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**Digital agency in social practice and language education:  
The CEFR Companion volume and online interaction**

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**Background reading 1**

## Online, digital interaction and transaction<sup>1</sup>

Technology-mediated digital spaces have become 'normalised' in our societies (Bax 2003, 2011), radically transforming the way we produce, share and communicate remotely and indeed whole industries (e.g., music, gaming, news, movies: Luke, 2005). As a recent Council of Europe Recommendation to member states reminds us: "... the digital environment provides an unprecedented means for people to express themselves, to assemble and participate, and opens new opportunities to improve access and inclusion" (Council of Europe CM/Rec(2019)10). Today's learners are digital natives who have adopted technology as a sixth sense, for whom technology-mediated communication and online transactions have become so normal that they serve as the principal means through which they interact with the world (Hershatter and Epstein 2010). These new digital environments create spaces for the richness and creativity of plurilingual competence (Melo-Pfeifer 2015). One could even go so far as to say that online communication is inevitably plurilingual and pluricultural, with alternation between languages, code meshing and the integration of icons and symbols, and audio-visual codes and conventions (Séror, forthcoming). It is also directly action-oriented and a natural field for the development and use of mediation as a social practice.

'Online' interaction is a useful umbrella term which complements the literature on digital literacies. It integrates different interactional and transactional modalities, media and images, as well paralinguistic features of communication. The result is a dynamic, media-rich flexible and creative communication, frequently embedding live-links and asynchronous texts, images, audio and video clips that make the communication interactive over time (Ivkovic and Lotherington 2009; Lotherington and Jenson 2011; Pegrum 2010).

Online interaction:

- involves multiple remote social actors who can flexibly remix media and texts to support their message
- is fluid, often following a non-linear progression, with embedded media and hyperlinks to illustrate and/or emphasise, to support reader autonomy, and to add perceived credibility (Pegrum 2010).
- involves both interpersonal and human-machine interaction as well as multimodality
- is sometimes collaborative, sometimes discursive and sometimes ludic
- requires explicit clarity of the message
- can be synchronous, asynchronous, spoken and written, and is often a blend of these, implying the need to point out instances of synchronous and asynchronous interaction

Further development is constantly transforming views of language use and therefore expectations of language learning (Leppänen and Peuronen, 2012). These technological innovations (e.g. social media, YouTube, wikis, blogs) facilitate the ability to easily generate and share a rich variety of multimodal and multilingual user content, which brings new pedagogical possibilities, expanding the scope of genres and cultural artifacts, opportunities for creativity and for exploring complex identities (see for example Ollivier 2018). In addition, E-twinning projects provide platforms for action-oriented communication and collaborative project work across frontiers (see for example Cinganotto and Langé 2020). To summarise the advantages of technology-mediated interaction for action-oriented, plurilingual language learning, digital tools and digitally enhanced collaborative spaces provide affordances for: agency; authenticity; output orientation; action orientation; competence orientation; self-directed

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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 B. North, E. Piccardo, T. Goodier, D. Fasoglio, R. Margonis and B. Rüschoff (Eds.), *Enriching 21st century language education: The CEFR companion volume, examples from practice*, Council of Europe Publishing, Strasbourg.

(collaborative) knowledge construction; flexibility in participatory classroom practice and interaction; and flexibility in time & space. Digital technologies not only serve as sources of content but can also be used to create action-oriented learning spaces that instil genuine and purposeful authentic language use, collaboration and interaction (Rüschoff 2018).

The exploitation of digital tools and integration of digital interaction aligns well with the methodological message of the CEFR that language learning should be directed towards enabling learners to act in real-life situations. The CEFR descriptive scheme and the action-oriented approach put the co-construction of meaning (through interaction) at the centre of the learning and teaching process. Communicative language competence also remains central to online interaction, as does text literacy (Pegrum 2010), language and text underpinning multimodal digital literacies and socio-emotional literacies (Eshet-Alkalai 2004).

However, the online medium breaks the conventional boundaries between spoken and written, between verbal and non-verbal. Technologically-mediated interaction brings great advantages in terms of flexibility and multimodality, but at the same time it brings drawbacks. For example, misunderstandings can be expected to be more frequent and less easy to spot and correct than is the case in face-to-face communication. There is a need for repetition, for redundancy, for ensuring that a message is more explicit than might need to be the case face-to-face. The use of tone, stress and prosody to modulate meaning and paralinguistic signals of emotional reactions or irony are each more difficult to catch. Choice of registers is more fluid – but still possible to get wrong. These are all aspects easier to handle at a higher level of language proficiency, but user/learners at all levels of proficiency need to mediate communication with redundancy, and develop strategies to avoid and if necessary repair misunderstandings

The CEFR Companion Volume does not try to provide a framework for digital literacies, but focuses instead on the communicative language activity involved, applying the principles of the action-oriented approach to provide descriptors for different levels of interactive competences in online environments. As the Companion Volume puts it, the descriptors:

... “concern the multimodal activity typical of web use, including just checking or exchanging responses, spoken interaction and longer production in live link-ups, using chat (written spoken language), longer blogging or written contributions to discussion, and embedding other media.” (Council of Europe 2020: 25)

In developing the descriptors, the focus was put on the goal of the communication rather than on the modality (written or oral distinguishing between open-ended socially-driven interaction: ‘Conversation and discussion’), on the one hand, and interest-driven interaction: ‘Goal-oriented transactions and collaboration’ on the other. Core elements of the construct that informed the descriptors are:

- the need for more redundancy in messages;
- the need to check that the message has been correctly understood;
- the ability to reformulate in order to help comprehension, deal with misunderstanding;
- the ability to handle emotional reactions and to demonstrate inter-cultural sensitivity;
- the capacity to participate in sustained interaction with one or more interlocutors;
- the capacity to react to other people’s posts and embedded media and to compose posts and contributions for others to respond to;
- the ability to include symbols, images, and other codes to broaden or refine the content or scope of a message;
- the understanding of implications of synchronous (real time) and asynchronous interaction

Some of the elements used to distinguish between levels are: the ability to handle synchronous and collaborative group discourse; the ability to modulate register, to embed the affective, emotional and ironic dimension, to deal with linguistic and cultural misunderstandings, and the degree of autonomy shown.

The descriptors reflect a broader aim of the CEFR Companion Volume to enrich the tools and interactional spaces available to educators for an integrationist, situated approach to learning. They are intended to help educators to formulate aims and outcomes in learning, teaching and assessment, without being constrained by 'the standardised testing culture that functions as watchdog over flat literacy practices' (Lotherington and Jenson 2011).

## Online interaction<sup>2</sup>

Online communication is always mediated through a machine, which implies that it is unlikely ever to be exactly the same as face-to-face interaction. There are emergent properties of group interaction online that are almost impossible to capture in traditional competence scales focusing on the individual's behaviour in speech, signing or in writing. For instance, there is an availability of resources shared in real time. On the other hand, there may be misunderstandings that are not spotted (and corrected) immediately, as is often easier with face-to-face communication. Some requirements for successful communication are:

- the need for more redundancy in messages;
- the need to check that the message has been correctly understood;
- ability to reformulate in order to help comprehension and deal with misunderstandings;
- ability to handle emotional reactions.

## Online conversation and discussion

This scale focuses on conversation and discussion online as a multimodal phenomenon, with an emphasis on how interlocutors communicate online to handle both serious issues and social exchanges in an open-ended way. Key concepts operationalised in the scale include the following: f instances of simultaneous (real-time) and consecutive interaction, the latter allowing time to prepare a draft and/or consult aids;

- participation in sustained interaction with one or more interlocutors;
- composing posts and contributions for others to respond to;
- comments (for example, evaluative) on the posts, comments and contributions of others;
- reactions to embedded media;
- the ability to include symbols, images and other codes to make the message convey tone, stress and prosody, but also the affective/emotional side, irony, etc.

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2. Council of Europe. (2020), *Common European framework of reference for languages: Learning, teaching, assessment. Companion volume*, Council of Europe Publishing, Strasbourg, available at [www.coe.int/lang-cefr](http://www.coe.int/lang-cefr).

	Online conversation and discussion
C2	<p>Can express themselves with clarity and precision in real-time online discussion, adjusting language flexibly and sensitively to context, including emotional, allusive and joking usage.</p> <p>Can anticipate and deal effectively with possible misunderstandings (including cultural ones), communication issues and emotional reactions in an online discussion.</p> <p>Can easily and quickly adapt their register and style to suit different online environments, communication purposes and speech acts.</p>
C1	<p>Can engage in real-time online exchanges with several participants, understanding the communicative intentions and cultural implications of the various contributions.</p> <p>Can participate effectively in live, online professional or academic discussion, asking for and giving further clarification of complex, abstract issues as necessary.</p> <p>Can adapt their register according to the context of online interaction, moving from one register to the other within the same exchange if necessary.</p> <p>Can evaluate, restate and challenge arguments in professional or academic live online chat and discussion.</p>
B2	<p>Can engage in online exchanges, linking their contributions to previous ones in the thread, understanding cultural implications and reacting appropriately.</p> <p>Can participate actively in an online discussion, stating and responding to opinions on topics of interest at some length, provided contributors avoid unusual or complex language and allow time for responses.</p> <p>Can engage in online exchanges between several participants, effectively linking their contributions to previous ones in the thread, provided a moderator helps manage the discussion.</p> <p>Can recognise misunderstandings and disagreements that arise in an online interaction and deal with them, provided the interlocutor(s) are willing to co-operate.</p>
B1	<p>Can engage in real-time online exchanges with more than one participant, recognising the communicative intentions of each contributor, but may not understand details or implications without further explanation.</p> <p>Can post online accounts of social events, experiences and activities referring to embedded links and media and sharing personal feelings.</p> <p>Can post a comprehensible contribution in an online discussion on a familiar topic of interest, provided they can prepare the text beforehand and use online tools to fill gaps in language and check accuracy.</p> <p>Can make personal online postings about experiences, feelings and events and respond individually to the comments of others in some detail, though lexical limitations sometimes cause repetition and inappropriate formulation.</p>
A2	<p>Can introduce themselves and manage simple exchanges online, asking and answering questions and exchanging ideas on predictable everyday topics, provided enough time is allowed to formulate responses, and that they interact with one interlocutor at a time.</p> <p>Can make short descriptive online postings about everyday matters, social activities and feelings, with simple key details.</p> <p>Can comment on other people's online postings, provided they are written/signed in simple language, reacting to embedded media by expressing feelings of surprise, interest and indifference in a simple way.</p> <p>Can engage in basic social communication online (e.g. a simple message on a virtual card for special occasions, sharing news and making/confirming arrangements to meet).</p> <p>Can make brief positive or negative comments online about embedded links and media using a repertoire of basic language, though they will generally have to refer to an online translation tool and other resources.</p>

Online conversation and discussion	
A1	Can formulate very simple messages and personal online postings as a series of very short sentences about hobbies, likes/dislikes, etc., relying on the aid of a translation tool. Can use formulaic expressions and combinations of simple words/signs to post short positive and negative reactions to simple online postings and their embedded links and media, and can respond to further comments with standard expressions of thanks and apology.
Pre-A1	Can post simple online greetings, using basic formulaic expressions and emoticons. Can post online short simple statements about themselves (e.g. relationship status, nationality, occupation), provided they can select them from a menu and/or refer to an online translation tool.

### Goal-oriented online transactions and collaboration

This scale focuses on the potentially collaborative nature of online interaction and transactions that have specific goals, as a regular feature of contemporary life. A rigid separation between written and oral does not really apply to online transactions, where multimodality is increasingly a key feature and resource, and the descriptors therefore assume the exploitation of different online media and tools according to context. Key concepts operationalised in the scale include the following:

- purchasing goods and services online;
- engaging in transactions requiring negotiation of conditions, in a service as well as client role;
- participation in collaborative project work;
- dealing with communication problems.

Progression up the scale is characterised as follows: the move towards higher levels expands from basic transactions and information exchange at the A levels towards more sophisticated collaborative project work that is goal-oriented. This can be seen as a progression from filling in predictable online forms at Pre-A1, to solving various problems in order for the transaction to take place at the B levels, through to being able to participate in, and ultimately co-ordinate, group project work online at the C levels. One can also see such competences as progressing from reactive to proactive participation, and from simple to complex. Simple collaborative tasks appear at A2+, with a co-operative interlocutor, with small group project work from B1 and the ability to take a lead role in collaborative work from B2+. By C1, the user/learner can co-ordinate a group that is working on a project online, formulating and revising detailed instructions, evaluating proposals from team members, and providing clarifications in order to accomplish the shared tasks.

Goal-oriented online transactions and collaboration	
C2	Can resolve misunderstandings and deal effectively with frictions that arise during the collaborative process. Can provide guidance and add precision to the work of a group at the redrafting and editing stages of collaborative work.
C1	Can co-ordinate a group that is working on a project online, formulating and revising detailed instructions, evaluating proposals from team members, and providing clarifications in order to accomplish the shared tasks. Can deal with complex online transactions in a service role (e.g. applications with complicated requirements), adjusting language flexibly to manage discussions and negotiations. Can participate in complex projects requiring collaborative writing and redrafting as well as other forms of online collaboration, following and relaying instructions with precision in order to reach the goal.

	<b>Goal-oriented online transactions and collaboration</b>
<b>C1</b>	Can deal effectively with communication problems and cultural issues that arise in an online collaborative or transactional exchange by reformulating, clarifying and providing examples through media (visual, audio, graphic).
<b>B2</b>	<p>Can take a lead role in online collaborative work within their area(s) of expertise, keeping the group on task by reminding it of roles, responsibilities and deadlines in order to achieve established goals.</p> <p>Can engage in online collaborative or transactional exchanges within their area(s) of expertise that require negotiation of conditions and explanation of complicated details and special requirements.</p> <p>Can deal with misunderstandings and unexpected problems that arise in online collaborative or transactional exchanges by responding politely and appropriately in order to help resolve the issue.</p> <p>Can collaborate online with a group that is working on a project, justifying proposals, seeking clarification and playing a supportive role in order to accomplish shared tasks.</p>
<b>B1+</b>	<p>Can engage in online transactions that require an extended exchange of information, provided the interlocutor(s) avoid complex language and are willing to repeat and reformulate when necessary.</p> <p>Can interact online with a group that is working on a project, following straightforward instructions, seeking clarification and helping to accomplish the shared tasks.</p>
<b>B1</b>	<p>Can engage in online collaborative or transactional exchanges that require simple clarification or explanation of relevant details, such as registering for a course, tour or event, or applying for membership.</p> <p>Can interact online with a partner or small group working on a project, provided there are visual aids such as images, statistics and graphs to clarify more complex concepts.</p> <p>Can respond to instructions and ask questions or request clarifications in order to accomplish a shared task online.</p>
<b>A2</b>	<p>Can use formulaic language to respond to routine problems arising in online transactions (e.g. concerning availability of models and special offers, delivery dates, addresses).</p> <p>Can interact online with a supportive partner in a simple collaborative task, responding to basic instructions and seeking clarification, provided there are visual aids such as images, statistics or graphs to clarify the concepts involved.</p> <p>Can make simple online transactions (e.g. ordering goods or enrolling in a course) by filling in an online form or questionnaire, providing personal details and confirming acceptance of terms and conditions, declining extra services, etc.</p> <p>Can ask basic questions about the availability of a product or feature.</p> <p>Can respond to simple instructions and ask simple questions in order to accomplish a shared task online with the help of a supportive interlocutor.</p>
<b>A1</b>	Can complete a very simple online purchase or application, providing basic personal information (e.g. name, e-mail or telephone number).
<b>Pre-A1</b>	Can make selections (e.g. choosing a product, size, colour) in a simple online purchase or application form, provided there is visual support.

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