

The Action-oriented Approach¹

The action-oriented approach (AoA) has sometimes been interpreted in terms of the use of Can Do descriptors for curriculum design. This is certainly an important aspect of it, as we will see below, but the AoA is rooted in a constructivist paradigm and takes task-based learning to a higher level where the class and the outside world are integrated in genuine, situated communicative practices. The approach is also known as action-based teaching (van Lier 2007), especially in North America, and is very similar to the more developed version of the task-based language teaching (TBLT) proposed by van den Branden and his colleagues (2006, 2009). Although “[T]he precise form that tasks in the classroom may take, and the dominance that they should have in the programme, is for users of the CEFR to decide” (Council of Europe 2020: 32), the approach is usually associated with scenarios for group task/projects.

The AoA is informed by CEFR descriptors since, as Bandura reminds us, “Action is motivated and directed by cognised (i.e., known and understood) goals rather than drawn by remote aims” (Bandura 1989: 1179), and descriptors can offer the focus and signposting necessary for this. The teaching and learning process is driven by action in this way at two levels, that of the curriculum/syllabus/course planning and that of the classroom enactment. In the planning process, this involves planning backwards from learners’ real-life communicative needs, ensuring alignment between planning, teaching and assessment, and using descriptors as signposts to communicate to users/learners in advance about the concrete “cognised” goals in relation to specific tasks embedded in the scenario.

Action orientation involves task/projects, usually in the form of scenarios that allow initiative, so learners can purposefully and strategically exert their agency, scenarios in which the learners have a defined mission to produce a proposal, artefact or other product under defined conditions and constraints (Bourguignon 2010) and which require co-construction of meaning through mediation in interaction. The way the CEFR Companion volume puts this is as follows:

Above all, the action-oriented approach implies purposeful, collaborative tasks in the classroom, the primary focus of which is not language. If the primary focus of a task is not language, then there must be some other product or outcome (such as planning an outing, making a poster, creating a blog, designing a festival or choosing a candidate). Descriptors can be used to help design such tasks and also to observe and, if desired, to (self-)assess the language use of learners during the task. (Council of Europe 2020: 30)

Action-oriented scenarios are usually developed through steps which involve the communicative activities of reception, production, interaction and the mediation of concepts and/or communication, inspired by CEFR descriptors. The final phase of the scenario is the collaborative production of an artefact or performance. Learners decide how to accomplish the task/project; teachers provide language input, resources and support to class, group or individuals as required. There is a focus on autonomy and authenticity of materials, topics and practices. Learners may well be encouraged to use sources in various languages and work in a plurilingual way – though this is not necessarily the case. Self-assessment and/or peer assessment of results with selected descriptors is quite common.

¹ This text is an extract from Piccardo, E. and North, B. (in press), “Enriching the scope of language education: The CEFR Companion Volume”, Chapter 1 in North B., Piccardo E., Goodier T., Fasoglio D., Margonis R. and Rüschoff B. (eds.), *Enriching 21st century language education: The CEFR companion volume in practice*, Council of Europe Publishing, Strasbourg.

The way in which the AoA goes beyond the communicative language teaching (CLT) as well as the related, weaker, more linguistic versions of TBLT (Nunan 1989, 2004; Skehan 1998; Willis 1996; Willis and Willis 2007) could perhaps be summarised as follows.

- Syllabus based on defined situational needs (as in the original version of CLT) that form the starting point for a backward design of the syllabus.
- Rejection of a linear syllabus based upon grammatical progression, as in many programmes in which teachers follow a textbook, which may have a “communicative veneer” but in practice still retains the traditional focus on grammar rather than on meaningful language use (Waters 2011).
- Needs-appropriate (possibly adapted) CEFR descriptors used to inform end objectives for the course and to help structure the syllabus, think up scenarios, design tasks, communicate aims to learners, assess outcomes and involve learners in that assessment process (North 2014; North et al. 2018).
- Organisation of learning through realistic, unifying scenarios, which form a module spanning several lessons in a project approach that – through a series of steps/subtasks (some teacher-led, some group work) – leads up to a final collaborative task (Bourguignon 2010; Piccardo 2014; Piccardo and North 2019).
- Centrality of learner agency, individually and collectively, in the sense described in the previous subsection: learners make decisions about their task/project and monitor how things are going.
- Collaborative culminating tasks that involve a small group developing a concrete product of some kind that is clearly defined in their “mission”, which includes conditions and constraints (Bourguignon 2010).
- Scenarios and culminating tasks (as opposed to enabling subtasks earlier within the scenario module) that are not language-oriented, not nice activities to practise particular language: the language follows the necessities of the task, the task does not follow the language as a fluency activity, as is the case in CLT and “weaker” variants of TBLT (Piccardo and North 2019).
- Authentic materials and processes that are not “dumbed down” but are scaffolded for learners according to their need for support.
- Acceptance by learners and teachers of the complexity and phases of chaos (in the sense of complexity theories) involved in genuine learning and creativity (Piccardo 2017).

The action-based approach thus takes into account “the cognitive, emotional and volitional resources and the full range of abilities specific to and applied by the individual as a social agent” (Council of Europe 2001: 9). If a plurilingual approach is adopted, it will also be necessary to specify “language policy” – when to “plurilanguage” (Lüdi 2014, 2016; Piccardo 2017, 2018), when to use one language or another – in relation to the different steps or phases of the task/project.

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