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Article in *International Journal of Bilingualism* · August 2011

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International Journal of Bilingualism  
16(3) 348–365  
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DOI: 10.1177/1367006911426385  
ljb.sagepub.com  


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## Abstract

This contribution begins with a terminological discussion of ‘receptive multilingualism’ and related concepts. Subsequently, approaches to developing receptive competences in Romance languages in general, and Italian in particular, as well as their potential and possible shortcomings, are presented. Against the background of European multilingualism and particularly the Common European Framework’s concept of plurilingualism, the article opts for a broad approach to receptive multilingualism which foregrounds the interactive component. Second, the potential of the Austrian secondary school system for integrating receptive multilingualism is discussed against the background of the current curricula. Finally, a small-scale study involving future teachers of Italian investigates how far they are or are not familiar with the acquisition of receptive competences.

## Keywords

Austrian school system, foreign language learning, multilingualism, plurilingualism

## I From personal experience to the research question

This investigation into the potential of receptive multilingualism for learning languages within institutional contexts is biographically motivated in a twofold way. First, at the beginning of the 21st century, when Austrian secondary schools set out to develop specific school programs (Feigl, 2000), the author proposed a language program for the school where she was teaching French and Geography at that time. This new program for the upper level of the academic secondary school was inspired by new insights into the potential of receptive multilingualism, especially by insights gained within the EuroCom project. In short, pupils should learn a number of languages by making

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use of Romance inter-comprehension and acquiring receptive competences. The teaching staff found the proposal quite inspiring, although not very attractive for the future pupils. First, learning a language appears to be considered difficult by pupils and their parents; thus, learning a number of languages at the same time would be considered even more difficult. Second, the reward for the effort would not be very convincing as receptive competences tend to appear quite reduced. Children want to achieve more with languages than reading and listening, the teachers argued. The remark that receptive competences acquired at school would help in acquiring productive competences at a later stage could not fill the motivation gap. The school finally opted for a new program focusing on creativity (creative writing and music).

The second experience is quite recent. After having started to seriously learn English at the age of 10, the author's son had to decide which second foreign language he would start to learn at the age of 12. As in most of Austria's secondary schools, there were only a few options available: his academic secondary school offered Latin and Spanish. The decision was more complicated than it seemed at first sight. As the family usually spends one month in France during the summer, the boy actually wanted to learn French – which would be possible at the age of 14 (in school year 9), but is subject to the condition that Latin is chosen at the age of 12 (in year 7). In Austrian academic secondary schools with an emphasis on arts subjects (the *Gymnasium*), Latin is an obligatory subject, be it for six years (starting at the age of 12, in year 7) or for four years (starting at the age of 14, in year 9). The school had decided to offer Spanish in year 7 because the neighbouring school offered French, and to offer French only at the age of 14 (in year 9), i.e. for four years. Naturally, Austrian academic secondary schools also offer the opportunity of learning more than two foreign languages, but only in the form of courses offered in years 10, 11 and 12 and only at a rate of two or three lessons a week.

Both experiences relate to receptive multilingualism and therefore constitute approaches to the problem: only a small range of languages is represented in institutional settings, and to choose one language normally implies deciding against another. The question is in how far receptive multilingualism might bring about a paradigmatic change in this situation. As far as the present article is concerned, Austrian secondary schools – where the choice of languages remains a strongly debated issue – will thus represent the concrete institutional context for the investigation. The range of languages discussed will be limited to Romance languages. Moreover, the case of Italian as a third language will be foregrounded since it is particularly interesting from the perspective of Austrian language policy.

The investigation will be developed in three steps and will begin with a terminological discussion of 'receptive multilingualism' and related concepts such as semi- and inter-comprehension. Here, approaches to developing receptive skills in Italian, as well as their potential and weaknesses considering the background of institutional language learning in schools, will be presented. Second, the potential of the Austrian secondary school system for integrating receptive multilingualism will be discussed against the background of the current curricula. Finally, a small-scale study involving future teachers of Italian will investigate how far they are or are not familiar with the acquisition of purely receptive skills.

## 2 Delimiting the research concept

### 2.1 An approach to receptive multilingualism

*Receptive Multilingualism*, edited by Ten Thije and Zeevaert (2007a), can be considered an important step towards defining the concept under investigation. In their introduction to the volume (Ten Thije & Zeevaert, 2007b, pp. 2–6), the editors note three important characteristics of receptive multilingualism.

First, it can build upon rich historical traditions and geographical distribution. Second, it goes beyond minimal linguistic knowledge, incomplete language learning and so-called passive competence as it requires multilingual communicative strategies which are usually not focused on in language learning. And third, it can constitute a more efficient way of gaining mutual understanding than the use of a lingua franca. As a definition, the formulation proposed in the description of the respective AILA Symposium (2008, Essen) appears to be widely shared: 'Receptive multilingualism refers to interlingual discourse in which interlocutors use their respective mother tongues with the effect that they understand each other.'

Starting from this definition, three specifications will be made here which might contribute to a deepening of the discussion about conceptualizing receptive multilingualism. To begin with, the often implicit assumption that receptive multilingualism is based on mother tongues will be challenged. In a second step, the means of acquiring receptive competences will be specified. Finally, the question will be raised as to how and in how far receptive multilingualism relates to other options of communication between speakers of different languages who do not aim at a common language of discourse and whose communication does not involve an interpreter.

As to the role of the mother tongue, the terminological debate is far from being coherent. Approaches such as 'Both interlocutors speak their own language' (Zeevaert, 2007, p. 104) are less explicit regarding the question of whether receptive multilingualism is necessarily based upon the mother tongues of the interlocutors. On the contrary, in Zeevaert's overview of multilingual discourses (Zeevaert, 2007, p. 109), receptive multilingualism describes the communication between language users who understand the – only loosely related – L2 of each other. Here, discourses in which the mother tongue or tongues are used are identified as polyglot dialogue. These apparently contradictory terminological options indicate the developments in an ongoing discussion process in a rather recent field of investigation. The present contribution will not tackle the whole potential of a broad conception of receptive multilingualism; rather, it will limit itself to multilingual communication based upon receptive competences that originate from competences in languages which are not the mother tongues of the interlocutors, but French (and English) and thus languages learned as foreign languages in school.

The second specification relates to the question of how the receptive competences develop, i.e. if they are learned or acquired or if they can be taken for granted due to the intelligibility of the languages concerned. It has been repeatedly pointed out that mutual intelligibility of languages depends on much more than linguistic proximity and is considerably influenced by parameters such as psychotypology (Kellermann, 1983) or sociocultural and ethnopolitical factors (Blanchet, 2004). As to the Romance language group, it can be assumed that despite their close relationship, the Romance languages are not (completely) mutually intelligible. From this it follows that if receptive competences are to be developed, they have to be acquired or learned. In this context, it will be of central interest in how far the Austrian school system will and can support this development of partial competences.

From what has been said, receptive multilingualism in the context of the present contribution can be quite easily distinguished from semi-communication, another mode of multilingual communication without an interpreter. Referring to multilingual communication between interlocutors who are able to understand the respective languages due to genetic proximity and typological similarity (Haugen, 1966), semi-communication, particularly studied in the inter-Scandinavian context, underlies different conditions for which reasons it might be perceived as a special case of receptive multilingualism (e.g. Braunmüller, 2000). The conceptual differentiation is much more problematic with regard to inter-comprehension, which shares a wide range of characteristics with receptive multilingualism: it is based upon a long tradition (Blanche-Benveniste, 2008), requires specific strategies to develop (Hufeisen & Marx, 2007) and is widely considered to be an efficient,

successful and even economical approach to multilingualism (Grin, 2008). It comes as no surprise that receptive multilingualism and inter-comprehension happen to be seen in a close relationship (e.g. Brussels Declaration on Language Learning, undated; Lavric & Bäeck, 2009) and that they are sometimes treated as synonyms.

It cannot be ignored, however, that inter-comprehension research and research on receptive multilingualism are not always fully integrated and sometimes even seem to represent two different strands within multilingualism research. In order to foster integration, it will be shown that the following characteristics, although identified for inter-comprehension, easily apply to receptive multilingualism as well. Depending on its function, inter-comprehension can focus either upon international communication or on language learning (Morkötter, 2008). Although it is more often researched between typologically related languages, this is not a necessary condition (Castagne, 2007). Similar to receptive multilingualism, inter-comprehension is not necessarily based upon the mother tongue. In his critical overview of approaches to inter-comprehension, Christian Degache (2006, pp. 13–18) challenges the notion of the mother tongue in well-known definitions such as ‘une forme de communication dans laquelle chaque personne s’exprime dans sa propre langue et comprend celle de l’autre’ (Doyé, 2005, p. 7; see also Grin, 2008, p. 80). His plea for more flexibility in this discussion has been taken up in the present investigation.

To sum up, for inter-comprehension as well as for receptive multilingualism, a broad conceptual approach appears to reflect the present state of the discussion more appropriately than narrowing down their potential meaning. In this case, however, it is impossible to clearly differentiate between the two modes of multilingual communication. It can be concluded that both cover a wide range of phenomena related to multilingual communication that can be differentiated based on criteria such as its function (e.g. communication, learning), individual linguistic resources (e.g. mode of acquisition and competences acquired) and the role of the mother tongue and the linguistic relationship between the languages involved (e.g. intelligibility). The present contribution will only cover a small part of this potential and will specifically be interested in receptive multilingualism as a mode of multilingual communication – written as well as spoken – in which language users understand the language of the persons (L1, L2, ...) or texts they interact with because they have acquired partial competences which are based upon their competences in an L2.

Although narrowing down the potential of receptive multilingualism, this approach allows for a wide range of multilingual communications. Germanophone learners of a Romance language (e.g. French) with receptive skills in Italian can interact with non-Germanophone speakers of Italian (with receptive skills in another language) in a receptive multilingual mode and use Italian and French, Italian and English, Italian and German – depending on the receptive skills of the persons they interact with. The only prerequisite is that these learners have acquired receptive skills in Italian. How far multilingualism research provides for didactic support in this context, whether Austrian schools are prepared for this task and why receptive competences in Italian are particularly interesting in the Austrian context, will be discussed in the following section.

## ***2.2 Broader theoretical framing: Plurilingual competence in the Framework’s conception***

Receptive multilingualism associates with research strands which stem from different, although related contexts, such as, for example, inter-Scandinavian or Euro-comprehension studies. The present investigation is located within the context of European language policy and its promotion of multilingualism as a European value. From its perspective on language teaching and learning, it follows that the Common European Framework (CEF) of Reference (Council of Europe, 2001),

the key document in this domain, and its approach to individual multilingualism – plurilingualism in the Council’s terminology – is of central interest.

Plurilingualism differs from multilingualism, which is the knowledge of a number of languages, or the co-existence of different languages in a given society. Multilingualism may be attained by simply diversifying the languages on offer in a particular school or educational system, or by encouraging pupils to learn more than one foreign language, or reducing the dominant position of English in international communication. Beyond this, 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 (whether learnt at school or college, or by direct experience), he or she does not keep these languages and cultures in strictly separated mental compartments, but rather builds up a communicative competence to which all knowledge and experience of language contributes and in which languages interrelate and interact. (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 4)

The Common European Framework conceives of plurilingualism as a counter-concept to multilingualism. While multilingualism is characterized by a coexistence of languages, the Council’s plurilingual approach emphasizes the cooperation of languages and cultural experiences. Being multilingual/plurilingual is not simply equivalent to having skills in several languages. The conceptual basis for plurilingualism is formed by a communicative competence which is fed by all linguistic knowledge and experiences of the individual. The entire language repertoire available to individuals is contained in this single multilingual and pluricultural competence. In this competence, the components related to single languages are not to be seen as being stored separately. The communicative competence enables individuals to use languages for communication as societal agents and to engage in intercultural interaction. The approach to plurilingualism formulated in the Council’s Framework of Reference, which is taken up again and further elaborated in later texts (e.g. Beacco & Byram, 2003), has far-reaching consequences for the teaching and learning of foreign languages.

From this perspective, the aim of language education is profoundly modified. It is no longer seen as simply to achieve ‘mastery’ of one or two, or even three languages, each taken in isolation, with the ‘ideal native speaker’ as the ultimate model. Instead, the aim is to develop a linguistic repertory, in which all linguistic abilities have a place. This implies, of course, that the languages offered in educational institutions should be diversified and students given the opportunity to develop a plurilingual competence. (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 5)

Thus, it already becomes apparent in the Common European Framework that multilingual competence in the Council’s terminology constitutes a dynamic concept of intercultural and individual shaping, whose key points denote a paradigmatic shift for learning and teaching languages (e.g. Vetter, 2008). Partial competences are of special significance for expanding plurilingual and cultural competences, while near nativeness in individual languages is less central. Receptive competences enable language users to engage in multilingual communication without an interpreter, i.e. to practise receptive multilingualism.

### *2.3 Acquiring and learning receptive competences (in Italian)*

Within European language teaching research, particularly Language Didactics, which has increasingly focused upon inter-comprehension, a range of programs have been devised which aim at the

development of receptive competences within institutional contexts. As to receptive competences in Italian, schools, teachers and learners appear to have a choice. Galanet, Babelnet and EuroCom are only three examples of recent projects which have elaborated on didactic materials for Italian: Galanet (<http://www.galanet.eu/>), for example, has been developed for learners who are already competent in a Romance language (mother tongue or foreign language). This project follows Galatea and is followed by Galapro (<http://www.galapro.eu/>, 2008-2010), which is now devoted to the training of 'inter-comprehension trainers' and aims at spreading the already existing knowledge about teaching methods that make use of mutual understanding within Romance languages. Babelnet (<http://babelnet.sbg.ac.at/>), followed by Babelweb (<http://projetbabelweb.wordpress.com/>, 2008-2010), aims at fostering communication and cooperation between learners as well as receptive multilingualism by creating a website for learning and using the three Romance languages Spanish, French and Italian. The project also aims at contributing to spreading the idea of mutual understanding. Finally, EuroCom, which is perhaps the best known of these projects, makes use of the transfer inventories within a language group, but also across language groups with English as a bridge into the Romance language group (Klein & Reissner, 2006).

The mentioned projects are all embedded in the European effort towards multilingualism, with the development of scenarios for teaching and learning of receptive competences in Italian being part of this endeavour. The EuroCom project provides for a concrete example of what such a teaching and learning scenario could look like against the background of the Austrian school system, as it addresses Germanophone learners who are to a certain degree competent in French (which is considered as the bridge language) and English – a quite realistic plurilingual profile of Austrian language learners in schools (see below). Learners might, for example, choose to benefit from the EuroCom online training for Italian. The method follows four steps (text work, text comprehension, translation, progress). The hypertext structure supports the individual learner by helping her to associate, to transfer, to hypothesize and to systematize. Language educators are supported by multimedia presentations provided by EuroCom (25 lessons of Italian inter-comprehensive, Italian reading comprehension through EuroCom).

For those learners or teachers who prefer books to working online, the textbook (Klein & Rudtke, 2005) might be of interest. Its subtitle sounds promising: 'to be able to read Italian immediately'. Twelve of the 36 online documents in Italian can be found in this book. The acquisition of receptive oral competences, of course, has to be based on the exercises available online. To sum up, a ready-made blended-learning concept supports the acquisition of receptive competences in Italian. And experiences with the EuroCom method are well documented. The success of one week of intensive EuroCom training at a German comprehensive school appears to be convincing. Almost all pupils reached B2 in understanding oral and visual texts in Italian and even three afternoons of receptive training can be successful (Bär, 2006). The term 'fascination' is used in order to describe the reactions of parents and pupils.

Against the background of institutional language learning, two characteristics of teaching and learning scenarios, such as the one developed by EuroCom, have to be mentioned. First, these scenarios should be understood as complementing conventional language teaching and are not intended as a new method to replace conventional courses. Second, from a language policy perspective, their scope goes beyond a simple complement to foreign language learning as they can also be seen as encouraging a reform of the entire system. Acquiring receptive competences seems to make language learning much easier, which is important in so far as the effort needed for language learning is supposed to reduce its motivation and the number of languages taught within schools (Bär, 2004). A focus on receptive competences can trigger an increase in the number of languages introduced at schools and can thus enhance the schools' linguistic diversity.

## 2.4 Possible shortcomings

Experiences with the acquisition of receptive skills are convincing, and the potential for institutional language learning seems promising as learners acquire receptive competences at the level of B1 and B2 within a surprisingly short period of time. Despite this apparent success of approaches to receptive competences, two shortcomings can be identified at the present stage which might limit their potential for institutional language learning. The first relates to the didactic implications of learning theory, the second to the understanding of competence.

The Council's plurilingual approach influences the choice of learning theories which didactic concepts for receptive competences can be based upon. The conception of the plurilingual repertoire as a dynamic, intercultural and thus individual concept which links all competences individuals dispose of, does not fit into instructivist didactic models such as those based upon behaviourisms. It comes as no surprise that the didactic concepts which underlie approaches to receptive competences are rather embedded in constructivist learning theories. EuroCom, for instance, presents its didactic concept as constructivist and learner-oriented on the website. This self-presentation might be regarded as not completely convincing. Despite their relative heterogeneity, all constructivist approaches aim at maximally fulfilling individual preconditions and needs (Bach & Viebrock, 2002; Meixner & Müller, 2001). The existing approaches to receptive skills implement this principle only partially. Although EuroCom, for example, does not include a strictly linear learning progression and supports learners in activating their individual repertoires, learners are not genuinely free to choose their topic of interest or to deepen certain aspects of it. The 36 texts on different topics constitute the clearly defined fixed inventory of the EuroCom training in Italian, which, of course, should enable learners to read other texts in Italian as well, but which in the context of young learners might be considered a motivational barrier. Learners aged 14 or 16 years might not be interested in the topics proposed. Galanet, on the other hand, invites learners to choose the topic on which a dossier should be prepared. At this point, the learning process appears to be less guided. The adequate integration of the individual linguistic repertoire and the other prerequisites that learners bring with them still appears, however, to represent a major challenge for approaches to receptive multilingualism.

The second and even more important shortcoming relates to the understanding of receptive competence and its motivational implications. There are doubts whether understanding a language alone can be regarded as a motivating objective for learners (De Florio-Hansen, 2006; Schöpp, 2008). As Schöpp (2008) deduces from a survey of learners of Italian in a German secondary school, pupils are mostly interested in learning to speak. Learners want to communicate, he concludes in this study. These findings can be merged with the outcome of two studies on language use and need within the Austrian economy, i.e. a large-scale survey of languages required in Austrian enterprises (Archan & Dornmayr, 2006) and an investigation into code choice in Austrian export (Lavric & Bäeck, 2009). Both stress the importance of Romance-language-speaking countries for the Austrian economy. Half of the questioned enterprises have trading partners in Italy and it is estimated that the demand for competence in Italian will grow in the future (Archan & Dornmayr, 2006). Oral communication (direct or by telephone) in the foreign language seems to be of utmost importance for economic relationships: 'If you want to act as an international seller today, language is the first issue to be addressed. To be able to communicate as effectively as possible, that is the first thing. Only then can you proceed to make any further sales decisions. (Sales manager, company C)' (Lavric & Bäeck, 2009, p. 23). The recommendation that language teaching should focus upon oral communicative competences is one of the conclusions (Archan & Dornmayr, 2006, p. 77). Taken to extremes, one could sum up that pupils want to communicate by means of a foreign language, and that later, the

ability to communicate will most probably be expected of them. The gap between these requirements and expectations, on the one hand, and the communicative purpose of receptive competences, on the other, might present a motivational barrier for learners.

At present, the mentioned shortcomings appear to narrow down the potential of receptive multilingualism. The first one, however – the question of a didactic concept and its realization – is a challenge that each didactic approach has to face, and it can be expected that future research will further elaborate on the coherence between the underlying learning theory and the didactic scenario. As to the second shortcoming, it will be argued that the emphasis on communicative oral competences does not necessarily exclude receptive multilingualism and that a plea for oral production is rather based upon a misinterpretation of the concept under investigation.

## 2.5 Reception for interaction

It will be argued that the purpose of receptive competences goes far beyond reading and listening if it is embedded into the context of multilingual communication. The Common European Framework suggests a differentiation between productive, receptive, interactive and mediating activities and strategies of language users. Can-do descriptors are available for production, reception and interaction. It goes without saying that receptive competences enable language users to engage in receptive language activities, such as listening to public announcements or reading and following instructions (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 65), and to make use of receptive strategies, such as identifying cues and inferring from them (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 72). The CEF outlines, however, that many communicative activities, such as conversation and correspondence, are *interactive*, that is to say, the participants alternate as producers and receivers, often with several turns. The Framework outlines that interaction is central for communication and that it clearly goes beyond a simple combination of reception and production: ‘In interaction at least two individuals participate in an oral and/or written exchange in which production and reception alternate and may in fact overlap in oral communication. (...) Learning to interact thus involves more than learning to receive and to produce utterances. High importance is generally attributed to interaction in language use and learning in view of its central role in communication’ (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 14). The concrete example of oral interaction makes this approach clearer:

In interactive activities the language user acts alternately as speaker and listener with one or more interlocutors so as to construct conjointly, through the negotiation of meaning following the co-operative principle, conversational discourse. Reception and production strategies are employed constantly during interaction. In addition to these strategies, interaction also requires a class of strategies exclusive to interaction concerned with the management of this process. (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 85)

If receptive competences are to constitute a motivating goal for language learners, their use in interaction will represent a milestone as it opens up for communication, particularly for multilingual communication (see also Degache, 2006; Jamet, 2005). At this point, the CEF remains rather vague, although it seems to implicitly suppose that the interaction (and hence the communication) will take place in one language. This is, however, not a necessary prerequisite for the Framework’s definition of interaction, which can be adopted for multilingual interaction modes as well: language users can act as a speaker in one language, for example French or English and receiver in another, for example Italian. This also holds true for written interaction. Activities such as passing on and exchanging notes or correspondence by letter, fax or email can also be multilingual. And the

descriptors for interactional strategies easily apply for multilingual communication: 'Can relate own contribution skilfully to those of other speakers' (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 86), for instance, does not prescribe that the contributions are made in one and the same language.

On the one hand, the acquisition of receptive competences does not automatically guarantee that learners also have interactional competences, on the other receptive competences are a necessary although not sufficient condition for a multilingual communication mode without an interpreter, such as receptive multilingualism. Initial experiences with the linguistic management of a multilingual discussion forum (Melo-Pfeifer, 2009) and with the prototype of the Galanet Internet Forum (Degache & Tea, 2003) showed that multilingual interaction is a highly challenging enterprise and that its development can be fostered by training. From a didactic perspective, this implies that if pupils are to be enabled to use their receptive competences in multilingual communication, they should be involved in multilingual interaction in order to also develop interactional competences.

From this it should become clear that receptive multilingualism does not only extend far beyond minimal linguistic knowledge or incomplete language learning, but also beyond reception and receptive competences. This aspect appears to be neglected when talking about receptive multilingualism in institutional language learning, which diminishes the potential and attractiveness of receptive multilingualism.

### **3 Austrian secondary schools and language learning**

As a participant in the Council of Europe's language education policy planning process, Austria has recently published its country report 'Language and language education policies in Austria: Present situation & topical issues' (BMUKK/BMBWK, 2007), which contains the most relevant facts about Austrian language education. Romance languages are rarely taught in primary schools, but play an important role in secondary schools. In general, Austria's schooling at the lower secondary level (school years 5 to 8) is divided into general secondary schools (HS, 269.418 pupils in 1.170 locations) and the lower level of academic secondary schools (116.617 pupils in 266 locations). Most schools offer only one foreign language. A second foreign language may be added as an optional subject. At those academic secondary schools with an emphasis on arts subjects, a second foreign language can be introduced in year 7 as a compulsory subject. This has been made possible by the new curriculum (year 2006/2007; see BGBl. II – Ausgegeben am 13. Juni 2003 – Nr. 283: Artikel 5) and, as already mentioned, pupils can choose between Latin and a modern language.

After completing compulsory schooling, two distinct branches of schooling are offered – vocational upper secondary schooling and general upper secondary schooling. Vocational schools are divided into vocational middle schools, which offer one or two modern foreign languages, and vocational upper secondary schools, which from the language education viewpoint can be compared with the upper level of academic secondary schools (AHS, academic secondary schools, 54.243 pupils in 256 locations). Both add a second foreign language and may offer a third foreign language (as a compulsory or as an optional subject).

As to the languages taught, English clearly dominates: nearly all Austrian pupils learn English, across all school years. However, a small proportion of pupils do learn other foreign languages. It is only in years 10 and 12 that the percentage of pupils learning a second foreign language is higher than 20 per cent for French, and about 10 per cent for Italian (see Table 1). Regarding the distribution of the two most important second foreign languages, French and Italian, substantial geographic variations can be observed, with Italian dominating at the Italian border (Kärnten, Tirol, see Table 2).

**Table 1.** Total number of pupils receiving MFL teaching (English and Romance languages) at schools in Austria, in years 4, 8, 10 and 12: numbers and percentages (2004/05) (BMUKK/BMBWK, 2007, p. 43).

Languages	Year 4	Year 8	Year 10	Year 12
English	98,67	98,82	94,16	96,13
French	1,76	8,89	23,21	26,9
Italian	1,44	3,76	9,6	11,78
Spanish	0,1	1,5	4,09	4,74

**Table 2.** French and Italian in Year 8, in Austria's *Länder* (percentages of pupils out of the total number of pupils in each *Land*; school year 2004/05, BMUKK/BMBWK, 2007, p. 44).

	B	K	NÖ	OÖ	S	ST	T	V	W
French	11,08%	4,52%	7,21%	8,41%	6,73%	10,19%	4,72%	15,48%	12,76%
Italian		19,23%	0,81%	0,70%	4,35%	7,56%	6,61%	0,57%	0,60%

B: Burgenland; K: Kärnten; N: Niederösterreich; O: Oberösterreich; S: Salzburg; ST: Steiermark; T: Tirol; V: Vorarlberg; W: Wien

**Table 3.** Academic secondary schools, 2nd FL at end of year 4 of study: overall year 12.

Spoken interaction	Spoken production	Listening	Reading	Writing
B1	B1	B1	B2	B1 + argumentative writing

**Table 4.** Academic secondary schools, 2nd FL at end of year 6 of study: overall year 12.

Spoken interaction	Spoken production	Listening	Reading	Writing
B1	B1 + partial competences from B2	B1 + partial competences from B2	B2	B1 + partial competences from B2

Language choice is a strongly debated issue. Some schools have started to replace French with Italian (or Spanish), which may mark the beginning of substantial changes within the Austrian foreign language education system. From the perspective of school administration, decisions for or against a particular language are often taken against the background of competitiveness.

Regarding the level of competence that should be reached in school, most of the Austrian curricula relate to the Common European Framework. Academic secondary schools, for instance, differentiate between competences in spoken interaction, spoken production, listening, reading and writing. The levels of competence pertinent to Romance languages, particularly Italian, which is usually taught as a second or third foreign language, reach B1/B2 after four years of study (Table 3) as well as after six years of study (Table 4). When a language is taught as an optional subject for three years, the level of competence to be reached is A2 in all five domains (Table 5).

Although the curricula allow for a certain differentiation between partial competences, they do not tap the full potential of receptive multilingualism. It is, for example, not possible at the moment to acquire only receptive competences and no productive competences at all. Moreover, the levels

**Table 5.** Academic secondary schools, 3rd (or 2nd) FL as a type of optional subject (cf. above): year 3 of study: overall year 12.

Spoken interaction	Spoken production	Listening	Reading	Writing
A2	A2	A2	A2	A2

of competence to be reached appear to be very low and less efficient than those of receptive approaches. The EuroCom example has shown that pupils reach level B1 within a tremendously short period of time, whereas the Austrian curriculum foresees A2 after three years of study.

It goes without saying that receptive multilingualism, which is to be understood as a mode of multilingual communication without an interpreter, might add a new perspective to the teaching and learning of languages in Austrian schools. First of all, it might reduce the competition between languages, particularly the Romance languages. Instead of French *or* Italian *or* Spanish, pupils could be competent in French *and* Italian *and* Spanish. One realistic procedure would be to choose one major (second foreign) language, starting in year 7 and then to add receptive competences in other languages in year 9 and later. The focus on multilingual interaction might also help to re-define the linguistic needs of the economy. In the long run, the high degree of panromanity could even contribute to fostering the role of Romance languages in Austria.

#### 4 Receptive competences in current language learning

The last section is dedicated to a small-scale pilot study carried out among future teachers of Italian in order to estimate the role of receptive competences in current institutional language learning. The main research questions were:

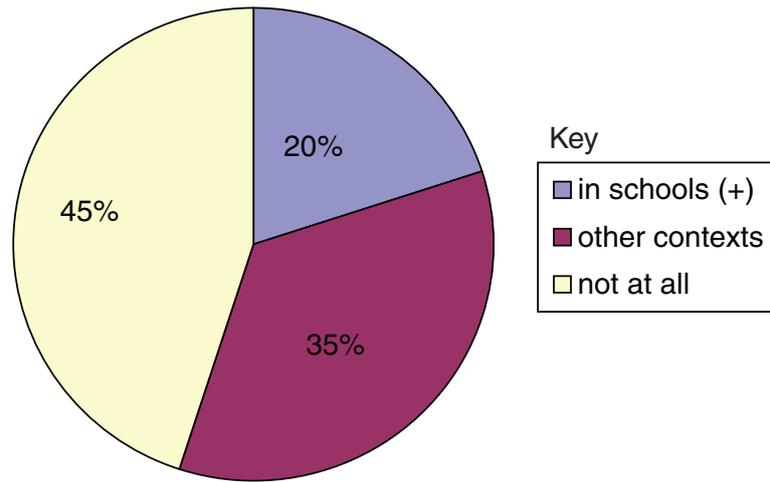
1. How far are future teachers familiar with ways of acquiring receptive skills?
2. In which (institutional) learning contexts did they become familiar with using their existing language competences in order to acquire receptive skills?
3. What are their attitudes regarding the potential of language transfer for the acquisition of receptive skills?

A total of 27 future teachers of Italian were confronted with a written questionnaire at the beginning of their studies. Figures 1–6 show the main results relating to the first two research questions.

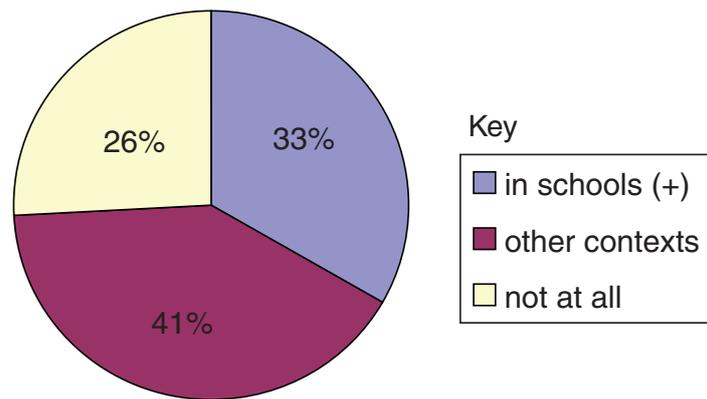
As to the first research question, it can be concluded that familiarity with the acquisition of receptive skills mainly depends on the language group. The majority of the students are acquainted with using their existing competences in Romance languages for understanding written and spoken texts in another Romance language; these findings, however, do not apply beyond the Romance language group. Moreover, the language students differentiate between the understanding of written and oral texts. Irrespective of the languages under investigation, they are more familiar with using their linguistic competences for understanding written texts than for understanding oral texts.

Regarding the second question, the role of schools and other institutional contexts cannot be neglected, particularly concerning written texts, although receptive skills do not figure prominently in the curricula. Other contexts than schools are, however, generally more important, especially for understanding oral texts.

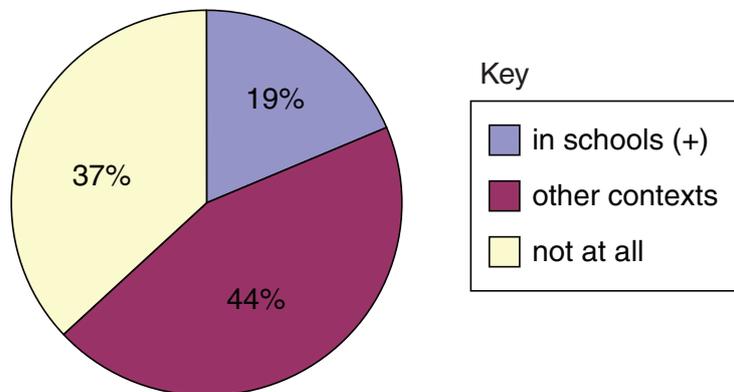
The third research question relates to students' attitudes. The results (Figures 7–10) perfectly match the findings above.



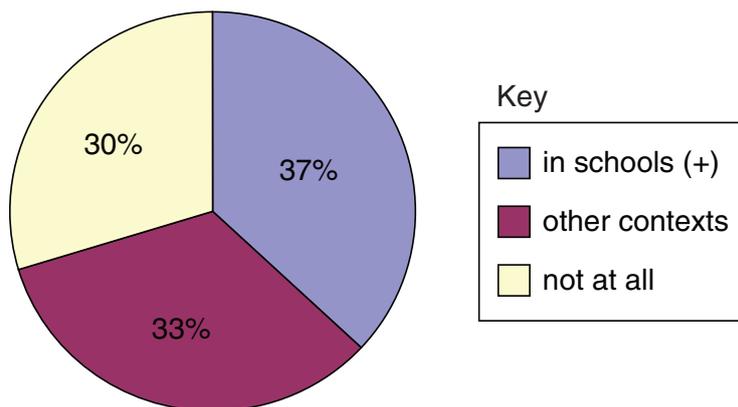
**Figure 1.** In which contexts did you become familiar with using your existing competences in Italian in order to understand an oral text in another Romance language?



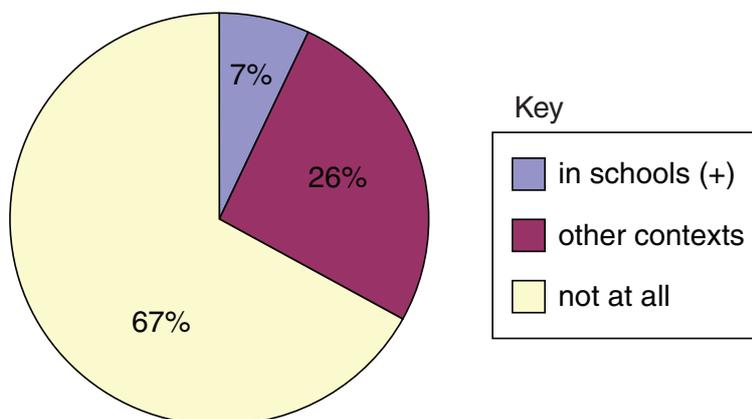
**Figure 2.** In which contexts did you become familiar with using your existing competences in Italian in order to understand a written text in another Romance language?



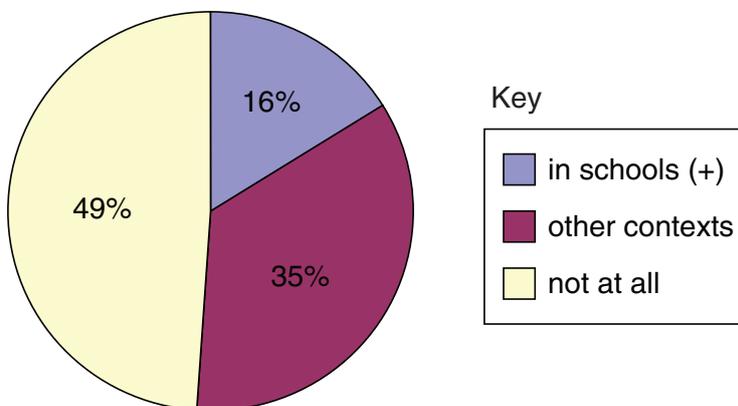
**Figure 3.** In which contexts did you become familiar with using your existing competences in another Romance language in order to understand an oral text in Italian?



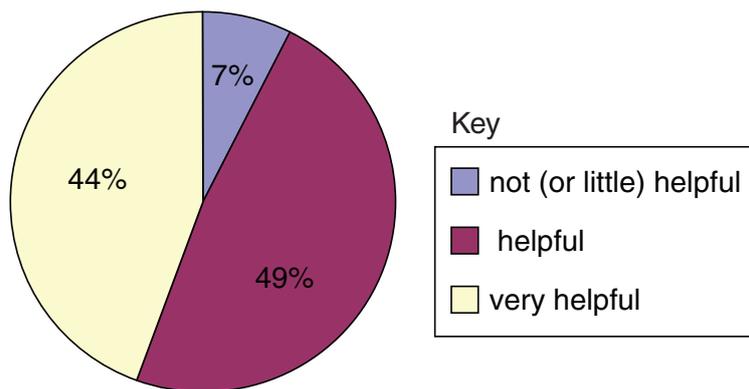
**Figure 4.** In which contexts did you become familiar with using your existing competences in another Romance language in order to understand a written text in Italian?



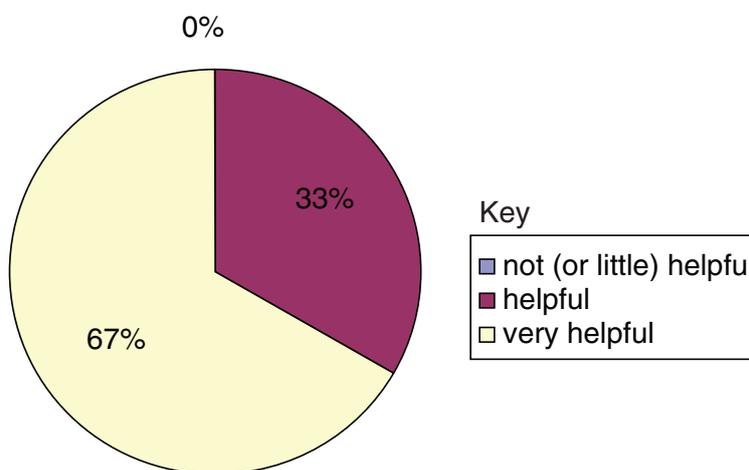
**Figure 5.** In which contexts did you become familiar with using your existing competences in a non-Romance language in order to understand an oral text in Italian?



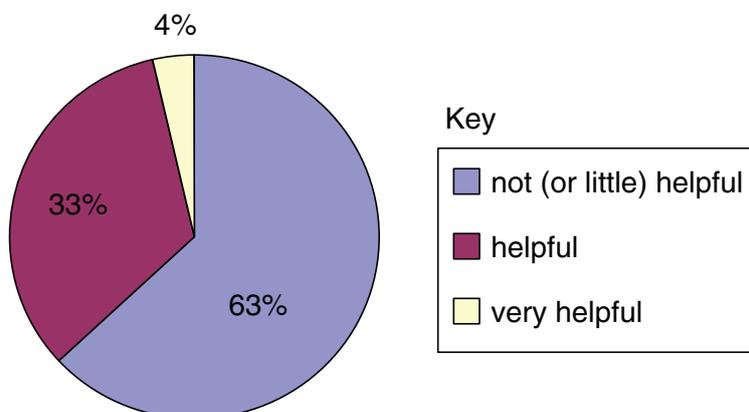
**Figure 6.** In which contexts did you become familiar with using your existing competences in a non-Romance language in order to understand a written text in Italian?



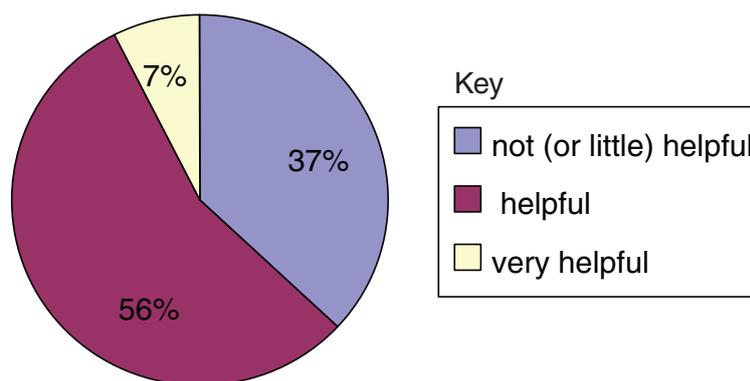
**Figure 7.** How helpful do you consider Italian for understanding an oral text in another Romance language?



**Figure 8.** How helpful do you consider Italian for understanding a written text in another Romance language?



**Figure 9.** How helpful do you consider Italian for understanding an oral text in another non-Romance language?



**Figure 10.** How helpful do you consider Italian for understanding a written text in another non-Romance language?

The students' attitudes are very positive: competences in a Romance language are considered extremely helpful for the acquisition of receptive skills within the Romance language group, more helpful for written than for oral texts and least helpful when crossing the border of the language group.

In general, these findings indicate a currently rather problematic role of orality. Oral receptive competences are less frequent, they are rarely learned in institutional contexts and orality is regarded as less helpful for inter-comprehension. These results become even more problematic against the background of linguistic needs within the economy which clearly foregrounds orality.

## 5 Conclusion

The present investigation started from a broad conceptualization of receptive multilingualism as a mode of multilingual communication without an interpreter which is close to inter-comprehension and not necessarily based upon the notion of mother tongues. Its particular interest focused upon the paradigmatic change that the integration of receptive multilingualism in institutional language learning might bring about. It has been shown that receptive multilingualism fits into the European struggle for multilingualism and that a range of approaches to the acquisition of receptive competences have already been developed. Although positive and convincing experiences with these approaches were noted, a motivational barrier has been identified which primarily originates in the assumption that understanding alone might not be enough.

Taking up the Common European Framework's differentiation between reception, production, interaction and mediation, it has been argued that receptive multilingualism does not only extend far beyond minimal linguistic knowledge or incomplete language learning, but also beyond reception and receptive competences. It is the interactive component which accounts for its innovative character. As the central feature of communication, interaction clearly goes beyond the simple combination of reception and production and calls for specific strategies. Here, receptive multilingualism means communication. This aspect appears to be neglected when talking about receptive multilingualism in institutional language learning, which narrows down the potential and attractiveness of receptive multilingualism.

In this sense, receptive multilingualism constitutes an interesting option for institutional language learning as it reduces the competition between languages and presumably increases the number of languages taught. Moreover, it might help to redefine the language needs of the economy, which is particularly interested in oral communicative competences.

This small-scale study complements the discussion. The findings suggest that oral receptive competences have been widely ignored within institutional contexts, although they appear more

difficult to acquire in comparison to visual competences. The present investigation has shown that oral interaction is the place where the potential of receptive multilingualism meets language needs. At present, the Austrian school system is not well equipped for exploiting this potential. If a paradigmatic shift is to take place, specific curricula and the focus on interaction are two milestones that must be reached.

## Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

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