

# THE CEFR COMPANION VOLUME AND THE ACTION-ORIENTED APPROACH

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## INTRODUCTION

This chapter is organized in two parts: Sections 1-3 concern the *CEFR Companion Volume*, describing briefly what it is, what it contains, the paradigm shift it seeks to foster, and how it was developed. The second part, sections 4-6, goes into more detail on the action-oriented approach, giving an overview in section 4, an explanation of the crucial concept of the social agent in section 5, and a discussion of the three key aspects of the approach – affordances, agency and collaborative tasks – in section 6.

### 1. THE CEFR AND THE CEFR COMPANION VOLUME

Following the publication of the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001) after several years of consultation and piloting with the provisional version (Council of Europe, 1996), the Council of Europe frequently received requests from member states to update and/or further flesh out the descriptors – especially “for mediation, reactions to literature and online interaction, to produce versions for young learners and for signing competences, and to develop more detailed coverage in the descriptors for A1 and C levels”(Council of Europe, 2020, English: 13, Italian: 9). In addition, there were “many comments that the 2001 edition was a very complex document that many language professionals found difficult to access” (Council of Europe, 2020, English: 21, Italian: 20). A decision was therefore taken in May 2013 to update and extend the descriptors and, following the 2014-2016 research project to do so, to provide a “new, user-friendly version” (*ibid.*) with “[t]he key aspects of the CEFR vision [...] explained in Chapter 2, which elaborates the key notions of the CEFR as a vehicle for promoting quality in second/foreign language teaching and learning as well as in plurilingual and intercultural education”(*ibid.*).

The Council of Europe makes clear that, whilst researchers will wish to continue to consult the 2001 edition, whose conceptual framework remains valid and which remains on the CEFR website ([www.coe.int/lang-cefr](http://www.coe.int/lang-cefr)), “[f]or pedagogical use of the CEFR for learning, teaching and assessment, teachers and teacher educators will find it easier to access the *CEFR Companion volume* as the updated framework” (Council of Europe, 2020, English/Italian: ii). In addition, it is clearly stated that the updated and extended 2020 edition of the illustrative descriptors “replaces the 2001 version of them” (Council of Europe, 2020, English: 21, Italian: 20).

Here one should re-emphasize that the CEFR descriptors are illustrative in two senses of the term: firstly, they are *examples*; no one is obliged to use them, and they should be used with adaptation and/or further elaboration appropriate to the context. Secondly, they do not attempt to describe everything systematically at every level – they give examples of language behaviour that appears to be salient in the category concerned at

the level concerned. This point is often misunderstood: if all relevant aspects were described at each level (if that were even possible), the result would be pages and pages of descriptors for each category – and the effect would be that of a straightjacket. The national delegates at the intergovernmental Symposium that recommended the development of the CEFR and Portfolio were very clear on this point: they preferred the ‘salient feature’ approach to a ‘systematic’ approach (Council of Europe, 1992; North, 1992). It is this open nature of the CEFR descriptors – demonstrated, for example, by the inclusion of CEFR-based descriptors from a variety of sources in the 2020 update – that ensures their acceptance in what, after all, is a *reference* system, not a standard to be ‘applied.’ Delegates at the 2007 intergovernmental Symposium to take stock of CEFR implementation were clear that, though the integrity of the common reference levels should be respected because this facilitates networking and synergies in a ‘shared space,’ it is the CEFR’s potential for stimulating reform in language education that was of paramount interest (Council of Europe, 2007). The CEFR, and *CEFR Companion Volume*, provide a heuristic for this process of reflection on current practice.

The CEFR 2001 had pioneered a new vision in language education with:

- a) the provision of the common reference levels and illustrative descriptor scales to facilitate the alignment of curriculum planning, teaching and assessment (= constructive alignment: Biggs, 2003);
- b) the presentation of four modes of communication: reception, production, interaction, mediation to replace the four skills (now presented under reception and production) – which had long been considered inadequate to describe communication (see e.g., Alderson and Urquhart, 1984; Breen, Candlin, 1980; Brumfit, 1984);
- c) the concept of the user/learner as social agent mobilising and further developing competences and strategies in action;
- d) an action-oriented approach to classroom pedagogy focused on tasks – to which a whole CEFR chapter (Chapter 7) was devoted; and last but not least,
- e) plurilingual and pluricultural competence.

However, the CEFR vision was somewhat ahead of its time and, for a variety of reasons, initially many of these innovative concepts were largely misunderstood (e.g., the action-oriented approach; the move from four skills to four modes of communication), or largely ignored (e.g. mediation, plurilingualism). This may well have been because of the immediate practical utility of the levels and descriptors, which tended to dominate, as Coste complained (2007). The levels and descriptors quickly gained popularity with member states, associations and institutions, probably because they appeared at precisely the moment in which people were looking for a solution of this kind (Goullier, 2007). As Porto (2012) reports and Byram and Parmenter (2012) confirm, however, it was the fact that the CEFR provided such practical tools *as well as* a progressive, educational vision of interculturality that made it appealing to education ministries.

As interviews with CEFR pioneers in Switzerland and Canada suggest (Piccardo, North, Maldina, 2017, 2019) it may not be an exaggeration to say that there appeared to be a tendency to engage with aspects of the CEFR vision in a particular order: first the levels, then the descriptors, then tasks, then the action-oriented approach, then mediation, and finally plurilingualism. Certainly in the 2000s the main focus of CEFR use appears to have concerned levels and assessment, with a draft CEFR manual for aligning examinations (Council of Europe, 2003), finalized after piloting (Council of Europe, 2009) through a series of case studies (Martyniuk, 2010), with the addition of a second manual devoted to designing CEFR-based examinations (ALTE, 2011).

This phase of CEFR implementation did also have a positive pedagogical impact insofar as it led to the revision of language examinations for many languages, including the DELF/DALF for French, the DELE for Spanish, CILS and CELI for Italian, and the Trinity suite for English. A large number of versions of the European Language Portfolio were also produced in the 2000s, following the Swiss prototype (Schneider, North, Koch, 2000) and development guide (Schneider, Lenz, 2001). The Portfolio introduced teachers to using descriptors for setting learning objectives and for self-assessment, which, together with the new CEFR-based exams, facilitated CEFR-inspired innovation in classroom practices in many countries (see, e.g., Byram, Parmenter, 2012; Figueras, 2013; Piccardo, 2006, 2020; Takala, 2013). However, the focus on exams and checklists of descriptors at one level tended to reinforce the interpretation of the CEFR as primarily a series of proficiency levels.

With regard to other concepts in the CEFR, the action-oriented approach was clearly distinguished from the communicative approach by many Francophone scholars (e.g., Bourguignon 2006, 2010; Puren, 2002, 2009; Richer, 2009, 2012), due to the focus on agency, self-regulation, and the mobilization and further development of competences and strategies through the completion of a task. However, in the English-speaking world the CEFR was generally interpreted as a tool to help give rigour to curricula for the communicative approach through its ‘can do’ descriptors. The concept of the social agent – the core of the action-oriented approach – received little or no echo in the professional literature written in English. In the period before and immediately after the publication of the CEFR in 2001, the buzz word was ‘autonomy’ rather than agency, with a very reductive not to say trivial concept of autonomy (see Schmenk, 2005, 2008 for a discussion).

Mediation in the more limited sense of ‘mediating a text’ and ‘acting as an intermediary’ suggested by the presentation in the CEFR 2001 was, by contrast, elaborated in Profile Deutch (Glaboniat *et al.*, 2005) and also adopted from around 2003 in both Germany (Kolb, 2016; Reiman, Rössler, 2013) and Greece (Dendrinos 2006, 2013; Stathopoulou, 2015). However, as Kolb explains, “...it is sometimes the case that the contextualisation with a particular addressee is considerably underspecified [so that the context given] can be seen as above all an excuse for a summary” (Kolb 2016: 52 my translation), and tasks for acting as an intermediary are often presented as individual writing tasks, often gapped dialogues, which “... seems to make little sense, even if this is due to the constraints of a test situation” (Kolb: 2016: 50, authors’ translation).

As regards plurilingualism, as John Trim, the director of the CEFR project, lamented at the 2007 Symposium:

Most users of the CEFR have applied it only to a single language but its descriptive apparatus for communicative action and competences, together with the ‘can-do’ descriptors of levels of competence, are a good basis for a plurilinguistic approach to language across the curriculum, which awaits development (Trim, 2007: 51).

Apart from some pioneering plurilingual teaching, mainly in France (e.g., Auger, 2005), one had to wait for the so-called pluri-/multilingual turn in 2012-2015 (Candelier *et al.*, 2012; Conteh, Meier, 2014; May, 2014; Piccardo, Puozzo, 2015; Taylor, Snodden, 2013) before the concept really began to be noticed academically. Even then the distinction between plurilingualism and multilingualism was often ignored (see, e.g., the discussion in Piccardo, Germain-Rutherford, Lawrence, 2022a). However, recently: the number of references per year in Google Scholar for plurilingualism has been rising year on year,

while those for multilingualism are declining quite dramatically; a *Handbook of Plurilingual Language Education* has just been published (Piccardo, Germain-Rutherford, Lawrence, 2022b); and a range of plurilingual pedagogies around the world have recently been documented (see, e.g., Choi, Ollerhead, 2018; Lau, Van Viegen, 2020; Piccardo, Lawrence, Germain-Rutherford, Galante, 2022).

## 2. WHAT THE COMPANION VOLUME CONTAINS

Put briefly, the *Companion Volume* updates and completes the CEFR with new scales of descriptors, makes explicit and develops certain CEFR constructs, particularly mediation, phonology and plurilingualism, and refines the CEFR vision of the action-oriented approach. It emphasizes an integrated view of language activities, rather than four isolated skills, which – as even language testers (e.g. Bachman, Palmer, 2010) are now starting to realize – are simply unrealistic. The CEFR tries to facilitate the current paradigm shift from the traditional, Cartesian, perspective of dissection (e.g., the four skills, languages kept strictly separate) to an integrationist (Harris, 1981; Orman, 2013), ecological (van Lier, 2004, 2007), complex (Larsen-Freeman, 2017; Larsen-Freeman, Todeva, 2022) perspective.

Chapter 2 in the *Companion Volume* explains the key aspects of the CEFR vision for teaching and learning in a short, illustrated text that may be of considerable use in teacher education. This text explains the main aims of the CEFR and outlines the CEFR model and descriptive scheme, focusing on plurilingualism, the action-oriented approach and mediation. With regard to mediation, the CEFR view of the user/learner as a social agent gives a central role in its model to mediation (Piccardo, 2012), which was a key factor in the development of the new descriptors. The text (*Companion Volume* chapter 2) also discusses misunderstandings in relation to the common reference levels and the descriptors – the focus mentioned before on levels as holistic concepts, rather than using the multidimensional set of categories defined for each level as a tool to create profiles of the needs of certain groups and profiles of the differing proficiency of individuals.

As mentioned above, the *Companion Volume* contains the complete set of illustrative descriptors in chapters 3 to 6, including descriptors specifically for signing competences (chapter 6) organized under linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic competence, like those for communicative language competences (chapter 5). In addition, every scale of descriptors now has a short rationale that explains the focus of the scale and the way it develops up the levels. Descriptors for communicative language activities (chapter 3) have been considerably expanded for reception and for both A1 – with the addition of a ‘Pre-A1’ – and the C-levels. Descriptors for plurilingual and pluricultural competence are included in chapter 4, presented after mediation at the end of chapter 3, in order to emphasize the close link between these two aspects, discussed by Piccardo (this volume).

As well as the new descriptor scales for mediation, online interaction and plurilingual/pluricultural competence, there are also three other new scales, one for each of reception, production and interaction, namely ‘Reading as a leisure activity,’ ‘Giving information,’ and ‘Using telecommunications’ respectively. In chapter 5, there is a new scale for phonological control (see Piccardo, 2016 for the research), with subscales for sound articulation and for prosody (= stress and intonation). This new phonology scale avoids native-speaker norms, focusing on intelligibility and recognizing the fact that many speakers at C2 retain a noticeable accent. Separately available on the CEFR website are

compilations of CEFR-based descriptors for younger learners (Szabo, Goodier, 2018), for the age groups 7-10<sup>1</sup> and 11-15<sup>2</sup>.

Finally the *Companion Volume* offers a number of appendices: Appendices 1-4 provide updated versions of the summary scales in CEFR Tables 1-3, plus a writing assessment grid previously presented in Table C4 in the Manual for relating examination with the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2009); Appendix 5 then gives example of contexts for the four CEFR domains: public, personal, occupational, educational – for each of the descriptors for online interaction and for mediation; Appendices 6-9 then relate to the development project, with Appendix 10 listing relevant resources.

### 3. THE NEW CEFR DESCRIPTORS

The development and validation of the descriptors is summarized briefly in Appendix 6 of the *Companion Volume* and described in detail in North and Piccardo (2016, 2019), so will be mentioned only briefly here. The project took place in three broad stages that overlapped slightly: firstly, the updating of the 2001 scales, principally at the C levels and A1 with the addition of Pre-A1 (2014-2015); secondly the development of descriptors for mediation and related areas (2015-2016); and finally production of descriptors for signing competences (2017-2019). The project team was structured in the concentric circles typical of communities of practice (Wenger-Trayner, Wenger-Trayner, 2015). There was a small Authoring Group of four, working interactively through email and regular meetings, with a Sounding Board of another four experts who reacted with comments and suggestions, plus a third tier of 20-30 consultants invited to three meetings in July 2014, 2015, and 2016 respectively. Finally, a network of 140 institutions (rising to 189 later in 2015) were organized into five divisions of approximately 30 institutes according to the associations they were recruited through<sup>3</sup>. These institutions, each with a designated coordinator, carried out three phases of validation activities between February to December 2015. The first two validation activities were undertaken in pairs in face-to-face workshops, whilst the third was an individual task, with an optional workshop undertaken by some of the institutes.

In addition, immediately after these three 2015 phases, in early 2016, there were two sub-projects: a phase of further validation of descriptors for plurilingual and pluricultural competence (chapter 4 in the *Companion Volume*, described in North, Piccardo 2016), plus the development of a new scale for phonological control, described by Piccardo (2016), to replace that from 2001, which had always been recognized as the weakest of the 2001 scales (North 2000).

The three main phases of the project emulated the phases of the 1994-1996 Swiss project that had produced the original CEFR/ELP prototype descriptors (North, 1995, 1996, 2000; North, Schneider, 2000; Schneider, North, 2000), but on a larger scale. For each validation phase, the draft descriptors were put onto overlapping questionnaires that were distributed evenly around the five divisions of institutes, with detailed instructions for the coordinator and for the participants. In the Phase I workshops (1,000 participants),

<sup>1</sup> <https://rm.coe.int/collated-representative-samples-descriptors-young-learners-volume-1-ag/16808b1688>

<sup>2</sup> <https://rm.coe.int/collated-representative-samples-descriptors-young-learners-volume-2-ag/16808b1689>

<sup>3</sup> 1. Eaquals ([www.Eaquals.org](http://www.Eaquals.org)); 2. CercleS ([www.cercles.org](http://www.cercles.org)), 3. Ealta ([www.ealta.eu.org](http://www.ealta.eu.org)); 4. from German and American universities (especially members of UNICert: <http://www.unicert-online.org>); and 5. an international group.

the focus was on whether the pairs of participants could identify the category of each descriptor, as well as evaluating it for clarity, pedagogical usefulness and relation to real-world language, and, if they wished, suggesting improvements to formulations. In the Phase II workshops (1300 participants), after some familiarization activities suggested by the CEFR alignment manual (Council of Europe, 2009), pairs first discussed the level of the descriptors and then entered their individual decisions on the questionnaires. Phase III (3500 usable responses) was the main data collection for calibration, with a task simulating the one used in the 1994-1996 Swiss project (North 1995, 1996, 2000; North, Schneider, 1998; Schneider, North, 2000). Participants were asked to think of a person they knew well (partner, friend – themselves) and rate the extent to which that person could do what was described in the descriptor, using the same 0-4 rating scale that had been used in the Swiss project. Data from Phases I and II were analyzed qualitatively whilst those from Phases II & III were analyzed quantitatively with the Rasch scaling model. The scale value for each descriptor was then equated to the mathematical scale from the Swiss project, which underlies the CEFR levels.

Finally, in a separate project, to which the current author acted as scientific adviser, descriptors scales for different aspects of signing competences (chapter 6 in the *Companion Volume*) were developed in two phases: for productive signing (2017-2018) and for receptive competence in interpreting signing by others (2018-2019) (Keller, 2019; Keller *et al.*, 2017, 2018). In a final step, *all* the CEFR descriptors were lightly edited where necessary in order to make them modality-inclusive (i.e. to apply also to sign languages<sup>4</sup>) and – at least for English – gender neutral.

The resulting set of CEFR descriptors, presented in chapters 3-6 of the *Companion Volume*, show a really remarkable consistency with the content of the 2001 CEFR descriptors, expanding and complementing them. This is the case with the updating of the 2001 scales, with the new descriptor scales for mediation and related areas, and with those for signing competences. There is no impact on the CEFR levels, which have not changed. For mediation and related areas, this consistency with 2001 is explained with an example at the end of the project report (North, Piccardo, 2016): The new scales ‘Building on pluricultural repertoire’ and ‘Facilitating pluricultural space’ are compared to the 2001 scale for ‘Sociolinguistic appropriateness’. The consistency is due to the fact that, apart from the technical success in linking the different scales together, an action-oriented approach is adopted for all the descriptors: it is the way someone at a particular level can reasonably be expected to be able to *act* that is described.

Not everyone agrees with the adoption of an action-oriented approach to plurilingual/pluricultural competence – and the consequent association of aspects of such competence to successive language proficiency levels like A2 and B1 (see, e.g., Cavalli, this volume; Coste 2021a, 2021b). Coste has never been particularly keen on descriptors for the common reference levels (e.g., Coste, 2007) and has now extended a disapproval of the descriptors for plurilingualism/pluriculturalism (e.g., Coste 2021a, 2021b) to the descriptors of mediation as well (*ibid.*), even though many of them appear in draft form in Coste and Cavalli (2015). Here one should mention that, quite apart from the scientific basis of the approach (described above), the resulting descriptors met with overwhelming approval in the 2017-2018 consultation with institutions, experts and Council of Europe member states. Indeed, with member states, those for plurilingualism/pluriculturalism were the most popular. In the development project we had taken the view, with Auger

<sup>4</sup> The approach taken here was inspired by that taken in the ECML ProSIGN project, whose project team contributed to the process. All CEFR descriptors have been recorded in International Sign, but are not yet at the time of writing available on the CEFR website.

and Louis (2009), that pluri/inter-cultural competence can best be developed with a problem-solving, action-oriented approach, rather than through taxonomies of elements. A small number of descriptors describing aspects that are potentially salient when learners are A2, B1 or B2 provides teachers who have classes at those levels with specific aims and some inspiration for feasible activities that may encourage plurilingualism. At the same time these descriptors provide the kind of concrete goals that are an effective way to promote learner *agency* (Bandura, 1989, 2001). Finally, the provision of such descriptors at successive levels underlines the fact that plurilingual and pluricultural competence is a dynamic and developing competence (see *Companion Volume*, Section 2.3), not a static mindset.

#### 4. AN OVERVIEW OF THE ACTION-ORIENTED APPROACH

As mentioned in Section 1, whilst the action-oriented approach was largely seen as a new paradigm in France after the publication of the CEFR 2001, it was largely ignored in the English-speaking world, being seen by many as simply the addition of ‘can do’ descriptors to the communicative approach. Now that the *CEFR Companion Volume* has made the action-oriented approach more explicit, a rather sterile debate has taken place (in Little, Figueras, 2022) as to whether the action-oriented approach is further developed in the *Companion Volume*, or whether everything was already there in 2001. The fact of the matter is that the principles of the action-oriented approach were there in the CEFR 2001, but with the tendency to focus on the CEFR levels and descriptors, it was overlooked by most users. There were of course exceptions, especially in France (e.g. Bourguignon, 2006, 2010; Puren, 2002, 2009; Piccardo, 2010, 2014) and in the 20 years following the first appearance of the CEFR in the late 1990s, experimentation by practitioners – influenced by socio-constructivist/-cultural, collaborative and ecological approaches to language education – further developed task-based language teaching (TBLT: the “strong version” of the communicative approach: Larsen Freeman and Andersen, 2011: 150), often in the context of teaching adults (e.g. Van den Branden, 2006).

The way the *CEFR Companion Volume* introduces the action-oriented approach is as follows:

The CEFR’s action-oriented approach represents a shift away from syllabuses based on a linear progression through language structures, or a pre-determined set of notions and functions, towards syllabuses based on needs analysis, oriented towards real-life tasks and constructed around purposefully selected notions and functions. This promotes a “proficiency” perspective guided by “can do” descriptors rather than a “deficiency” perspective focusing on what the learners have not yet acquired. (Council of Europe, 2020, English: 28, Italian: 26)

The aim of the action-oriented approach is broader, more political and less instrumental than the approaches that preceded it, which is not surprising considering it comes from Europe’s Human Rights organization, the Council of Europe. As Puren explained:

It is no longer a question of educating learners, like at the beginning of the 1970s, to establish contact with and communicate with foreigners passing by. It is rather a question of educating the citizens of multicultural and

multilingual societies capable of living together in harmony, ... as well as students and professionals capable of working together over an extended period of time in a foreign language/culture (Puren, 2009: 124, my translation).

The emphasis on collaboration and co-construction in the action-oriented approach led Puren (2002) to talk of ‘co-action’ and Bourguignon (2006) of ‘communic-action’ in order to express the co-operation and joint agency in creating something new. The main differences between the communicative and action-oriented approaches are well explained by Bourguignon (2006), Puren (2009), and Piccardo (2014). They include:

- teaching the use of language *now* in the class, as opposed to for some future needs;
- the focus on developing a variety of competences as well as strategies – rather than practicing certain language;
- the scope and breadth of the tasks, their richness in terms of affordances they offer;
- the agency, freedom of manoeuvre and responsibility that the users/learners have;
- the organization of didactic sequences of several lessons unified in a ‘scenario’;
- the fact that the purpose is to produce something, with learners having a “mission” to fulfil under conditions designed to foster creativity (Bourguignon, 2006, 2010);
- the acceptance of complexity – in terms of the task itself, the organization of the work in cycles of try and retry, the new language users/learners needed, the language(s) used at different points, the apparent loss of control by the teacher – who, however, provides the mediation and scaffolding required to be successful.

In the action-oriented approach the teaching and learning process is driven by action at two complementary levels:

- a) in terms of the curriculum and related course planning;
- b) in terms of enactment in the class.

Firstly, at a curriculum and planning level, action-orientation involves planning backwards from learners’ real-life communicative needs in a process sometimes called backward design (Richards, 2013; North *et al.*, 2018); alignment between planning, teaching and assessment (Biggs, 2003; North, 2014); involving students in the learning process by using descriptors for ‘signposting’ to users/learners why certain things are happening (North, 2014) and finally, using descriptors to create concrete goals in relation to specific tasks/scenarios.

Secondly, at the classroom level action-orientation implies providing such purposeful, collaborative tasks that:

- a) allow initiative, so that learners can strategically exert their agency;
- b) have a defined mission for the learners (usually to create a product, an artefact);
- c) require co-construction of meaning through mediation in interaction;
- d) set conditions and constraints;
- e) specify a ‘language policy’ of when to use one language or another in which phases/activities, and when free *plurilinguaging* (Piccardo, 2017, 2018) is encouraged.

As Bourguignon suggests, “carrying a project through to completion being engaged in an action for which he/she needs language can and should lead to a desire to know even more: thus the action becomes the facilitator of learning” (2006: 66, my translation).



## 5. THE LEARNER AS SOCIAL AGENT IN THE ACTION-ORIENTED APPROACH

In the action-oriented approach, users/learners are thus seen as “acting in the social world and exerting agency in the learning process (Council of Europe, 2020, p. 22). As suggested by the types of tasks/scenarios mentioned above, the class is seen as a real social context in which, rather than receiving inert knowledge, students as social agents learn to (co)-construct content and communication by engaging in collaborative tasks – *whose primary purpose is not language* – in which they can *act* in the language in order to construct and mediate meaning. They are a *social agent* because they exert their agency within a specific social context, a defined situation which imposes conditions and constraints, which in turn stimulate creativity. Within these constraints, the social agent mobilizes *all* their resources (cognitive, emotional, linguistic and cultural), in iterative cycles in order to plan, produce results, and monitor their action. By performing such tasks, the learners further develop their competences and strategies.

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 (Council of Europe, 2020, English: 30, Italian: 28, my emphasis).

The CEFR model of the action of the user/learner as social agent exercising their agency in an action-oriented approach is extremely compatible with recent theories informing language education, particularly the ecological approach (van Lier, 2004, 2007), complexity theories, especially complex dynamic systems theory (CDST) (De Bot, Lowie, Vespoor, 2007; Larsen-Freeman, 1997, 2011) and socio-constructivist / sociocultural approaches inspired by the work of Vygotsky (Lantolf, 2000; 2011). Van Lier (2007), for example, in an article on action-based teaching, agency and autonomy, emphasizes the importance of ‘affordances’ – interpreted as invitations to action – with the vital issue being “perception in action” (van Lier, 2004: 97). Larsen-Freeman and Todeva (2022), in discussing the significance of complexity for language learning, suggests CDST as a theoretical framework for plurilingual action-orientation, as does Piccardo (2017). As Bourguignon puts it, “The new reality with which the teaching/learning of language-culture is faced is a complex reality” (2006: 61, my translation).

This reality, as the CEFR recognizes, has external and internal aspects. What one ‘can mean’ in any given situation – Halliday’s (1973, 1978) concept of ‘meaning potential’ – is in fact determined by an interaction between (a) external (social) factors and (b) internal (individual) factors (CEFR 2001, Sections 4.1.3-5). Richer (2009, 2012) in discussing the CEFR model and the nature of competence, refers to the concepts of *pouvoir agir* (external

factors) and *vouloir agir* (internal factors) in this respect as essential aspects of a dynamic concept of competence. As Piccardo (2012) points out, the recognition of the centrality of this external/internal interaction in the CEFR gives mediation, in the sense of the term used in Vygotsky's work and in socio-constructivist/cultural approaches – and indeed in mainstream educational theory nowadays – a crucial role in the CEFR model. This is why the 2020 version of the CEFR takes a far broader view of mediation – see Piccardo forthcoming and Piccardo, North, Goodier (2019) for discussion. It also links directly to the concept of the affordances present in the environment, which is discussed below, and in addition to the recognition that any language use/learning, any competence in action, is *situated*. As Piccardo and North (2019: 85) put it:

the concepts of agency, communities of practice, collective intelligence, and situated cognition cast light on the teaching and learning process in general and present a great potential in the understanding of the innovative conceptualization of language education that the AoA [action-oriented approach] is fostering. These concepts together with theories of action [...] complete the colourful picture of the AoA theoretical framework.

## 6. KEY ASPECTS OF THE ACTION-ORIENTED APPROACH

As suggested in the previous two sections, the key aspects of the action-oriented concern affordances, agency and tasks. In this section we look at each of these in turn in more detail.

### 6.1. *Affordances*

Affordances are “opportunities for action” (Käufner, Chemero, 2015: 166) with the environment “*calling for* a certain way of acting” on the part of a social agent (Dreyfus, Kelly, 2007: 52; original emphasis); they “are not mere possibilities for action but generally invite us” Withagen, Araújo, de Poel (2017: 16). However, “affordances can only solicit us if we perceive them” (*ibid.*) and not all affordances are perceived, firstly because someone working on a task “is only sensitive to the affordances that are relevant [...] Only those relevant affordances [...] are experienced as invitations” (Käufner, Chemero, 2015: 203) – but more fundamentally because not everyone is equally perceptive all of the time, especially in a school environment.

Van Lier therefore emphasises the need to provide learning environments with “action potential” (2004: 92 – Halliday’s “meaning potential”) and to encourage “perception in action” (2004: 97):

From an ecological perspective, language *learning-as-agency* involves learning to perceive affordances (relationships of possibility) within multimodal communicative events. Every subject and every topic is an ‘affordance network’ that is accessed through *collaborative activity* (Van Lier, 2007: 53, my emphasis).

Thus, rather than providing ‘inputs’ to learners as passive recipients one should expose them as social agents to a rich landscape of affordances in collaborative task/projects, which will foster emergence of language (Piccardo, North, 2019: 107). Such rich

affordances will also encourage creativity, affordances being an element of one of the leading theories of creativity (Glävenau's 'Five A's' theory of creativity) in which: "creativity can be defined as a process of perceiving, exploiting, and 'generating' novel affordances during socially and materially situated activities" (Glävenau, 2012: 196). Piccardo (2017) explains how complexity theories, ecological theories and creativity theories interact and provide a theoretical framework for providing a rich environment for collaborative *linguaging* (thinking things through: Swain, 2006; Cowley, Gahrn-Andersen, 2018) and *plurilinguaging* (Lüdi, 2015, 2016; Piccardo, 2017, 2018) in an action-oriented approach.

The *Companion Volume* descriptors for mediating concepts provide 'signposts' that are intended to help to make such collaborative languaging more explicit and thus more effective.

## 6.2. *Agency*

In socio-constructivist/sociocultural thinking, learners are seen as agents who "actively engage in constructing the terms and conditions of their own learning" (Lantolf, Pavlenko, 2001: 145). However, agency is both facilitated and constrained by the affordances available in the context. In the broader field of agency studies, people are nowadays seen as "agents able to influence their contexts, rather than just react to them, in a relationship of ongoing reciprocal causality in which the emphasis is on the complex dynamic interaction between the two elements [social and individual]" (Mercer, 2011: 428) – just like in the CEFR model of the social agent, who perceives and acts on affordances available. Larsen-Freeman puts the same point as follows:

Agency is not inhered in a person. There is no homunculus or innate internal program that is responsible for the observed behavior. Instead, agency is interpellated from the self-organizing dynamic interaction of factors internal and external to the system, persisting only through their constant interaction with each other (Larsen-Freeman, 2019: 65).

Mercer, in reporting on an in-depth case study with one learner, reports that "motivation, affect [interest, likes/wants] and self-regulation emerge as the 'controlling' components of this learner's agentic system" (2011: 427). Mercer, like Larsen-Freeman (2019) concludes that agency:

can best be understood as a complex system composed of a number of constituent components; each of which can itself be thought of as a dynamic complex system ... No single component or element in the complex system causes Joana [the subject of the case study] to exercise her agency in a certain way, but it is rather a series of multiple, interconnected causes which appear to vary in their relative significance and can interact in unpredictable ways (Mercer, 2011: 435).

Agency thus has a social/environmental aspect and an individual aspect – hence the expression 'social agent.' To recap, these are considered again below.

### 6.2.1. *Social*

Social agents exert agency within a specific social context, which imposes conditions and constraints. What they ‘can mean’ is defined by the range of affordances of the specific situation type in which the agent is able/permitted to act (*pouvoir agir*: Richer, 2009, 2012): the “meaning potential:” (Halliday, 1973, 1978) or “action potential” (van Lier, 2004), which van Lier equates with affordances.

### 6.2.2. *Agent*

When the social agent perceives the affordances of the situation, they mobilize all their resources/competences (cognitive, emotional, linguistic and cultural) and develop strategies to complete the task, working in iterative cycles in order to plan, rehearse/draft, produce results, and monitor their action. According to Bandura (1989, 2001), agency has four core characteristics:

- a) *Intentionality*: a plan of action, which is at partially thought through, and which is adjusted in the light of new information and/or experience during the process of completing the task;
- b) *Forethought*: which involves considering consequences, anticipating outcomes, and selecting further actions based on experience so far;
- c) *Self-regulatory processes* in relation to concrete goals that link thought to action: Are we heading in the right direction? Are we making progress towards the goal? and finally
- d) *Self-reflection* on the soundness of one’s ideas and the actions undertaken, judged against the outcomes achieved through them: Do we need to adjust our actions – or the goal?

In later versions of his theory, Bandura (2008) clarifies that agency can be collective and collaborative rather than just individual and also (2018) simplifies his model to three aspects: *forethought*, *self-reactiveness* (self-regulation) and *self-reflectiveness*. According to Bandura, the result of experiencing success through following such processes is to increase the agency itself in what is called *self-efficacy*: the belief in future success.

As Larsen-Freeman points out (2019) agency is thus *dynamic*: it develops through iteration (with safe spaces to produce drafts, to rehearse, and through repetition of familiar types of tasks) and through co-adaptation to other complex adaptive systems – here, adaptation to the other user-learners when working together in a collaborative context. As Bandura emphasizes, agency is reinforced by self-efficacy: the motivating belief, based upon experience, that one can be successful.

Agency theory thus has direct implications for the action-oriented approach:

- concrete goals can be provided to learners with CEFR ‘can do’ descriptors selected in relation to specific tasks; such more concrete goals work better than vaguely formulated aims;
- motivation is strengthened by self-belief that one can be successful, and this is increased by previous experiences of success;
- tasks can be challenging rather than dumbed down, provided learners know that they can be imperfect in their first try: “Conceptions are rarely transformed into masterful performance on the first attempt” (Bandura, 1989: 1181).

- an iterative process with feedforward (in relation to goals) and feedback (in relation to challenges/weaknesses): “motivation is self-regulated through the joint influence of proactive and feedback mechanisms” (Bandura, 1989: 1180)

The iterative process mentioned in the final point above requires reflection on the part of the social agent – throughout the process, not just a reflection phase tacked onto the end of a task:

[Reflection is] a recursive, awareness-raising, (self-)regulatory process that supports the social agent in his/her actions, risk-taking and learning process. ... The reflection process does not always necessitate formal steps or formalized tools, it is very often an impromptu process done through personal, unstructured or even scribbled notes – or sometimes even just at the mental level. It is more the idea of creating a reflective habit that fosters self-regulation and other-regulation and self-confidence and eventually more effective autonomous learning. This does not mean that more formal end of project reflection is not useful, quite the contrary, this last type of reflection in fact further contributes to reinforcing and giving value to the reflective habit itself (Piccardo, North, 2019: 255).

To summarise, action-oriented tasks therefore need to provide the space for the learners to take responsibility and to design what they are doing and reflect on how they are progressing towards the goal.

### 6.2.3. *Tasks*

Tasks, of which as stated before: “the primary focus of the tasks is not language” (Council of Europe, 2020, English: 30, Italian: 28) are central to the CEFR model and the CEFR 2001 dedicated a whole chapter to tasks (CEFR Chapter 7). In an action-oriented approach, the classroom becomes a context for real use of language, breaking down the classroom walls, e.g. through projects and the use of online tools. Tasks provide direction to teaching, learning and assessment, with learning occurring in context, as learners as social agents activate and further develop the strategies and competences needed to complete the task – with scaffolding from the teacher. Action-oriented tasks involve the development of a product or outcome, which might be “planning an outing, making a poster, creating a blog, designing a festival or choosing a candidate” (*ibid*).

The following list summarizes the principal characteristics of an action-oriented task:

- a) action is purposeful with real-life application;
- b) there is a clearly communicated goal to be accomplished that results in a product or outcome;
- c) learners process authentic texts and real-life experiences;
- d) learners exercise agency in an authentic social context;
- e) there are conditions and constraints (e.g., that promote critical and creative thinking);
- f) learners work collaboratively, helping the progress of others;
- g) learners draw upon existing and newly developed competences;
- h) learners make choices and think and act strategically.

(modified from: Hunter *et al.*, 2019)

How is this different from task-based language teaching (TBLT)? The short answer is in (a) the richness of the tasks – that provide a ‘landscape of affordances’ and (b) the agency that learners have. The role of learners and teachers are fundamentally different in the action-oriented approach. In the action-oriented approach, tasks are essentially projects that learners design and control. Learners act as social agents, take responsibility and design what they are doing as they engage in a process of co-construction, within given conditions and constraints – as in real life. The teacher asks about progress and provides help if needed at regular intervals – as in academic or professional life.

Definitions of ‘task’ in TBLT differ greatly and often contradict each other (see van den Branden 2006: 3-10). Most types of tasks described by Ellis (2003), Nunan (2004), Skehan (1998), and Willis, Willis (2007) are far narrower than those used in the action-oriented approach. In TBLT, the tasks are often simple role plays or very structured activities in which learners only choose from a list of options provided. Nunan (2004: 20-21), for example, introduces the notion of ‘task’ with a very restricting activity. In TBLT there is often a focus on a tight instructional sequence following defined principles: scaffolding, task dependency, recycling, active learning, integration, reproduction to creation, reflection (Nunan, 2004: 35-38). There is also a tendency to design tasks to use particular language – related to the target real-life situation that the task simulates – that the learner is expected to rehearse and learn through performing the task, in preparation to some future ‘real life’.

Willis and Willis (2007), for example, give seven types of task in their ‘task generator’: a) listing; b) ordering and sequencing; c) matching; d) comparing; e) sharing personal experience; f) problem-solving; and g) “projects and creative tasks: class newspaper, poster, survey, fantasy, etc.” (Willis, Willis, 2007: 108). The first four of these types are so narrow that they could be test tasks. The fifth – sharing personal experiences – is a nice communicative activity, but unless part of a broader scenario, it lacks purpose. Only the final two, problem-solving and ‘projects and creative tasks’ have a clear potential to be action-oriented. In Willis and Willis’s TBLT vision, however, even the projects are tightly controlled by the teacher with the learners having little or no agency, e.g.: “The students work in groups and choose the five best questions ... and answer them from the documentary” (*ibid.*: 102).

Piccardo and North summarise the difference between the communicative and action-oriented approaches as follows:

In the communicative approach, learners had a limited responsibility and an equally reduced range of choices. The point was to be able to function in everyday situations, performing speech acts that enabled communication. This characterizes the communicative approach both in its weak ‘classic’ version and in its strong version, i.e. TBLT. Tasks in the AoA [action-oriented approach], on the other hand, are projects and as such they require real problem-solving and decision-making skills that enable actions here and now. (Piccardo, North, 2019: 246)

and:

Action-oriented tasks give users/learners the opportunity to engage in action – to come up with a well-defined outcome, to create an artefact: a visible product. It is during the process of developing the product that the learners mediate and (pluri)language i.e. exploit different linguistic and semiotic resources to communicate and (co)construct meaning, and so acquire new language. This is why action-oriented tasks can be equated with projects. And

project work is a perspective that is valid from the lower levels, when users/learners are developing the ability to communicate, all the way to the highest levels. It is no coincidence that professional further training tends to be task and project-based. (Piccardo, North, 2019: 278-9)

Action-oriented tasks, being broader than TBLT tasks, require more time and are spread over a number of lessons in a didactic sequence. This sequence is often given a frame and credibility for the learners through a ‘scenario’. A summary of the scenario puts the groups of learners in a certain simulated context and explains to them both their mission and the conditions and constraints under which they are to realize it. Here it is important to understand that the learners are not role-playing. In the 1980s, when simulations (Debyser, 1986; Jones, 1982) were quite popular, an important distinction was made between role-playing – in which learners pretend to be someone else, often with defined opinions and personal characteristics – and role-enactment. In role-enactment, defined by a scenario, learners as social agents adopt the stance of a participant in a given situation, but act as themselves in the realistic context given by the scenario, developing *their own* opinions and plans.

Over the past decade action-oriented scenarios have become more common in language education (e.g., Eaquals - CIEP, 2014; Hunter, Andrews, Piccardo, 2016; Hunter *et al.*, 2019; North, Ortega, Sheehan, 2010; Piccardo, 2014; Piccardo *et al.*, 2022; Schleiss, Hagenow-Caprez, 2017; Scholze *et al.*, 2022) and more recently in language assessment (Carroll, 2017; Purpura, 2021). I will not go into more detail about scenarios here, since Piccardo (this volume) gives a detailed description and worked example. Readers are also referred to Piccardo and North (2019, Chapter 7) for further explanation and discussion.

## 7. CONCLUSION

This chapter has introduced the *Companion Volume* and briefly explained the main ideas behind the action-oriented approach. Action-oriented/-based teaching is becoming common in other school disciplines, with the effect of socio-constructivist theories on education, and language education is of course the most obvious context in which to apply it. The action-oriented approach is not the same as the communicative approach, which has remained much the same since the 1980s, with the norm being a thinly disguised grammatical syllabus organized in linear fashion, elements of behaviourism, and an obsession with ‘native-speaker’ competence.

To risk summarising prerequisites for an action-orientated approach, one could say that it boils down to the following points:

- The backward design of curriculum modules, with alignment between planning, teaching and assessment facilitated by using ‘can-do’ descriptors to define the aims and outcomes.
- The shift from a paradigm of simplicity (chop things up; don’t make things challenging) to a paradigm of complexity: accept complexity and provide reasonable challenges, with scaffolding as necessary.
- The authenticity and credibility of a scenario for a task/project in which the learners have the autonomy to research different source materials, which they mediate to their peers, and create a product in which they invest.
- A didactic sequence over several lessons that leads up to a unifying, final task, with several phases offering different language activities and iterative cycles of draft/

redraft culminating in the (co)production and presentation of an artefact, followed by a reflection phase.

- A plural, intercultural focus, recognising that all languages the learners possess have a place, at times, in the classroom, with an integrated approach to language education, to teaching additional languages, to incorporating elements of heritage languages, and linking to the language of schooling.
- Agency for the learners as social agents to decide how to go about the task, make decisions as they go along, co-constructing meaning through the mediation of concepts and/or communication.
- Feedforward towards the concrete goals (expressed with descriptors) and feedback from the teacher on drafts created in a safe environment, with the experience of success with the final product leading to self-efficacy and increased self-awareness.
- Self-, peer and teacher assessment of the outcomes, with (CEFR-based) criteria shared in advance.

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