comments in a short time, with numerous reactions to the words in the video, including their use and pronunciation. This is interesting from an IC perspective as the notion of ‘related’ languages, as in the case of the Romance languages included in EuROM5, can be extended to include sociolinguistically marked contexts, such as those characterised by historical diglossia, as in the relationship between Classical Arabic and varieties of this language. In this TikTok video this is done by means of a ‘dialect challenge’ and the results are stimulating and lead to extensive feedback. The main point being made here is that TikTok input can be useful to extend the notion of mutual intelligibility between related languages to varieties which may not have an established written tradition or which present differences with respect to standard forms, thereby also providing opportunities to reflect on the cultural dimensions of language use.

¹⁸ https://www.tiktok.com/@eimanhamza/video/7103931417192631595?_t=8Tb2VSz6Udy&_r=1, access date 23/05/2022

3.4 *Digital multimodal means and IC: concluding remarks*

The examples provided in the sections above serve the purpose of underlining how social media and online materials, including back-translation, could be relevant to IC. In synthesis, the easy accessibility of multimodal input, augmented by visuals, can lead to useful inter-linguistic reflections, both between typologically close languages and others which may be more distant. It can serve as a first step towards developing IC competences or a means to consolidate previously acquired IC skills. It can also act as a stimulus for adults to re-kindle languages learnt at school, even though they may have abandoned them for years or saw little relevance for them because they were learnt in an excessively traditional fashion. Furthermore, it can lead to better attitudes towards lesser-known varieties, including those which are not highly visible online as they may be less widespread than standardised forms.

Other, possibly more complex input scenarios, which could lend themselves to IC are memes (see Pontremolesi, this volume) and interlingual film trailers. This also in consideration of the role of online users who are increasingly becoming content creators and not only consumers, and where augmented and virtual reality are gaining ground and may be explored as future possible IC scenarios, together with the creation of artificial visual and other sensory environments (Ho *et al.* 2017; Parmaxi 2020). Both augmented and virtual reality could offer opportunities to be exposed to languages through activities specifically designed for this purpose, on the lines that Bonner & Reinders (2018) suggest for the English as a Second Language classroom.

4. *Conclusion*

Having been exposed to digitally-mediated communication from a very young age, today's youths are said to be digitally 'native'. Nevertheless, even if this may be the case, this does not necessarily mean that they are digitally 'literate', as this requires the ability to process information, to form schemas for information retrieval and to make metacognitive connections (Smith *et al.* 2018: 511).

Digitally-mediated multimodal texts can be useful to develop IC competences and they can be used autonomously or accompanied by others of different genres, such as those used in EuROM5. They may also be useful to maintain and strengthen the original conceptual framework of IC, which involves in-depth analysis and problem-solving via authentic texts. More-

over, as I propose in this contribution, the type of linguistic input prevalent in short texts, such as those normally encountered on platforms like Twitter and Tik-Tok could possibly motivate younger learners because they are very familiar with them. Data regarding increased online access, especially among young users, is in itself an indication that these sources cannot be ignored and that their learning potential ought to be investigated and exploited.

The cultural dimension of IC is equally relevant and:

A bonus is that [s]uch an approach becomes a resource of linguistic emancipation for the foreign students from immigrant families, as the classroom space is transformed into a real meeting place between diverse cultures and between their representatives and thus an adequate place for intercultural learning (Pugliese, Filice 2012, cited in Larsen Freeman 2018: 61).

This observation is aligned to the words of Blanche-Benveniste (2008) who states that developing IC skills involves a gradual process which is obstructed by misconceptions and prejudice. As suggested by Larsen Freeman (2018: 61), among others, in multicultural and multilingual societies even more attention needs to be given to develop sensitivity toward cultural and linguistic diversity, more so as we are constantly exposed to all types of messages from the media.

While in this contribution I provided some insights into how audio-visual input has changed over the years and I made some proposals in relation to the relevance of ‘new’ media to IC, the effectiveness of digitally-mediated communication can only be measured by means of empirical studies or through didactic interventions designed to reflect on its effects. These, to my knowledge, are not numerous and while acknowledging that this type of input changes almost as fast as the media through which it is transmitted, investigating it further and using it to teach language-related skills and competences, including IC, can indeed be a step in order to bridge the gap between being digitally ‘native’ and becoming digitally ‘literate’.

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