

THE CEFR COMPANION VOLUME

A key resource for inclusive plurilingual education

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Developing meaningful tasks for teaching, learning and
assessment with the Action-oriented Approach

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Background reading

To be read before or after the webinar.

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 cognized² goals rather than drawn by remote aims” (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, using descriptors as ‘signposts’ to communicate to users/learners in advance about the concrete “cognized” goals in relation to specific tasks embedded in the scenario. Planning, enactment in the classroom and assessment should be aligned into a transparent, coherent and dynamic system in this way.

At the level of enactment in the class, action-orientation involves task/projects, usually in the form of scenarios that allow initiative, so learners can purposefully and strategically exert their agency, 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 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 B. North, E. Piccardo, T. Goodier, D. Fasoglio, R. Margonis and B. Rüschoff (Eds.), *Enriching 21st century language education: The CEFR companion volume, in practice*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing.

² Cognized means known and understood.

The way in which the AoA, which 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:

- 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 programs 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)
- Organization 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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2.2. Implementing the Action-oriented Approach³

The CEFR sets out to be comprehensive, in the sense that it is possible to find the main approaches to language education in it, and neutral, in the sense that it raises questions rather than answering them and does not prescribe any particular pedagogic approach. There is, for example, no suggestion that one should stop teaching grammar or literature. There is no “right answer” given to the question of how best to assess a learner’s progress. Nevertheless, the CEFR takes an innovative stance in seeing learners as language users and social agents, and thus seeing language as a vehicle for communication rather than as a subject to study. In so doing, it proposes an analysis of learners’ needs and the use of “can do” descriptors and communicative tasks, on which there is a whole chapter: CEFR 2001 Chapter 7.

The methodological message of the CEFR is that language learning should be directed towards enabling learners to act in real-life situations, expressing themselves and accomplishing tasks of different natures. Thus, the criterion suggested for assessment is communicative ability in real life, in relation to a continuum of ability (Levels A1-C2). This is the original and fundamental meaning of “criterion” in the expression “criterion-referenced assessment”. Descriptors from CEFR 2001 Chapters 4 and 5 provide a basis for the transparent definition of curriculum aims and of standards and criteria for assessment, with Chapter 4 focusing on activities (“the what”) and Chapter 5 focusing on competences (“the how”). This is not educationally neutral. It implies that the teaching and learning process is driven by action, that it is action-oriented. It also clearly suggests planning backwards from learners’ real-life communicative needs, with consequent alignment between curriculum, teaching and assessment.

At the classroom level, there are several implications of implementing the action-oriented approach. Seeing learners as social agents implies involving them in the learning process, possibly with descriptors as a means of communication. It also implies recognising the social nature of language learning and language use, namely the interaction between the social and the individual in the process of learning. Seeing learners as language users implies extensive use of the target language in the classroom – learning to use the language rather than just learning about the language (as a subject). Seeing learners as plurilingual, pluricultural beings means allowing them to use all their linguistic resources when necessary, encouraging them to see similarities and regularities as well as differences between languages and cultures. 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.

Both 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. This has clear implications for the classroom. At times, this interaction will be between teacher and learner(s), but

³ Extract from: Council of Europe. (2020), *Common European framework of reference for languages: Learning, teaching, assessment. Companion volume*, Council of Europe Publishing, Strasbourg, pp. 29-30. <https://rm.coe.int/common-european-framework-of-reference-for-languages-learning-teaching/16809ea0d4>

at times, it will be of a collaborative nature, between learners themselves. The precise balance between teacher-centred instruction and such collaborative interaction between learners in small groups is likely to reflect the context, the pedagogic tradition in that context and the proficiency level of the learners concerned. In the reality of today's increasingly diverse societies, the construction of meaning may take place across languages and draw upon user/learners' plurilingual and pluricultural repertoires.