

# INTERCOMPREHENSION OF ROMANCE LANGUAGES, PLURILINGUALISM AND LANGUAGE POLICY

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## **Abstract**

*One of the defining characteristics of the European Union (EU) is multilingualism. In his comprehensive work *La ricerca della lingua perfetta nella cultura europea*, Umberto Eco (2018) explores the search for a common perfect language for Europeans. The aim of our study is to find out what the EU language policy is in line with Romance languages. The paper describes the state of Romance language teaching at secondary level in Europe and compares it with Slovak schools at the same level. We use a survey carried out by the Eurydice Information Network, which is the European Commission's instrument for collecting information on the education systems in the Member States of the European Union, to determine the state of foreign language teaching in Europe. Furthermore, we provide a comparative analysis of the results with statistical data regarding foreign language teaching at secondary level in Slovakia obtained from the Ministry of Education of the Slovak Republic. After assessing the status and prospects of Romance language teaching, we suggest possible solutions to the situation of Romance languages in Slovakia, while intercomprehension can be considered as such. Finally, we offer possible approaches to the teaching of intercomprehension at the university level in the non-philological field.*

**Keywords:** language policy, foreign language teaching, European Union, Romance languages, intercomprehension

The importance of language policy for the EU and individual Member States is not a new topic. Representatives of government and research institutions are dealing with this issue. Tosi (2007: 13) recalls that the first principle on which the 'common European home' was built during the historic Rome Conventions is 'the recognition of cultural diversity across the continent. The founding fathers believed that each national language was an expression of the distinctiveness of

the nation'. In a multicultural society that embraces interculturality, it is essential to find a 'common language', that is, a language that serves for mutual communication and cultural interaction. In a culturally heterogeneous society, we are inevitably confronted with the concepts of plurilingualism<sup>1</sup> and multilingualism<sup>2</sup>, which are often mentioned in contemporary literature due to the state in which the world has found itself in recent years as a result of wars, the financial crisis and the associated political and economic migration.

### **Uniformity in language education and minimalist plurilingualism**

The phenomenon of multilingualism has been accepted by the EU as the status quo, and perhaps that is why it has stopped looking for ways to a single language of communication (*lingua franca*) but has moved on to exploring ways and means to exploit the potential of multilingualism and multicultural coexistence. Nevertheless, the primacy of English and its status as a language of communication, i.e. a *de-facto lingua franca*, in many scientific disciplines must be acknowledged. In its language policy, the EU declares the development and promotion of language education, which is why the Council of Europe's Language Policy Department was set up in Strasbourg in 1998-2000 to promote plurilingualism and multiculturalism, and why the European Commission issued an Action Plan for the Promotion of Language Learning and Linguistic Diversity in 2003. The development of plurilingual competences is intended to promote interaction between EU citizens. (Kubekova, 2020: 58) Therefore, these institutions advocate the protection of cultural plurality, where language is the instrument through which culture is expressed. Thus, the EU is perhaps the only international organization that seeks to put all the languages of its member states on roughly equal footing, although this is a difficult goal to achieve. Other international organizations, such as the UN, NATO or the Red Cross, have established several official languages to avoid communication problems.

Linguistic pluralism is also one of the strategic topics of the European Commission's education policy. This strategy was included in the White Paper on Education and Training and later in the Memorandum on Lifelong Learning, published on 30 October 2000 as part of the Lisbon Strategy, which sets the goal of every European citizen being proficient in three Community

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<sup>1</sup> It is an ability of an individual to use several languages throughout their life in order to communicate according to their needs. According to the European Charter of Plurilingualism (*Charte européenne du plurilinguisme*, 2005: 2), plurilingualism is an important factor in building awareness of democratic citizenship and is also the most desirable and effective form of communication, as it incorporates the values of tolerance and acceptance of diversity. (Zazrivcová, M., Chovancová, K. 2015)

<sup>2</sup> It is a social phenomenon, linked to a specific community of people in a specific territory. (Zazrivcová, M., Chovancová, K. 2015)

languages by promoting language learning from pre-school level, then during vocational training, and by introducing systems of assessment and quality assurance for language learning (Proserpi, 2010).

According to B. Cassen (2008: 81), language policy is a means by which regional, national and international bodies deal with the hegemony of one language (currently English) in the 'language market'. The aim is not so much to combat English as to promote other languages in accordance with the logic of linguistic pluralism.

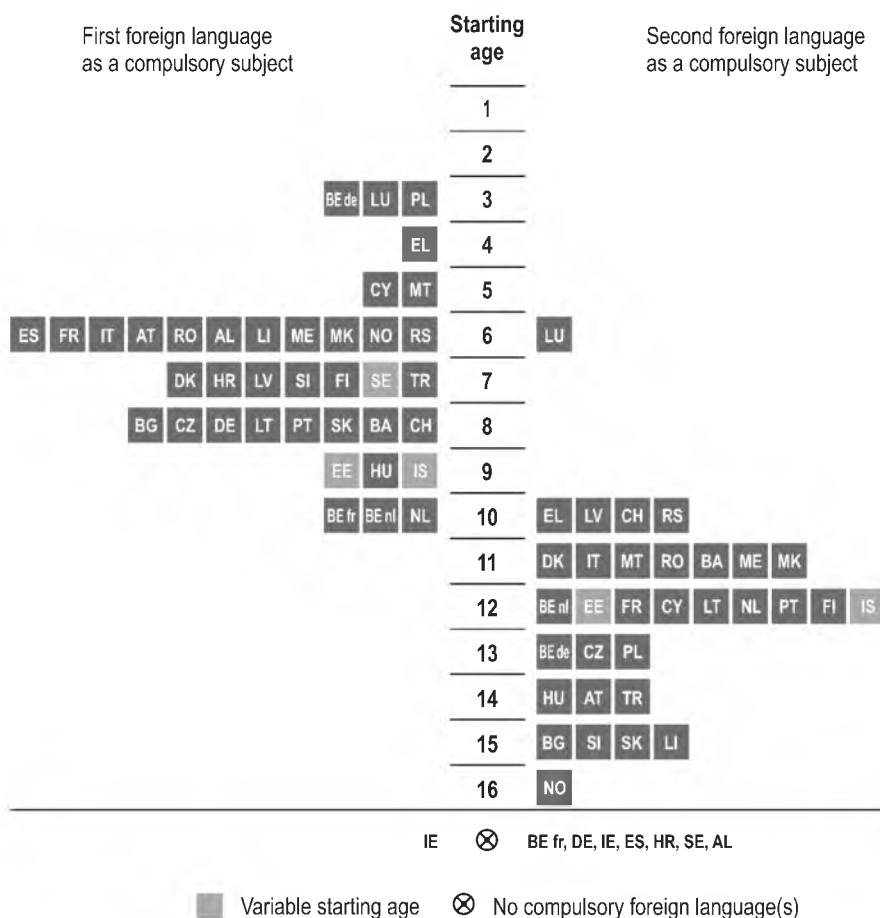
Key data on teaching languages at school in Europe provides detailed data on foreign language teaching in Europe in 2023. With the aim of monitoring policy developments in the field of foreign language teaching in Europe, the document includes data from 39 education systems from the 37 member countries of the Eurydice network, i.e. the 27 EU Member States, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, North Macedonia, Serbia, Switzerland and Turkey. Data from Eurostat and two international OECD surveys - PISA 2018 and TALIS 2018 - are also included. The report contains up to 51 indicators on foreign language policies at European and also at national level, such as the inclusion of foreign languages in the curriculum, the number of foreign languages, the extent to which they are taught, first and second language achievement, the involvement of migrants in the teaching of a country's language, the qualifications of teachers and their international mobility, and so on. The main source of data is the Eurydice network, which provides qualitative data on language policies and activities in schools (Birch, P., Baïdak, N., De Coster, I. et al., 2023).

In this paper we focus on teaching two foreign languages in primary and secondary education, and, as a starting point for university education, we compare it with the situation in Slovakia.

In the education system of the EU Member States, students start learning a foreign language at the age of 6-8. Slovakia is one of the countries where the majority of students start learning a foreign language at the age of 8, although there are also schools where it starts at the age of 6. These are mostly selective primary schools where children have to fulfil certain criteria to be admitted for study.

The Barcelona European Council in 2002 called on EU Member States to develop measures to improve their citizens' knowledge of two foreign languages. Two thirds of education systems have responded to this call by extending the duration of foreign language learning from one to seven years. This measure has had an impact on the starting age of compulsory foreign language learning, which has been lowered.

The Figure below shows the age at which students are required to learn a first and a second foreign language in each Member State. (Birch, P., Baïdak, N., De Coster, I. et al., 2023: 44)

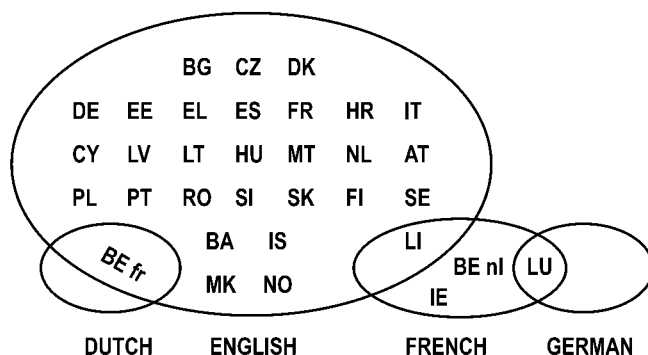


**Figure 1: starting ages at which the first and second foreign language are compulsory subjects for all students in pre-primary, primary and/or general secondary education (ISCED 0-3), 2021/2022**

Source: Euridice

Figure 1 below whose primary source is Euridice, shows foreign language learning is compulsory before primary education in some countries. In the EU as a whole, 86.1% of students in primary education were learning at least one foreign language in 2020. The chart also shows data on learning a second foreign language, which stood at 59.2% in the EU in 2020.

In most EU countries, students start learning a second foreign language as a compulsory subject in upper primary or lower secondary education. In some countries, such as Bulgaria, Austria, Hungary, Slovenia, Slovakia, Liechtenstein, Norway and Turkey, the second foreign language is taught at upper secondary level. Figure 1 also shows that there are countries in Europe that do not have a policy on the learning of two foreign languages.



**Figure 2: The most learned foreign language in primary and secondary education (ISCED 1\_3), 2020**

Source: Eurydice, based on Eurostat/UOE data  
(data extracted 15 December 2022)

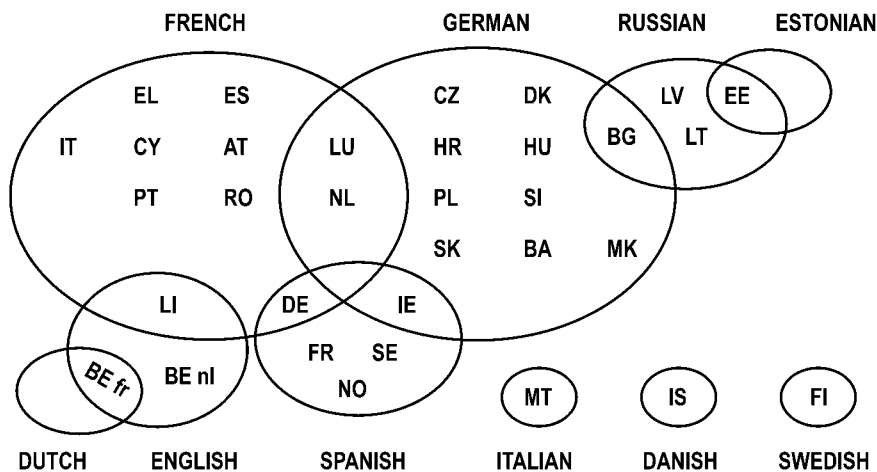
The Eurydice source also provides Figure F2, which shows that English is the most widely taught foreign language in Europe. In almost all European countries, it is so at primary and secondary level, where English is a compulsory subject in many countries. There are very few countries where the majority of students learn a foreign language other than English. As to the Romance languages, at the European level, French is the only Romance language that is studied as the first language. Ireland, an English-speaking country, is one of the countries where French is the most taught foreign language.

In Luxembourg, French ranks third after German in primary and secondary education. At lower secondary level, all students study both German and French. In Liechtenstein, all students at lower secondary level study French and English. In Belgium, students routinely learn the languages of the other communities. In particular, in the Flemish Community of Belgium, French is the most widely taught language at all levels of education. In primary education in Spain, France and Italy, all or almost all students (99-100%) learn English.

Figure 3 shows the second language learning in Europe according to the Eurydice survey, while only taking into account languages taught to more than 10% of learners (and the corresponding levels of education).

French is one of the most popular foreign languages, not only among Romance languages, in many central and southern European countries. It is the second most widely taught foreign language (to at least 10% of students) in Germany, Greece and Spain, taught in Germany, Greece, Spain, Italy, Cyprus, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Austria, Portugal, Romania and Liechtenstein. The study of French is less widespread in the countries of Eastern Europe (except Romania) and in the Nordic countries. Spanish is the second most studied foreign language among the Romance languages.

In Ireland, at upper secondary level in Germany, and at lower and upper secondary level in France, Sweden and Norway. Italian is a popular foreign language in Malta. Portuguese does not appear as the second foreign language in any European country.



**Figure 3: The second most-learned foreign language in primary and secondary education (ISCED 1-3), 2020**

Source: Eurydice, based on Eurostat/UOE data (data extracted 15 December 2022)

How does the promotion of Romance languages in Slovakia relate to EU language policy? Until 2015, studying two foreign languages was compulsory in primary and secondary schools in Slovakia: English as the first language, while students could choose a second language from a range of languages such as German, French, Spanish, Italian and Russian. Between 2015/16 and 2019/20, English was compulsory in Slovak primary schools from year 3 (students aged 8), and students could choose another world language in addition to English from year 7 (students aged 12). Since 2019/20, there has been yet another change: students can now choose their first foreign language other than English in year 3, but they will have to study it as a second foreign language in year 7 (at the age of 12).

According to the statistical data of the Ministry of Education of the Slovak Republic, in 2023, the representation of Romance languages at Slovak grammar schools was as follows: French 9%, Spanish 14% and Italian 0.13%. The statistics provided by the Ministry of Education do not indicate the percentage of students who could study Portuguese. Comparing these statistics with those of 2007 (before the abolition of the obligation to study two foreign languages), 28% of students studied French as a second language in secondary education, 5% Spanish and 0.7% Italian, and no data are given for the study of Portuguese in that year.

**Table 4: Distribution of second foreign language selected at primary school in Slovakia (2010-2023)**

	year							
	2013/14	2015/16	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
<b>ENG</b>	99%	98%	98%	99%	99%	99%	99%	99%
<b>DE</b>	60%	60%	61%	59%	60%	58%	57%	56%
<b>FR</b>	13%	9%	8%	8%	8%	8%	8%	9%
<b>SPAN</b>	9%	10%	9%	11%	11%	12%	13%	14%
<b>ITAL</b>	0,1%	0,1%	0,1%	0,9%	0,7%	0,5%	0,9%	0,13%
<b>RU</b>	15%	17%	16%	17%	16%	15%	15%	14%

*Source: <https://www.cvtisr.sk>, Own processing*

The data in Table 4 clearly indicate that the prospects for the development of Romance languages in secondary schools are not very favourable, and this, undoubtedly, has negative consequences for subsequently studying these languages at university.

With the development of new technologies, the use of the Internet and, of course, the considerable number of English speakers, English is establishing itself as the first foreign language in most European countries.

Other foreign languages need to make greater efforts to maintain their position in the 'language market', especially in the field of foreign language teaching. The growing interest in the internationalization of study programmes is a response to the internationalization of companies and their requirements to recruit multilingual candidates (Rošteková, 2018). This may be a reason why young people should learn more foreign languages, but in reality, few of them find sufficient motivation to continue learning more foreign languages at advanced levels.

### **Intercomprehension and „language bridge“**

English has become the first foreign language in most of Europe and could therefore be used as a 'bridge' to the study of other languages. As Filomena Capucho (2011) explains, „the notion of 'language bridge' (cf. Klein, Reissner, 2006) is therefore particularly useful in cases where English (now the first foreign language taught at school in most European countries) can play a crucial role“.

One possible solution is the teaching of Intercomprehension (IC) for mutual language understanding, which may be attractive to learners because they are simultaneously learning several languages within the same language family at the level of text comprehension.

The most widely used methods for teaching intercomprehension are EuRom4, EuRom5, Galatea, Galanet, Galapro, EuroComRom, Itinéraires romans, ICE, Eurocom.

In order to understand a text in a language, learners whose first and second, etc. language belongs to the same language group can use a set of related linguistic features, which refer to different levels of analysis (morphological, syntactic, and lexical). When teaching languages belonging to the same group, features of linguistic proximity are often under-utilised because linguistic proximity is usually seen as a problem rather than an advantage.

IC uses the detection of meaning-transparent zones in the text, which facilitate the understanding of the text and its meaning. IC uses deductive techniques by applying a model called the „seven sieves“ (CFR. Klein & Stegmann, 2001).

In IC classes, students „rely“ on the Romance language they already know, as mentioned above (French or Spanish), but also on English and, in some cases, on Slovak (their mother tongue). Our experience of teaching IC clearly confirms that students want to continue and develop their knowledge of Romance languages as they progress in their IC studies. As mentioned above, IC develops the ability to understand a non-native or unfamiliar language due to similarities with other languages within the same language family. The application of IC in foreign language teaching has many advantages and approaches that can facilitate the understanding and learning of a new foreign language. One of the ways in which IC can be used in foreign language teaching is by comparing morphological, syntactic and semantic structures between several languages with which the learner is familiar. Identifying similarities and differences between languages can help learners make faster progress in understanding and remembering a new language.

Paradoxically, even a slight advance in the study of IC gives the opportunity to work with more challenging texts which also contain phrases and collocations. Phraseology is an area of linguistics to which students are only introduced at a more advanced level. However, phraseologists encourage the study of phrases from the earliest stages of language learning. Gonza'lez Rey (2012, p. 67) defines phraseology not only as 'the teaching of the phraseology of a language, but also as the teaching of the whole language through its phraseology'. With the inclusion of phraseology in IC, we encounter multi-disciplinary approaches in foreign language teaching, where there is an intersection between phraseology, professional texts, didactics and intercomprehension.

In our research, to test the appropriateness of including phrases and collocations in the teaching of IC, we selected text fragments containing phraseological units from the domain of professional language and general language that contain cultural content (Europeanisms).



We chose phraseological units from the fields of international relations, diplomacy, political science and economics.

We have indicated that we use four Romance languages in the classroom, Spanish, French, Italian, Portuguese and occasionally Catalan. In this study we have selected only three languages (Spanish, French, Italian), supplemented by English as a 'bridge' language and a vehicle language, in our case Slovak.

In terms of textual typology, we worked with descriptive and informative texts available on the Internet, thus guaranteeing their authenticity. The texts are of different genres as we have used different reports, minutes of European Parliament meetings, definitions, fragments of journalistic and legal texts.

In the classroom, we consider a linguistic continuum that respects the geographical continuum, which means that we work with texts in blocks made up of the languages of the Iberian Peninsula (Portuguese, Spanish) and a second block made up of French, Italian or Catalan. (Kubeková, 2018)

As mentioned above, in addition to phrases from general and specialized language, we also included collocations consisting of a noun and an adjective „virtual“ in the IC class. We took into account semantic considerations and equivalence. We included the adjective „virtual“ because of the frequent use of this adjective in compound expressions in many disciplines and because of the rich lexical production with this adjective in the languages to be compared. The adjective virtual can be found in collocations in almost all scientific disciplines, in research, industry, medicine, in the educational process, telecommunications, transport, computer science, social sciences, the environment, or in the arts, e.g.: *virtual university, virtual auditorium, virtual museum, virtual democracy, virtual market, virtual currency, virtual assistant, virtual communication, virtual reality, virtual library, virtual battery, virtual cemetery*, etc. Many of these collocations have more than one adjective or they have multiple synonyms. In our research we also used the multilingual terminology database IATE(7) - InterActive Terminology for Europe. The database contains selected terminology in all EU languages and also offers the possibility to consult Latin terms and definitions. IATE currently contains 6,944,534 terms.

The survey was conducted among students of the IC courses, which are mainly attended by students with Slovak as their mother tongue. As mentioned above, we offered the students collocations containing the adjective virtual and asked them to determine the semantic transparency or opacity on a scale of three semantic levels. For example, the collocation virtual water was on the side of the least transparent expressions. Up to 83% of the IC students found the collocation virtual water semantically opaque, but they had no problems identifying the collocation in the text based on interlanguage similarity.

Eng.: *virtual water*<sup>3</sup>  
Esp.: *agua virtual*  
Fr.: *eau virtuelle*  
It.: *acqua virtuale*  
Sk.: *virtuálna voda*

On the other hand, 81% of the students considered the collocation virtual currency to be semantically transparent, they were able to explain the meaning and easily identify it in the text.

Eng.: *virtual currency*  
Esp.: *moneda virtual*  
Fr.: *monnaie virtuelle*  
It.: *moneta virtuale/ valuta virtuale*  
Sk.: *virtuálna mena*

For example, one of the technical terms we worked with was virtual democracy, which is interesting because it has a large number of synonyms, but virtual democracy is only found in Spanish, but the students easily identified the term in the text:

Eng.: *e-democracy / electronic democracy / digital democracy / online democracy / cyberdemocracy / internet democracy / teledemocracy*  
Esp.: *democracia virtual / democracia electrónica / e-democracia / democracia digital / ciberdemocracia*  
Fr.: *démocratie électronique / démocratie en ligne / cyberdémocratie / démocratie numérique*  
It.: *democrazia elettronica / teledemocrazia*  
Sk.: *virtuálna demokracia*

Similar results were observed for Europeanisms or internationalisms of biblical origin or from Greek mythology. The presence of Europeanisms in Slovak as well as in other European languages is a favourable factor in foreign language teaching. Europeanisms are suitable for IC because they are found in all European languages. This fact led us to conclude that: 1. it is easy for students to identify them in the text; 2. it is easy to decode and understand them; 3. it is not difficult to remember them. It is important to emphasise that texts of this type are used in the final part of the semester programme of intercomprehension. (Kubekova, 2018)

## Conclusion

From the above, we can conclude that specialized language, compound terms and also collocations are suitable for the study of IC. The closer the

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<sup>3</sup> Definition: amount of water required to produce a certain good. Van der Zaag, P. and Savenije, H., Principles of Integrated Water Resources Management, UNESCO-IHE Institute for Water Education, Delft, October 2014, p. 42, <https://pietervanderzaag.files.wordpress.com/2015/02/principles-of-integrated-water-resources-management-october-2014.pdf> [27.10.2015]

collocations were to the term, the easier they were for students to understand, as in the example of collocations with the adjective „virtual“.

When the EU abandoned the search for a ‘perfect language’ for its citizens and embraced its multilingualism and multiculturalism as an asset to be proud of and protect, it took this as a challenge and began to emphasise education of students in foreign languages and thus the mastery of at least two foreign languages. The EU has set up programmes for students, teachers, researchers, workers and companies to help develop language skills and promote the mobility of students in European universities and workers in the European labour market. With the enlargement of the European Union and its link with the complex phenomenon created by globalisation, the importance of foreign languages has grown. Due to the diversity of their contacts, companies are increasingly looking for the ability to communicate in several languages for newly recruited staff. For companies, the challenge is of huge importance, as the lack of foreign language communication ability may cause them some market shares. For job seekers, being recruited quickly by companies settled in Slovakia or abroad requires having several foreign languages communication skills, which appears to be the only option to be able to be well integrated in a globalized world. (Mortreuil, F. - Rošteková, M. 2019: 215)

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