COMBINED SKILLS FOR INTERCOMPREHENSION

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Abstract: Following two sets of articles based on Case Studies that were developed in order to prove that reading comprehension and listening comprehension in an unknown language are possible at a certain level (for the beginning level); this paper is also a Case Study that tries to combine the two skills, reading and listening, in order to improve the comprehension in a foreign language that has not been studied before. The questions are provided in Dutch and the task is to understand and provide an answer to demonstrate that the message was understood. The analysis of the answers is the main part of the paper.

Keywords: reading, listening, message, intercomprehension, Dutch

1. Introduction

First of all we should define the main word that is also the central idea of the study. **Intercomprehension** is about developing a mental ability that makes the most of the resemblances between one's own language and other languages. The concept implies an approach to teaching/learning foreign languages, and has been developed at first for languages in the same linguistic group. We have been involved in both the "Redinter" and "Intermar" projects which have outlined new ways and solutions for integrating intercomprehension into institutional language learning programs.

The paper 'Combined skills for intercomprehension' is a Case Study that tries to demonstrate that comprehension of a foreign language that has never been studied and it is not from the same family of languages the native subjects are speaking, can be understand at a basic level, provided we combine the listening and reading skills for comprehension. There were two previous Case Studies in which we tried to prove the same theory.

The first Case Study was based on **reading comprehension** and on the assumption that people speaking different European languages can have at least limited understanding of an unknown language, regardless the group of languages they belong to or have knowledge of. The target language chosen for this study was Romanian. Twenty questions were presented in written form to 90 speakers of different languages and then analyzed. The conclusions were that for reading comprehension it was not the length of the sentence that matters but the number of international words in the sentence.The difference between the answers of the respondents, from our point of view, was given by the number of languages those knew that permitted some of them a greater adaptability to be capable of understanding a language they have probably never seen before in written form.

The second case study tested **oral comprehension**; the respondents could only listen to the questions without being given the possibility to see them. This is an important aspect of the study because the respondents could rely on identifying acoustic similarities between Romanian

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or English and the target language that was Dutch.Fifteen questions were read out loud to 180 Romanian speakers. For the listening comprehension the conclusions were that the understanding depends on two factors: the difficulty of the sentence and the period of time a person is exposed to a language, or certain sounds. The assumption we started with proved to be partially incorrect for the listening comprehension.

2. Method of research

We used a questionnaire that was similar to the one used for the listening comprehension, so that the main body of the study to be about the same in order to spot the differences easier. The instructions were read in Romanian: "Read and listen to the following questions and try to understand as much as possible. According to what you understand, you can translate a word, a group of words, or the whole question, but the main purpose of the study is to respond the questions in Romanian or English, whichever is easier for you". The questionnaire comprises two sets of interrogative sentences, the first set consisting of 10 sentences, in comparison to the listening one where there were only 7 sentences, and the second set made of 8 sentences, identic to the ones in the listening comprehension Case Study.

The people questioned are military and civilian students ranged from 18 to 25 years old, young men and women of about the same level of education, graduates of high schools from different towns and cities of Romania. All respondents speak Romanian, which is the mother tongue for most of them, and English at different levels, from beginner to upper intermediate. Other languages known by the respondents are: French, Spanish, German, Italian and Hungarian. There were between 5 and 20 students in a group, at the time of rendering the questions, and the answers were given by 75 students altogether. The students were asked not to speak up loud when they understood the translation or when they wanted to give an answer, but to write the answers in order not to influence their mates whether the answer or the translation would be the one expected or very different to what we supposed to be.

3. The analysis of the first set of answers

The first set of 10 questions is used especially when people get acquainted, in an informal conversation, or in everyday situations: in the street, at school, in an office, at shopping etc. The English version is rendered here in brackets. The students have the opportunity to choose between Romanian and English for their written answers.

1. *Kan ik u helpen?* (Can I help you?)
2. *Spreek je Engels?* (Do you speak English?)
3. *Hoe laat is het?* (What time is it?)
4. *Hoeveel is dit?* (How much is this?)
5. *Hoe heet je?* (What is your name?)
6. *Waar woon je?* (Where do you live?)
7. *Welke taal spreek je?* (What language do you speak?)
8. *Uit welk land kom je?* (Where do you come from? / What country are you from?)
9. *Ben je getrouwd?* (Are you married?)
10. *Wie ben je?* (Who are you?)

We are going to give the statistic results for each of the sentences, giving examples of the unusual answers or connections between the Romanian or English and the target language that is Dutch.

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3.1. The first sentence ‘Kan ik u helpen?’ is understood by all the respondents (except for four) that mean 95%, who gave short or long answers in Romanian or English. The connection with the English is obvious, both in written form and oral communication. The form of the pronouns is the unknown element of the sentence; some of the students answered: ‘Yes, I can help you.’ while the correct answer should have been: ‘Yes, you can help me’, but the overall meaning was caught.

3.2. The percentage of students who got the meaning of the second sentence ‘Spreek je Engels?’ and rendered short answers is a bit higher than for the first sentence and is 97%. The sentence has two recognizable elements, the verb and the noun, that are similar to English as form and pronunciation.

3.3. For the third question ‘Hoe laat is het?’ there are 45 blank spaces in the questionnaires, and four correct answers pointing the time. The other responses are simple guesses, some of them with no connection to the question, ranging from dimensions to relatives, from the date to the age and place of birth. There are also translations of words that were recognized from which the most frequent is the form ‘is’ of the verb ‘be’ with the same form in English and Dutch, recognized by 6 people.

3.4. The fourth question ‘Hoeveel is dit?’ was not understood by 50 people, 20 students tried different answers or translations which were meaningless, and only 5 recognized the verb ‘to be’ with the same form ‘is’, and the demonstrative pronoun ‘dit’. Some students considered the pronoun as being a verb, probably influenced by French.

3.5. The fifth interrogative sentence ‘Hoe heet je?’ was not understood by 62 students, 12 students understood the overall meaning and answered accordingly, and one student considered that ‘heet’ is similar in meaning with the English verb ‘hate’.

3.6. For the sixth question ‘Waar woon je?’ there were only five students that realized that the meaning of ‘waar’ was ‘where’ and no one rendered a meaningful answer. We can say that the meaning of the question was 100% not understood.

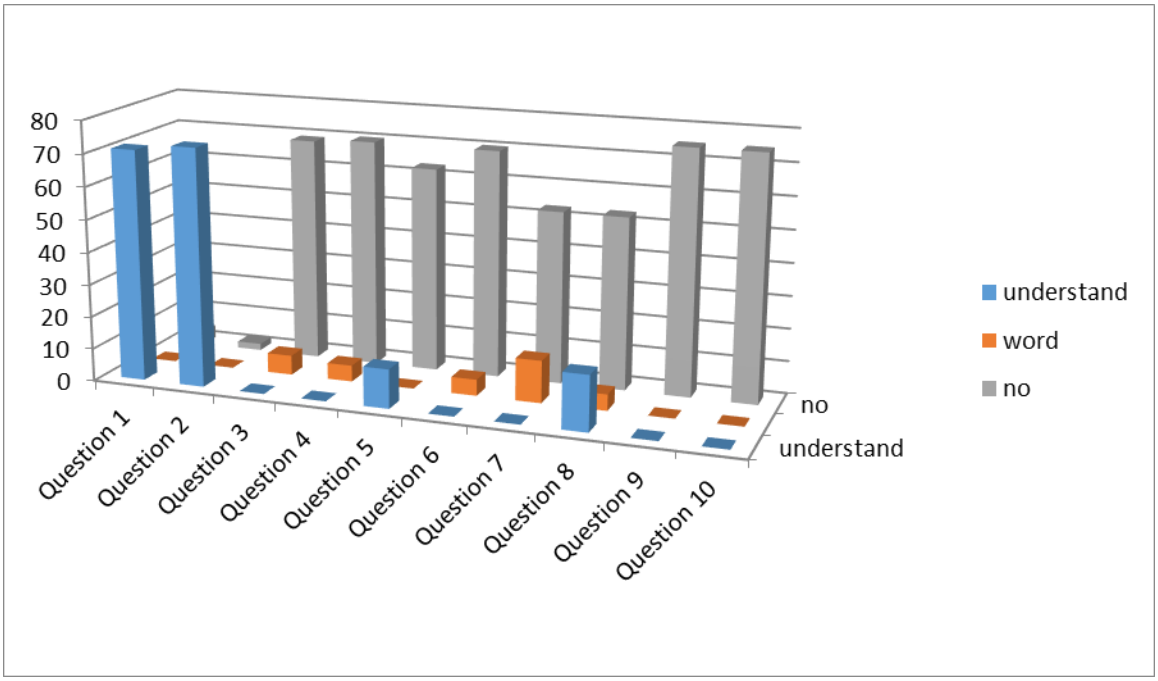
3.7. From the seventh question ‘Welke taal spreek je?’ 13 students recognized the verb ‘spreek’ similar to the English verb ‘speak’, perhaps because they paid attention to the second sentence where there was the same verb in a more accessible context. Only 9 students understood the question and answered mentioning the languages they can speak. The other 53 could not understand any word from the sentence.

3.8. The eight interrogative sentence ‘Uit welk land kom je?’ was understood by 17 people who gave correct answers or translated the sentence correctly. A number of 5 students understood the word ‘land’ and translated it as ‘land’ or ‘county’, and one student made the connection between the Dutch verb ‘kom’ and the English verb ‘come’.

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3.9. The ninth question ‘Ben je getrouwd?’ and the tenth question ‘Wie ben je?’ were not understood by anybody.

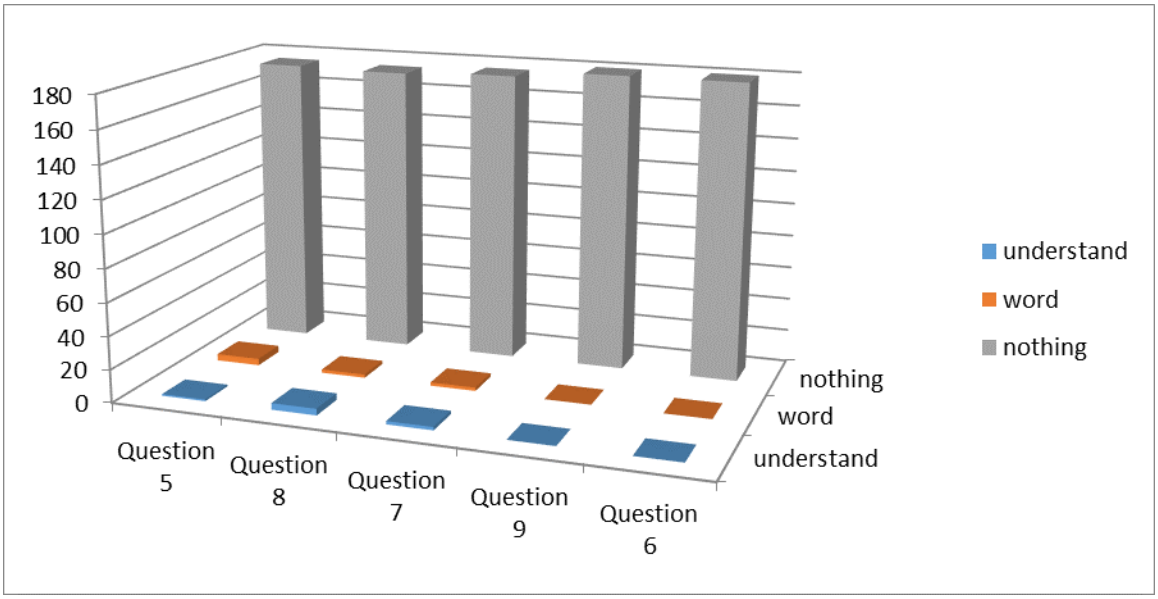
From the statistic point of view, the answers for the ten questions that form the first part of the questionnaire can be represented on a chart as follows:



Taking into account the fact that the main purpose of this paper is to prove that two combined skills are more efficient in understanding than only one, we should make a comparison between this set of questions and the set used for listening comprehension. We are going to compare the same questions, into the brackets there is the number of the same question from the chart above.

1. Hoe heet u? (Question 5)
2. Uit welk land komt u? (Question 8)
3. Welke taal spreekt u? (Question 7)
4. Bent u getrouwd? (Question 9)
5. Waar wont u? (Question 6)

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If we compare the two charts, we can see that except for the question 9 with 100% of students who could not understand in both cases, the other questions were better understood in the situation of the combined skills implying listening and reading.

4. The analysis of the second set of answers

There are 8 basic Dutch questions used especially when people get acquainted. The English version is given in brackets.

1. '*Hoe lang woont u in Belgi*ë?' (How long have you been in Belgium?)
2. '*Wat is uw familienaam*?' (What is your surname?)
3. '*Kan u dat spellen*?' (Can you spell it?)
4. '*In welke straat woont u*?' (What street do you live in?)
5. '*Op welk nummer woont u*?' (What number do you live at?)
6. '*Hebt u telefoon*?' (Have you got a telephone?)
7. '*Wat is uw telefoonnummer*?' (What is your telephone number?)
8. '*Wat is uw geboortedatum*?' (When were you born?)

4.1. For the first sentence 'Hoe lang woont u in België?' the key word is 'Belgium' that was recognized by almost all of the respondents, except for 12 who rendered no answer. The correct translation of the interrogative sentence or the right answer including the length of the action was given by 45 students.

4.2. The second question '*Wat is uw familienaam*?' was far simpler than the first one. Although the main word to be recognized in almost all European languages is 'family', 8 students could not recognize it. The noun 'family' and an answer or translation in connection to it was rendered by 8 respondents, while the other 59 understood perfectly the sentence.

4.3. The third question '*Kan u dat spellen*?' was not an easy one if we take into consideration the number of different translations with no connection to the meaning. Altogether the wrong translations and people who did not write anything there were

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about a half, more precisely 38 persons. There were many participants, about 35, who made the connection with English and offered a good translation into Romanian and one into English. Two students recognized only the verb 'spell' and translated it.

4.4. The fourth question '*In welke straat woont u*?' was correctly translated into Romanian or rendered the name of the street by 39 people. There were translated the words 'in welke' from the sentence, being recognized as 'on what' by one student. The other 35 could not recognize any word although the noun 'straat' could be assimilated to the Romanian or the English noun.

4.5. The fifth question was '*Op welk nummer woont u*?' There were 36 students that understood correctly the question so that they rendered the answer or translated the question into Romanian. Other 8 students recognized the word 'nummer' that has about the same pronunciation in English 'number' and Romanian 'număr', while the German word has the same form and pronunciation.

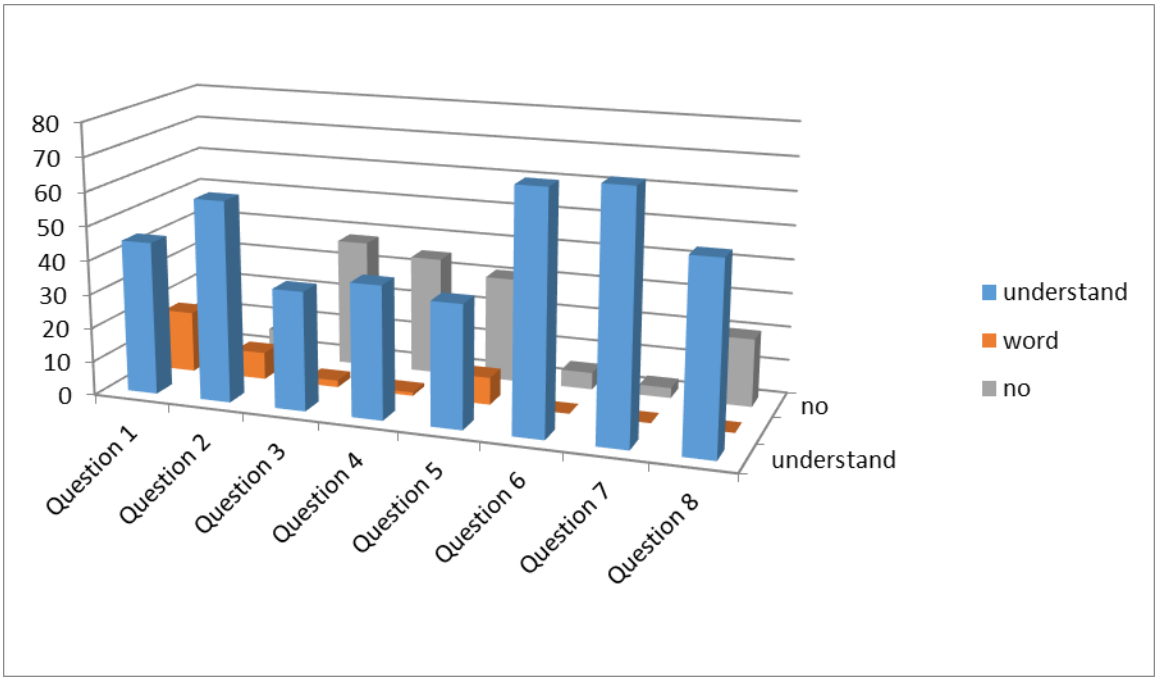
4.6. The sixth sentence was one of the easiest of all '*Hebt u telefoon*?' as long as it was understood by 70 students. A number of 5 students could not understand the question. The main word to be recognized is 'telefoon', with about the same form and pronunciation in all European languages.

4.7. The seventh question, already anticipated by some students was '*Wat is uw telefoonnummer*?' and it was understood by 72 participants. There are several characteristics of this interrogative sentence that made it so approachable. First of all the pronunciation of the words is similar to the English one. Secondly, the students were already familiar to the all the words and with the most important ones from the previous two sentences: 'telefoon' and 'nummer', words that make the compound 'telefoonnummer', which is the main word of the sentence as meaning.

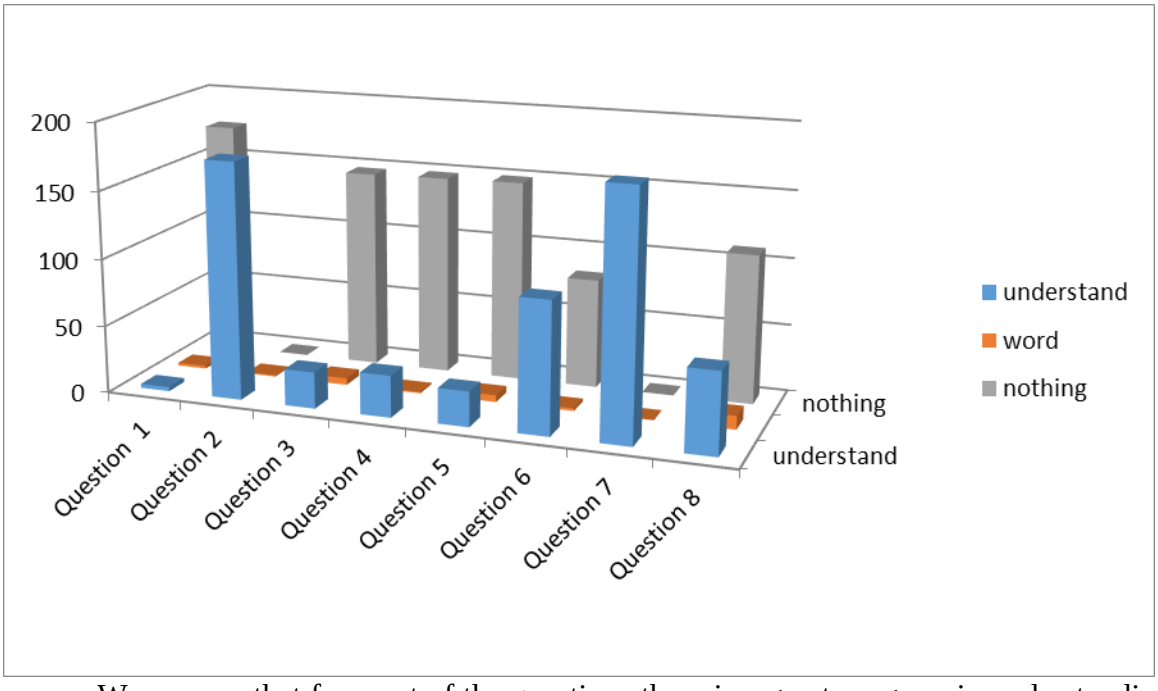
4.8. The eighth question, which is also the last one in the case study, was a bit more difficult than the previous one '*Wat is uw geboortedatum*?' The question was understood by 55 students who rendered answers accordingly.

Statistically, the answers can be represented by the following chart that shows that the respondents understood more from the second set of sentences than from the first one.

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The second set of sentences was rendered exactly in the same form and order to the participants at the previous case study involving only listening. To compare the two sets of answers we need another chart.



We can see that for most of the questions there is a great progress in understanding when the two skills are combined and the student can see the words and listen to the pronunciation.

5. Conclusion

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From the statistic and the linguistic analysis, some conclusions can be drawn according to the purpose of the study. The level and percentage of understanding a message in an unknown language, such is Dutch, from another group of languages depends on several factors.

a. **The difficulty of the sentence**. The term 'difficulty' includes, in our opinion, two factors: the vocabulary and the word order. If the sentence contains international loans, proper nouns, or words that are approximately similar in more languages from the same linguistic family ('Germanic cognates'), the process of understanding will be facilitated.

b. **The length of the exposure**. The period of time a person is exposed to a language, or certain sounds. At the beginning of the experiment the students were very surprised to listen to and read something they could not understand. After the second question they got used to the language and tried to make connections between what they hear and read and the languages they had already known, or perhaps searching for patterns.

c. **The combined skills**. The combination of listening and reading proved to be beneficial for the participants who proved that could understand the meaning of the message better than in the case of listening comprehension.

We started the case study from the assumption that people speaking different languages could have at least limited understanding of an unknown language, no matter what group of European languages they belong to or have knowledge of and concluded that the assumption was correct in certain conditions. The conditions include sufficient exposure to the unknown language, a medium difficulty of the sentences and combined receptive skills.

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