The development of plurilingual competence through authentic assessment and self-assessment: case study

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Abstract

In this article we present a case-study of authentic assessment carried out with learners taking part in an online plurilingual learning programme. The procedure of authentic assessment chosen here was to propose the learners to elaborate a Portfolio. The learning context consists of a programme in intercomprehension in Romance languages which is offered through a virtual environment (www.galanet.eu). The Portfolio is used in this programme as a document of reflexive self-assessment, aimed at initiating and promoting the emergence and manifestation of plurilingual competence, as well as promoting awareness and identification of the strategies needed in a context of plurilingual intercomprehension. Following the general structure of the *European Language Portfolio*, our model is organised in three sections (Language passport/Linguistic and intercultural biography/Dossier) where learners are invited to reflect on such issues as their linguistic-intercultural life experiences, self-assessment of proficiency in the languages they know, and self-assessment of learning achievement. The results of the study show that the Portfolio experience has contributed to modifying the learners' conception of linguistic competence, allowing them to make meaningful connections between formal instruction and experiential learning, as well as to identify meta-linguistic strategies used in the process of intercomprehension.

Key words: authentic assessment, Portfolio, self-assessment, intercomprehension, plurilingual approach

Resumen

En este artículo se examina el caso de una actuación de evaluación dinámica o auténtica realizada con los participantes en una formación de aprendizaje plurilingüe en línea, y que ha consistido en proponer a los estudiantes la elaboración de un Portfolio. El contexto del aprendizaje es una formación en intercomprensión en lenguas romances que se ofrece a través de una plataforma en línea (www.galanet. eu). El Portfolio se utiliza como un documento de auto-evaluación reflexiva dirigida a potenciar la emergencia y manifestación de una competencia plurilingüe, así

como la toma de conciencia de las estrategias que se emplean en un contexto de intercomprensión plurilingüe. Siguiendo la estructura general del *Portfolio Europeo de las Lenguas*, nuestro modelo se organiza en tres secciones (Pasaporte lingüístico/ Biografía lingüístico-intercultural/Dossier), en las que se invita a los aprendientes a reflexionar sobre asuntos como sus experiencias lingüístico-interculturales, auto-evaluación de sus competencias en las lenguas que conocen, y auto-evaluación de su progreso en el aprendizaje. Los resultados del estudio muestran que la experiencia Portfolio contribuye a modificar la concepción que tienen los aprendientes de sus competencias lingüísticias, abriendo la vía a establecer conexiones entre el aprendizaje formal y el experiencial, así como a la identificación de estrategias meta-lingüísticas que han empleado en el proceso de intercomprensión.

Palabras clave: evaluación auténtica, Portfolio, auto-evaluación, intercomprensión, enfoque plurilingüe.

1. Introduction

Language teaching is experiencing a time of interesting innovative proposals on plurilingual approaches which promote the learning of several languages at once and, with this, favour the activation of language awareness (Araújo e Sá and Melo, 2007) and plurilingual intercultural competence (Lustig and Koester, 1993) not centred on a single language. The plurilingual approaches to learning are driven by European Union linguistic policies, interested in combating the reduction of the languages used in the European setting and the domination of some languages over others, as well as protecting European linguistic diversity and reducing the dependence on the translation of all languages in an ever wider and more plurilingual Europe, with a growing level of mobility and internationalisation in labour, scientific and academic areas.

In this context, the *Common European Framework of References for Languages* (Council of Europe, 2000) drew up the *Cadre de Référence pour les Approches Plurielles des Langues et des Cultures* (Candelier et al., 2007) where the directives that this type of learning must follow are set out. The CARAP has contributed to systematising and driving a series of research lines in language didactics which are already being developed in Europe and attempts to include its repercussion by systematising its principles and validating its results. Some of these plural approaches are seen in the didactics of intercomprehension; others, not looked at here, are those known as "awakening to languages" and "integrated didactics of languages". Despite the difference between them, the three have been backed by European Union projects and consider language learning from a plural focus, taking advantage of the skills and knowledge that the learner possesses in a language – the mother tongue, second or foreign language – to

use them in other(s) (Candelier and al. 2007: 6-8).

In plurilingual interaction, several commentators speak in different languages simultaneously – each in their mother tongue. The capacity of the commentators to understand other languages and be understood by others, without anybody abandoning their language is called intercomprehension (Candelier et al 2007: 6-7).

This article presents a case study carried out on a plurilingual learning programme performed through participation in an online platform, *Galanet*. With regards to plurilingual learning, a Portfolio proposal is developed here which is used as a qualitative or authentic assessment and, therefore, as a self-assessment document for the learner. As far as the development and implementation of the *Galanet* platform is concerned, some assessment work has been performed (Quintín, Depover and Degache, 2005; Quintin and Masperi, 2006) that focuses on analysis of the different training aspects such as the platform's adaptation and operation, the teaching environment and the learning resources. Nonetheless, no studies have been performed to date that show the application of self-assessment processes. We believe this type of assessment may be very useful since training of this type activates a set of plurilingual, intercultural and overlapping skills and abilities in using Information and Communication Techolnogies (ICTs) in education which are not adequately shown in performance or level trials. Further, authentic assessment experiences comprise highly useful learning process analysis tools for language learners.

Specifically, the study here consists of an analysis of an authentic assessment performed on a group of students who took part in a session on the *Galanet* plurilingual learning platform throughout the winter term in 2008. The experience comprised the drafting of a learner self-assessment document following the general lines and spirit of the *European Language Portfolio* (Council of Europe, 2000 and 2002; Schneider and Lenz, 2001).

The general hypothesis is that the Portfolio is an open tool that, applied to online plurilingual training such as *Galanet*, drives the language awareness process, activates plurilingual training and favours, through reflective self-assessment, the emergence and support of strategies used in learning, as well as the specific necessary strategies in intercomprehension processes. In other words, the aim is to look at how the Portfolio can contribute to strengthen the emergence of necessary skills for intercomprehension.

The article is structured in the following way: section 2 introduces the learning context and online plurilingual training features; section 3 reviews the main concepts and procedures for authentic assessment with special attention to the Portfolio; section 4 describes the Portfolio Model developed in the study, and section 5 sets out

and debates the study results. The article ends with final conclusions and references.

2. The learning context: Online plurilingual training features

The case to be examined in this work falls within plurilingual training and learning offered using an online platform and developed through intercomprehension in Romance languages. Intercomprehension didactics, which have been ongoing for at least a decade, offer a type of learning that is not limited to a single language but works with several languages simultaneously. The coexistence of different languages is achieved through a set of interactions performed online – forums and chats – where participants use their mother tongue.

This training is characterised by three main aspects which distance it from the usual learning process when studying a foreign language: the number of languages, being a plurilingual approach: the skills, since reception or comprehension are mainly worked on; and support, since it is performed over the internet.

Each of the three areas the training is based on, and the object of our study, are explained below.

2.1. The plurilingual approach

In opposition to typical foreign language learning, the *Galanet* and GALAPRO platforms introduce four and six Romance languages respectively: Spanish, Catalan, Italian, French, Portuguese and Romanian. As stated in the introduction, this falls within the plural approach to languages (Candelier et al., 2007: 6):

> Didactic approaches that put into practice teaching-learning activities involving several (= more than one) linguistic and cultural varieties at the same time are known as "plural language and culture approaches". We contrast these approaches with those that could be termed "singular approaches" where the only aim behind the didactic approach is specifically one language or one culture, taken in isolation.

Participants using their mother tongue may or may not have knowledge of the languages on the platform. The plurilingual approach is developed more easily if the languages are similar. In fact, intercomprehension didactics are based on the similarities between neighbouring languages:

> The *intercomprehension between languages from the same family* offers a parallel work on several languages from the same family, whether it belong to the same family as the learner's mother tongue (or the school language) or of a language learnt. The most tangible advantages of belonging to the same family are made the most of – those relating to comprehension – which is intended to be developed systematically (Candelier et. al.,

2007: 7).

In intercomprehension studies we can see that speakers of languages from the same family are able to establish relationships or links between words from languages from the same family, without using diachrony or going to the origin of the words (Benucci, 2007: 159-162). Speakers of languages from the same family establish relationships or links at several linguistic levels – phonological, morpho-syntactic and lexical; in turn, however, the closeness between neighbouring languages allows learners to activate frames of knowledge, common norms and cultural knowledge that help them to construct the meaning of a text.

2.2. Intercomprehension and competence

Intercomprehension didactics also offer a new application of the concept of communicative competence, based on the idea of partial competence (Reference Framework, Council of Europe, 2002): this recognises that speakers may have a relative knowledge of one or several languages which allows them certain levels of communication – for example, understanding written texts – without requiring language fluency in other areas (e.g. oral comprehension or speaking). Partial competence is especially interesting in a plurilingual approach since it differs from the idea that one requires prior language knowledge in all forms to be able to understand or communicate in a language.

Galanet platform learning is developed through taking part in forums and chats and, therefore, written texts, as part of an approach which uses competence specialisation and a learning focus on reception skills. In this way, understanding texts becomes a much more interactive process where production skills are put into practice and the so-called *sixth skill* is used – written interaction (Reference Framework, 2002).

For this reason, intercomprehension researchers emphasise the difference between comprehension and intercomprehension. Whereas comprehension supposes a dissociate vision of language skills, intercomprehension develops the ability to interact with speakers of different paired or neighbouring languages and to understand written texts combining several of these languages to position themselves and react (Degache and Masperi, 2007: 5).

2.3. Information Technology

Information technology offers optimal conditions for plurilingual learning. Firstly, it allows people in different countries, universities and with different languages to communicate (mainly in Europe but also on other continents) which, in turn, attracts

competent speakers of different languages to use the platform, as well as contribute an intercultural dimension to learning.

Secondly, online platforms offer communication tools corresponding to different present and easily-recognisable discursive genres (forums, chats, messaging) which are common to participants in all countries and allow collaborative didactic activities to be performed, strengthening teamwork. Distance learning also favours the development of meta-cognitive and meta-linguistic social skills as participants have to agree to take appropriate decisions leading them to perform the tasks required in the training. In this way, participation in natural, non-simulated and significant interactions is achieved for learners who enter into a highly diverse intercultural dialogue with students and instructors from other countries.

In short, information technology introduces some major changes that help to boost plurilingual learning, such as the creation of student groups with different mother tongues, the use of recognisable genres, practice in authentic significant interactions and, lastly, the integration of comprehension and production through written interaction.

2.4. Plurilingual learning in the Galanet programme

In the *Galanet* platform, learning is performed over a session lasting three or four months, announced on the institutional *Galanet* platform that was created in 2002 thanks to the consortium of eight European universities. Students from the different universities involved and speakers of Spanish, French, Italian, Portuguese, Rumanian and Catalonian participate in the training. Based on project teaching and with a co-action perspective on learning (Puren, 2004), students perform a series of collaborative tasks leading to the joint production of a *Press Dossier* on a topic they have chosen and which they have voted on previously. The programme is presented as a learning itinerary which is articulated in four successive steps or *phases*. In the first stage, learners fill their digital profiles and get to know each other through the Platform; in stage 2, they all propose topics in a general Forum and they vote for the one which has received more messages; in stage 3, they work on the elaboration of a collective Dossier of the chosen topic, and in stage 4, learners leave their comments on the Dossier.

3. Authentic assessment in learning foreign languages

Assessment comprises a widely useful field within foreign language didactics which has evolved alongside language teaching principles and methods. Assessment is taken to mean, in a wide sense, 'a data collection process on learner knowledge and activities' (Puig, 2008: 84) with different aims. Thus, according to Puig, assessment is

performed at different times and with different aims whereby diverse assessment types are used. In the literature on the topic, *authentic assessment* is mentioned (Kohonen, 1992b) to refer to a type of internal or classroom assessment comprising a proposal and collection of learner data or activities; these can be surveys, interviews, diaries, portfolios or, in fact, any significant activity in the learning process in question:

> Authentic assessment refers to the procedures for evaluating learner performance using activities and tasks that represent classroom goals, curricula and instruction in as realistic conditions of language as possible. It emphasizes the communicative meaningfulness of evaluation and the commitment to measure what we value in education (Kohonen, 1992b: 6).

Although not mutually exclusive, there are substantial differences between this assessment type and external or performance assessment. Through different procedures and techniques, authentic assessment is seen an integral part of teaching, running throughout, and not simply when the training ends. It is, therefore, a type of progressive or continuous and non-summative assessment. Further, learners are assessed individually through these procedures considering their personal differences in training, level, experience, motivations, psychological features and biography. Naturally, in comparison to assessment based on measuring academic performance and the level achieved by learners, authentic assessment procedures are aimed at assessing global knowledge and skills in an integrated way, and not average knowledge. Lastly, these procedures invite learners to relate the learning with their personal experience (as promoted in *experiential learning*, see Kohonen, 1992a); learners are faced with their past and future objectives in a self-analysis and reflective exercise on their way of learning, needs and objectives.

In studies involving authentic assessment and its educational applications, a positive influence from this type of procedure has been underlined in integrating learners' cognitive skills and in increasing their affective involvement in learning (Hart, 1994: 9; O'Malley and Valdez Pierce, 1996: 12).

There are numerous procedures and authentic assessment techniques that have been trialled, such as: oral interviews, surveys, learner diaries, projects and demonstrations, experiments, teacher observations, student accounts (see McNamara and Deane, 1995; O'Malley and Valdez Pierce, 1996; Kohonen, 1992a, 1992b; Mariani, 2000; Laugier, 2002). One of the most successful has been the Portfolio.

3.1. The Portfolio: values and educational uses

Authentic assessment may include and is frequently aimed at self-assessment activities, such as portfolios, albeit not exclusively (Kohonen, 1992a; 1992b; Cassany,

2002, Puig 2008). In fact, the Portfolio comprises a collection of work or activities which learners collect and is defined in the following way:

A portfolio is defined as a purposeful, selective collection of learner work and reflective self-assessment that is used to document progress and achievement over time with regard to specific criteria (Kohonen, 1992b: 8).

The Portfolio is an open tool which can be applied in many ways and with a variety of designs and content, in accordance with the aims of the teacher or the institutions using it. One of the main features is a *learner autobiography* (Kohonen, 1992b), where highly useful documentation and reflection functions are fulfilled both for students and teachers: "They serve as a guide for students in making choices and in demonstrating how they reason, create, strategize, and reflect" (Gottlieb, 1995: 12). In this way then, more than referring the teacher to results achieved, the Portfolio is meant to "state to learners their learning process, including those not visible due to being hard-to-measure quantitatively with tests or trials" (Landone, 2004:4). For example, it allows learners to reflect on their (partial) competence in the different languages they know and which they would like to perfect, or which skills to develop to activate their intercultural competence, or even to explore the image they have of themselves as a SL speaker or student.

Thus, for teachers the Portfolio provides the "framework or backdrop for instruction and their contents chronicle the dynamic curriculum of their classroom" (Gottlieb 1995: 12). Whilst always bearing in mind the *European Language Portfolio* (ELP) model, in language learning this authentic assessment tool has been shown to be highly useful in an educational sense, as shown by the many applications and studies that have been performed in several European languages (Bilotto, 2000, Mariani, 2000, Laugier, 2002). The basic structure of the European Language Portfolio in its three sections – Language Passport, Biography and Dossier – offers the possibility of combining more open reflective self-assessment methods, such as narrative Biography methods, with other more standard methods, such as self-assessment tables and grids where students can check and contrast their skills in languages.

As we will see below, the ELP design can be a highly useful and valuable tool for training of the kind studied here, which is aimed more at the process than the result. In turn, it is extremely valuable from an educational standpoint as students learn to collect data on their own work and how to analyse them. They are introduced to skills for assessment and analysis of their progress, motivation and effort. In short, it shows their learning process and progress.

Still, in order to be valid and significant, authentic assessment experience must comply with certain requisites such as (Kohonen, 2000b: 8): (i) adapting or coinciding with curriculum objectives, (ii) being aimed at strengthening individual competence and (iii) being performed as a substantial part of learning or teaching. As shall be seen, the Portfolio for online plurilingual training meets these three requirements.

In accordance with the learning context description where the Portfolio has been prepared, intercomprehension training in Romance languages offered on the Galanet and Galapro platforms stands out from other language learning types in some important aspects: learning is not centred on a single language but is plurilingual and pluricultural; it is over the internet and, therefore, depends on the relatively free participation of learners in interactions, and it breaks with normal student-teacher roles, centring learning on the subject and the relations s/he is able to establish with other students.

Due to the training's new non-traditional features it is difficult and not particularly useful to apply performance or level tests. However, the self-assessment activities such as the Portfolio can be highly useful. Specifically, and according to Kohonen's criteria and recommendations for the suitability of the Portfolio, producing a Portfolio responds to the following objectives:

1) Language awareness: boosting the awareness process for languages within a linguistic family and getting over the fear of facing languages never before studied.

2) Integrating non-institutional language learning, i.e., awareness of language learning done through experiences outside the classroom (*experiential learning*).

3) Activating intercomprehension strategies: inciting reflection on strategies students have to use to participate in plurilingual interactions.

4) Integrating the training offered on the platform into the curriculum planning for the education being followed by students.

4. Description of the model

The starting point for the case looked at here is the production of a series of training activities based and modelled on the *European Language Portfolio* (Council of Europe, 2000; Schneider and Lenz, 2001). The three main sections remain: (i) Profile, (ii) Language and inter-cultural biography, and (iii) My folder (Dossier), with the applications provided below.

As in the ELP, the Profile (My language passport) is an initial brief schematic section where students provide some personal and professional information, and record the specific studies they have followed in languages (location and duration); it also contains tables or grids for the different languages known, following the *European Reference Framework* model. This section contains the *institutional* learning students have followed in the different languages and also includes an initial self-assessment grid of language skills in the different languages known.

The *Language and inter-cultural Biography* is a relatively open narrative section. Here, students have the chance to narrate their language biography freely, as well as list the inter-cultural meetings they consider to be relevant to their lives and linguistic-cultural training, centring on remembering or recounting meetings they have had over their lives, or currently have, with people from other cultures and/or countries.

The third section, called *My folder*, is an e-folder where students include material and activities proposed to them throughout the training; they can also add other documents they wish. Different activities are proposed amongst this material, offered at different times during the training, and respond to the aims set out in the section above, such as strengthening intercomprehension training in Romance languages and providing greater curriculum momentum. In addition, learners answer a self-assessment questionnaire in this section where, they assess their learning progress (what they have learnt) and examine the learning process (how they have learnt).

The Portfolio is therefore a personal document for the learner aimed at strengthening the training received in the classroom whilst developing other learning aspects by placing attention on the learners themselves and their learning process.

5. Results and discussion

The data we have collected through authentic assessment comprise 10 student Folders or Portfolios where the activities described above are collected. From the substantial and highly useful information in the documents, we centre our analysis on two fundamental aspects: (1) participant competence(s) in training and (2) the description of the strategies used in intercomprehension. In the first, the aim is to examine the number of languages students know and the possible differences arising in perceiving this knowledge according to the learning type (formal teaching/natural learning, for example). The aim of the second is to examine the reflective self-assessment marks from the students, i.e., awareness of the processes that take place in intercomprehension training.

5.1. Linguistic competence analysis

Firstly, we have taken into account the number of languages students know, as they themselves state in the Profile, and in the self-assessment grids for competence in different languages. Below are the languages included in the Linguistic Biography. The results are shown in table 1.

Table 1. Languages known by participants on the Galanet platform

	Mother Tongue	Languages Studied	Languages Stated in the Biography	Total Languages Known
Student 1	Spanish	English, French, Italian, German	+ Catalan, Portuguese	6
Student 2	Spanish	English, French, Italian	English, French, Italian	3
Student 3	Spanish	English, French	English, French	2
Student 4	Spanish	English, German, Swedish	+ Norwegian	4
Student 5	Spanish	French	French	2
Student 6	Spanish	English, French	English, French	2
Student 7	Spanish	English, French	English, French	2
Student 8	Spanish	English, French	English, French	2
Student 9	Italian	English, Spanish, French	+ Swedish + Portuguese	5
Student 10	German	English, Spanish	English, Spanish	2

5.1.1. Languages known by participants on Galanet training

Participants on *Galanet* training show a fairly varied language knowledge table which breaks with the idea that students only know one foreign language. The data show that 8 of the 10 participants have Spanish as their mother tongue and two state Spanish as a foreign language, being Erasmus students with German and Italian respectively as their mother tongues. Of all the languages they know, English appears in 9 out of 10 cases (only one person states to know no English and this is someone older – 57 – who states having received no foreign language training until becoming an adult). After English, most of the languages known by students are closely-related, both by type and culture: Romance, firstly (with French leading amongst 7 students followed by Italian for 2 students) and Germanic, secondly (German in 2 cases as a foreign language and 1 as mother tongue). Another language studied is Swedish (1 case).

In their narrative language biography, training participants list languages studied and they assess their competence in them. In addition, they also include stays, trips and meetings with people and hobbies that have advanced their learning. The biography also includes languages they know but have not formally studied: the Italian student mentions Swedish (the mother's native language) and Portuguese (the father's native language) at different levels (better in Portuguese than in Swedish, with which the student only feels familiarity and understands at a basic level). Other students mention Catalan and Portuguese in oral and written comprehension skills (due to the proximity with speakers of these languages or stays in the corresponding locations), and another student mentions Norwegian (due to its proximity to Swedish which the learner had formally studied).

An interesting point is that students tend towards similar languages in all cases, whether by type – Romance languages – or culture – English, German, Swedish. The languages they state they know outside formal learning, such as Catalan, Portuguese and Norwegian in the case of the student who studied Swedish, are also similar languages; this effectively suggests specific plurilingual competence within a linguistic family that the learners themselves mobilise where their social and communicative circumstances so require.

5.1.2. *Values from the Linguistic-cultural Biography*

The production of a personal language biography allowed students to extend on their competence grid in different languages by including learning outside the classroom which, in the case of languages, is particularly important. The Biography allows links to be established between learning and personal life, helping them to add value to the learning performed in different life circumstances. Students did not include these languages in their self-assessment grids, although some, such as the Italian student, recognise having "a very good communication level" in Portuguese, here the father's native language. In this way, the learner does not take into consideration this learning although recognises it is valuable and is part of their identity, and can use this learning in specific personal or work situations.

In this sense, the production of the Portfolio can contribute to changing the perception of linguistic and cultural learning amongst students, awakening in them the ability to integrate different learning types and circumstances.

Another interesting aspect to the Biography is that it allows learners to collect and systematise their experience and linguistic learning, and link it to their personal experiences. In this way then, they recognise they studied German "as my grandmother

returned from Germany, she was an *émigré* and always spoke highly of her experiences there"; another student who learnt Portuguese, the father's native tongue, "through his half-brother who taught him to love that language and culture". The inter-cultural meetings have specific importance in this sense, and all students mention some personal meeting.

In general, one could say that this type of self-biography exercise points out that a major part of learning is performed outside the classroom. In the case of language learning, this type of learning is particularly relevant as it includes situations such as trips, stays abroad or contact with people speaking different languages and from different cultures; i.e., situations where knowledge acquired in the classroom is specifically put into practice and, in many cases, comprises the aim itself of learning a foreign language. In turn, the production of a linguistic-cultural biography has allowed students, in this case, to relate learning with their personal life, contributing an affective dimension to learning (Arnold, 1998). The activity's affective dimension is shown in the students' comments such as those mentioned above, where an interesting link between the affective dimension to learning and its motivation is also established.

5.2. Intercomprehension strategies analysis

This second section looks at the results from the learning analysis in the sense of how students assessed their progress and were able to identify the strategies used in intercomprehension. For this purpose, they carried out several activities and finally answered a questionnaire from which only four questions have been extracted for this discussion: (1) Have you noticed any progress in understanding Romance languages? (2) Rate your progress from 1 to 5; (3) What have you learnt?, and (4) How have you learnt these? (What type of skills or strategies have you used? How has the learning progressed, etc.?). These questions invite students to assess themselves, as well as leading to reflection on two essential points: (i) the learning progress, i.e., if they have learnt something and what they have learnt, and (ii) the learning process: i.e., how they have learnt and what type of skills they have used.

5.2.1. Learning progress assessment

The results show all learners respond positively to the question on whether they have noticed progress in the learning and if they have improved their comprehension skills in Romance languages after following training on *Galanet*. When making a quantitative assessment of their learning, on a scale of 1 (minimum) to 5 (maximum),

2 students rate it very positively (with a 4), 5 students rate it positively (with a 3) and the remaining 3 rate it as limited progress (with a 2).

Table 2. Learning progress self-assessment of participants on *Galanet*

	Have you noticed any progress?	Rate your progress (1-5)
Student 1	Yes	3
Student 2	Yes	4
Student 3	Yes	2
Student 4	Yes	2
Student 5	Yes	2
Student 6	Yes	3
Student 7	Yes	3
Student 8	Yes	4
Student 9	Yes	3
Student 10	Yes	2

In this first self-assessment, the difference between the first and second question stands out. Whilst all answer the first positively (rating learning progress), they do not choose high scores for their learning in the second. Nonetheless, out of 10 students 50% state satisfactory progress with their learning.

Of course, this training is too short (one term) to see a global change in foreign language competence. In addition, since participants on the platform use their mother tongue, they may find certain difficulties when quantifying what they have learnt as they have not practised in a foreign language. Nevertheless, in some activities carried out as part of the Portfolio, students show progress in Romance language comprehension skills. In one of the activities, students had to read forums in different Romance languages and answer questions such as: (i) recognition and identification of languages in the forums, (ii) assess the difficulty level of each language, and (iii) offer pseudo-translation of a forum message. Students showed pointedly greater skill in recognising the languages and progress in the difficulty level when understanding the messages in different languages in these activities.

In short, Galanet participants positively rate their learning progress, believing that they have improved their Romance language comprehension skills in aspects such as recognising languages and how familiar they feel with them, or the ability to understand texts through using prior knowledge and links with languages they know.

5.2.2. Reflection on the learning process

The qualitative learning analysis is of greater usefulness for researchers and teachers. All participants feel they learnt something in their training and are fairly specific when identifying what the learning offered. The participant responses show the plurilingual approach provides a new way of dealing with languages in the sense that it breaks down psychological barriers that many speakers perceive with a language they do not know or have not studied:

1) He aprendido a no cerrarme ante un idioma que no conozco, hay muchas herramientas con las que poder entender y hacerme entender.
'I have learnt to not block myself off from a language I do not know, there are many tools to help me understand and make myself understood'.

2) He aprendido que al menos ahora no me cierro en banda cuando oigo o leo una lengua romance. Antes si oía hablar francés o portugués, por ejemplo, directamente no prestaba atención. Ahora soy consciente de que sí puedo llegar a entender algo de una conversación en alguno de esos idiomas.
'I have learnt that at least now I do not dig my heels in when I hear or read a Romance language. Before, if I heard French or Portuguese, for example, I simply paid no attention. Now I am aware that I can understand something in a conversation in those languages'.

3) Me he dado cuenta de que no es necesario estudiar una lengua de manera regular y sistemática para comunicarme en ella o para comprenderla.
'I have realised that it is not necessary to study a language regularly and systematically to communicate in or understand it'.

In this sense, the plurilingual approach provides a liberating method of approaching a languages as it breaks with the idea that we can not communicate in a language we do not know. In this way, a *language awareness* process takes place through which speakers begin to establish connections between languages they know and those they do not. For some students this awareness process is a discovery:

4) La idea de la intercomprensión me ha parecido la mar de interesante. Es algo que no se me había ocurrido nunca y me ha hecho darme cuenta de que aunque no sepa italiano realmente sí puedo llegar a entenderlo.
'The idea of intercomprehension has really interested me. It is something I had never thought of before and I have realised that, although I do not really know Italian, I can manage to understand it'.

5) Conocí el catalán y para mí fue un descubrimiento total. Vi que es muy diferente del español y quizá más parecido al italiano (me pareció muy divertida su semejanza con el dialecto de Milán). Las otras lenguas ya las

conocía y no tuve problemas de intercomprensión, pero *fue muy interesante verlas todas juntas en un mismo instrumento, pasar a leer de una lengua a otra es un óptimo ejercicio mental.*

5) 'I discovered Catalan and this was real discovery for me. I realised it is very different to Spanish and perhaps more similar to Italian (I found its similarity with the Milan dialect very funny). The other languages I already knew and had no intercomprehension problems but *it was very interesting to see them all together on the same tool, reading in one language or another is a great mental exercise'.*

Participant (5) underlines the experience of 'seeing all languages together' as something never before experienced and being a discovery as it offers the chance to observe and compare the similarities between them. Exposure to several languages at once awakens global or plurilingual competence in speakers in the sense that the knowledge we possess in one or several languages may be used with greater capacity to understand and make oneself understood in others:

6) He aprendido a utilizar recursos para poder establecer conexiones entre las palabras que sé o me suenan y las que no.
'I have learnt to use resources to establish connections between the words I know or that seem familiar and those I do not know'.

7) He aprendido que, con poco, puedo llegar a saber mucho.
'I have learnt that I can get to know a lot with very little'.

Plurilingual learning is achieved thanks to activating speakers' prior knowledge which they use to understand transparent lexical elements as well as common structures or constructions. It is an inferential process whereby speakers perform a comparative language study, with the following serving as analogy in the comparison:

8) A base de leer en una lengua e ir traduciendo a la vez, se crea la estructura que usa una determinada lengua para decir lo mismo que en español se dice de otra forma.
'Based on reading in one language and translating at the same time, we create the structure a specific language uses to say the same thing that in Spanish is said in a different way'.

9) He utilizado mucho mis conocimientos previos. Me fijaba en la intervención del foro para analizar los verbos y la construcción frasal. Con el catalán utilicé mucha fantasía porque era la primera vez que la encontraba pero no reconocí que no era extraño, entonces reconocí un poco de italiano, un poco de español y cosas totalmente nuevas en una mezcla compleja pero bonita.

En general en todas las lenguas utilicé mucha estrategia de comparación: las lenguas romances son todas derivadas del latín, entonces si no conocía una palabra, la deducía por lógica o por sus características. Leí y escribí mucho en general en todas estas lenguas y fue un óptimo ejercicio.

'I have used my prior knowledge. I looked at forum interventions to analyse verbs and sentence building. With Catalan I used a lot of imagination as it was the first time I had come across it but I saw that it was not strange, then I recognised a little Italian, a little Spanish and completely new things in a complex but nice mix. Generally, I used comparison strategy a lot for all languages: Romance languages are all derived from Latin, so if I did not know a word, I would deduce it logically or from its characteristics. I generally read and write a lot in all these languages and it was a great exercise'.

As can be seen in the participants' comments, the plurilingual approach leads to certain meta-linguistic skills being developed, such as the ability to uncover parallelisms and similarities, common and cross forms, between languages. Further, as participants on the training not only had to read and understand texts but also react to them by writing messages and taking part in forums, they discover the interactive side to intercomprehension. This is seen as a natural communicative procedure that requires specific communication strategies:

10) [he aprendido a] Hacer más fácil el uso de las paráfrasis para hacerme entender.
'[I have learnt to] Make easier use of paraphrases to make myself understood'.

11) [He desarrollado] la comprensión lectora, pero de una forma mucho más abierta.
'[I have developed] learning comprehension but in a much more open way'.

The description of a student taking about global competence being put into practice to understand and make herself understood, modifying her view of languages on the one hand as related and paired systems instead of isolated and distinct and, on the other, in the sense of our capacity to learn languages, is particularly interesting:

12) He conseguido utilizar los conocimientos previos en unas lenguas para comprender en otras. *Tenía una idea más rígida de independencia y aislamiento de las lenguas* en mi mapa lingüístico mental, de manera que evitaba recurrir a una para desenvolverme en la otra.
'I have managed to use prior knowledge of languages to understand others. *I had a more rigid idea of language independence and isolation* in my mental linguistic map so that I would avoid recurring to one to manage in another'.

The student makes explicit reference to a mental view of languages where each comprises a linguistic system – a common view amongst speakers and which is perhaps unwittingly strengthened in teaching. Furthermore, the student goes even further, discovering that this plurilingual competence is indeed more global and, in reality, the same as our competence in our mother tongue. Or, that it allows us to access other languages:

13) Principalmente que la comprensión, de un texto al menos, en otras lenguas de la misma familia lingüística que la materna *es algo más global de lo que yo pensaba.*
'Mainly that comprehension, at least in the case of text, in other languages from the same linguistic family as the mother tongue *is more global than I thought*'.

Lastly, another aspect learners point out in their self-assessment is how natural learning is: it is developed through taking part in real, authentic and, therefore, significant interactions. For this, participants establish social relationships with students from other places and, in order to carry out common tasks, have to take decisions and reach agreements; therefore, they develop different social and affective skills through inter-comprehension. Students highlight the fun, enjoyable side of learning and the unconscious or natural way it is developed:

14) Ha sido un aprendizaje natural, nada forzado.
'It has been a natural learning experience, not at all forced'.

15) Ha sido un aprendizaje relajado, divertido y real, que fomenta la interculturalidad.
'It has been a relaxed, fun and real learning process, boosting interculturality'.

16) "He aprendido de una forma inconsciente. No me daba cuenta de que lo estaba aprendiendo hasta que he tenido que hacer esta reflexión.
'I have learnt in an unconscious way. I did not realise that I was learning until I had to reflect on it here'.

An analysis of learners' documents shows that the training offered on the *Galanet* platform has a bearing on some extremely interesting aspects regarding student beliefs about languages and learning them and can change some of these suppositions. Specifically, the observations made by students can be ordered into the following points:

1. Breaking psychological barriers on languages: the idea that it is not possible to communicate in or understand languages that are unknown or have been studied is broken down.

2. A discovery of global competence allowing resources we already use in known languages to be used – mother tongue, second and third language – to communicate in a new situation in a new language.

3. The emergence of intercomprehension strategies: identifying strategies allowing learners to understand and make themselves understood: (i) using prior knowledge, (ii) using lexical transparency and (iii) using analogy and comparison between languages.

4. The use of social skills: practising intercomprehension appears as an interactive and not only receptive process, whereby learners develop social, relationship and collaboration tools with others. They recognise having used the following to understand and make themselves understood: asking for clarifications, negotiating meaning, asking questions, reformulating.

5. Conclusion

The analysis of participants' work on the platform leads us to believe that producing the Portfolio holds useful educational values; as an open tool, its contents can be adapted to the objectives and needs of different educational activities. In the case study we have shown in this article, the Portfolio has led to two essential objectives being achieved: (i) strengthening the platform training in intercomprehension and (ii) starting students off in reflective self-assessment or analysis of their learning.

With regard to point one, the analysis of participant competence has shown they know between 1 and 3 foreign languages at different skill levels according to the languages and sub-skills. Specifically, the majority know similar languages or those from the same linguistic family. Proximity is cultural (languages and cultures considered close or influential, such as English) and linguistic (Romance languages). The choice of stated languages and competence by students underlines the existence of plurilingual and pluricultural competence, more than uniform and monolingual competence, which puts into practice intercomprehension with paired languages.

In learning self-assessment, the Portfolios reveal an awakening process regarding non-systematic learning: students do not assess institution-based learning the same as that outside the classroom. However, they do recognise that instruction is important in language learning. Therefore, the Portfolio contributes to students connecting the different learning methods.

With regards to progress and learning process analysis, we see that students positively assess the training received, but have difficulties when performing a quantitative assessment. Nonetheless, they are able to state and reflect on the learning

method and also specify or reflect in a meta-communicative way on the nature of intercomprehension.

Finally, the programme has a clear *language awakening* effect in the sense that it breaks away from the barriers learners feel with unknown languages and awakens an awareness process regarding a series of skills of which speakers are unaware and do not normally use.

Acknowledgments

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