

FSL

FRENCH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

A Guide to Reflective Practice for Core French Teachers

MODULE 3

The Action-Oriented Approach

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Erin Balmer	Thames Valley District School Board
Maureen Benfey	Peel District School Board
Melissa Brown	Greater Essex County District School Board
Geoff Collins	Durham District School Board
France Dupuis	Catholic District School Board of Eastern Ontario
Laura Dursley	Trillium Lakelands District School Board
Jayne Evans	Niagara Catholic District School Board
Joanne Guindon	Durham Catholic District School Board
Heather Henke	Avon Maitland District School Board
Elizabeth Hoerath	Halton District School Board
Suzanne Korell	Ottawa Catholic School Board
Liliana Martins	Toronto District School Board
Sharon McNamara	Algonquin and Lakeshore Catholic District School Board
Renee Meloche	Halton District School Board
Jennifer Moodie	Thames Valley District School Board
Alison Pearce	Toronto District School Board
Lorraine Richard	York Region District School Board
Brooke Robinson	Lakehead District School Board
Christina Schilling	Upper Grand District School Board
Anne Marie Sienna	Halton District School Board
Chantal Soucy	Ottawa Catholic School Board
Karen To	Greater Essex County District School Board
Karla Torrente	Durham District School Board

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Context

This module focuses on developing and implementing action-oriented learning tasks in elementary and secondary Core French. It draws on relevant research and the experiences of Core French teachers, and provides suggestions for planning, teaching, assessment, and reflection on practice.

Researchers in second-language education have written extensively about the advantages of adopting a communicative approach in order to shift the focus in language instruction from learning *about* the language to learning to *communicate in* the language.

The action-oriented approach builds on the communicative approach by synthesizing research over three decades by experts in the field of second language teaching and learning. Core French teachers who have become knowledgeable about the action-oriented approach to inform their classroom practice embrace this as a means to increase students' functional proficiency. The merits of the action-oriented approach are the subject of much discussion.

Evolving Approaches to Language Instruction

In his article “Vers une nouvelle cohérence didactique” (2006), Christian Puren presents a compelling synopsis of how second language instruction has evolved over the past century. He views its sequential development through a lens he calls “les entrées” – that is, the changing starting points for how the new language is introduced that have been embraced by successive generations of language teachers.

Each ensuing instructional focus has arisen in response to the limitations of previous approaches and to the societal needs of the time. Over time, approaches to second language instruction have evolved from a strict focus on grammar and reading to an emphasis on the capacity to carry out specific social or interactive tasks in the target language.

AN OVERVIEW OF HISTORICAL LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION APPROACHES

	L'entrée par	La tâche des étudiants
Avant 1900	la grammaire	lire
1900–1910	le lexique	décrire
1920–1960	la culture	expliquer
1960–1980	la communication	reproduire, s'exprimer
1980–1990	la communication	informer, s'informer
2000+	l'action	agir

Compiled with information from Puren's 2006 article, “Vers une nouvelle cohérence didactique,” *Le français dans le Monde*, 348, 42–44

The Communicative Approach

In the communicative approach to second language acquisition, students learn by communicating in the target language rather than by practising language skills in isolation. Learning activities are selected to build communicative proficiency by engaging the learner in meaningful, authentic language use. Until recent years, language instruction usually has placed greater emphasis on oral *production* than on spontaneous and authentic oral *interaction*.

The Action-Oriented Approach

The action-oriented approach to language acquisition views communication as a social activity designed to accomplish specific tasks. The *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR) advocates going beyond the communicative approach to emphasize *active language use* that develops five language skills – spoken production, spoken interaction, listening, reading, and writing which includes the skills required for writing to interact. It recognizes students as active participants in the learning process.

COMMUNICATION AS A SOCIAL ACT

Communication is a purposeful social activity, and in this context, language learners are considered *social agents* or *actors* (*acteurs sociaux*) who have tasks to accomplish “in a given set of circumstances, in a specific environment, and within a particular field of action” (CEFR, p. 9). Students in the Core French classroom are not only accumulating banks of new vocabulary, they are developing competence, along with strategies, to communicate effectively and to manage their use of the language within the context of various situations and the tasks to be accomplished. Students interact through listening, speaking, reading, and writing in actual or simulated real-life situations.

The motivation to communicate is enhanced through having a genuine purpose: “a task to be accomplished, a problem to be resolved, an obligation to be fulfilled, or an objective to be achieved.”

Based on CEFR (2001), p. 10

ACTION-ORIENTED TASKS

Action-oriented tasks are purposeful acts set in a context that students could face in everyday life in a variety of situations. These tasks are open-ended and complex, requiring a variety of knowledge and skills, and there are many possible paths leading to attaining the specific end goal. To accomplish these action-oriented tasks, students require knowledge of the language and appropriate use of that language within a given cultural and social context. Each of these social tasks consists of *acts of speech* (*les actes de paroles*), or words and groups of words that enable them to communicate for a specific purpose in a real-life interaction. Examples include offering an apology, greeting, request, complaint, invitation, compliment, or refusal.

Action-oriented tasks actively involve learners in meaningful communication, are relevant and challenging but feasible, and have identifiable outcomes which are real and practical. Students can track their progress in developing language skills by their ability to carry out realistic tasks (“I can ask for details about a product at an electronics store and inquire if it can be placed on hold using the verbs *vouloir*, *devoir*,

[L]a production orale n'est pas qu'une activité scolaire, comme beaucoup d'élèves le croient encore. Elle doit être travaillée explicitement à l'école de manière à ce que les élèves puissent ensuite y avoir recours efficacement dans le vie de tous les jours, pour convaincre un parent, plaider sa cause auprès d'un enseignant, obtenir un service de la part d'un entreprise, raconter un événement à un ami, porter plainte à un magasin, etc. ... [On doit] rappeler régulièrement aux élèves les contextes du quotidien.

Saada and Makarow (2012)

and prendre correctly”) rather than their ability to complete grammar quizzes on verbs (“I can conjugate the irregular verbs *vouloir*, *devoir* and *prendre* in the present and conditional tenses”). Learning how to get something done *in French* empowers students.

When Core French teachers adopt the action-oriented approach, students are able to demonstrate what they can do in French as well as what they know about French language structures. The action-oriented approach has a clear focus on second language learning as an active process in which students shape the nature of their language interactions. Action-oriented, task-based instruction and active learning are also often linked with discussions and research on learner autonomy.

David Little (2006) notes that “The development of autonomy in language learning is governed by three basic pedagogical principles: learner involvement ... learner reflection ... and appropriate target language.”

Building Proficiency Through Action-Oriented Tasks

Introducing Students to Action-Oriented Tasks

At the beginning stages of developing language proficiency, Core French students learn to interact in French in order to have basic needs met, to make introductions, and to ask and answer simple personal questions about family, home, neighbourhood, school, friends, and personal interests. These are all topics of immediate personal relevance.

Core French students may be learning to carry out the following acts of communication in French:

- Greeting someone
- Making introductions
- Asking and answering simple questions about familiar topics
- Completing simple registration forms
- Writing simple descriptions to inform someone about an event
- Asking for help
- Requesting and giving directions
- Offering and responding to an invitation
- Offering and responding to an apology
- Reading advertisements
- Giving oral information, answering questions, and writing about oneself
- Understanding and following procedures to join a club, team, or other group
- Understanding and asking questions about tasks they are to perform
- Understanding safety rules and instructions
- Making purchases

Providing an Authentic Social Context

To emphasize the relevance of these acts of communication, Core French teachers set a context for learning by providing a task for students to complete, usually in collaboration with one or more peers. Tasks and acts of communication can have multiple components and can be simple or complex depending on the level and interests of the students involved. For example, to make introductions, beginning Core French students start by learning to say their name, age, and grade in complete sentences. As next steps, students might add what they are studying, talk about their hobbies, how they usually spend their free time, and describe chores or part-time jobs.

The Core French teacher presents an authentic situation in which individuals might need to provide information, such as registering at a hospital clinic, where students may need to give details such as the spelling of their name, their address and telephone number, email address, date and place of birth, and age, sex, and nationality. As students progress, the tasks become more linguistically and cognitively challenging.

In the communicative approach, students might be asked to turn to a partner and talk about their likes and dislikes, describe their family and what other people are like, and ask each other questions. By contrast, in the action-oriented approach, students are presented with a scenario such as planning a family holiday, in which they must discuss their likes and dislikes and come to an agreement regarding their travel destination and details of their holiday.

Problem: Imagine you are shopping in the mall with your family and you get lost. Describe your family to the mall security personnel.

With my Grade 5 students, I decided to start with a focus on presenting the family. My students spent a week reviewing descriptions of families. We answered teacher-led questions, read descriptions, listened to them, wrote them. Then I gave them pictures of clip art families and they had to choose one grandparent and prepare to describe them with a partner. The following week, students continued to offer spontaneous descriptions, and after that, they described their own families to peers and asked questions. This is the introduction/review work each day.

The students now have the linguistic tools to cope with the situation of being lost and needing to describe their family. For the summative assessment, they role-play a conversation where I play the security guard; students write the names of family members on a cue card and I select the person with whom they are shopping.

Grades 4–8 Core French teacher

Scaffolding Learning in an Action-Oriented Approach

At the introductory level, students frequently are asked to memorize oral presentations and scripted dialogues. It is essential to provide opportunities for them to begin to interact with the teacher and each other to complete tasks that reflect or simulate real-life situations that are unscripted and sometimes unpredictable. It is important to note that adopting an action-oriented approach does not mean abandoning presentations and dialogues that have been a part of the communicative approach. These activities are a critical part of the scaffolding and practice that is necessary to enable students to acquire new vocabulary and facility with the language.

In *Grammar in a Communicative Approach* (1993), William Littlewood proposes four pedagogical steps to scaffold learning. In the first step, which he calls pre-communicative language practice, the Core French teacher engages students in activities that focus on a specific language feature. “Communicative language practice” is the second step, in which students are engaged in activities that require them to convey a meaningful message using their newly acquired language skills. The third step is referred to as “structured communication” because the teacher structures the situation and task so that students are primarily required to use the French vocabulary and language structures they have learned. When students arrive at the fourth step, authentic communication, they are prepared to successfully undertake action-oriented tasks using the language skills and communication strategies that are now part of their repertoire.

I moved my students beyond rehearsed dialogues to more authentic, spontaneous communication by adding one small new component to a familiar task. Students were accustomed to working together in pairs to prepare and practise Q&A interviews to present to the rest of the class. Once the original presentations were complete, I asked volunteers to pair up with a partner with whom they had *not* rehearsed to answer slightly different questions on the same topic.

Secondary Core French teacher

The Gradual Release of Responsibility Model

Using the gradual release of responsibility model, the Core French teacher first demonstrates and *models* the asking and answering of personal questions in discussion with the whole class. Next, the teacher demonstrates the dialogue, eliciting students’ input as the conversation progresses (*shared* practice). Students are then *guided* in short interactions with others. This guidance may take the form of oral or written support, such as conducting a three-way conversation with the teacher as a supportive participant, or posting possible questions, answers, or contextual tasks in the classroom. As students become familiar with a particular conversational approach or a set of questions, the partners, the context, the task, or the questions change, promoting a greater degree of *independent* interaction. Many different cooperative learning strategies are employed when students are practising these kinds of conversations (e.g., Four Corners, Inside-Outside Circle).

See Module 4: *Cooperative Learning* in A Guide to Reflective Practice for Core French Teachers.

When incorporating the action-oriented approach into their practice, Core French teachers recognize the importance of:

- Scaffolding the learning to enable students to use French confidently and competently as social actors to complete real-life tasks
- Providing specific and timely feedback, followed by opportunities to apply it
- Creating tasks that are relevant, authentic, and appropriate for students
- Setting the stage for learning by fostering in students a need to communicate — critical in motivating students to engage in spontaneous and purposeful language.

Core French teachers may wish to consult the *On est capable!* video series for examples of effective practices and strategies.

By getting to know their students, Core French teachers incorporate student interests or hobbies into classroom tasks. The key is to create opportunities for interaction, to make them authentic, and to ensure that the talk has an explicit purpose which is clear to the students.

I was accustomed to having students prepare to introduce themselves at the beginning of the year. These introductions sometimes took the form of oral presentations or interviews between students. One September, I planned a “cultural focus,” with students researching and reporting on French Canadian personalities. The self-introductory work this year was to culminate with a letter to a pen pal selected from a French language school in the same city – to make the task more authentic.

But the students’ response was unenthusiastic – until they suggested writing letters to French Canadian professional hockey players instead. So, I adopted the students’ suggestion, and their motivation level increased dramatically. Students had a real reason to describe their lives and their passion for the sport. The key to success was listening to the students, incorporating their interests, and connecting what happened in the Core French classroom to the outside world.

Intermediate Core French teacher

Meeting the Needs of All Students

A critical element in the implementation of the action-oriented approach is providing a choice of tasks and activities. The content, the process, and the products are adapted to meet learners’ needs. The Core French teacher considers the interests and needs of students and provides choice to motivate and engage students. The varied needs of English Language Learners (ELLs), students with Individual Education Plans (IEPs), or students in combined-grade classes can all be accommodated through task-based instruction.

The Core French teacher plans tasks and activities that:

- use flexible groupings (e.g., interest, readiness, purpose)
- provide opportunities for students to work in pairs, in small groups, and as a whole class
- create a context for learning vocabulary and language structures
- require using and practising higher order thinking skills
- provide multiple opportunities for practice prior to summative assessments

Sample Action-Oriented Tasks

These examples of action-oriented tasks are set in a range of authentic situations to engage students in achieving various learning goals.

Learning Goal	Authentic Situation	Action-Oriented Task
	<i>When would this occur in real life?</i>	<i>What is the purpose? What will be accomplished?</i>
I am learning to describe my family.	Showing photos of my family to a friend and identifying each person	You have just set up an account on a social networking site. Discuss with a friend who lives in Quebec which family photos to upload. Explain your choices.
	Answering questions from a French exchange student about my family members	You have enrolled in an exchange program and are speaking to your French-speaking partner on the phone for the first time. This person will be staying with you next month. Answer the exchange student's questions about your family.
	Buying a gift for a family member and having to describe the person to the sales assistant	You are in a department store and are having trouble finding the perfect gift for a family member. Describe the person to the French-speaking sales assistant, and answer questions about his/her likes and dislikes.
	Applying to be on a reality TV show	You are applying for your family to star in a reality TV show called "Canada's Most Talented Family." Film a short video to describe your family to the French producers.
I am learning to ask and answer simple questions.	Meeting a new classmate on the first day of school	A teacher asks you to greet a new French student and to give a tour of the school. Help this person feel at home by answering questions about the school.
	Asking a friend to borrow missing school supplies	You have arrived in French class only to discover that you left your backpack at home. Ask three friends questions about your schedule for the day and whether they can lend you the materials you need to get through the day.
I am learning to make simple purchases.	Buying items at a convenience store	You are driving to Québec City for a family vacation and you stop for gas on the way. Go into the convenience store to buy some supplies for the journey. Ask the sales assistant for help finding these items. Discuss the price, quantity, and how you will pay for them.
	Ordering a pizza by phone	You and some friends are on an overnight trip to a French community. You have decided to order pizza. Phone in an order for three pizzas, making sure that they each have very different toppings to accommodate your friends' diverse tastes. Discuss the price, quantity, payment options, and how each person contributes.
I am learning to set a date for a meeting, to talk about dates and times, and to give directions.	Arranging to see a movie with friends	Your best friend has French-speaking cousins who are visiting from Montreal and the group is having trouble agreeing on the details for going to a movie. Talk to them to decide when and where you will meet, how you will get to the theatre, and what movie you will see.
I am learning to express my likes and dislikes.	Describing what you would like to receive as a birthday gift	A French-speaking friend of your family whom you have not seen for a long time phones to ask what you would like for your birthday. She seems to think that you still like the same things you did when you were five years old. Give her three or four ideas of what you would really like to receive as a gift. Explain your choices.

Learning Goal	Authentic Situation	Action-Oriented Task
	<i>When would this occur in real life?</i>	<i>What is the purpose? What will be accomplished?</i>
I am learning to request and follow detailed directions.	Travelling in a French-speaking area	You are planning a visit to the Biodôme in Montréal. You go to an Info-touriste location and ask for directions using the visitor's guide/map. On the way to the Biodôme, you check these directions with a passerby.
		You are in a train station (or an airport) and you want to find an ice cream shop. You ask a person at the information kiosk how to find your destination. A little later, a French tourist sees you with your ice cream and asks you for the same directions. Explain how to get there.
		You are going to visit a friend who lives in residence on a university campus in the Acadian region of New Brunswick. You have found the university campus, but are having trouble locating the residence building. You stop a group of students to ask for directions.
I am learning to give or seek personal views and opinions in informal discussions with friends.	Discussing movies, books, music, etc.	You are visiting a friend in Quebec City and would like to see a movie this week. The friend wants to see an action film, and you would prefer a comedy. Have a discussion, giving your opinions and the reasons for them.
	Looking for others' input before making a purchase	You email some French-speaking friends to find out what kinds of phones and data plans they have and their opinions of the service offered by the various phone companies. Share the information with your parents and convince them to help you pay for the data plan.
I am learning to agree and disagree politely with someone.	Rejecting a meal in a restaurant	You ordered a vegetarian pasta in a French restaurant, but the server brings you meat lasagna, insists it is what you have ordered, and argues that it is delicious. Politely convince the server to bring the meal you ordered.
I am learning to ask someone to clarify or elaborate on what they have just said.	Buying additional components for your computer	You notice signs for a sale and decide to purchase components or software for your computer while on a student exchange. You are following the explanation of the French-speaking salesperson, but there are some particular words which you do not recognize. Ask the salesperson for an explanation of the unfamiliar terms.
I am learning to make myself understood even when I don't know the exact word.	Making a purchase at the garden store	You are visiting relatives in a small Québec town and would like to buy a particular plant as a thank-you gift. You don't know the correct name of the plant, but you know what it looks like. Describe what you are looking for to the French-speaking salesperson.
I am learning to write to express an opinion.	Writing to a newspaper editor	A developer would like to build a strip mall where there is currently a park in which many children and their families play. Write a letter to the editor of the local French newspaper giving reasons why the park and its green space should be preserved.
	Completing a survey	You and your family have completed a stay at a hotel in Québec. You are filling in the customer satisfaction survey before you leave.

Beyond the Basics

As Core French students gain linguistic competence and confidence in their French skills, the tasks become more complex, and the communication strategies and language required become more sophisticated.

I wanted students to be involved in a real-life situation that offered the opportunity to describe what they used to do when they were younger. This would require them to use the imperfect tense [*imparfait*]. I came up with the following situation: the wedding of a student's elder sibling to a person from Québec. At the reception, following the various speeches, the student was called upon to share a story or two from the bride's/groom's youth.

The delivery of these anecdotes was the action-oriented task, but my students wanted to take this scenario further and share more old stories about the happy couple over a glass of juice and some hors d'œuvres. This enabled us to bring in more interactive and spontaneous conversation. Students relished the 'real' experience of such a fun event (the food and drink helped!) and they had great fun.

Grade 9 Core French teacher

Use of Technology in Action-Oriented Tasks

Technology can be a powerful learning tool for Core French students. It can provide a risk-free environment for students to communicate, facilitate provision of feedback from teachers, enable students to review and self-assess their oral performance, and help motivate students by tapping into an area of interest, comfort, and expertise. Using a variety of technologies can enhance and complement the authenticity inherent in the action-oriented approach.

Cell phones are used by students for authentic oral interactions on a daily basis. They can be useful props in parts of many action-oriented tasks.

Media such as television, radio, newspapers, blogs, and websites provides authentic French texts and creates opportunities for action-oriented tasks in the Core French classroom. Whole-class discussions and informal, small-group debates and dialogues can be part of authentic, relevant, and spontaneous oral tasks related to using media.

Social media technologies such as blogs, email, music and picture sharing, voice-over-Internet services, podcasts, and wikis have significantly changed how our students communicate. Core French teachers can use these technologies to provide virtual exchanges with students around the world, promoting cultural literacy as well as providing authentic tasks.

Video and voice recorders allow students to record, re-record, and receive immediate feedback on their communication through self- and group evaluation, enabling them to create texts that can be shared within and beyond the classroom.

Teachers must be sensitive to students' socio-economic situations and to different family perspectives regarding children having and/or using social media and other technologies and follow related school and board policies.

I set my Grade 7 students the task of arranging a date to go to the movies with a friend. We began by examining the language on a Montréal movie listings website. I asked the students to make the date – this helped me determine what they already knew and what they still needed to know. We created a sentence wall for their classroom that continued to grow. I began by leading the conversations and gradually released the responsibility to the students. I challenged students by setting parameters such as having to babysit a younger cousin or attend a family dinner. This really made them think about their choice of time and cinema. Material for the final assessment was easy to find, as movie listings are updated weekly. Students then performed the same task, but working from new movie listings so that their conversations were both spontaneous and authentic.

Grades 4–8 Core French teacher

The students were studying a specific region of Québec [and] had to create a seven-day itinerary for a class trip to their specific region. They called 1-877-Bonjour (“Bonjour Québec” – *le Bureau de tourisme du Québec*), requested information from the agent, and arranged for brochures to be sent to their home. The students had to identify themselves, explain their project, and request necessary resources for the different components of their project (hotels, restaurants, sites to visit, activities to do, presentations to watch, maps, directions, etc.).

The students had never used French on the phone before. They were nervous, but they were proud to be able to express themselves and get what they needed. They knew that the person would offer to speak English, and they had to ask that the full conversation be [conducted] in French. I asked that the students bring their cell phones to make these calls. Some students borrowed phones from their friends, but it was all done in class – an advantage of the new technology!

Grade 11 Core French teacher

Reflective Practice

Thoughtful reflection is an important part of the teaching/learning process that helps Core French teachers deepen their professional learning in order to support student success.

Core French teachers may wish to use the following statements to guide their personal reflection.

SETTING THE STAGE

- ✓ I create a need for students to communicate in French.
- ✓ I establish and practise routines for task-based instruction.
- ✓ I plan action-oriented tasks based on curriculum expectations and the needs and interests of my Core French students.
- ✓ I organize learning opportunities to ensure students develop their ability to work with different individuals in a variety of situations using appropriate cooperative and linguistic strategies.

SCAFFOLDING LEARNING

- ✓ I make a conscious effort to heighten students' confidence in their ability to apply their French skills.
- ✓ I use a variety of strategies to maximize purposeful student talk time.
- ✓ I help students develop autonomy by providing tools and time to track progress and set goals.
- ✓ I move the students from dependence on my direct instruction, through shared and guided practice, to independent production and confidence when carrying out action-oriented tasks.

ACTION-ORIENTED LEARNING

- ✓ I explicitly teach learning strategies.
- ✓ I provide a choice of action-oriented tasks that reflect the interests, abilities, and learning styles of my students.
- ✓ I provide my students with a variety of authentic texts and models of the French language (e.g., music, video clips, stories, news media, real objects) as part of the action-oriented tasks.
- ✓ I ensure tasks have a problem to resolve, or a tangible outcome.
- ✓ I encourage my students to be social actors in French.
- ✓ I link the learning goals to specifically support authentic, action-oriented tasks.
- ✓ I create tasks that require students to apply critical and creative thinking skills when completing tasks.

ASSESSMENT AND EVALUATION

- ✓ I make learning goals explicit and co-construct success criteria with my students.
- ✓ I provide opportunities for students to self-assess and reflect on their strengths and areas for improvement.
- ✓ I give my students repeated opportunities for peer assessment.
- ✓ I continually provide specific and timely descriptive feedback and give students time to implement it.

Considerations When Planning

Planning always begins with the curriculum expectations and with consideration of individuals in the class. Core French teachers establish appropriate learning goals and engaging action-oriented tasks that help students achieve these specific goals while steadily increasing their levels of confidence, fluency, and accuracy. Success criteria are co-constructed with students and are revisited as learning progresses. Core French teachers involve students in assessing their learning on a regular basis until a final task gives the students the opportunity to demonstrate their achievement of the learning goals through what they say, write, and do in French without teacher support.

Core French teachers might find the following questions useful to guide their planning for instruction using the action-oriented approach:

- ✓ Which curriculum expectations (overall and specific) will be addressed through this action-oriented task?
- ✓ What are the learning goals, expressed in student friendly language? (i.e., what students are expected to know, to say, to do, and to understand)
- ✓ What are the success criteria? (While these are co-constructed with students, the teacher has to think about what the evidence of learning will be ahead of working with the students.)
- ✓ What are some authentic or real-life situations that provide the context for communication?
- ✓ How might I set a context for the identified learning? (e.g., activate prior knowledge and experiences, connect to topic being studied, set stage for new learning)
- ✓ How will I scaffold new learning? (e.g., explicit teaching and modelling, shared and guided practice and rehearsal, varied groupings)
- ✓ What strategies and tools could I use to monitor the quality of oral production and interaction during small-group work (e.g., mini-conferences, self and peer assessment forms, use of audio and/or visual digital recorders)?
- ✓ What action-oriented tasks would allow students to consolidate and apply learning? (e.g., demonstration of achievement, reflection on learning, goals and next steps)

Suggestions for Further Reading

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