Pham Dinh Trong

English as an Aid in Gaining Skills in Other Germanic Languages [1]

Abstract

This paper reports on a small-scale project that sheds light on the role of English in gaining receptive competence such as decoding skills in other Germanic languages, specifically the Dutch language, based on the theoretical foundation of EuroCom (European Intercomprehension). We hypothesised that Germans could take advantage of English to decode Dutch texts. The project was carried out at Bayreuth University by interviews which were conducted in a way that twenty non-linguistics students with German as their mother tongue and with no knowledge of the Dutch language were asked to decode an authentic Dutch text from a Dutch website by a think-aloud method. The results showed that, with different levels of English knowledge, all the informants were able to understand the text variously with many words referred to English; such an amount of words led them to the possible interpretation of the sentences in the given text. This partially confirms the hypothesis introduced by EuroCom that learners can decode texts in a foreign language when they already know another language from the same language group (Germanic, Romanic or Slavic).

1 Introduction

English, which is considered to be a language for international communication, has been a lingua franca since World War I and especially after World War II; it is extensively used as a second language or an official language in many countries, and is the most widely understood language in the world. The role of English is widely considerable in many different fields, especially in business, politics, and science.

In Europe English is one of the official languages; its role is also considerably important. However, as for the EU, only English does not seem to be sufficient due to the benefit from multilingualism; EU's general rule is that every official national language is also an official EU language, which results from the linguistically tolerant attitude. Therefore, multilingualism is necessary for the European language policy as Nelde (2002: 26) remarks, "It is only during the last ten years that the European Commission has recognised the importance of multilingualism as being conductive to the functioning of the economic, political and social components and had made the necessary means available and learners to deal with the asymmetry of multilingualism". Cornelia Grosser (2002: 21) also draws a

---

[1] I would like to thank Prof. Grzega for his wholehearted support and guidance. I am also grateful to Johanna Messling for her great help during the interview processes; without her, I would not have achieved the results in this paper.

conclusion in her article, "A main finding is: Euro is multilingual". Using a foreign language one already knows to learn another foreign language should be taken into consideration, especially receptive competence being exploited and then productive skills extended. That is why a project called EuroCom (European Intercomprehesion) was launched and has been carried out; the purpose of the project is to do research into intercomprehension in the three big language groups, the Romanic, the Slavic and the Germanic languages. It is hypothesised that if one already knows a foreign language, it will be easy to learn another language from the same language group. For example, learners find it rather effortless to learn Italian or Spanish when they already know French. In this case, French is a bridge language in the acquisition of (the) other languages of the same language group, especially in gaining receptive competence as there exist at least some similar elements that learners are able to identify such as vocabulary and syntactic structure. This is also illustrated by Horst G. Klein's landmark works for the Romanic language groups; Horst G. Klein, Gerhard Kirschel and their teams have also developed the seven techniques to achieve receptive reading competence in a rapid way, particularly for the Romanic language group. The project deals with the intercomprehension of Romanic languages called EuroComRom and the other projects also being known as EuroComSlav for the group working with the intercomprehension of Slavic languages and EuroComGerm for the group studying Germanic languages. While much time and effort have been put in the EuroComRom project, EuroComGerm is the rather young branch of these groups and there should be further experiments on Germanic languages. In this small-scale project, we proposed and would like to confirm the hypothesis that German learners who already knew another Germanic language would be able to understand other Germanic languages in terms of receptive competence of reading comprehension; namely with certain knowledge of English, native speakers of German could be able to understandably read authentic texts from the Dutch language.

2 EuroCom Method and the Seven Sieves

2.1 EuroCom and EuroCom Method

EuroCom stands for EuroComprehension, a clipping for European Intercomprehension in the three main European language groups: Romanic, Slavic and Germanic languages. It is a programme that enables learners to decode texts in a foreign language when they already know another language from the same language group. For example, if one already knows

French, they probably decode texts from other languages of the same language group such as Catalan, Italian, Portuguese, Occitan or Romanian.

The aim of the EuroCom method is to help Europeans to achieve multilingualism in a realistic way; that is, the acquisition of the receptive competence of reading comprehension in one language group may be gained. Learners possibly acquire reading competence in all the languages of a group or parts thereof. Receptive competence such as reading skills are focused on first, and then it can help to develop productive competence such as speaking and writing skills. EuroCom intends to show learners that knowledge of their mother tongue and just another foreign language they have learned provides them with an unexpectedly high level of knowledge, allowing them, for instance, to be able to rapidly understand the news or technical texts in all other related (but not yet learned) languages. For example, if a Romanic speaker has certain knowledge of French as a foreign language, he or she can easily understand texts in other Romanic languages such as Spanish or Italian.

Why should it be easy to receptively understand other languages when one already knows one language of the same language group? What is based on to draw such conclusions? With respect to EuroCom Method, a system of the Seven Sieves (seven transfer techniques) have been developed by Gerhard Kischel, Horst G. Klein and their teams to achieve receptive reading competence in a rapid way.

2.2 The Seven Sieves

2.2.1 International Vocabulary

With the First Sieve, we can extract words from international vocabulary or (Neo-Latin) internationalisms from the text. There are many loanwords occurring in several languages with the same or similar meaning and etymology so that they can be understandable among different languages. European internationalisms originate from different languages such as Latin or Greek and others from other languages such as English; with the result of computing, many words can be considered as internationalisms from the English language such as *computer*, *disk*, *spam*, *download*. Also, due to the high prestige of (American) English as a scientific or economic lingua franca, a lot of terms are coined in the English-speaking community with clearly English morphemes such as *fax, football, hi-fi, jeans, manager, shopping team* (cf. Grzega 2005). Other typical internationalisms are *academy*, *computer*, *internet*, *international*, *Metro*, *radio*, *sport*, *tennis*, *ticket*, *television*. This benefits

learners greatly in learning vocabulary from a foreign language, especially adult learners who normally have many easily recognisable words in their vocabulary since these words are a part of newspaper articles and other sources of information.

2.2.2 Language Group Vocabulary

Learners use the Second Sieve as an aid in understanding words belonging to the vocabulary that is common to one language group. This technique shows how knowledge of just one language can open the doors to the others of the same group. For instance, if a learner knows *langue* in French, easily recognisable words of the same origin can be understood in different languages of the same language group such as *lingua* in Italian, *llengua* in Catalan, *lingua* in Portuguese, and *lengua* in Spanish.

2.2.3 Sound Equivalence

In the Third Sieve, sound equivalence is possibly employed; in this case, the lexical relationships between the languages by considering sound correspondences are taken into account. Many words, particularly some that occur very frequently, do not look related to one another at first sight, but if more proper consideration is taken, they may be identified. For instance, *good* in English may have the sound equivalence with other languages such as *goed* in Dutch; *gut* in German; *god* in Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish (cf. Grzega 2005: 11). With the Third Sieve, EuroCom provides learners with all the essential sound correspondence formulae so that they can recognise the relationships between the words and their　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　meanings.

2.2.4 Spelling and Pronunciation

The Forth Sieve is Spelling and Pronunciation. While the Romanic languages generally use the same letters for writing the same sounds, some spelling solutions are different and can hinder the recognition of the relationships between words and meanings. EuroCom shows these differences very clearly, describing the logic of the spelling conventions and removes any stumbling blocks. The learner only has to concentrate on a few specific phenomena. Some of the conventions of pronunciation are also demonstrated and used to point out the relationships between words, as words written differently may well sound quite similar. Spelling and pronunciation may also be extracted in the Germanic language group (cf. McCann,　　　　　　　　　Klein,　　　　　　　　　Stagmann　　　　　　　　2002).

2.2.5 Syntactic Structure

The Fifth Sieve is concerned with syntactic structure; many basic sentence types are structurally identical in the same language group. If learners are aware of this, they can find it helpful when using syntactic structure of one language to rapidly learn that of the others of the same language group by finding out the position of the article, noun, adjective, verb and conjunction, etc. in a sentence; also, clauses, inclusive of all kinds, may be easily recognised as illustrated by the following:

(1)   I come from Germany (English).

                 Ich komme aus Deutschland (German).

                 Ik kom uit Duitsland (Dutch).

(2)   Generaal-majoor William Caldwell zei zaterdag dat twee experts van het Amerikaanse leger in Irak zijn aangekomen (Dutch).

                 General-Major William Caldwell sagte samstag, dass zwei Experten von der   amerikanischen Armee im Irak angekommen sind (German).

                 Major General William Caldwell said (on) Saturday that two experts of the   American Army had arrived in Iraq (English).

It can be easily recognised that the syntactic structure in the three languages in (1) are similar and as it can be seen in (2), with careful consideration about syntactic structure of English and German in comparison to that of Dutch, learners may identify the main clause following a that-clause in a sentence, hen probably understand the meaning of *zei* in the above sentence.

2.2.6 Morphosyntactic Elements

The Sixth Sieve is related to morphosyntactic elements which provides the basic formulae for learners to recognize the different ways that different grammatical elements have developed in the same language group. This makes the grammatical structure of a text easy for the reader to understand. As for receptive competence of reading comprehension, morphosyntatic elements are beneficially necessary for the learner to comprehend the text. For example, the regular plural formation of English ends in –*s*, whereas German has different forms of noun-plural endings such as *Städte* 'cities', *Augen* 'eyes', *Häuser* 'hauses', *Mütter* 'mothers', only some words ending in –*s* like *Motels*, *Taxis*, *Kinos*, *Autos*,

Babys, *Handys*. Similarly, in the Dutch language, the plural formation of noun is not fixed such as *experts* 'experts', *agenten* 'agents', *miltairen* 'soldiers'.

2.2.7 Eurofixes

Finally the Seventh Sieve, Eurofixes provides learners with lists of prefixes and suffixes and enables them to work out the meaning of compound words by separating affixed elements from the root words. We may only have to remember a relatively small number of Greek and Latin prefixes and suffixes in order to be able to decipher a large number of words since the eurofixes are Latin- and Greek-based affixes. Two widespread eurofixes from English (which are also used in pseudo-Anglicisms) are *–ing* and *–man* (e.g. *footing* 'jogging' (Fr., Sp., It., Pol., Croat.), *forcing* '1. constraining a person by force or against his or her will; 2. continual attacking (sport)' (1. Du., It., Hung.; 2. Fr., It.), *forechecking* 'the interruption of an attack from the opposite team' (G., Norg., It.) (cf. Grzega 2005).

With the Seven Sieves, the learner can find out a great number of familiar knowledge s/he already has. These seven techniques can probably benefit learners greatly in all related languages; therefore, learners should grasp the chance to reach their multilingual ambition from the system of the Seven Sieves.

3 EuroComGerm

EuroComGerm studies intercomprehension of Germanic languages; it is the youngest branch compared with EuroComRom, into which much time and effort has been invested and from which there have been a great number of publications. Different from the other groups, Romanic and Slavic languages, the Germanic language group is a rather heterogeneous ensemble from a synchronic point of view (cf. Grzega 2005). Some differences are at least probably seen among English and other languages in Germanic languages due to the social-linguistic history of English.

3.1 Previous research into EuroComGerm

EuroComGerm is managed by Britta Hufeisen. Some sub-projects to experiment Scandinavian intercomprehesion were conducted such as the Öresund Bridge Project in which Swedish-Danish intercomprehesion was tested by Lars-Olof Delsing and Eva Kärrlander. The results showed that, in spite of the fact that neither Danes nor Swedes could

understand particularly well the whole listening and reading texts given, they showed that they could partially understand the texts. The informants involved in the project understood the reading text better than the listening one, that is, their receptive competence of reading skills was better than that of listening. Hence, Delsing and Kärrlander concluded, "The scores seem to indicate that it was easier for both Swedes and Danes to understand written language then spoken language" (229).

Another research project was the Iglo project by Marghrete Mondahl which dealt with the subject *Across the Germanic Language Border*. The research also aimed at multilinguistic competence among Germanic languages, especially in the Scandinavian languages. John Trim, in his address of the launch of the European year in Denmark stressed "the very high foreign language competence found in the Scandinavian countries" (cf. Mondahl 2002: 246). This project also oriented to the receptive competence in which courses were designed for learners who would like to take advantage of multilingualism. This is considered a contribution to multilinguistic competence of the same language group as Mondahl concluded, "the IGL course will be a giant step forward for the native speaker of one Germanic language who wants to be able to read one or several other Germanic languages in order to add his/her knowledge of the culture, business community and people behind the language". (2002: 253)

3.2 Our project

With the subject *English as an Aid in Gaining Receptive Skills in other Germanic Languages*, we hypothesised that with certain knowledge of English, native speakers of German could probably understand authentic texts of other Germanic languages such as those being from newspapers, magazines or daily sources of information. However, because of time limit, we only focused on conducting small-scale experiments on Dutch, one of the Germanic languages; hopefully further experiments on other Germanic languages such as Danish, Swedish or Norwegian will be carried out to verify the hypothesis.

4 Our project procedures

4.1 The subject

Twenty non-linguistics informants, both male and female, involved in our project were students of Bayreuth University, all of whom, with different ages, were German. They had

gained certain knowledge of English for a certain period of time and, certainly, could not know or speak the Dutch language; their majors were also varied. They were asked to spend about twenty minutes on the task given, following our instructions so that they could understand what they were expected to do.

4.2 The materials

The materials we used in the project were in Dutch, one being a dialogue from a textbook designed for learners of Dutch at the beginning level as a warm-up activity and as instructions for the informants (see *Appendix II*), the other being an authentic reading text as the main task drawn from a Dutch news website for the informants during the decoding processes since we intended to use a real text in daily sources of information (see *Appendix I*). As the text was slightly long if intended for approximately fifteen minutes, the last two sentences were removed from it as long as this would not affect the informants' understanding the meaning of the text or hinder any interpretation from them.

4.3 Aim of our project

In this project, we conducted experiments to test to what extent the informants could understand an authentic Dutch text and verified the hypothesis that English could help native speakers of German to gain receptive competence of decoding skills in the Dutch language based on the theoretical foundation of EuroCom.

4.4 Think-aloud protocol

A think-aloud protocol was employed in this project because it could help us bring some benefit in carrying out and analysing the results.

4.4.1 What is "think-aloud protocol"?

The think-aloud protocol is a popular technique used to gather data in usability testing. This technique involves participants thinking aloud whilst they are performing a task or a specific set of tasks. During the course of a task, the participant is asked to verbalise his/her thoughts, feelings, and opinions while interacting with the product. Observers involved in such a test are asked to take notes of what is considered as necessary the participant say without interrupting his/her actions and words. Audio and/or video is taped so that the observer can probably go back and refer to what the participant has done and how he/she has reacted. This technique must be distinguished from other methods such as talk-aloud

protocol in which the participant only describes his/her actions without giving explanations (cf. Ericsson & Simon 1980, 1983, 1987).

4.4.2 Usefulness of think-aloud protocol

There should be particular values in a think-aloud protocol as this technique focuses on the problems a user has. When the user is working with difficulty, direct observation is much used; in contrast, if the user is working without difficulty, then direct observation can be limitedly used. The think-aloud protocol is a very perceptive and informative method, so if we use this technique effectively and accordingly, we may gain a lot of valuable information leading to good testing results. Although the main benefit of a think-aloud protocol is to gain a better understanding of the user's mental model and interaction with the product, other benefits can be gained as well. A number of advantages from a think-aloud protocol can be seen as follows:

- User feedback is rapid and qualitative if compared with questionnaires.
- Training in think-aloud paradigms is negligible compared with that employed in classical introspection experiments.
- Data can be gathered from a wide range of sources such as direct observation of what the subject is doing, and hearing what the subject wants or is trying to do; in this way, the experimenter may analyse the data gathered in a more objective manner.
- If the subject faces any trouble or difficulties during the testing process, the experimenter may clarify the situation on the spot.
- The experiment in such a technique is highly flexible as the observer may control the experiment easily.

4.5 How informants get involved in our project?

We asked students on the campus of Bayreuth University if they would like to participate in our project (one at a time, of course). If so, we then sat down with him/her in an empty classroom where it was quiet because we needed to record what he/she verbalised. We were sitting at a table, face to face with the informant and we tried to make them co-operate with us with ease. Some scholars such as Ericsson and Simon (1983) suggest that the experimenter should be seated behind the informant and is hence not visible. The aim of

sitting in this way is to avoid a "social communication" setting in which the informant is tempted to communicate with the experimenter. However, we decided not to do so because we felt that this could cause some embarrassment if there were people sitting behind the informants and unconsciously looking at their backs. Furthermore, there were things for us to do as observers such as note-taking, recording and a number of other things that should be completed during the testing period. For the purpose of our project, we assumed this would be fine. As a matter of fact, however, we observed that the informants tried to evoke some reactions from us (e.g. via eye-contact if what they said was correct). The temptation was there to nod, not meaning "Yes, you did it correctly", but it was considered as a sign of encouragement. Again, for the purpose of our project, we did not think this would falsify the results.

After the informant had sat down with us, we explained to them what they were expected to do in the project under explicit instructions in German (we did not tell them the purpose of project we were carrying out until he/she finished the task given. The informant was asked to translate the Dutch text into German by means of trying to decode the text in any possible ways, preferably word for word first, and then saying what the sentence meant in order to understand the whole text. While performing the task, the informant was required to think aloud as mentioned above; he/she was encouraged to verbalise his/her thoughts and opinions, everything he/she knew about the text as long as the whole text was tried to be understood. Although spontaneous loud thinking is normally rare in everyday life, students often engage in many other forms of verbalisation relevant to thinking. For example, a student is sometimes asked to explain verbally how to solve a problem or task in front of the class /other students.

After having followed our clear instructions, the informant was involved in our warm-up activity; a short and easy Dutch dialogue drawn from a Dutch textbook for beginners was used for this activity. The aim of this step was to acquaint the subject with the experimental situation and to accustom him/her to our recording task and everything necessary. The warm-up procedure explicitly trained the subject to conform to think-aloud instructions and during the warm-up, the informant might be interfered unless he/she did perform the task properly as expected.

After the warm-up activity, we began with the Dutch text as a daily news article from the Dutch website mentioned previously. As stated, our aim was to test if the subject could

decode authentic texts; therefore, we decided not to use a text in a textbook. Also, our project focused on receptive competence of reading comprehension, a reading text had to be used in the experiments, not a dialogue as this could not conform to our purpose. The informant was required to read the text in silence first for a short moment before starting with the first sentence and the whole text.

During the moment the subject looked at the text in silence, we wanted to make sure that the recorder was ready to perform the task properly and prepared note-taking equipments such as pens and pieces of papers. In some studies, the experimenter can also monitors the content of the verbalisations, and when necessary, asks the subject to explain what he means by something, and/or asks him to explain his solution processes. One may conjecture that the mere presence of the experimenter may induce some subjects to provide descriptions or explanations that they would omit in a non-social situation (cf. Ericsson and Simon 1983) Nevertheless, our project was carried out in a different way; we did not interfere the subject until he/she finished verbalising his/her thoughts and opinions.

After the subject finished decoding the text, we could refer back to the whole text in order to ask him/her what should be necessarily explained for our later data analysis in case the subject might, in some cases, forgot what he/she was expected to perform. For example, in some situations, some informants forgot to make any reference in what way they could understand what they said; they just translated into German without explanation. Therefore, our job was to go back to these situations so that we could ask them to explain the solutions; the question we used was, "How can you understand this word/sentence in German?" As importantly noted, we did not refer anything to or gave them any hints about English because we would like to realistically see how/ what factors could help them to decode the text. Finally, the informant was required to fill in the questionnaires we prepared (see *Appendix III*) in which some personal information about the subject was necessarily known such as the duration of the informant's English learning and the number of other foreign languages they might know since this possibly affected his/her ability to decode the text; all of this information was also important for our analysis.

In summary of our project procedures, clear instructions were given to the informants so that they could think aloud, verbalising spontaneously to explain how they came up with their translations/ understanding the text.

5 Analysis of the project results

5.1 Vocabulary

The results showed that all the informants, without our interference during the text decoding process, understood the text in spite of different levels of comprehension. Out of the twenty informants, some nearly decoded the whole text with full understanding. The rest partially comprehended without any help from the experimenters. However, the results seemed to change with the experimenters' hints after the informants' task performance; most of the informants understood the text better and they referred some words to English. All of the informants understood the text based on variously linguistic aspects such as vocabulary, structure and context. It is possible to say that vocabulary is quite important in decoding a reading text or in the receptive competence of reading comprehension. Psychologically, it is assumed   in second language acquisition for the adult learner that a hierarchy of cognitive control can be established which ranges from little cognitive control over language phonology to medium control of syntax/grammar to maximum control of vocabulary (cf. Marghrete Mondahl 2002). Therefore, when being asked to vocalise the meaning of the text in their mother-tongue, all the informants considered vocabulary to be a key factor in helping them to perform the task; they all referred to both English and German vocabulary equivalences as a contribution to their comprehension, besides syntactic structure and a little about context. The following table (3) will show how much English could help the informants read the text by showing the number of English equivalences in the text, which, without their presence in the text, may hinder the informants' understanding. In the column "Notes" below, some important information about the informants are noted down as they are necessarily included for the data analysis; other information about the informants can be seen in the questionnaires attached as *Appendix III* in this paper.

(3)

Informant Nr.	Nr. of words referred to English (Without help)	Additional Nr. of words referred to English (With help)	Total number	Notes
1	6	1 (zaterdag)	7	23; male; fell : E., 8 years, good; others: Lat., Sp: very good
2	5	2 (zaterdag; bloedde)	7	22; male; ffl: E., 16 years, very good; others: Sp.,basic
3	6	1 (bloedde)	7	26; male; ffl: E. 9 years, very good;

				others: Lat., basic
4	4	3 (zaterdag, woensdag, bloedde)	7	25; male; ffl: E., 7 years, very good; others: Fr., very good; Sp., basic
5	3	2 (zaterdag, woensdag)	5	25; male; ffl: E., 8 years, very good; others: Fr., basic; Sp., basic
6	5	3 (zei, neus, bloedde)	8	22; female; ffl: E., 9 years, very good; others: Fr., good; Rus., basic
7	3	4 (woensdag, hij, zaterdag, bloedde)	7	23; female; ffl: E., 10 years, basic; other: Rus., basic
8	5	2 (zaterdag, woensdag)	7	21; female; ffl: E., 9 years, very good; others: L., basic; Sp., basic
9	3	2 (zaterdag, neus)	5	19; male; ffl: L., 7 years, good; others: E., good; Sp., basic; Fr.
10	2	3 (zaterdag, woensdag, bloedde)	5	22; male; ffl: E., 13 years, good; others: Fr., basic; Sp., basic
11	1	3 (neus, woensdag, was)	4	25; female; ffl: E., 8 years, good; others: Sp., very good; Fr., basic
12	2	2 (zaterdag, woensdag)	4	25; male; ffl: E., 7 years, good; others: Lat., basic; Fr., basic
13	3		3	27; male; ffl: E., 9 years, very good; others: Fr., very good; Pg., very good; Sp., It.
14	3	2 (zaterdag, woensdag)	5	24; male; ffl: E., 11 years, good; others: Sp., basic; Fr., basic
15	3	4 (zaterdag, bloedde, neus, experts)	7	20; female; ffl: E., 7 years, very good; others: Fr., basic
16	2	3 (bloedde, neus, woensdag)	5	25; male; ffl: E., 10 years, very good; others: Fr., basic; Sp., basic
17	5	1 (neus)	6	24; male; fl: E., 10 years, good; others: Lat., basic; Turkish, basic
18	1	4 (bloedde, zaterdag, woensdag, neus)	5	23; male; ffl: E., 11 years, very good; others: Fr., good; Sp., basic
19	2	4 (bloedde, neus, zaterdag,	6	24; male; ffl: E., 13 years , basic; others: Fr., very good; Sp., good

		woensdag)		
20	3	2 (neus, zaterdag)	5	22;male; ffl: E., 14 years, good; others: Fr., basic; Sp., basic

In "Note Column": First number = age; ffl = first foreign language; E. = English; Fr. = French; It. = Italian; Sp. = Spanish; Lat. = Latin; Rus. = Russian; Pg. = Portuguese

The results in the recordings showed that all the informants involved in the project, in term of vocabulary understanding, decoded the words in the text without much difficulty and more interestingly they could, as seen in the table above, refer to English as an aid in helping them read the text although the name and aim of the project was not mentioned before their decoding processes and no interference was made despite some difficulties they might face and wanted us to help them, but the decoding processes went as intended without interruption. Various as they were in the way of decoding the text and different levels of comprehension, all the informants found out the sentence meaning largely based on the role of vocabulary. They were independently aware that some of the vocabulary in their reading task could share some similarities with English equivalences.

In other cases, they were able to decode the meanings of other words in the text, but merely saying what they meant in German without explanation. Therefore, after their task performance, we referred back to the text and gave them some hints to check how they could understand the words. For example, it was noticed that some words in the Dutch language could linguistically have some similarities to English words such as spelling, pronunciation and sound equivalences, we raised a question: How do you understand this/these word(s)? After a short moment of thinking, they gave us an answer as expected: the word(s) were related to English. For instance, *zaterdag* was interpreted as *Saturday*, not related to *samstag* in German; *bloedde* was *blood* and other words being explained in the same way.

5.2 Syntactic structure

Most of the informants did not refer much to the syntactic structure of the text with the exception of some phrases which enabled them to recognize their functions which led them to fully understand the exact meaning. In other words, they just identified and decoded the sentence in terms of deduction at phrasal level. For instance, Let us consider the following sentence in the text:

(4) Het Amerikaanse leger in Irak will het autopsieverslag van de gedode terroristenleider Aboe Moessab al-Zarkaqi zo mogelijk maandag al bekendmaken.

With the noun phrase *Het Amerikaanse leger*, some of the informants recognized immediately that *het* was an indefinite or definite article similar to that of English or German, which really helped them in conjecturing the meaning of the phrase, so *Amerikaanse leger* was effortlessly predicted as an American person or an organization without much thinking; in contrast, some guessed *het* was *heute* in German since they did not consider the syntactic function of this word and, therefore, had a wrong prediction. They did not know that if *het* were *heute in* German functioning as an adverb, then the phrase *Amerikaanse leger* might lack an article because of the appearance of the adjective *Amerikaanse*. Similarly, the prepositional phrase *in Irak* was easily recognized with *in* as a preposition since *Irak* was the name of a place, namely that of a country, Iraq. Consequently, the phase *Het Amerikaanse leger in Irak* was predicted and interpreted as a phrase functioning as the subject of the sentence. The same cases were employed by some of the informants in many places in the text, especially with those seriously taking into account the task they were performing although they sometimes unknowingly decoded the text without referring to the syntactic structure.

5.3 Context and background knowledge

The use of context which helps identify specific words is also one of the key factors although it does not sufficiently compensate for laborious basic decoding skills; it might enable the informants to gain better text comprehension. The results showed that many of the informants referred to the context in which the text was used when they predicted the meanings of some words.

One of the informants said that the news about Zarkawi was familiar with him, so he could make correct predictions about some words in the text in spite of his uncertainty about them; therefore, background knowledge also plays a vital role in the text comprehension as skilled readers often make use of context and prediction.

Out of the twenty informants, four of them also referred to the context when decoding correctly some words such as *bloedde* 'blood', *neus* 'nose', *zei* 'say', *was* 'was'. However, in this project, emphasis was placed on text decoding; with this level of experiment, the informants were only expected to decode the text or they might explain their comprehension

as a loud-thinking method which allowed them to freely verbalise their thoughts and feelings. Nonetheless, some of them still mentioned that the context aided them to predict the meaning of the text; in this case, word and sentence meaning were beyond our expectation. This is also good since these informants may develop their reading skills based on decoding skills and reading comprehension.

5.4 Understanding the whole text

5.4.1 In general

Generally all the twenty informants could decode all or partially the text; that is, they were able to show their certain receptive competence of reading comprehension of the text. Most of them did not indicate if the text was beyond their decoding ability, but some of them were struggling with the text, saying that there was some difficulty in vocabulary that could not be predicted in terms of English, German or other languages. Surprisingly enough, one informant decoded the text effortlessly from the beginning to the end without any help. He also referred to both German and English vocabulary as the main aid in the decoding processes. With some words being nearly similar to English, he confidently indicated that they were from English, which were easily recognised and which made a contribution to the reading comprehension; with words which were not easy to distinguish from English or German, he correctly translated into German without explanation. In this case he might think that they might be English or German, but the important factor here was that he could exactly understand their meanings. In short, no informants said that the reading product was too difficult to understand or that it was easy to totally comprehend the text. The reading task given was more or less decoded during the time of about twenty minutes.

5.4.2 Restraints on understanding the whole text.

As mentioned in the previous section, the informants could generally decode the text under our instructions as a think-aloud method. It seems to us that the given text requires more time-consuming for the informants to arrive at the level of thorough comprehension; this means that about fifteen minutes might not be sufficient for them to decode the text completely or to do a good translation. That is why some of the informants who really put more time (more than twenty minutes) and worked with more effort were able to do their jobs better, and the results reflected that the informants who ran very quickly with the text might not   complete their task successfully as required. There is certainty that to

comprehend a reading text requires many factors as language comprehension includes linguistic knowledge, background knowledge, making inferences, and the self-regulation of comprehension (or metacognition). However, the purpose of our project is to check informants' decoding skills of foreign languages when they already know one language of the same language group, and decoding skills are understood in terms of word and structure identification in the decoding text; therefore, should it be possible, language comprehension should be studied from a different perspective.

5.4.3 Informants' application of the Seven Sieves

From our observation, all the informants were only largely dependent on a number of words to decode the text given; as a matter of fact, they unknowingly applied the First or the Second Sieve in the EuroCom Method in which they exploited international vocabulary or similar words among the same language group. For example, there are many words in the text that can be easily recognized without much prediction as these words are either internationalisms or similar vocabulary among the same language group. The following table (5) will illustrate internationalisms in the text and the Dutch words related to English or German, i.e. the words from the languages of the same language group:

(5)

English	French	German	Dutch	Italian	Spanish	Portuguese
result	résultat	Resultat	resultaat	risultato	resultado	resultado
autopsie	autopsie	Autopsie	autopsie	analisi	autopsia	autópsia
terrorist	terroriste	Terrorsist	terrorist	terrorista	terrorista	terrorista
expert	expert	Experte	expert	esperto	experto	perito
military	miloitaire	Militär	militair	militare	military	military
direct	direct	direckt	direct	diretto	directo	direto
nose	nez	Nase	neus	naso	nariz	nariz
leader	chef	Führer	leider	capo	líder	líder
blood		Blut	bloed			
man		Mann	man			
release			relaas	rilascio		
general	géneral	general	general	general	general	geral

From the table (5) above, we can see that a lot of words are internationalisms. If the reader is already familiar with these words in his/her mother tongue or in a foreign language he/she has learnt, then he/she greatly benefits from this source of vocabulary because of their transparent similarities as it can be seen from one of the words in the table: *result* (English),

résultat (French), *Resultat* (German), *resultaat* (Dutch), *Risultato* (Italian), *resultado* (Spanish), *resultado* (Portuguese); furthermore, many other words are not internationalisms, but the reader probably recognises them due to the fact that they belong to the same language group such as *blood* (English), *Blut* (German), *bloed* (Dutch); although they do not look the same in spelling, but there are sound equivalences in such words. Therefore, if a German person knows the word *blood* in English together with his/her mother language word *Blut* and the context in which *bloed* occurs, it is then not very challenging for him/her to make a guess about the meaning of *bloed*; this was also tested in the informants' task during the interviews. For example, some informants who could not realise the word *bloed* during decoding processes interestingly recognised this word as being related to English rather than German with our help.

With the other Sieves of the EuroCom Method, all the informants scarcely applied implicitly or explicitly, except for syntactic structure such as noun phrases recognised by some of the informants, which is mentioned previously in the section 5.2. Some informants really saw the importance of syntactic structure in enabling them to gain receptive competence of reading comprehension, yet they did not take serious consideration about some other linguistic elements such as morphosyntactic elements or affixes; they only recognised the presence of phrasal structures such as noun phrase, prepositional phrase, etc., that were similar to English, which helped them out of difficulty when decoding the text. Because the given text was not long enough to construct all linguistic features as mentioned in the transfer techniques of EuroCom Method, the other techniques such as Eurofixes, Morphosyntatic elements were also rarely employed possibly because of several reasons, one of which was that they did not appear in the text, another being due to the informants; they did not pay attention whether such elements occurred in the text or not, so they decoded the text without being aware of the existence of them even though they existed. The results may help us to infer that readers who try to process daily news like that in the text may not probably take advantage of all the transfer techniques; they only unknowingly employ some of them instead. For this reason, there should be a conclusion that with learners of foreign languages, they may have more opportunities to take advantage of the knowledge of one language they already know to gain the receptive competence if they are taught to exploit the seven transfer techniques.

6 Discussions

6.1 Informants as readers

The authentic text that we constructed was intended for a think-aloud method in the project, so we tried to test on the informants so as to know if the informant could understandably read the text from another language (the Dutch language in this study) with knowledge of English. Nevertheless, with such a level of text difficulty, it caused some of the informants some challenges since a reading text might require many factors for the reader to understand its meaning. As mentioned previously, our intention was that we expected the informants involved in the project to use their decoding skills in order to construct the meaning of the text, and, as the results showed, most of the informants could decode the text, but not fully comprehend the meaning of the whole text because decoding skills (the ability to understand a reading text in terms of vocabulary and sentences) are different from text comprehension. Text comprehension requires many things for the reader; for instance, the reader must actively construct the meaning with the text; they not merely perceive the meaning in the text because reading comprehension also depends upon the reader's background knowledge, feelings and the needs of moment. As readers who just need to gather information from daily sources of news, it is quite sufficient for them to understand what is meant in the text content.

With lower-level reading texts, it may be more "digestive" for the informants since the usage of vocabulary and structure are more frequently used hence much easier. This was truly reflected in the warm-up dialogue drawn from a text book. After the warm-up activity was finished, it was from our observation that all the informants felt relaxed because of the fact that all of them could understand the dialogue effortlessly.

However, to evaluate that a text is easy or difficult also depends on the reader's knowledge background in order to associate with the context of the text which plays a vital role in decoding the text because the informants may use the context to make predictions about words or phrases they are not sure about. A text may be easy for one person but very complicated for another one and vice versa. The example of the word *bloed* in the text already illustrates this as stated in the previous section; as there were sound equivalences between the two words *bloed* in Dutch and *blood* in English and there was a context which gave a hint for decoding this word, most of the informants were able to decode this word with its exact meaning, yet the other informants found it impossible to decode it as the result

of without background knowledge and did not pay close attention to the context in which the word *bloed* occurred.

6.2 Informants as foreign language learners

If we had intended to experiment with the subjects as learners of foreign languages who were really taught to use more time and effort to decode the text, then the results might have been different; learners should be taught decoding skills such as the seven transfer techniques in order to decode another foreign language when they already know one language of the same language group. In this way, learners may be better in decoding skills and they may have the habit of decoding a foreign language whenever they are given a task, which benefits them much from taking advantage of already-gained knowledge. For instance, if the learner is taught that there may be some internationalisms in foreign language texts they are learning, they can be more aware of this and awareness of internationalisms enables the learner to decode texts more rapidly. In the text we used for the informants, not only English vocabulary could help the informants, but the recognition of the internationalisms as listed in the table 5 above was a great help for them to understand the text faster and more easily during the decoding processes. Similarly, another aspect of vocabulary, namely vocabulary similarity among languages of the same language group, should be closely paid attention to; usually the learner can identify this without knowing that they are semantically and phonetically similar due to the fact that they belong to the same language group. For this reason, they should be aware of taking advantage of this skill in order to develop reading comprehension.

Syntactic structure is also indispensable in strengthening the learner to decode a reading text since under some circumstances the meaning of a text is based largely on text mechanism; therefore, recognising some similarities of syntactic structure between two languages (English and Dutch in this project) is necessary for the learner. However, in this project, most of the informants did not pay much attention to some syntactic factors such as clauses in a sentence; as the result, the informants missed many chances in decoding the meaning of the sentence, especially *that-clauses* which were often present in such a text as can be seen in (1) and (2) exemplified previously.

Morphosyntactic elements are certainly necessary for the decoder's linguistic identification since they may help them in arriving at the differences between grammatical elements of the

two languages so that they can gain some experience in decoding other texts later. For example, noun plural endings are indispensable in predicting the meaning of the existing nouns in the text. German and English have a different system of noun plural endings whilst the Dutch language is a mixture of English and German, so once a learner has actually mastered this issue, he/she may correctly make some predictions about the meaning of the words in the text.

Spelling and pronunciation, though not much exploited in the given text, should be mastered by learners of foreign languages because this help them to decode unfamiliar and irregularly spelled words; spelling ability might contribute to word recognition and possibly to comprehension, proceeding developmentally from alphabetic spelling to within-word patterns, to spelling based on meaning.

Sound equivalence was observed to be employed by the informants in this project; therefore, they could have exploited more if they had been familiarised with such a transfer technique. As there is not exact pronunciation between the two languages due to the diachronic change of the sound system, some similarities still remain in sound production and meaning of the word. Therefore, if sound identification is considered, it may be advantageous for the informants when decoding a text of a same language group.

With the Eurofixes, the learner may find it more difficult to recognise them. Nevertheless, if these elements are instructed, some benefit is practically earned through the decoding processes; especially with the tendency of globalisation and multilingualism in Europe, the existence of linguistic affixes in Europe may make a contribution to language acquisition for Europeans as some exist as mentioned in 2.2.7 above.

Without acquiring the above transfer techniques, the learner may lack necessary skills in decoding a foreign text or it may further hinder or impair the learner's comprehension through gaining receptive competence of reading comprehension.

6.3 Language aptitude, time and effort in contributing to text decoding

It seems that language aptitude also makes a great contribution to the informants' decoding skills or reading comprehension. Out of the twenty informants we interviewed, the duration in which they learned English were sometimes different. Does duration of time to learn English play an important role in decoding the text? The answer does not seem to be

practically fixed as the personal data from the informants showed that some of them with a shorter period of time of English learning did perform the task of decoding better than those who spent much more time learning. Surprisingly, some of the informants, although they were not taught the Seven Sieves of EuroCom Method, were still able to unknowingly apply them usefully and hence decoded the text very successfully in terms of many aiding factors such as vocabulary, syntactic structure, context and linguistic knowledge. In contrast, some of them found the text quite difficult to decode it completely and they hardly refer implicitly anything to the seven transfer techniques in spite of the fact that some internationalisms and language vocabulary of the same language group exist in the text. Therefore, a conclusion may be drawn: decoding skills may also partially depend upon language aptitude; if it is not the case for some of the informants, another question is raised: Did all the informants spend enough time and effort on their task as required? During the decoding processes, we observed that some informants did not heartily perform their decoding tasks and the results show that their translated version into German was not better than those who were really involved in the project.

7. Conclusion

The number of informants we intended for our experiments may be not sufficient for a large-scale project; however, as stated at the beginning, it was a small-scale project which aimed at decoding ability of the informants. We hypothesised that they could use one foreign language they already know (English) to decode another foreign language of the same language group (Dutch). The results we gained from the informants showed that with certain knowledge of English, they (German students), to some extent, could decode an authentic text exerted from the daily news website in the Dutch language. Although the decoding results were varied, that is, the text was decoded in different ways, interpreted versions in German were intelligible and did not falsify the original meaning of the reading text in Dutch; this positively confirms our hypothesis.

However, to arrive at a good translated version and reading comprehension requires many factors, not simply needs to understand the text in terms of vocabulary and structure. Some other aspects such as linguistic knowledge, background knowledge, making inferences, and the self-regulation of comprehension must be gained so that the text can be fully understood. It is assumed that, for a reading text, there would be many elements that help the reader understand it besides some aspects such as vocabulary and syntactic structure. Although the

informants understand some words and sentences in the text, it is really difficult to fully comprehend the whole text, which constrains the informants in guessing the meaning of some words with the help of English as Mazza (2002: 206) states:

> Reading is a process that involves not only knowledge of linguistic elements, but also the entire knowledge of the reader. If you read a text and you know nothing about its content, you cannot understand its full meaning. You can perhaps understand some words, or the meaning of some words, but you cannot understand the meaning of the text if you have no knowledge about the subject dealt with.

These are constraints on the reader's ability to comprehend the text. Only decoding skills in this project are focused; therefore, should there be the time, other experiments will be carried out to check comprehension level of the informants.

From our observation, it is concluded that the informants' understanding the Dutch text also depends on the level of text difficulty. This could be illustrated by our warm-up activity as stated previously, so an authentic text at more difficult level is inevitably a little bit challenging for the informants, especially for those who did not really put their effort into their decoding task.

Whatever some informants found it slightly difficult to decode the text, the results showed that they could completely perform their decoding task with the method of loud thinking as required. If there had been more time on the decoding processes and if some of the informants had heartily done their decoding jobs, they could have been more successful; this leads to the fact that German learners can take great advantage of learning other Germanic languages with English as an aid when they already experience some decoding skills. It is possible that, thanks to the knowledge of both English and German, native speakers of German might do the decoding task more effortlessly than those who do not speak German as a mother tongue; this has not been experimented, but our observation and the results confirm partially about this statement as much of the Dutch vocabulary comes from two sources, English and German.

It is generally not easy to draw an exact conclusion that how many percent of English in the text aids native speakers of German in gaining receptive skills in other Germanic languages, it is possible to conclude that English practically helps them gain receptive competence such as some kind of reading skills (or decoding skills focused in this project) in the Dutch language. If comprehension techniques (the Seven Sieves) are taught for learners of foreign

languages, it would improve their decoding skills. If possible, some experiments on (the) other Germanic languages such as Denish, Norwegian will be carried out in the future to test the hypothesis that with English as an aid, learners (not only German but others as well) can decode texts in (the) other Germanic languages.

References

Braunmüller, Kurt (2002), "Variation in Receptive Bilingualism: What is Received and What is not Received", in: Kischel 2002: 226-235.

Delsing, Lars-Olof & Kärrlander, Eva (2002), "The Öresund Bridge Project. Swedish-Danish Intercomprehension", in: Kischel 2002: 255-264.

Ericsson, K. Anders & Simon, Herbert A., (1980), "Verbal Reports as Data". *Psychological Review* 87 (3): 215-251.

Ericsson, K. Anders & Simon, Herbert A., (1983), *Protocol Analysis: Verbal Reports as Data*, Boston: MIT Press.

Ericsson, K. Anders & Simon, Herbert A., (1987), "Verbal Reports on Thinking", in: Faerch & Kasper (ed.) 1987: 25-51.

Ericsson, K., & Simon, H. (1987). "Verbal reports on thinking", in: Faerch & Kasper (ed.) *Introspection in Second Language Research*: Clevedon, Avon.

Grosser, Cornelia (2002), "Linguistic Diversity and Multilingualism in Europe", in: Kischel 2002: 21-25.

Grzega, Joachim (2005), "The Role of English in Learning and Teaching European Intercomprehension Skills", *Journal for EurolinguistiX* 2: 1-18.

Kischel, Gerhard (ed.) (2002), *EuroCom – Mehresprachiges Europa durch Interkomprehesion in Sprachfamilien*, [Editiones EuroCom 9], Aachen: Shaker.

Klein, Horst G. & Stegmann Tilbert D. (2000), *EuroComRom – Die sieben Siebe: Romanische Sprachen sofort lessen können*, Aachen: Skaker Verlag.

Klein, Horst G. & Reissner, Christina (2002), *EuroComRom: Historische Grundlagen der romanischen Interkomprehension*, Aachen: Shaker Verlag.

McCann, Bill (2002), "Intercomprehension in Britain: Germanic, Romance or Celtic?", in: Kischel 2002: 200-2005.

Mazza, Elisabetta (2002), "Reading in Tertiary Language: German for Beginners with English Knowledge", in: Kischel 2002: 206-213.

Mondahl, Marghrete (2002), "Across the Gemanic Language Borders. Text Selection and the Learner in the Iglo-Project", in Kischel 2002: 246-253.

McCann, William J., Horst G. Klein & Tilbert D. Stegmann (2002), *EuroComRom - The Seven Sieves. How to Read All the Romance Languages Right Away*, Aachen: Shaker.

Nelde, Peter Hans (2002), "New Multilingualism, Perspectives for a European Language Policy", in: Kischel 2002: 26-37.

Appendix I

Maandag resultaat autopsie Zarkawi (1)

AMSTERDAM - Het Amerikaanse leger in Irak wil het autopsieverslag van de gedode terroristenleider Aboe Moessab al-Zarkawi zo mogelijk maandag al bekendmaken. Generaal-majoor William Caldwell zei zaterdag dat twee experts van het Amerikaanse leger in Irak zijn aangekomen om de exacte doodsoorzaak vast te stellen.

Zarkawi was afgelopen woensdag bij de luchtaanval op zijn schuilplaats in de omgeving van Bakoeba niet direct dood. Een Iraakse getuige zegt dat Amerikaanse militairen de gewonde Zarkawi een doek om zijn hoofd wikkelden en sloegen tot hij bloedde uit zijn neus. Het relaas van de man werd tot nog toe niet door anderen bevestigd. De Iraakse regering zegt dat Iraakse agenten als eersten ter plaatse waren, gevolgd door Amerikaanse militairen.

Maandag resultaat autopsie Zarkawi (2)

AMSTERDAM - Het Amerikaanse leger in Irak wil het autopsieverslag van de gedode terroristenleider Aboe Moessab al-Zarkawi zo mogelijk maandag al bekendmaken

Generaal-majoor William Caldwell zei zaterdag dat twee experts van het Amerikaanse leger in Irak zijn aangekomen om de exacte doodsoorzaak vast te stellen

Zarkawi was afgelopen woensdag bij de luchtaanval op zijn schuilplaats in de omgeving van Bakoeba niet direct dood.

Een Iraakse getuige zegt dat Amerikaanse militairen de gewonde Zarkawi een doek om zijn hoofd wikkelden en sloegen tot hij bloedde uit zijn neus

(1) Original version taken from
    http://www.telegraaf.nl/buitenland/Maandag_resultaat_autopsie_Zarkawi.html
(2) Formatted version for the project

Appendix II

Kun je een ogenblik wachten?

A: Is je vrouw thuis?

B: Ik weet het niet, Griet. Ik zal eens even gaan kijken. Kun je een ogenblik wachten?

A: Natuurlijk, Piet.

   - Een paar minuten later-

B: Sorry, ze is niet thuis. Ik hoor van mijn zoon dat zij met mijn dochter is gaan winkelen.

Appendix III

Liebe Kommilitonin, lieber Kommilitone!

Vielen Dank, dass Du an unserem Projekt, das wir im Rahmen eines sprachwissenschaftlichen Seminar durchführen, teilgenommen hast. Zum Schluss bitten wir Dich noch um einige persönliche Informationen, die uns bei der Auswertung helfen.

Allen Daten warden selbstwerständlich vertraulich behandelt.

---

1. Alter _____

2. Geschlecht   O Männlich
                     O Weiblich

3. Was studierst Du? _____

4. Bist Du in einer zweisprachigen Familie aufgewachsen?
O Ja
O Nein

5. Welche Sprache hast Du als erste Fremdsprache gelernt?
O Englisch
O Russisch
O Französisch
O Andere_____

6. Has Du die erste Fremdsprache in der Schule gelernt?
O Ja
O Nein

7. Wie lange hast Du die erste Fremdsprache gelernt?

_____

8. Wie gut sprichst Du die erste Fremdsprache?
O Grundkenntnisse (in Grammatik und Wortschatz).
O Gute Kenntnisse (Du kannst Dich gut mit einem Muttersprachler verständigen/unterhalten).
O Sehr gute Kenntnisse (Du kannst eine Tageszeitung in der Sprache lesen und verstehen und einem Fernsehprogramm in der Sprache mühelos folgen).

9. Welche anderen Sprache(n) hast Su gelernt? Wie gut sprichst Du diese Sprache(n)?
Sprache: _____ O Grundkenntnisse (in Grammatik und Wortschatz).
                     O Gute Kenntnisse (Du kannst Dich gut mit einem Muttersprachler verständigen/unterhalten).
                     O Sehr gute Kenntnisse (Du kannst eine Tageszeitung in der Sprache lesen und verstehen und einem Fernsehprogramm in der Sprache mühelos folgen).

Sprache:_____ O Grundkenntnisse (in Grammatik und Wortschatz).
                     O Gute Kenntnisse (Du kannst Dich gut mit einem Muttersprachler verständigen/unterhalten).
                     O Sehr gute Kenntnisse (Du kannst eine Tageszeitung in der Sprache lesen und verstehen und einem Fernsehprogramm in der Sprache mühelos folgen).