

# Lingua Receptiva

## Position paper on the European Commission's Skills Agenda

11 May 2016



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# Context

Through the New Skills for New Jobs initiative, the European Commission wants to (1) promote better anticipation of future skills needs, (2) develop better matching between skills and labour market needs and (3) bridge the gap between the worlds of education and work. With relatively little effort, the use of lingua receptiva can contribute significantly towards achieving these goals. Including it in the Skills Agenda as a “transversal skill” could:

- enhance the key competence “Communicating in and learning a foreign language”;
- refine the European Qualification Framework (EQF); and,
- strengthen the Europass.

# Terminology

“Lingua receptiva”<sup>1</sup> is a skill which allows people to communicate beyond the linguistic boundaries of their own language. It is the process whereby two people converse by speaking different languages, each using their comprehension of the other to understand what is being said to them. This avoids either having to switch to the other’s native tongue or to a more or less common lingua franca. In so doing, barriers to communication with speakers of other languages are broken down, since you are more precise and subtle when using a language you speak well, and you find it easier to explain things and make jokes. In short, it is when feel you most comfortable.

# Core message

Everyone, no matter what their level of education and literacy and no matter how many or few languages they speak, possesses the innate ability to use lingua receptiva. Yet it is a skill we have not paid enough attention to in the past, even though it is one successfully – if often subconsciously – practised in multilingual families and

<sup>1</sup> The academic literature also uses the terms intercomprehension, receptive multilingualism, polyglot dialogue and mutual intelligibility ([www.luistertaal.nl](http://www.luistertaal.nl); Rehbein, ten Thije & Verschik, 2013).

workplaces. Moreover, it is an ability which can be learnt actively, and which can be tested.

Much more than we may think, lingua receptiva has the potential to promote active citizenship, social cohesion, social and geographical mobility, literacy and international co-operation. It provides a relatively easy way for many more people to play a full part in a society which is becoming increasingly globalised, increasingly diverse and increasingly multilingual. It helps to dispel mistrust of speakers of other tongues, and it encourages greater respect for all languages and cultures including your own. In the longer term, it also enhances receptive and productive proficiency in multiple languages. Lingua receptiva lowers the threshold to learning another language, and takes away the fear of speaking it. Understanding a language paves the way to its active use. As well as “Communicating in and learning a foreign language”,<sup>2</sup> this can facilitate the acquisition of other key competences.

Within the Germanic, Romance and Slavic language families, the use of lingua receptiva is an easily-acquired and more or less natural skill. It is certainly possible with less closely related combinations too, such as French/German or Spanish/English, although these do require speakers to work harder on their receptive abilities. Still, it is far easier to learn to listen to a language than it is to learn to speak it. Moreover, this approach allows people to communicate without having to worry about making mistakes.

### Success stories

In the Euregio straddling the Dutch-German border, the King’s Commissioners from the Netherlands and the District Presidents on the German side use lingua receptiva at their regular meetings. Adopting English as a lingua franca is not a realistic option in this case, since the translation of official terminology would inevitably cause confusion (Beerens, 2010).

In talk shows on Dutch and Flemish radio<sup>3</sup> and television, foreign guests with sufficient receptive proficiency in the local language are regularly heard answering in English, French or German to questions put to them in Dutch. Scandinavian TV series like *The Bridge* often include compelling dialogues between Danish and Swedish characters, each talking their own language.

<sup>2</sup> One of the eight “key competences for lifelong learning” published in the *Official Journal of the European Union*, no. L 394, on 30 December 2006.

<sup>3</sup> A good recent example is an interview with Belgian Eurovision Song Contest entrant Sandra Kim on VRT Radio 1 in Flanders, broadcast on 3 May 2016. This was conducted very largely in lingua receptiva: Dutch on one side, French on the other.

## Exploiting the potential of lingua receptiva

Making use of lingua receptiva is an acquirable skill which is best first promoted in those domains where it has already gained a successful footing, such as cross-border communication and within multilingual families. In this kind of context, however, up until now it has usually been acquired informally. What we are urging is that it also be made part of formal learning strategies, and that it be incorporated into established qualification structures, like the [EQF](#) and [Europass](#).

As an additional learnable skill, lingua receptiva has the potential to revitalize traditional language education by disconnecting the link that is automatically made between receptive and productive proficiency. It is not necessary to develop new frameworks for this. Its inclusion within existing frameworks ([CEFR](#), [FREPA](#), [MAGICC](#)) will require little or no additional effort, since most already incorporate initiatives to that end. However, its applications do need to be made more explicit if it is to enrich those frameworks and to bring greater innovation to them. This means addressing a range of questions. For example, when does lingua receptiva work and when does it not? In conversation, how do you determine the other person's receptive ability? And how do you check that you really do understand each other? Because both speakers and listeners need to adapt to each other, learning the strategic use of lingua receptiva in different domains and contexts also means learning to make agreements about its acceptability and usage.

### Lingua receptiva training

Research shows that dedicated lingua receptiva training can achieve immediate results. The study in question looked at the Slavic language combination Czech/Croatian. Native speakers of Czech were given four hours of tuition in Croatian, focusing upon sound correspondences and lexical and grammatical differences with their own language, whilst a control group received none. Both groups were tested at the beginning and end of the exercise, with only those in the trained group showing significant improvement (Golubovic, 2016).

## Challenges for Europe

The use of lingua receptiva has the advantage that it stops multilingualism in Europe being reduced simply to speaking and learning English alongside one's own national language. As a skill, it acknowledges the linguistic diversity of Europe, including immigrant, regional, minority and non-European languages.

Encouraging lingua receptiva also has a positive effect in learning a standard (national) language. It makes inherent linguistic competence – in adults and children alike – a strong, recognized ability. This ability can be applied practically in learning different European national languages, both in education and at work. Lingua receptiva is not the solution to every language problem, but it does represent an important extension of our linguistic abilities, enabling us to function better in a multilingual Europe.

## Ambitions

Lingua receptiva is not a new concept. It exists already, and it is applied implicitly in a wide range of situations. In fact, people are often unaware that they are using it. Lingua receptiva is a learnable skill, but so far hardly any attention has been paid to its use in the workplace, in education or in everyday life. This position paper makes the following proposals:

- Enhance the key competence “Communicating in and learning a foreign language” with lingua receptiva, in order to better facilitate the acquisition of other key competences;
- Include the use of lingua receptiva in the Europass Language Passport and the level descriptors of the European Qualification Framework (EQF);
- Develop methods to teach and learn lingua receptiva as a practical skill in the workplace, in education (including adult education) and in training;
- Enhance existing language learning methods with new lingua receptiva techniques;
- Extend the learning of lingua receptiva strategies beyond education, into such domains as integration, healthcare, community work and international co-operation;
- Include lingua receptiva strategies in language evaluation and testing, incorporating them into existing qualification frameworks – including non-formal and informal testing structures as well as formal ones;
- Incorporate lingua receptiva into existing language proficiency frameworks (CEFR, FREPA, MAGICC), in an innovative manner;
- Regard lingua receptiva as an important social, cultural and economic instrument, creating room for its development at the regional, national and European levels;
- Make existing research funding schemes more accessible for initiatives related to lingua receptiva;
- Develop models so that international organisations can include lingua receptiva in their language policies for internal and external communications. This should deliver immediate economic benefits.

## Bridging at home, at school and at work

In migrant families, grandmothers and grandchildren often communicate in lingua receptiva. For instance, grandma speaks in Turkish and her granddaughter responds in Dutch. They understand one another perfectly, and so are able to discuss personal or complex topics quite easily. Much the same happens inside European institutions, international organizations and multinational institutions. In the workplace and at meetings, employers and staff use lingua receptiva as an alternative to English or another standard language (see the video documentary at [www.luistertaal.nl](http://www.luistertaal.nl)).

It is important that children learn at school when lingua receptiva is sufficient and when perfect command of a language is essential – when drawing up contracts, for example. In many cases, lingua receptiva is no substitute for translators and interpreters. Organisations and their personnel need to understand what strategy is sufficient, efficient or necessary in any given situation. They can set this out in an in-house language policy, so that everyone knows what to expect and is able to make the best use of the available expertise. Using lingua receptiva is a smart skill which prepares us for a future of greater cross-border interaction and growing multilingualism.

## References

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