

Online Plurilingual Interaction in the Development of Language Awareness

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This paper is situated in interaction on the Internet and presents an analysis of chat conversations in Romance languages – French, Italian, Portuguese and Spanish – between students from several universities. The Internet is currently a fertile setting for intercultural and plurilingual encounters, and interaction, virtual or real, is seen as a central field of meaning negotiation and mediation. Our aim is to highlight how these communicative situations, particularly when communicative problems have to be collaboratively solved, can raise a chat participant's language awareness (LA). The data analysis allows us to observe how LA is an essential domain in the development of plurilingual and intercultural communicative competences, particularly when considering political and critical linguistic education.

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Introduction

It is generally accepted that language awareness (LA) has a central role to play in language education, although no consensus exists as to its definition and scope. Its importance in the language learning context seems to be valid both for the mother tongue (MT) and for foreign languages (FL), with respect to three different domains: language learning, language teaching and language use (Garrett & James, 2000: 330). It has also been pointed out that LA can benefit five dimensions in language education: affective, social, power, cognitive and performance (Garrett & James, 2000: 330).

Bearing in mind the plurilingual European context and the growing use of communicative Internet tools as meeting points between individuals with different languages and cultures and as virtual spaces for teaching and learning languages, we focus here on online plurilingual communication as an area of increasing activity for intercultural encounters and of online mobility. More specifically, we analyse the role of plurilingual sequences of repair as manifestations and contexts of improvement in the LA of chat participants, particularly with regard to the social and empowerment dimensions mentioned above, which are related to the political goal of language education. In conclusion, we will underline a political dimension of LA, connected to plurilingual competence (PC) and intercultural communicative competence, as an emergent aim of foreign language learning and teaching, and to the concept of intercomprehension (sometimes called 'cross-comprehension' or 'compréhension réciproque') as a final goal of intercultural communication.

Language Awareness, Plurilingualism and Intercomprehension

The three concepts we are going to deal with reflect our concern with language education and linguistic policies in Europe. In the context of the complex debates that attempt to define European policies in several areas, linguistic policies assume a central role. These consider essentially the development of a broad communicative repertoire by European citizens in order to achieve plurilingual and pluricultural competence, understood as 'the ability to use languages for the purposes of communication and to take part in intercultural interaction, where a person, viewed as a social agent, has proficiency, of varying degrees, in several languages and experience of several cultures' (Trim *et al.*, 2001: 168). Thus, bilingual and multilingual approaches evolve into a plurilingual one, 'the plurilingual approach emphasises the fact that as an individual person's experience of language in its cultural contexts expands from the language of the home to that of society at large and then to the languages of other peoples (. . .), he or she does not keep these languages and cultures in strictly separated mental compartments' (Trim *et al.*, 2001: 4).

This means that individuals (should) build up an integrated communicative competence, in which different languages and cultures merge to fashion a more complete linguistic repertoire, updated through 'plurilingual speech' in interaction. In other words, individuals' verbal behaviour could be evidence of 'plurilingual communicative competence' in action, that is, a capacity to pass from one language to another according to the communicative situation (see the definition of 'bilingual speech' given by Lüdi & Py, 1986). This perspective leads us to an understanding that this 'plurilingual speech' is neither an addition of (several) monolingual competences nor a linguistic disability consisting of diverse unconnected linguistic knowledge: it is a creative and pragmatic use of languages in order to optimise the linguistic and cognitive resources and to adjust them to communicative needs, contexts and competences.

Thus, we can think of intercultural linguistic encounters where individuals must use and develop their plurilingual repertoire to achieve intercomprehension. A necessary (or at least helpful) condition and perhaps a consequence of participating in this kind of encounter is that speakers need to be aware of the communicative situation and of the linguistic and cultural diversity in that situation. If we are talking about languages belonging to the same linguistic family, which is precisely the context of our study, intercomprehension may be the result of consciousness of linguistic proximity and discrepancies, perception of possibilities and limitations of transfer between languages and cultures, and recognition that it is possible to move between them.

The capacity to construct intercomprehension depends on the relationship among a group of conditions that can be stated as follows: the individual's capacity to reflect upon the goals that are involved in the acts that lead to appropriation of knowledge and those involved in the use of the languages in contact; the mobilisation of his/her linguistic, communicational and cognitive abilities in his/her engagement, as a person and social actor, in the definition of the situation; and his/her perception of the communicative environment as a place for the construction of plurilingualism (see also Dabène, 2004: 29).

This brings us to the concept of LA. In a general sense, LA can be defined as ‘the ability to reflect on languages and to verbalise that reflection’ (Alegre, 2000: 93, our translation), including pragmatic behaviour and declarative knowledge. However, our view of LA follows ‘a more critical and meaning-orientated approach which stresses the role of language in the sociocultural and political affairs of the people’ (van Lier, 1995). This means that we are concerned with ‘linguistic etiquette’ (van Lier, 1995), but we emphasise the content (what is said) and the communicative process (how it is said), i.e. the meaning, its negotiation, its collaborative construction between plurilingual speakers and the discursive space that is given and negotiated within the interaction (see the concept of ‘Third Space’, Bhabha, 1994). Amongst the many meanings associated with the concept of LA, we should say that our view goes beyond a utilitarian definition and focuses on a plurilingual and intercultural perspective informed by European linguistic policies.

In addition, learning and using languages cannot be seen from a narrow pragmatic perspective. It is about citizenship and democracy; it is about people coping with contexts of diversity and with mutable needs and aims (Guilherme, 2002). From this point of view, learning languages is related to the development of learners’ critical, cultural and linguistic awareness, hence to political education (Byram, 1997: 35). In this sense, the concept of PC should emphasise a political goal, since this seems to be a neglected (or, at least, forgotten) dimension. Accordingly, as intercultural and plurilingual encounters are about awareness, interaction, mediation and negotiation, we consider plurilingualism and intercomprehension as political dimensions of a broad linguistic education.

For these reasons, our focus will be on how LA emerges and how it is developed through plurilingual communicative situations in which chat participants are affectively engaged and want to co-construct the meaning of what is said. Our contribution seeks to describe how chat participants use their ‘plurilingual speech’ in chat conversations and how they collaboratively solve interactive problems in several Romance languages, by mobilising their LA in order to construct intercomprehension.

Dynamics of Plurilingual Interaction in Chat Rooms

If we conceive of ‘chats’ as virtual conversations with a variable number of interlocutors with more or less opaque and changeable identities and whose almost total contextual opacity facilitates ambiguity and doubt in the production and reception of exchanges, we can conclude that

many non-verbal contextual clues at a vocal level (paralinguistic, intonation, etc.) as well as a visual level (gestures, expressions, etc.) are absent in chats due to the textual nature of the conversations carried out within them, which in turn means a significant reduction in the possible interpretations of utterances. (Yus, 2001: 86, our translation)

However, the absence of these characteristics is not perceived as a real barrier to communication, but rather as a challenge, since chat participants find ways to create contextual conditions in order to clarify the meanings they want to transmit. These conditions reveal an effort to optimise the only means they can access – the computer – with all its possibilities: capitalisation, punctuation,

special characters and so on. With these resources, smiles are produced, cries and laughs are visualised (as if they wanted to become sounds and be heard!) and gazes and gestures are mimed. In fact, we can observe multiple ways of alternative meaning-making, which are signs of participants' creativity and interactional involvement on three levels: (1) the use of technology, (2) the use of communicative language(s) and (3) the way technology and language(s) merge into a visual plurilingual patchwork.

Furthermore, we can describe chat rooms as polyphonic settings where several speakers from different geographical areas and temporal zones converge upon a unique melting pot, where different contexts, languages and cultures are brought into communication, co-constructing the interactional process, the communicative paths, themes and the collective meaning. Because of this polyphonic nature, chat is said to be 'incoherent', a common misconception which is often justified by reference to its collective, fragmentary and hybrid textual and discursive characteristics. As Crystal (2001: 158) points out, whilst reviewing some conversational analysis terminology such as 'turn-taking' and 'adjacent pairing', the constant eruption and interruption of messages of different conversational sequences – phenomena called 'overlapping' – seems to destroy any conventional understanding generated by heuristic tools of traditional discourse analysis. Therefore, this intrinsic characteristic suggests that the use of such terminology is no longer useful to report chat features (e.g. Araújo e Sá & Melo, 2003b; Mourlhon-Dallies *et al.*, 2004).

Even if chat is said to be a new textual genre because of its particular nature, namely because of this so-called polyphonic construction, we believe that this is a text whose production conditions move in three well-known continuums – oral and written, formal and informal, and graphemic and phonetic writing. This exceptional situation is the reason why we find so many particular discursive, textual and linguistic features (cf. Araújo e Sá & Melo, 2003b), for example, the opacity of identity and context, the constant 'topic migration' and the 'unpredictability of the subject-matter' (Crystal, 2001: 146), as well as phonetic writing and written smiles intended to provide contextual clues.

This polyphonic nature of chat communication is already original enough to defy linguistics and its tools of analysis, but the analytical framework becomes even more complex when approaching a plurilingual context, due to the range of concepts we might mobilise to (1) describe functions and status of languages in contact and (2) understand how chat participants use and develop language learning strategies. We can assume that the main difference from monolingual chats is the number of languages in use and their communicative emergence and negotiation. In fact, from an interactive point of view, it is usual to find in plurilingual chats, examples of exolingual¹/plurilingual strategies: on the one hand, strategies that concern the choice of languages and the definition of their status and functions (translation and codeswitching, for example); on the other hand, interactional behaviours which allow and preserve the co-construction of meaning and conversational dynamics.

On account of the effervescent nature of negotiation in plurilingual chats, individuals mobilise and develop language learning strategies in order to be able to deal with different languages used in the chat. These learning strategies can be observed at two levels: cognitive/procedural strategies which require

the analysis, transformation and synthesis of verbal materials (comparisons between languages and language transfer, for example); and metacognitive strategies, including metalinguistic reflection about languages and the relationships between them as well as the communicative situation (e.g. O'Malley *et al.*, 1985; Wenden, 1987). This allows us to say that chats are a particularly interesting context for plurilingual language learning.

Meaning Negotiation in Online Plurilingual Interaction

Corpus and methodology of this study

Our corpus is composed of chat sessions that occurred during the second piloting phase of the Galanet² online communication platform (www.galanet.be), named 'canosession'.³ Galanet is a Socrates project developed to create online multilingual learning situations between individuals who master one or more Romance languages. Its platform includes self-educational areas intended to develop intercomprehension competences in Spanish, French, Italian and Portuguese, as well as synchronic and asynchronic communicational areas (chat, discussion forum and an internal email) designed to provide real cross-comprehension situations. The aim of the platform is to further the development of a collaborative project between teams of university students from different Romance language countries, in order to produce a 'press dossier' on a theme previously chosen by the participants.

After printing the chat threads, we conducted a first analysis, which led us to the identification of episodes illustrating significant efforts at intercomprehension and in which the chat participants' LA emerged (Araújo e Sá & Melo, 2003a). The interactional analysis of these episodes revealed that their structure was based on the emergence and resolution of different communicative problems and so they could be defined as sequences of repair, understood as 'the treatment of trouble occurring in interactive language use' (van Lier, 1988: 183). Bearing in mind that in verbal interaction, 'in order to understand each other, speakers must constantly orient themselves to each other's utterances, i.e. understanding is also dialogic in nature' (Penz, 2001: 105), we formulated the hypothesis that the analysis of these episodes could allow us to better understand (1) how intercomprehension is achieved by chat participants' manipulation of their cognitive and plurilingual repertoires and (2) the implication of this work on the development of their LA, taking into account the work that has connected interaction and LA (e.g. Penz, 2001; Tsui, 1995; van Lier, 1995, 1996). Hence, we will analyse, in the next section, the identified sequences of repair, based on an adaptation of van Lier's analytical categories (1988): the trouble source; the request to the interlocutor to carry out repair (the initiation), and the conversational repair.

Generating and Solving Problems with Romance Languages in Chat Communication: Implications for Chat Participants' Language Awareness

In this section, we focus on the way chat participants accomplish the collaborative construction of meaning and the negotiation of comprehensible input

(see Tsui, 1995) during the repair sequences. In what concerns the structure of our analysis, after a first description of the main trouble sources occurring in the plurilingual episodes, we consider the processes of initiation of repair and their communicative values. Finally, we analyse the conversational repair, relating it with the structure of the episode, and highlighting the linguistic and communicative strategies employed, as well as the meanings of communication mobilised.

To facilitate better understanding of our chat examples below, we have translated them, maintaining the trouble source – between inverted commas – in the language it occurred, as well as other textual elements required to preserve the plurilingual nature of the interaction. We have also maintained the original orthography of each sample.

The collaborative online work of repair starts with chatters' identification of the *trouble source* and its verbalisation. In our sequences, the problems observed were mainly of a linguistic–communicative nature, particularly those related to vocabulary opacity ([JavierT] *peur es miedo?/'peur' means fear?*⁴). Other problems, less frequently encountered, were related to the technical support of communication. In fact, we identified some examples of how the formal characteristics of chats hinder the interaction, such as the opacity of contexts and identities and the discontinuous and fragmentary nature of these texts. In this sense, chatters often refer to difficulties concerning the number or the existence of other online participants ([JavierT] *hay alguien ahí?/Is there anyone out there?*) and the auto- or hetero-identification of some nicknames ([GérardG] *Ciao sono benedetto, ho il pseudo di Mr gouti perche ho un problema di password/Hallo, I'm benedetto, I have the pseudonym of Mr gouti because I have a problem with the password*). At other times, it is the peculiar coherence and turn organisation of this kind of communication that can threaten or impede understanding: [floquet] *ha ha, mon français, ça va, par contre, la conversation est un peu rapide là pour le reste/ha, ha my French, it's OK, however, the conversation is a little bit fast*. One should note that these problems of a technical origin are usually ignored by other chat participants, as opposed to what happens when the source of trouble is form- or meaning-oriented. In these situations, as we will see, chat participants become actively engaged in a conversational work, which shows their concern with the plurilingual construction of meaning and intercomprehension.

It is interesting to notice that in this plurilingual situation, chatters frequently anticipate what could be a source of a problem or misunderstanding ([SilviaM] *Achas que foi a ETA? – Achas = piensas que/'Achas' it was ETA? – 'Achas' = think that*), or at least they are aware that their discourse could be (or become) incomprehensible: [EliaC] *que va Andrea, mientras entiendas lo que escribo ya está muy bien, si hay algo que no, dimelo, vale?/?Well Andrea, since you understand what I write that's ok, but if you don't understand something just tell me, ok??* These anticipations are the result of the interlocutor's preconceptions about possible sources of trouble in his MT and so he prevents the communicative rupture through an adaptation that can be designated 'diligent anticipation' (Araújo e Sá, 1993: 220). This means that speakers are aware of the communicative context (asymmetric competences in several languages, differences between languages and cultures, distances and proximities between them, etc.) and that they make an effort to

autoregulate in order to adapt their discourse to what may be their interlocutors' competences.

These form- or meaning-oriented problems result in chatters' requests for help. In the sequences analysed, the most frequent process used by chat participants in order to initiate repair is the one that van Lier (1988) names 'self-initiation of repair'.

These initiations of repair have different communicative values. Sometimes, chatters just communicate the existence of some kind of problem ([*floquet*] *argh, je suis paumé/argh, I'm lost*), expecting some reaction from their interlocutors. Most frequently, their aim is to know something about languages ([*Isadora*] *Cosa vuoi dire con aviao, Silvia?/What do you want to say by 'aviao', Silvia?*), to redress the balance of participation ([*wei-la*] *Ninguém pode falar comigo????/Can't anyone speak to me???*), or to control the understanding ([*mokab*] *Pois é, os romanófonos são mesmo uns bons garfos! Conhecem a expressão: ser um bom garfo?/It's true, romance speakers are really 'bons garfos'! Do you know what it means to be a 'bom garfo'?*), thereby looking for a greater active involvement of the other interlocutors in the conversation. In these cases, in order to achieve their goals, chatters' requests are extremely incisive, using direct questions and/or addressing the interlocutor whose intervention has motivated the request for help.

Both the public status of online communication and the understanding that during this plurilingual chat, one can develop linguistic and communicative repertoires, explain why there is so much investment in *conversational repair*. Analysing the structure of the sequences of our corpus, we can observe that this investment can be made by interlocutors with different enunciative responsibilities in relation to the emergence of the trouble in the discourse, namely, (1) the creator of the trouble spot, (2) other participants or (3) both parties cooperatively. The following examples illustrate these three trajectories of repair, with the last one being the most common.

Sequence 1

Julien:	je sais à peu près comment faire. tu as des problèmes pour la mise en marche du tiens?	[I know more or less how to make it. Do you have problems with the 'mise en marche du tiens?']
AlexandreA:	emmm no t ehe entendido muy bien	[emmm I didn't understand you well]
AlexandreA:	mise en marche du tiens? que significa?	['mise en marche du tiens'? What does it mean?]
Julien:	mise en marche = le fonctionnement du tiens. en france, lorsque on dit 'ça marche' ça peut vouloir dire 'ça fonctionne'	['mise en marche' = le fonctionnement du tiens. in France, when we say 'ça marche' that also means 'ça fonctionne']
AlexandreA:	ah ... vale	[ah ... ok]

In this sequence, the trouble source is due to opaque vocabulary ('*mise en marche*' said by Julien, a French speaker, to AlexandreA, a Spanish chat participant). AlexandreA intervenes twice to signal his comprehension problem, through a first vague attempt in Spanish and a more focused one using Julien's opaque words followed by a question in Spanish. The problem is solved by Julien

through self-repetition, which includes a synonym and a paraphrase, both in French. These conversational strategies of repair seem to work successfully if we look at the last intervention of AlexandreA.

Sequence 2

SilviaM:	Isadora, espera por mim!!!! Vou apanhar o avião!!!!	[Isadora wait for me!!!! I'm going to catch the 'avião'!!!!]
SilviaM:	Como se diz avião em italiano?	[How do we say 'avião' in Italian?]
djose:	aereo	['aereo']
djose:	si te refieres a avion	[if you are referring to 'avion']
Remy:	Giusto Djosé!!!!	[That's right Djosé!!!!]
SilviaM:	voglio coger gli aereo!	['voglio coger gli aereo!']
SilviaM:	Quem corrige a minha frase????? Je je je	[Who'll correct my sentence????? Je je je]
Isadora:	Cosa vuoi dire con aviao, Silvia?	[What do you want to say by 'avião', Silvia?]
djose:	voglio prendere l'aereo	['voglio prendere l'aereo']
SilviaM:	plane!	[plane!]
djose:	silvia no inglês	[Silvia no English]
SilviaM:	Gracias! Gracie mille!	[Thank you! Thank you very much!]
SilviaM:	Sorry :([Sorry :(]
djose:	jajjajajaj	[jajjajajaj]
SilviaM:	;)	[;)]

This sequence starts with a word elicitation (*Como se diz 'avião' em italiano?*) by SilviaM, a Portuguese speaker, who feels it is necessary to produce this in Italian. Two of the Italian speakers online, Djose and Remy, intervene to help her: the first provides the Italian word (*aereo*) through the mediation of French (*avion*) and the second one confirms the help given by the first chatter. With the elicited word, SilviaM risks building her sentence in an unknown but neighbouring language (*voglio coger gli aereo*), but asks for repair knowing that she is not sufficiently competent (*Quem corrige a minha frase?????*). Djose, once again, intervenes to correct the sentence (*voglio prendere l'aereo*). It is interesting to point out that even if the Portuguese word (*avião*) written by SilviaM in the self-initiation of repair is not clearly fully understood by the Italian speakers (Djose and Isadora), the sequence is managed successfully, with three humorous interventions, which were made possible by the conversational engagement of all the participants in the clarification of the problem and its resolution.

Sequence 3

CleliaDC:	Basta parlare di cibo.. è quasi ora di merenda!!! ;-)	[Stop talking about 'cibo' . . .its almost time for eating!!! ;-)]
SilviaM:	Cibo es comida??????	['Cibo' is food??????]
CleliaDC:	si,comida	[yes, food]
Isadora:	cibo è comer	['cibo' is to eat]

This sequence of repair is, once again, motivated by the use of an opaque word, *'cibo'*, addressed by an Italian chatter to a Portuguese one. SilviaM has inferred the meaning of that word, asking if her translation is correct (*cibo es comida?*). The understanding confirmation is made both by CleliaDC, the trouble source, and Isadora, another Italian online, who feels linguistically competent and communicatively engaged to intervene in the resolution of the problem.

During the sequences analysed, students activate heterogeneous strategies connected to their plurilingual competence, particularly their LA, in order to call attention to, prevent or solve communicative problems and to negotiate comprehensible input and output. They reveal their metalinguistic competence in their own MT (for example, through lexical substitution: *lorsque on dit 'ça marche' ça peut vouloir dire 'ça fonctionne' /when we say 'ça marche' that also means 'ça fonctionne'*) and in languages in contact (*'achas' = piensas que /'Achas' = think that*).

A detailed analysis of the verbal means of communication involved in our sequences reveals that participants use the whole linguistic repertoire of their PC in order to establish understanding and intercomprehension, through 'a dialectic interrelationship where meaning has to be negotiated' (Fenner, 2001: 6). This use is motivated by socio-affective strategies regarding languages (*[mokab] Ik ben 24 jaar! Chouette, je sais parler déjà un petit peu de flamand! /'Ik ben 24 jaar!' Very good, I can already speak a little bit of flamenco!*), speakers (*[SilviaM] Gracias Remy!!!! dos kilos de mousse para mim!/Thanks Remy!!!! two kilos of mousse for me!*), themes (*[Remy] Possiamo parlare ancora?/[SilviaM] Claro! Queres 'parlare' de que?/[Remy] Can we 'parlare' a bit more?/[SilviaM] Of course! what do you want to 'parlare' about?*) and communicative situations (*[NoraR] Hola Javi, vi un saludo tuyo pero no sabia como contestarlo que bueno que estas por el chat/Hallo Javi, I saw your greeting but I didn't know how to answer it it's good to have you in the chat*).

This collaborative conversational construction of meaning in the repair sequences is fertile territory for conversational adjustments (cf. 'adjustment-in-interaction', van Lier, 1988: 180). As we will see through the presentation of some more examples, those adjustments include:

Comprehension checks

AlexandreA:	pero es que me sale siempre el bar ...	[I always get the 'bar' ...]
Julien:	??	[??]
AlexandreA:	y yo queria entrar en el despacho, vamos el bureau, y cambiarme el perfil (porque nuestra profesora nos ha dicho que se cambia ahi) pero es que no me va	[I wanted to enter in the office, that's to say the bureau, and 'cambiarme' my profile (our teacher told us that's where we 'cambia' there) but I just can't do it]
Julien:	ok???	[ok???
AlexandreA:	que es lo que no entiendes?	[What don't you understand?]
Julien:	c'est une histoire de bar ... que signifie 'cambiar'	[It's a story about a 'bar' ... what does 'cambiar' mean?]

- AlexandreA:** aaaaahhh [aaaaahhh]
AlexandreA: pues no, en español el bar es el [well, in Spanish the bar is the bar]
 bar
AlexandreA: vamos . . . una cafeteria [well . . . a 'cafeteria']

In this sequence, between a Spanish and a French speaker, about technical specific characteristics of the Internet Galanet platform, Julien twice signals his problems in understanding AlexandreA (??, ok??), which forces his interlocutor to adjust, after a comprehension check (*que es lo que no entiendes?*), even though he adjusts to the wrong problem (*bar* instead of *cambiar*).

Confirmation requests

- S?©verine:** Ils ont peur? [Do they have 'peur'?]
JavierT: peur es miedo? ['peur' means fear?]
S?©verine: Si [Yes]
JavierT: no, no tienen miedo [no, they have no fear]

The object of request in this sequence is the lexical opacity ('*peur*'), originating in the question of S?©verine, a French speaker, to JavierT, a Spanish speaker. S?©verine confirms the hypotheses of JavierT, which then allows him to answer, using his MT.

Clarification requests

- mokab:** escrit un petit peu en flamand! [Write a little bit of flamenco!]
 PLEASE!!! PLEASE!!!
SilviaM: Escreve flamanego: (Vá lá!!!!) [Write flamenco: (Come on!!!!)]
Annalisa: hallo alles kits? [hallo alles kits?]
Annalisa: ik ben 22 jaar. en jij? [ik bem 22 jaar. en jij?]
SilviaM: Kits para ti também:))) ['Kits' for you too:)))]
mokab: Qu'est-ce que ça veut dire [What does that mean?]
SilviaM: Ich bin 26 jahre alt [Ich bin 26 jahre alt]

In this sequence, another language, Flemish, is introduced into communication, after Annalisa has identified herself as a native speaker of that language. This affirmation of linguistic identity arouses the curiosity of the two Portuguese chat participants (mokab, writing in French and SilviaM, writing in Portuguese), who become interested in coming into contact with this unknown foreign language (*ecrit un petit peu en flamand! PLEASE!!!* and *Escreve flamenco :(Vá lá!!!!)*). Annalisa accepts these requests to initiate a conversation, which follows quite stereotyped parameters (greeting and presentation of her age) that guide her interlocutors. This seems to be a good strategy since SilviaM understands both the greeting and the question, being able, firstly to use the new Flemish word ('*Kits' para ti também*) to respond to her and secondly to answer her in German (*Ich bin 26 jahre alt*), a language that is felt to better suit the Flemish question. However, the communicative strategic behaviour of Annalisa only partially works since mokab makes a clarification request about the Flemish sentences, in French, the language that functions as her lingua franca.

Other repetitions

EliaC:	estaba buscandoos por los otros chats jajaj	[I was looking for them in the other chats jajaj]
SilviaM:	Y que tal?	[and?]
EliaC:	nada	['nada'/nothing]
SilviaM:	Nadia?	[Nadia?]
EliaC:	nadie	['nadie'/nobody]

Even if in our chats everyone usually uses their MT, sometimes conversations are monolingual, such as the one above (in Spanish). In this sequence, the lack of comprehension emerges intralinguistically, due to the misunderstanding of *nada*. In order to ask for clarification, SilviaM repeats the same lexical item, adopting what she believes to be its correct form (*Nadia?*), but which in turn is rectified by EliaC, who provides another word (*nadie*), which works as a synonym in this context.

As we can observe, diverse languages are used separately or integrated in a linguistic patchwork. In fact, the alternate or simultaneous use of FLs plays, as stated by Coste (2001: 191), a role in discourse, communication, cognition, identity and culture, and thus, it should not be seen as a simple compensatory communicative strategy, but rather as an evidence of the existence and mobilisation of a plurilingual and intercultural individual repertoire, called into action when necessary, from an affective and/or a pragmatic point of view. Accordingly, we can say that chat participants engage meta-communicatively with the language source of the problem and with the other FL, sometimes appealing to a 'user-friendly metalanguage'. These strategies are adopted in order to reach a *plurilingual usability*, here understood as a coherent and intelligible plurilingual interactional field built within a specific communicative context, where languages and socio-affective predispositions play an important role in mutual understanding (see Araújo e Sá & Melo, 2003a).

Some Conclusions

As our analysis has indicated, the communicative problems recognised during the plurilingual chat interactions previously presented were not experienced as real barriers to plurilingual interaction in Romance languages, but as additional reasons and incentives to develop the interactional process and to become enthusiastically engaged in it. In fact, participants were observed resorting to different problem-solving strategies, by mobilising their linguistic and communicative repertoires, interaction skills and affective dispositions, which are evidence of LA and PC in progress. Our work therefore reveals arguments in favour of the use of online communication tools in promoting and developing plurilingual learning and plurilingual abilities/skills.

Following on from this idea, the collaborative work analysed here can lead us to outline some observations about the way plurilingual chats, as a particular communicative situation, can stimulate and enhance participants' LA, mainly in connection with the social and power domains. These domains are strongly related to a political dimension of FL learning. In fact, if we take into account Byram's (1997: 53) definition of the 'political education' of

the intercultural speaker as 'an ability to evaluate critically and on the basis of explicit criteria perspectives, practices and products in one's own and other cultures and countries', we should not forget the political issues involved in this plurilingual chat communication: they promote the equality of languages in communication and of access to the communicative process and a feeling of belonging to a European communicative environment where plurilingualism and intercomprehension are seen as social values and public concerns.

From the point of view of the social dimension of LA, there is evidence of linguistic and cultural broadmindedness and acceptance, as exemplified in one of the chatter's contributions: (*SilviaM*) *Penso que cada um deve falar o que quer ... Eu falo português ... /I think that everybody should speak the language they want to ... I speak Portuguese ...*). In the chats, there is an open attitude towards relationships between languages and cultures and a better understanding of one's role in the linguistic and cultural diversity: (*EliaC*) *jo parlo el que vosaltres volgueu⁴ /I'll talk the language you want me to*. This seems to be a clue to understand how online plurilingual communication can develop chatters' skills for living in a plurilingual and intercultural society.

Furthermore, since 'developing awareness of the relationship between mother tongue and foreign language education is a particularly important factor of language awareness' (Penz, 2001: 104), we have identified in our corpus a strong belief in the possibilities of intercomprehension when it is necessary to avoid and to solve communicative problems; there is a mobilisation of several languages comprising the linguistic repertoire, in order to provide the means of coming to an understanding. Thus, linguistic diversity in communication is seen as a facilitating factor which multiplies the possibilities of understanding and being understood, providing access to knowledge and information.

The plurilingual chats that took place on the Galanet platform enhanced the contact with linguistic and cultural diversity, providing us with the opportunity to improve the ability to think about and reflect on languages and the way they work together, to consider them as departure points to other languages and cultures, where problems of a different nature can be found. Our perspective takes into account that FL learning should enable participants 'to react linguistically and culturally in an appropriate manner in communicative situations which were not predetermined' (Fenner, 2001: 7) and where communicative problems (like the ones we have analysed) can occur. It is thus 'a question of intercultural and "interlingual" awareness in the encounter with the foreign language text' (Fenner, 2001: 7) and with *otherness*.

These considerations bring us back to a political dimension of LA and language learning, which focuses on the promotion of intercomprehension in successful intercultural encounters. As van Lier (1995: 9) points out, 'language awareness opens up new possibilities for language education in schools, and avoids the extremes of prescribed correctness and utter neglect'. In fact, the LA approach goes beyond the utilitarian view of (foreign) languages; they should be seen as living phenomena which, while to some extent shaping our lives and worlds, are also a set of resources which we ourselves can shape, and through which we can shape our own existence, identities and social lives.

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Notes

1. The concept of exolingual communication, initially presented by Porquier (1979: 50), only refers to 'celle qui s'établit entre individus ne disposant pas d'une L1 commune'. Afterwards, the definition was enlarged to new contexts, due to a consideration of wider identifying criteria of the exolingual situation, such as the languages known by the speakers, the situational context or the means of interaction (Porquier, 1984; Py, 1986). As a result of communicational ethnography contributions, the concept of exolingual communication is even more enriched with the intercultural dimension, then establishing links between linguistic and cultural codes which does not necessarily mean languages in contact. So, Porquier (1984) defines exolingual communication as the one that happens between individuals from different ethno-cultural backgrounds. Coletta (1991) suggests the expression 'exocommunication'.
2. This project is coordinated by Christian Degache from the Université Stendhal, Grenoble 3 (France), and includes the participation of six other institutions: Universidade de Aveiro (Portugal), Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (Spain), Universidad Complutense de Madrid (Spain), Università de Cassino (Italy), Université Lumière Lyon II (France) and Université de Mons-Hainault (Belgium).
3. 'Canosession' is the second experiment of the Galanet platform in order to test, observe and analyse the instruments included in it, namely those designed for online communication, as well as the intercomprehension situations that appear. During this experiment, the chosen theme for communication and discussion was 'Ridiamo por le stesse cose?', which resulted in a press dossier (available from www.galanet.be). Students from all the institutions of the project participated in this session.
4. This example is in Catalan, another Romance language sometimes used by Galanet participants, when Barcelona's students are online.

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