The user/learner as a social agent[1]

Languages are not only an instrument to receive and exchange information. They are also a unique tool to interpret the world and to build both individual and collective knowledge through interaction and dialogue. Language use and language learning are, therefore, both cognitive and social activities. Users/learners are "act[ing} in the social world and exert[ing] agency in the learning process" (Council of Europe 2020: 26) and "co-constructing meaning in interaction" (ibid: 21). Users/learners therefore need to take into consideration the interactional and communicative realities, purposes and contexts of real-world language use. Language users are independent and responsible participants in society: "social agents" who use languages to communicate in the real world, to create and mediate meaning, often in collaboration. They pursue different goals, in several contexts, exerting their agency in the particular social context concerned, which imposes conditions and constraints.

The term "social agent" aims to capture the dual nature of what it means to function in a language. There are two facets to the concept, two intertwined contexts: the individual (internal context) which acts within the social (external context). The individual exerts their agency, their will and power to act. It is not surprising that in the French version of the CEFR the expression *acteur social* is used and not that of social agent. In French the concept of agency is strongly associated with "action" (hence *perspective actionnelle*; *approche actionelle*) and it refers to the verb "to act", *l'agir* or *capacité à agir* (Richer 2014). Regarding the social context, what one "can mean" in any situation is, to a considerable extent, determined by the range of options characteristic of that particular type of social context, and also at the same time by the interactive and collaborative nature of what the individual does with others in that social context in order to (co-)construct meaning. Context-dependence was emphasised by the linguist Halliday with his concept of the "meaning potential" which, as he himself said, was "not unlike Dell Hymes' notion of 'communicative competence' except that Hymes [1972/1986] defines this in terms of 'competence' in the Chomskian sense of what the speaker knows, whereas we are talking of a potential" (Halliday 1973: 54). Certain conventions, expectation and rules of use exist in any situation, shared with the other participants, and these may restrict what someone can say. The idea of what a person could mean in a particular situation type (but might not actually get a chance to mean, for various reasons) is in fact what is intended with "can do" descriptors. It is no coincidence that in the same period, Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) and other scholars were investigating the way that power relationships in structured contexts, particularly classrooms, assigned people, in this case learners, to a subordinate role in which they were prevented from taking the initiative, expressing themselves or developing ideas in collaboration with each other.

These different strands of research, plus the development in continental Europe of the concept of competence as primarily a question of mobilising and combining resources in action (Piccardo and North 2019; Richer 2014, 2017), flowed into the concept of the social agent as it is presented in the CEFR and *CEFR – Companion volume*. Depending on the context of situation, the learner as social agent judges, based on their sociocultural knowledge of the world, decides which language(s),

[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, examples from practice*, Council of Europe Publishing, Strasbourg.

variety/ies and/or register(s) to use, which sociocultural norms to respect, what strategies to adopt, etc. In making such choices, the social agent mobilises and combines all of their repertoire, all of their general competences and communicative language competences in order to tackle the task at hand. In so doing, they act in a strategic, agentive manner. The learner/social agent thus mobilises all their resources (cognitive, emotional, linguistic and cultural) and develops strategies, including the exploitation of accessible objects, tools, people and other funds of knowledge, in iterative cycles in order to plan, to produce results and to monitor their action. The experience of monitoring their action further develops those competences and strategies (Council of Europe 2001: 9; 2020: 32).

As suggested in the previous paragraph, agency involves more than mere choice, and this is very important when we consider classrooms – and the action-oriented approach. Bandura's (1989, 2001) socio-cognitive theory of agency underlines four main characteristics of agency.

- Intentionality: having at least a partial plan of the action necessary to achieve the goal, which will be completed later, adjusting it in the light of new information and experience.
- Forethought: considering consequences of certain actions, anticipating outcomes, selecting actions based on experience of successfully using them.
- Self-regulatory processes that link thought to action in relation to the concrete goals being aimed at (i.e. constant reflection and re-evaluation of strategies and proposed actions as one goes along).
- Self-reflection on the soundness of the ideas and concepts proposed and the actions undertaken, judged against the success of the outcomes. Such agentive experience leads to a motivating belief that one can be successful, which Bandura calls "self-efficacy".

Language education should therefore create learning contexts that encourage learners to grow in their role as social and collaborative agents, as autonomous and responsible language users/learners. Essentially, this means that the language curriculum should include tasks and/or projects that allow learners the space to take the initiative, collaborate together, plan and produce something. Learners as social agents can then take responsibility for their learning process, further developing their language repertoire as powerful lifelong learners. The concept of the social agent is thus central to the action-oriented approach, mediation, online interaction and collaboration and plurilingual language education.

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