

From Communicative to Action-Oriented: A RESEARCH PATHWAY

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



About the Author

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NOTE TO THE READER



Note to the Reader:

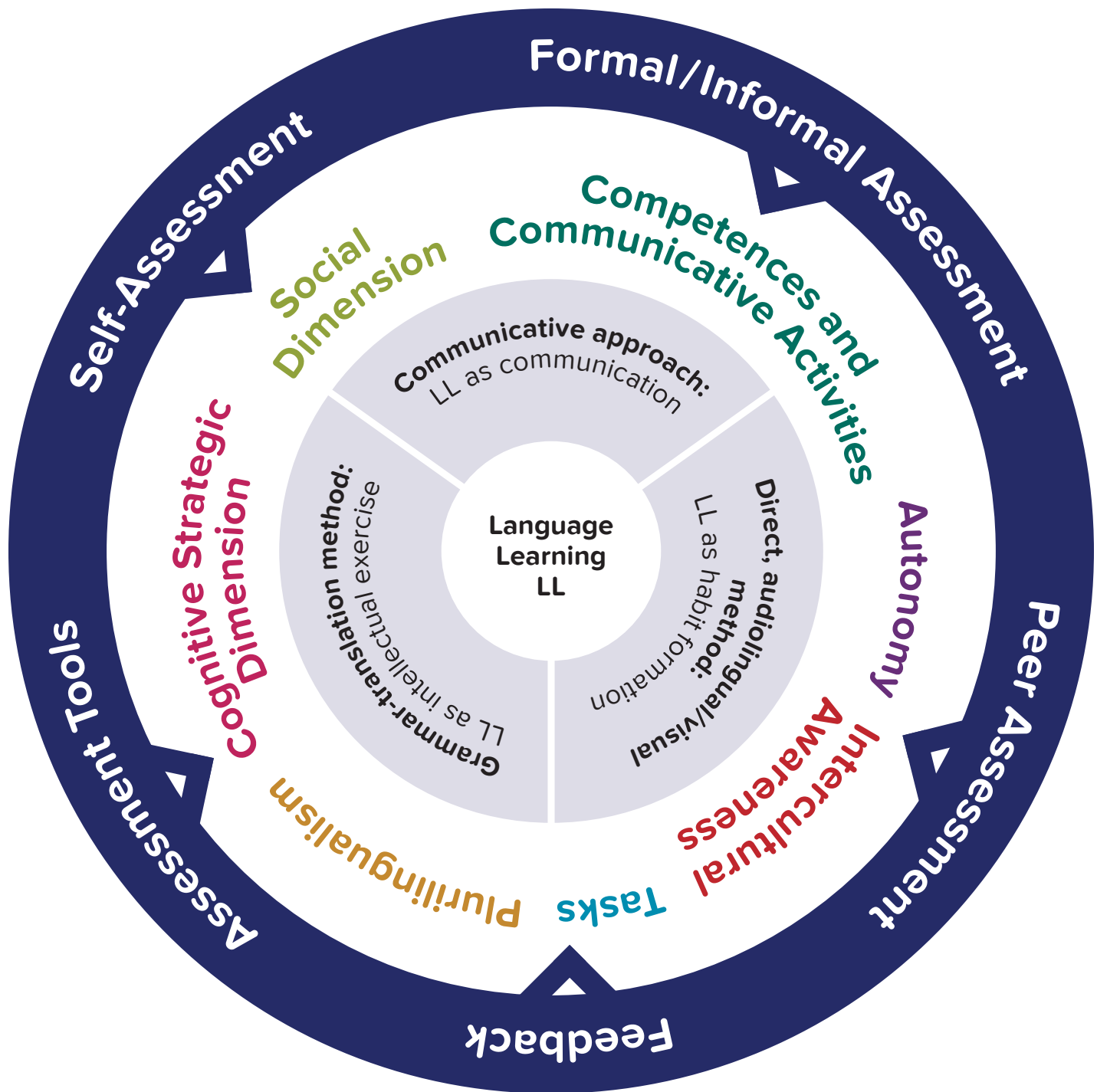
In this guide, you will encounter the following two icons. The legend below explains their significance:

	This icon notes where sections of the text have practical implications for the classroom. Educators are encouraged to think of ways in which the highlighted content might inform their planning, instruction and assessment practices.
	This icon identifies relevant resources for further reading.

On the following page is a diagram that represents the contribution of the action-oriented approach to language education as well as the new understanding of the role of assessment. The diagram is presented as a series of concentric circles in order to highlight the evolution of language education from the older methods, and from the communicative approach, to the complex vision of the action-oriented approach and its principles. The outermost circle, assessment, influences all the elements that characterize the action-oriented approach.



The Action-Oriented Approach





Preface

This guide and the accompanying poster form part of the resource titled *Theory into Action: From the Communicative to the Action-Oriented Approach*. Designed to help professionals engaged in every level of language teaching, they provide an understanding of the foundational principles of the vision proposed by the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR); in particular, the foundational principles of the action-oriented approach.

These two documents draw on the advances that have been made in applied research, yet are written in plain, accessible language. They are designed to provide language teachers with points of reference for navigating the complexity of the CEFR and for fully grasping the strides that language teaching has made in recent decades, particularly the transition from the communicative approach to the action-oriented approach.

The guide contains eight chapters, leading readers through the maze of the CEFR. Along the way, they discover concepts and tools and learn ways to integrate them into their own thinking processes and work in the classroom.

Beginning with a brief historical overview in **Chapter 1**, which places the CEFR in its proper context and helps to understand the choices that were made, the guide describes the transition from the communicative approach to the action-oriented approach. **Chapter 2** describes advances in the research that explain how this transition came about. Analyzing a number of the key terms, this chapter introduces the essential elements of the communicative approach. This leads to an exploration of the transition from the communicative approach to the action-oriented approach and, especially, of the contributions of the CEFR. **Chapter 3** begins with the concept that marks the transition from communicative to action-oriented: that of the social agent. With this new vision of the learner as a social agent, it is possible to analyze the role that action plays in the construction of learning. Action, in turn, makes it possible to contextualize other key notions such as goal, needs, social context, strategy, task, and competence. **Chapter 4** provides an understanding of the genesis of the notion of competence, the terminological choices made in the CEFR, and the complementarity between competence and communicative activity. Once readers have a clear understanding of some of the key concepts of the action-oriented approach, they will understand the new vision of the task and its key role in language learning/teaching. **Chapter 5** plays a central role in the guide, analyzing the task from two perspectives — conceptual and practical — and offering a number of examples for reflection. **Chapter 6** takes the concepts that have been introduced and reframes them within the broader and more dynamic perspective of plurilingualism. **Chapter 7** explores the learner/social agent's responsibilities and autonomy, and looks at strategies. **Chapter 8** presents a vision of assessment that is transparent, rigorous, and consistent with the action-oriented approach.

This guide was not designed to cover the content of the CEFR exhaustively or as a comprehensive treatment of the action-oriented approach. Nor is this guide a prescriptive tool. Rather, its goal is to support teachers to understand key concepts and to help them in their own process of thinking about, understanding, implementing, and adapting the action-oriented approach to their own environment. This guide provides a conceptual framework for the other components of the resource, *From Communicative to Action-Oriented*; in particular, the lesson plans and the lesson plan guide, which provide teachers with an overall vision that is coherent and grounded in clear principles.

The poster can be thought of as a roadmap for teachers to navigate the conceptual complexity of language teaching/learning. The guide can be seen as a tool that fleshes out these concepts and brings them to life in such a way that teachers can use them in their own professional path.

We hope you enjoy reading this guide and using these tools!



From communicative...

Learn the language,
not about the
language

Meaningful target
language use

Real-life
situations

Communicative
functions

Authentic
material

Four
skills

Pair/Group
work

Task-based

Linguistic
+ general
competences

Key role of
positive
assessment

Communicative
activities
(of reception,
production,
interaction, mediation)

Strategic/process
oriented

Learner's
responsibility/autonomy

Intercultural awareness

Plurilingualism

...to action-oriented

Chapter 1. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Introduction and Historic Overview

Interest in the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*, or CEFR as it is commonly known, has been growing in Canada's education community for a number of years. Increasingly, language professionals, teachers, researchers in the field of language education, language education specialists, administrators, parents, and students of all ages are curious about the CEFR and are expressing interest in it.

For institutions and professional associations in the education community, the CEFR appears to be acting as a catalyst for discussion and innovation. Over time, these discussions have become richer and more focused, with efforts both to find ways to adapt the principles of the CEFR to the Canadian context and to rethink language teaching/learning in Canada to align it with the CEFR's core principles.

This interest in a European document beyond the borders of Europe is not a uniquely Canadian phenomenon; indeed, since it was first published, the CEFR has gained extraordinary exposure in every part of the world. It has been translated into approximately 40 languages and the interest it generates shows no signs of slowing down.

Why this extraordinary level of interest? What was the genesis of the CEFR? What is its place in the field of language education?

We will attempt to answer these questions and many others in this guide. First, however, a look at the historical context in which the CEFR emerged is in order.

The CEFR: A Brief Background

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) is a tool that was created in Europe in the 1990s, and a hardcopy version of it was published in English and French in 2001. The birth of the CEFR is linked not only to advances in the field of language education, but also to the social and political changes that were sweeping through Europe in the late 1980s. In 1989, a single event changed the geography of Europe radically: the fall of the Berlin Wall. This event created the conditions for a redefinition of the European space, geographically and politically, as well as for social, economic, and linguistic mobility on a massive scale. The fall of the Berlin Wall is the most recent change in a centuries-long series of changes in the Old World's political, linguistic, and cultural landscape, which has been marked by a continual pattern of change, restructuring, and reconfiguring.

With Europe's new open borders came exponential growth in trans-border mobility. Together with migration on a global scale, this



This symposium was an initiative of several Swiss institutions, including Switzerland's federal government.

Founded in 1949, with 47 member nations, the Council of Europe is Europe's largest and oldest institution.



To learn more, see: Hymes, 1972; Widdowson, 1978; van Ek, 1975; Canale & Swain, 1980

brought an increased awareness of the role and importance of language for both individuals and for societies.

It is no accident, therefore, that the foundational act leading to the creation of the CEFR came in 1991, just after the fall of the Berlin Wall, at an intergovernmental symposium in Rüşchlikon, Switzerland. The symposium, which had been given the evocative title, *Transparency and Coherence in Language Learning in Europe: Objectives, Evaluation, and Certification*, culminated in a recommendation to the Council of Europe for the creation of a comprehensive, transparent, and coherent framework of reference describing levels of language proficiency and comparing examinations, diplomas, and degrees in Europe.¹ Ten years later, after years of intensive work and a number of revisions to incorporate feedback from stakeholders, the final version of the CEFR was published.

Initially, the CEFR was meant as a guide for comparing objectives and qualifications internationally, thereby facilitating personal and professional mobility in Europe. However, the group of experts working on the CEFR decided to give it a more ambitious purpose. John Trim, who was the Director of the Council of Europe's Modern Languages Projects at the time, grasped the importance of linking evaluation to teaching and learning from the very beginning, creating a triad in which all three elements were inextricably connected.

The CEFR: A Tool for Language Teaching, Learning, and Assessment

The CEFR is one of the Council of Europe's many projects,² each a milestone on the path toward the paradigm shift that the Council is advocating.

THE CEFR defines itself as a “descriptive” tool, rather than as a “prescriptive” tool; it integrates concepts from a number of different theoretical studies.

As will be explained in greater detail in Chapter 2, the concept of “communicative competence” remains foundational to the CEFR. Nevertheless, the CEFR has embraced a broader notion of competence that now includes the capacity to act with ever-increasing autonomy.

The CEFR's core objective is to provide a common language to assist professionals involved in the teaching and learning of languages at all levels in their respective practices and missions. It is to provide a **common foundation** upon which to organize the entire range of language proficiency into six general levels, expressed using positive descriptions of communicative language activities of comprehension, production, interaction, and mediation that learners perform through meaningful tasks that draw on a variety of competences, both linguistic and general.



The CEFR provides tools, principles, and resources for the development of language curricula, textbooks, and programs to support the teaching and learning of various languages, as well as assessment tools.

What is CEFR's place in the vast field of language teaching, vis-à-vis the evolution of methodologies and approaches and the choice of theoretical frameworks of reference? What objectives does it support in the area of education policy? What possibilities does it suggest for linking theory and practice? Or for linking teaching and assessment? These are some of the questions that will be explored in the chapters that follow.

Notes

1. At the same time, the Swiss delegation proposed the development of a European Language Portfolio (ELP), in which an individual could keep a record of his or her foreign language experience and qualifications. The ELP is a tool designed to accompany the CEFR, acting as an intermediary between the approach advocated by the CEFR and the language learner (Little, 2011).
2. The work of the Language Policy Division of the Council of Europe played a key role in the advancement and dissemination of innovations in language teaching; in particular, the publication of *Threshold Level* in 1975 and its publication in French as *Niveau Seuil* in 1976. *Threshold Level* marked a key moment in the development of language curricula and textbooks based on the communicative approach.





Chapter 2. From Communicative to Action-Oriented: Tracing a Path

Since it first became a distinct area of study, language teaching has undergone many important changes. In the space of just over a century, many differing points of view on language teaching, often diametrically opposed, have emerged. Each reflected a very different vision of what learning a language actually means. Does learning a language mean memorizing vocabulary, learning rules, and then applying them? Or does it mean that a new language is absorbed by osmosis, the way an infant learns his or her mother tongue? Does one learn a language through conditioning and by mechanically repeating a model? Or, conversely, is learning a language a creative form of cognitive development? Finally, given the close connection between language and communication, does learning a new language mean primarily — or perhaps even exclusively — learning to communicate in that language?

Each of these notions and concepts was used to develop methods for language teaching. For years, advances in language teaching appeared to be in reaction to what had gone before — picture a pendulum swinging back and forth — and teachers were expected to apply these methods strictly in order to ensure that the desired results were achieved.

These opposing views of what it means to learn a language are perhaps best exemplified in the grammar-translation method and the audio-lingual method.

At one end of the pendulum's swing is the grammar-translation method, which applied to modern languages the methods that had been used to teach dead languages (i.e., Latin and Classical Greek). A language was seen as a set of rules and a number of exceptions to those rules, which students were expected to master. Oral language skills were of secondary importance; the form of the texts used in the classroom was more important than their meaning and this was thought to be true of literary texts as well. The sentences used for learning were often artificial; lists of words were memorized, out of context, along with their translations. The grammar-translation method was said to “develop a learner's intellectual faculties” (Germain, 1993, p. 103; our translation). In other words, it developed a learner's ability to decipher a code and then use it, primarily to understand written texts.

At the other end of the swing was the audio-lingual method. A language was seen as a type of human behaviour — a set of conditioned reflexes. Language learning was believed to consist primarily of memorization and the acquisition of automatic linguistic reflexes. The foreign language was to be spoken exclusively in the classroom, because the mother tongue was primarily viewed as a source of interference. It was believed that, through repetitive exercises and imitation, students would learn the structures of the language and be able to use them in new situations.

Towards Change

As we have mentioned, the notion of method implies rigidity; methods are “turnkey” products that teachers are required to apply in the classroom. In addition to this rigidity, for many years, the focus was on language as an object of learning, not on the learner learning the language. It was not until the 1970s that this understanding of language teaching began to change on both sides of the Atlantic.

Two concepts helped to bring about this change: the concept of communicative competence, and the concept of language needs.

Communicative competence emphasizes that language is communication first and foremost, and the goal is precisely to prepare learners to be able to communicate. The notion of language needs contends that language teaching must be closely linked to the learner for whom it is intended and to the context in which it is delivered.



This shift in perspective paved the way for the communicative approach. Earlier visions of language teaching held that the end goal was grammatical competence or lexical competence. With the communicative approach, the goal of language teaching became communicative competence, which became central to pedagogical practices.

Not only did the goal of teaching change, the role of the teacher changed as well. It was no accident that the word *approach* was now used to articulate this new vision of language teaching. An approach is far less structured than a method and gives the teacher far greater latitude. The teacher is no longer someone who simply follows and applies a set of strict rules designed by experts; he or she is expected to draw on principles and techniques to prepare activities and design learning that is adapted to the needs of learners.

The following figure helps define these terms:

Approach	An approach refers to the theories that describe language and language learning and which provide principles that inform language teaching. It describes how people acquire a language and makes statements about the conditions, which promote successful language learning. It also describes how a language is used.
Method	A method is the practical realization of an approach. The originators of a method have made decisions about types of activities, the roles of teachers and learners, materials, and program organization. Methods include various procedures and techniques.
Procedure	A procedure is an ordered sequence of techniques, usually described in terms such as <i>first you do this, then you do that...</i> For example, a common procedure used when working with an authentic document such as a video sequence involves pre-viewing activities such as eliciting hypotheses based on silent viewing or showing the first frame, followed by a first viewing supported by a true/false exercise to complete, and then a subsequent viewing and activities in order to come to a more detailed understanding.
Technique	One example of a technique is the silent viewing mentioned in the sequence above.

Adapted from Harmer, 2001, pp. 78–79

The advent of the communicative approach in language teaching constituted a major shift whose impact would be felt for decades. There were, of course, local adaptations. However, the guidelines remained the same, regardless of the country in which they were adopted.

Highlights of the Communicative Approach

Why was the communicative approach such a radical departure from previous understandings of language teaching and learning?

Linguist Dell Hymes’ notion of “communicative competence” (1972) as the ability to use language meaningfully in specific real-life situations shifted the paradigm for language teaching. For specialists of language education and teachers who had been working within the constraints of method, communicative competence was truly liberating. This paradigm shift opened up the possibility of teaching language in a way that reflected real life. Theorists of the communicative approach understood that language varies according to the situation and the message that the speaker or writer wants to convey.



Various aspects of communicative competence are described in seminal works from that time such as:

Grammatical, sociolinguistic, and strategic	(Canale & Swain, 1980)
Grammatical, sociolinguistic, strategic, and discursive	(Canale, 1983)
Linguistic, discursive, referential, and sociocultural	(Moirand, 1982)
Linguistic, referential, sociocultural, sociolinguistic, and strategic	(Bergeron, Desmarais & Duquette, 1984)

A number of foundational resources made it possible to develop curricula consistent with the communicative approach. These included, among others, *Threshold Level* (van Ek, 1975), subsequently published in French as *Niveau Seuil* (1976); *The Notional-Functional Syllabus* (Wilkins, 1976); *Teaching Language as Communication* (Widdowson, 1978); and *Enseigner à communiquer en langue étrangère* (Moirand, 1982).

It was indeed a great change, and it quickly became apparent to all of the stakeholders — especially teachers and researchers — that an approach to a phenomenon as complex as human communication involves changes on many levels, and that this approach requires a structure or framework of principles.

What were the foundational principles of the communicative approach?

As the goal of teaching is communication, instead of studying a language as a phenomenon or as an object, students would now acquire a tool — language — in order to communicate a message either orally or in writing.

Furthermore, it became clear that conveying a message involves much more than communicating information. Language has many functions beyond communicating information. Language is used to express emotion, make contact, articulate thoughts, and elicit a reaction from a listener.

With the publication of *Threshold Level by the Council of Europe*,¹ for the first time, language was divided not into grammatical structures, but into a list of concepts and functions defined according to minimum needs.

Language functions or communicative intentions made it possible to use the target language effectively in situations that involved communication. Introducing oneself, asking for directions, ordering a meal, and purchasing a train ticket are typical examples found in textbooks. These functions take place within notions such as time, space, social relations, and so forth.

We can say that language is used to accomplish speech acts in given contexts and situations. Through a speech act, a speaker seeks to act upon a listener through his or her words. Examples of speech acts include asking, instructing, affirming, and begging; each of these speech acts can be expressed differently.

There are different ways to complete a speech act. The words and expressions vary depending on the message, the context, and the situation. What is more, the same words and expressions can be used to convey different messages.

Language is a complex phenomenon and language teaching must take this complexity into account. Language cannot simply be presented as a set of rules to be learned, and language learning cannot be reduced to imitation. **Learners must learn the language, not just *about* the language.**



If the goal of language teaching is to ensure that the learner is able to communicate in this language, sending messages and accomplishing speech acts, the usage of language in the classroom **must serve this purpose**. Rather than endlessly repeating with the aim of memorizing or dissecting the language, particularly its grammatical structures, students must **use the target language in meaningful ways** to communicate a message either orally or in writing. Using the target language to communicate is what provides opportunities for modelling in the classroom and prepares students for communication outside the classroom.

Grammar is only one component of “communicative competence.” Indeed, knowledge of the rules and structures of grammar and of the vocabulary is a “*necessary, yet insufficient* condition for communication” (Germain, 1993, p. 203; our translation). In order to communicate effectively, one must know not only how a language works, but also what parts of the language to use and when. These vary depending on the situation, the context, the listener, and the communication intention. For example, we speak very differently to members of our family, friends, co-workers, and strangers. As mentioned above, the fact that some expressions can be used to convey very different messages adds to the complexity of language.

Use of the communicative approach aims to bring real life into the classroom. **Teaching/learning is organized around real-life situations**, as demonstrated by the **chapter headings in the textbooks that are used in this approach**. The idea is to suggest situations that make it possible to use language to transmit information, implying certain choices of what needs to be said and how to say it. Situations conducive to an exchange with other speakers are also suggested.

With the communicative approach, the vision of vocabulary and vocabulary teaching/learning changes as well. There is a shift away from memorizing lists of words and toward the context in which the communication is taking place. The supports selected and studied are not created artificially for the classroom in order to present the structures that the students are required to assimilate. **Priority is given to authentic materials; supports are purposefully selected from real-life sources (newspaper articles, radio programs, advertising, excerpts from books, video clips, and so forth), above all to reflect the meaning and themes being covered**. Vocabulary is introduced not in a rigid progression, but rather following a spiral approach as these authentic documents are studied.

With the communicative approach, the learner’s role changes, and so does the teacher’s. **The learner not only becomes a communicator engaged in the negotiation of meaning, but also takes greater responsibility for his or her learning**. The teacher is by turns “a ‘model,’ a ‘facilitator,’ an ‘organizer’ of activities in the classroom,





an ‘advisor,’ an ‘analyst’ of the needs and interests of learners, a ‘co-communicator,’ etc.” (Germain, 1993, p. 206; our translation). In this new relationship, classroom activities are organized differently. **Pair and group work** become common and important. Instead of being the person who “masters” or “possesses” knowledge, the teacher is the person who fosters, encourages, and orchestrates the work of the students, who are now referred to as “learners” to reflect their new responsibility and autonomy in the process of acquiring language. Learning is now described as “learner-centred” and “learner-focused”; the group dynamic becomes a key factor in support of communication and learning.

Because it marked such a radical departure from rigid, structured, method-based teaching, the communicative approach and its core principles of authenticity, context, oral interaction, and learner-centredness took time to be adopted.

There have been many misinterpretations and misapplications of the approach due to a lack of understanding of it rather than to flaws in the approach itself. On the one hand, the principle of organizing learning around real-life situations has not always been applied; instead, learning situations were organized around the teaching of the rules of grammar, which continued to be the measuring stick of progress, with only lip service being paid to real-life situations as the organizing principle. Some textbooks integrated the communicative approach superficially, with an overemphasis on oral communication to the detriment of written language skills and a solid grasp of the grammar. Faced with the responsibility of implementing this new approach, many teachers felt alone and overwhelmed as a result. Over time, this situation has changed. A new wave of textbooks has been published that identify **four skills** (see Chapter 4) as essential for language courses: aural comprehension, written comprehension, oral production, and written production. Progress starts to be based on the principle of a pathway of learning extending from the known to the unknown, from the simple to the complex, and from the general to the specific. Finally, each teaching unit starts to include an important component focusing on reflection on the language and language awareness, making it possible to study the grammatical structures in context.

From Communicative to Action-Oriented: The Introduction of the CEFR

As we have seen, with the advent of the communicative approach, language teaching underwent a paradigm shift. The communicative approach introduced foundational concepts such as authenticity in both the situations and the resources that are used. Another concept is communication goals. This approach places the learner at the centre of the learning process and places communication at the forefront. In short, the communicative approach changed the vision of language teaching/learning. And, like any profound change, it took time. There were high and lows as well as modifications, additions, and changes. This entire process and the research and dialogue that accompanied it resulted in a body of knowledge that enriched the communicative approach and shone a light on its limitations, creating the conditions for the emergence of the CEFR.

The CEFR incorporates the advances that were made with the communicative approach and takes them to the next level, proposing a fuller and more thorough vision capable of linking teaching and learning, objectives and evaluation, the individual and the social, the classroom and the world beyond.

The CEFR takes on the lofty goal of describing language use and language learning, and offers a synthesis of this description right from the beginning:



The characteristics of any form of language use and learning

Language use, embracing language learning, comprises the actions performed by persons who as individuals and as social agents develop a range of competences, both general and in particular communicative language competences. They draw on the competences at their disposal in various contexts under various conditions and under various constraints to engage in language activities involving language processes to produce and/or receive texts in relation to themes in specific domains, activating those strategies which seem most appropriate for carrying out the tasks to be accomplished. The monitoring of these actions by the participants leads to the reinforcement or modification of their competences. (CEFR, p. 9)

The CEFR adopts a very general view of language use and language learning:

A comprehensive, transparent and coherent frame of reference for language learning, teaching and assessment must relate to a very general view of language use and learning. (CEFR, p. 9)

The CEFR proposes a new action-oriented approach, which it describes in these terms:

The approach adopted here, generally speaking, is an action-oriented one in so far as it views users and learners of a language primarily as ‘social agents,’ i.e. members of society who have tasks (not exclusively language-related) to accomplish in a given set of circumstances, in a specific environment and within a particular field of action. While acts of speech occur within language activities, these activities form part of a wider social context, which alone is able to give them their full meaning. We speak of ‘tasks’ in so far as the actions are performed by one or more individuals strategically using their own specific competences to achieve a given result. The action-based approach therefore also takes into account the cognitive, emotional and volitional resources and the full range of abilities specific to and applied by the individual as a social agent. (CEFR, p. 9)

This description, which is no doubt far from clear upon first reading, contains a series of key words that we will clarify over the next few chapters. This will enable us to understand just how far the action-oriented approach has come since the communicative approach, while at the same time encompassing the advances that the communicative approach has made in the field of language education.

We shall begin with the concept of the social agent.

Note

1. The *Threshold Level* is a syllabus inventory produced through a project of the Council of Europe. It lists situations, activities, functions, topics, notions (general and specific), forms and degrees of skill. The specifications for the different languages have been produced by national teams. The first was developed for English (*Threshold Level*, 1975), followed by the specification for French (*Un Niveau Seuil*, 1976). New editions of both specifications have been produced and published more recently. The English and French documents have been a model for specifications for other languages.

Following the publication of the CEFR, Reference Level Descriptors (“profiles”) have been produced for all the levels in different languages, and this work is still in progress (see the Council of Europe dedicated page: http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/dnr_en.asp).

The specifications for English can be found on the “profiles” website: <http://www.englishprofile.org/index.php/resources/t-series>.





Chapter 3. Learners As Social Agents

In order to understand the action-oriented approach, one must first understand the foundational idea of learners as social agents.

To clarify and provide better understanding of this idea, here again is the quotation from the end of Chapter 2 explaining the action-oriented approach.

The approach adopted here, generally speaking, is an action-oriented one in so far as it views users and learners of a language primarily as ‘social agents’, i.e. members of society who have tasks (not exclusively language-related) to accomplish in a given set of circumstances, in a specific environment and within a particular field of action. While acts of speech occur within language activities, these activities form part of a wider social context, which alone is able to give them their full meaning. We speak of ‘tasks’ in so far as the actions are performed by one or more individuals strategically using their own specific competences to achieve a given result. The action-based approach therefore also takes into account the cognitive, emotional and volitional resources and the full range of abilities specific to and applied by the individual as a social agent. (CEFR, p. 9)

Working with this description, let us see if we can determine why the notion of the social agent brings an element of innovation to the vision proposed by the communicative approach.



The great virtue of the communicative approach was that, in introducing the notion of “learner-centred learning,” the focus of the educative action moved out from behind the teacher’s desk and into the classroom. In the process, the notion of “needs” also played a key role, as we saw in Chapter 2. Instead of proposing, or imposing, preconceived content that had been designed elsewhere, the focus became developing contents (functional, lexical, and grammatical) that were based on the needs (real or presumed real) of learners.

The learning was organized around a series of language functions and speech acts, from the lowest levels onwards, that all learners needed to learn how to perform, for example, introducing oneself, asking for information, making a purchase, etc. These were then used to build up learning situations based on the language needs necessary to accomplish the speech acts that the communicative task entailed.

Bit by bit, new situations were added. These required either new functions and new speech acts or the application of previously acquired functions and speech acts, but at a greater level of difficulty, in a spiral progression.



Here is a straightforward example:

Function/ Speech Act	Informal Situation (involving two friends)	Generic Formal Situation	Formal Situation Involving Work Colleagues
Saluer quelqu'un Se présenter	A ; Salut, ca va? Je m'appelle Max et toi? B :	A : Bonjour, je m'appelle Maximilien Deschamps (ils se serrent la main) B : A : Enchanté	A : Bonjour, je m'appelle Maximilien Deschamps. Je suis le nouveau directeur des ressources humaines (ils se serrent la main) B : Ravi de faire votre connaissance

Another typical entry point in the communicative approach was the thematic entry point, which is often linked to the one just described. For example, if the theme is “making a purchase,” learners will be exposed to written or audio documents on the theme of purchases and guided through speech acts to develop the competence they need to make a purchase.

The underlying approach is still fairly linear; the focus is on the learner who, through exposure to authentic situations and documents, and with the support of the language resources provided, succeeds in mastering the speech acts needed to perform the task. The goal, of course, is to enable the learner to increase his or her communicative competence.

However, as we have just seen, according to the CEFR, speech acts only have meaning if they are actions carried out in a social context. The CEFR states that “Each act of language use is set in the context of a particular situation within one of the domains (spheres of action or areas of concern) in which social life is organised” (p. 45).

In fact, social actions always have a goal other than language. We read in order to understand or glean information or simply for the pleasure of reading. We speak and write in order to persuade, inform, help, argue, defend ourselves, and so on.



Learning is constructed around action. Users/learners of a language are called upon to act and this action implies strategic activation of competences in order to achieve a particular outcome.

What does this mean in concrete terms?

As we have just mentioned, we do not read in order to read, nor do we speak in order to speak. In real life, we read or speak as a means of achieving a specific goal other than (or in addition to) a language goal.

In the action-oriented approach, the learner must be aware of this goal and the nature of the task that he or she must accomplish. The learner must understand what the accomplishment of this task entails in terms of language activities and non-language activities. The learner must be aware of his or her needs, strengths, and weaknesses with respect to this task — in other words, what he or she already knows and already knows how to do — and what he or she still needs to learn in order to maximize the likelihood of successfully accomplishing the task.

However, the user/learner is not alone in this process. The CEFR emphasizes the social nature of actions. Clearly, different tasks require different levels of co-operation with others (other users or learners). However, in performing even the most solitary task, a user/learner must at least consult materials produced by other individuals, and this task will generally have an impact beyond the user/learner performing it.

In reminding us that the learner is a social agent, the CEFR emphasizes the contextual and situated nature of tasks and the importance of strategy and co-operation in the use of language and, *a fortiori*, in the learning of language. According to the CEFR, it must be remembered at all times that this social agent, this user/learner, this individual, is not a neutral being. Not only is the social context in which the user/learner acts important, the user/learner's mental context is important as well. It filters and interprets the external context or situation. And the form that this interpretation or perception takes will depend on many different factors: physical, cultural, practical, cognitive, affective, emotional, etc.

There is a constant back-and-forth between the individual dimension and the social dimension and between the social context and the mental context. The user/learner's representations, capacities, and mental processes influence his or her social action and, therefore, his or her learning. In turn, this social action and learning influence the user/learner's representations, processes and capacities.



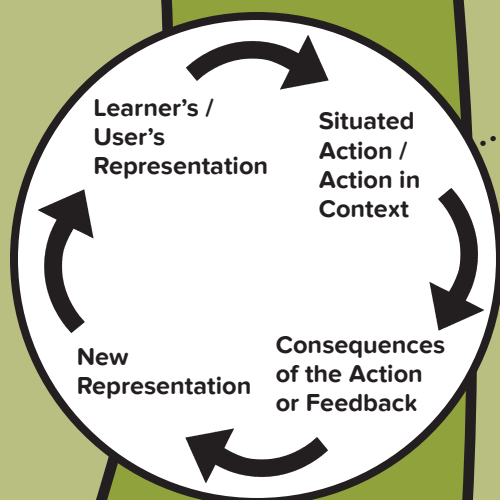


The external context is filtered and interpreted through the user's:

- perceptual apparatus
- attention mechanisms
- long-term experience, affecting memory, associations and connotations
- practical classification of objects, events, etc.
- linguistic categorisation in the user's mother tongue

These factors influence the user's observation of the context. The extent to which the observed context provides the mental context for the communicative event is further determined by considerations of relevance in the light of the user's:

- intentions in entering into communication
- line of thought: the stream of thoughts, ideas, feelings, sense, impressions, etc., attended to in consciousness
- expectations in the light of previous experience
- reflection: the operation of thought processes upon experience (e.g. deduction, induction)
- needs, drives, motivations, interests, which lead to a decision to act
- conditions and constraints, limiting and controlling the choices of action
- state of mind (fatigue, excitement, etc.), health and personal qualities (see section 5.1.3) (CEFR, p. 50)



This is a very dynamic process. For the CEFR, the notion of the social agent implies genuine interaction between individuals and between the individual and the external context. Each learner has experiences and has contact with an ever-widening number of other individuals, and this helps to define and shape his/her identity. The learner becomes aware of his or her own knowledge and competences, and uses them in and for social action. In turn, through this social action and this sharing of language, the learner receives feedback that helps him or her to keep building up knowledge and competence. In other words, the learner acts in order to learn; he or she does not learn in order to act.

Thus, the communicative approach must be completed by a focus on action. The activities performed by the learner/social agent take place in specific situations and for a specific reason. They are not simply a pretext for communication.

The contextual nature of the tasks that the user/learner is required to accomplish implies the existence of conditions and constraints and the need to activate competences in order to address them.



“Conditions and constraints are what moved the communicative approach in the direction of the communic’action-oriented approach.” (Bourguignon, 2010, p. 36; our translation)

As we shall see in Chapter 5, entitled “One Task, Many Tasks,” the concept of constraint plays a key role in the action-oriented approach.

Conditions and constraints ensure that the action is not happening in a vacuum; they require the learner to think and make choices and to activate all of his or her resources; notably, his or her general and linguistic competences.

We shall examine these competences in detail in the next chapter.





Chapter 4. Developing Competences through Communicative Activities

The CEFR defines *competences* as:

the sum of knowledge, skills, and characteristics that allow a person to perform actions (CEFR, p. 9)

This is a very succinct definition of a relatively complex idea — indeed, one that has been the subject of wide debate and numerous studies in various scientific fields. Nevertheless, it is a functional definition for the conceptual framework of the CEFR upon which the action-oriented approach is based. It contains the keyword “action” and therefore links the notion of competence inextricably to the notion of action.

As we have seen in Chapter 3, in the communicative approach, learners were placed in communication situations in the target language. In the action-oriented approach, learners are social agents placed in situations involving social action. In order to be effective in social action, one must know how to activate one’s competences.

The notion of competence has been used in language teaching for a long time. A brief history of the stages through which this notion has passed will enable us to more fully understand the new layers of meaning that it has been given in the action-oriented approach.

In addition, because the CEFR is the result of a compromise among various language teaching traditions, notably the English-speaking and French-speaking traditions, we must also look at the terminology used in these two traditions and the way in which the CEFR has sought to overcome the differences between them.

We shall explore these in greater detail below.

Brief History of the Concept of Competence

The concept of competence is generally understood to have been introduced into the field of linguistics by Chomsky in the 1960s. For Chomsky, competence was “the underlying system of rules that has been mastered by the speaker-hearer” (1965, p. 4). In response to Chomsky’s individual, static, decontextualized definition of competence, Hymes proposed, as we said before, the notion of communicative competence (1972). Hymes’ conception immediately brought in the social dimension because it included not only knowledge, but also the ability to use knowledge, as explained in Chapter 2. A number of models were then proposed, each trying to more clearly define communicative competence by dividing it into its many constituent parts.

Beginning in the late 1960s, the notion of competence also emerged independently in the workplace, in business, and in adult training, where it evolved over time. In these settings, it related strictly to initiative-taking and autonomy on the part of workers and employees and represented a departure from the logic of qualification, which implied a stable relationship between knowledge validated by a degree or diploma and the requirements of a job. Instead, it focused on what workers were able to do, how they adapted to change, and what solutions they came up with in response to the unforeseen (Le Boterf, 1995, 2000). Over the years, with each new technological advance, the notion of the competences that an individual could activate in response to complex situations developed into a fundamental one (Zarifian, 2001). Today, even professional profiles are generally organized in terms of competences.

Vocational training also played a key role in transforming the notion of competence into a concept central to education.

The thinking in these two fields — linguistics and language teaching on the one hand, and business and vocational training on the other — developed in a parallel fashion. Yet, they are not incompatible; indeed, they follow the same logic.



Terminological Challenges and Choices

As mentioned earlier, the CEFR is the product of collaboration amongst a group of experts from a number of different teaching traditions; it reflects contributions from a diverse group of individuals involved in language teaching in myriad ways.

A major difference appeared in the terminology that these experts used to describe “competence”.

In the English-language tradition, a distinction was made in the communicative approach between *skills* and *competences* (British English) or *competencies* (North American English). The term *four skills* referred to written comprehension, aural comprehension, written production, and oral production, and the term *competence/competency* referred, for instance, to sociolinguistic, pragmatic, and grammatical competences or competencies. In French, the term *compétence* was used for both the *four skills* (*les quatre compétences*) and sociolinguistic, grammatical or pragmatic competence or competency. To make matters more complicated, the French word *compétence* can also mean *proficiency* in English, and the French expression “*niveau de compétence*” corresponds to a learner’s *level of proficiency* in the English tradition.

These differences made it necessary to find a common language. The distinction that the CEFR makes between competences (*compétences*) and communicative activities (*activités communicatives*) became very important in the transition from the communicative approach to the action-oriented approach.

Once again, contributions from other fields of knowledge helped to shape the notion of competence, which the CEFR saw as having far greater value and potential for innovation. The concept of competence now referred to something multifaceted; even when used in the singular, this term refers to a number of different constituent elements, all of which are activated to serve the action. Communicative activities (*activités communicatives*) do more than replace the four skills (*quatre compétences*); they also offer a more comprehensive and specific tool for describing a learner’s/social agent’s performance.

Let us look at how competences and communicative activities are organized so that we can more fully grasp and describe the complexity of the action.

Communicative Competence is Multifaceted

As we saw at the beginning of this chapter, competences enable us to act. Action involves far more than knowing and applying a set of grammatical rules and expressions. Action involves doing things. It involves accomplishing tasks. And these tasks require both language and communication to varying degrees.

One of the great advances of the action-oriented approach over the communicative approach is the understanding that “all human competences contribute in one way or another to the language user’s ability to communicate” (CEFR, p. 101). As he or she performs tasks, a learner/social agent activates both general competences and communicative language competences. “General competences are those not specific to language, but which are called upon for actions of all kinds, including language activities” (CEFR, p. 9).

At the same time, as he or she performs tasks, a user/learner of a language is also developing and refining his/her general competences and communicative language competences.

Thus, the action-oriented approach acknowledges that the learner draws upon his or her previous experience and sees this as something of great value.

It sees the learner as a whole person, with values, beliefs, a personality, and a language or languages that he or she already masters to varying degrees. The learner/social agent is not an empty vessel. Rather, the learner possesses knowledge and experience that can be mobilized to face the challenge of learning a language; this prior knowledge and experience provide points of reference and categories for organizing new learning. There is an understanding in the action-oriented approach that the acquisition and refinement of competences is a continuous process, both at school and in the world beyond the school. It is a lifelong



process. This continuous process represents another advance of the action-oriented approach over the communicative approach. It provides the framework or context in which the learner/social agent operates.

The following table contains all of the competences listed in the CEFR, with general competences on the left and communicative language competences on the right.

Table 1: Schematic Organization of Competences According to the CEFR

General Competences				Communicative Language Competences		
Declarative Knowledge	Skills and Know-how	Existential Knowledge	Ability to Learn	Linguistic Competences	Sociolinguistic Competences	Pragmatic Competences
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - knowledge of the world - sociocultural knowledge - intercultural awareness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - practical skills - inter-cultural skills 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - language and communication awareness - general phonetic awareness and skills - study skills - heuristic skills 	Competences: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - lexical - grammatical - semantic - phonological - orthographic - orthoepic 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - social relations - politeness - conventions - expressions of folk wisdom - register differences - dialect and accent 	compétences: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - discourse competence - functional competence

From Piccardo, Berchoud, Cignatta, Mentz, Pamula, 2011, p. 35

As the table above illustrates, linguistic competences include:

- Knowledge of the vocabulary and the ability to use it (lexical competence)
- Knowledge of the rules and structures and the ability to use them correctly (grammatical competence)
- The organization of meaning (semantic competence)
- Hearing and producing sounds (phonological competence)
- The ability to spell correctly (orthographic competence)
- The ability to read from a written text, pronouncing correctly (orthoepic competence)¹

However, linguistic competences are but one of three types of communicative language competence, sociolinguistic, and pragmatic competence being at least as important as the linguistic competence. To illustrate this point, a grammatically correct sentence will not serve the goal of social interaction if it is expressed using the wrong tone, or if the speaker is unable to construct a dialogue with the other speaker, or if two speakers are unable to interact effectively.

Although the communicative approach did make this distinction, the action-oriented approach adds the refinement of linking these competences to other competences relating to the learner's life experience and personality. This multitude of competences perfectly illustrates the multifaceted nature of the notion of competence.

Among these general competences, the ability to learn makes it possible to situate any action or learning along a trajectory that develops over the duration of, and on the basis of, the learner/social agent's experiences. As we shall see in Chapter 5, a learner acts and accomplishes tasks in order to learn; he or she does not learn in order to act. He or she draws on personal experience in order to build up competences.



If the goal is successful action, communicative activities serve the action. Communicative activities have ceased being the end goal of teaching/learning. “To carry out communicative tasks, users have to engage in communicative language activities” (CEFR, p. 57). It is by engaging in communicative language activities that learners/users build up their competences.

Here is how the CEFR defines communicative language activities:

Language activities involve the exercise of one’s communicative language competence in a specific domain in processing (receptively and/or productively) one or more texts in order to carry out a task. (CEFR, p. 10)

The following table further explains this definition.

Communicative Activity		Example
Reception	Oral	Listening to a song or a radio program
	Written	Reading a newspaper article, a book, the instructions for using an appliance, or a recipe
Production	Oral	Making a presentation, delivering a speech, or making an announcement
	Written	Writing a report, a letter, or an email
Interaction	Oral	Talking with a friend or talking on the telephone
	Written	Chatting on the Internet, participating in a blog, or exchanging emails

The CEFR distinguishes between four “types” of activity:

The language learner/user’s communicative language competence is activated in the performance of the various language activities, involving **reception**, **production**, **interaction** or **mediation** (in particular interpreting or translating). Each of these types of activity is possible in relation to texts in oral or written form, or both. (p. 14)

The language activity *mediation* is not elaborated upon in the CEFR, and no specific descriptors for it are provided. For this reason, we have chosen not to include it in this Research Guide. This is not to say that it is not important.

As we can see, there is a major difference between these types of activity, their organization and, especially, their function on the one hand, and the four skills (*les quatre compétences*) of the communicative approach on the other hand. Instead of content organized around one or more skills to be worked on, we find communicative activities, which become actions that the learner/social agent performs in order to build up general competences and communicative language competences. As a social agent, the learner activates competences through communicative activities.

As we shall see in the next chapter, these communicative activities serve as the means to accomplishing the task.



Note

1. The orthoepic competence only refers to the ability to pronounce correctly while reading a written text aloud; it does not imply that the reader understands what he or she is reading.





«The task puts the learner into action; it places the learner in the action. The task must make the learner more autonomous as a user of the language. The task must enable the learner to line up needs and a goal to be achieved, by selecting relevant knowledge and useful skills.» (Bourguignon, 2010, p. 19; our translation)



Chapter 5. One Task, Many Tasks

One of the most emblematic aspects of the transition from the communicative approach to the action-oriented approach is the latter's new vision of the task.

Let's begin with the definition of the task found in the CEFR itself:

Tasks are a feature of everyday life in the personal, public, educational or occupational domains. Task accomplishment by an individual involves the strategic activation of specific competences in order to carry out a set of purposeful actions in a particular domain with a clearly defined goal and a specific outcome (see section 4.1). Tasks can be extremely varied in nature, and may involve language activities to a greater or lesser extent, for example: creative (painting, story writing), skills based (repairing or assembling something), problem solving (jigsaw, crossword), routine transactions, interpreting a role in a play, taking part in a discussion, giving a presentation, planning a course of action, reading and replying to (an e-mail) message, etc. A task may be quite simple or extremely complex (e.g. studying a number of related diagrams and instructions and assembling an unfamiliar and intricate apparatus). A particular task may involve a greater or lesser number of steps or embedded sub-tasks and consequently the boundaries of any one task may be difficult to define. (CEFR, p. 157)

As we can see, this is a fairly broad vision; however, it is based on a series of key words that set the stage and point the way.

Let's analyze these key words in greater detail:

- **Tasks or activities.** The use of the term "activity" as a synonym for task reflects a vision of language teaching/learning that is action-based. The task is no longer seen as the equivalent of an exercise or a simple communication task. The task's goal is no longer limited to placing learners in a communication situation.
- **A feature of everyday life.** Tasks are real; they are not simply an excuse for communication, even less for strict progression of learning. Tasks are real actions; they are anchored in everyday life. They relate to particular situations and they have specific goals. Tasks are not designed around a notion that the learner must learn, or even around a simple communication situation. Tasks recreate what social agents do in everyday life. In daily life, communication comes into play when necessary so that tasks can be performed.



- **Strategic activation** of specific competences. The learner/social agent chooses a goal, — one or more — objectives. In order to achieve these objectives, the learner must act strategically. In other words, he or she must make choices. The more the learner is aware of what he or she must do in order to perform the task, and what general competences and communicative language competences this will require, the more effective he or she will be.
- A set of **purposeful actions**. Instead of performing a series of exercises that do not share a connection, or even performing a series of organized steps in a language progression, the learner/social agent performs a set of purposeful actions that point toward a clearly defined goal — steps that apply specific aspects of language, all of which contribute to a successfully performed task.
- Extremely **varied in nature**. Because each of the steps we have just described exercises different aspects, which implicate language use to a greater or lesser extent, the actions that the learner/social agent will accomplish may be very different.
- **Language activities** are involved to a greater or lesser extent. In the trajectory that leads to successful accomplishment of the task, there will be times when language is used heavily (reception, production, and/or interaction), and there will be other times when language plays a marginal role.
- Quite **simple** or extremely **complex**. Not all tasks are equivalent. Some are very simple, while others are more complex. In other words, some tasks will involve what can be referred to as **sub-tasks**, or steps, that make it possible for the learner to achieve the objective.

In the example provided, that is, “studying a number of related diagrams and instructions and assembling an unfamiliar and intricate apparatus,” we can picture what some of these steps might be:

- 1) A comprehension phase that consists of:
 - Reading and decoding texts by means of images (probably diagrams, symbols, and drawings), but also
 - Activating prior, non-language-related knowledge about similar apparatuses and how they work
- 2) An implementation phase, which:
 - will be more silent if the process only involves one individual
 - will be more “spoken” and interactive if two or more individuals are working together to understand how to proceed and if they are interacting, for example, by means of questions, suggestions, and comments

From this description, we can already see the key role that the task plays in language teaching/learning. The task is a federative tool. **It makes learning tangible, palpable, and meaningful.** A learner does not learn a language as an abstract concept so that one day, he or she can use it, for example, in speaking, reading, or writing, or so that he or she may perform tasks that may or may not relate to everyday life. Rather, a learner performs real-life tasks in order to develop competences and, in the process, learn the language and develop competences. The learner engages in communicative activities with a clear meaning, whose purpose is to help the learner to perform the task.

A task is not synonymous with an exercise. It is not an excuse for using language forms and structures, orally or in writing. A task is a way to launch learners into action in the pursuit of a specific goal. And action is always contextualized. Bourguignon (2010) talks about the *approche communic'actionnelle* or “communic'actional approach,” stating that the goal of the task is to carry out a mission, within a number of conditions and constraints.



The action-oriented task seeks to break down the walls of the classroom and connect it with the outside world. In the communicative vision, shaped in the 1980s and 1990s, the task was seen as class work, involving the students in activities that entailed comprehension, manipulation, production, or interaction in the target language, with an emphasis on content rather than form (Nunan, 2004). In the communicative approach, the task served communication; in the action-oriented approach, it is the reverse. Communication is one means, but not the only means, at the learner's disposal for accomplishing the task. Strategy, reflection, and critical thinking also play an important role.

In the communicative approach, the teacher accompanied the learner, step by step, toward the accomplishment of the task, providing all of the elements that the learner needed and guiding the process. In the action-oriented approach, the focus shifts. **The learner becomes an agent in his or her learning.** The learner is called upon to make choices and grasp the objectives and, therefore, the knowledge and know-how required and the competences he or she must develop. The learner must understand why he or she is doing things and how best to do them. The teacher facilitates this process, helping the learner to become increasingly autonomous.

The task is a federative tool **making it possible to structure learning around moments, actions, and products that are vivid, defined, and concrete.** The learner is not speaking or writing for the teacher or pretending to speak or write to another person. The learner is a social agent who needs to be able to be effective in real life. Clearly, the classroom situation, even if it retains a "real-life" social and interactive nature and "immediacy" as the CEFR states (p. 157), requires that "learners engage in a 'willing suspension of disbelief' and accept the use of the target language rather than the easier and more natural mother tongue to carry out meaning-focused tasks" (CEFR, p. 157). Nevertheless, the approach has moved away from an accumulation of knowledge and know-how and toward a logic of activating competences (both general competences and communicative language competences) in order to achieve an objective. The communicative activities required are not the goal, in and of themselves: learners are not communicating for the sake of communicating. Communicative activities help the learner to perform tasks. For example, they may provide information (reading activities, listening activities). They may make it possible to simulate an exchange (activities involving a dialogue or an exchange of letters or emails). They provide opportunities to produce relevant written and oral texts. Lastly, they provide opportunities for the learner to ponder the structures of language and to appropriate them (activities that create awareness of the grammatical, lexical, sociolinguistic, and pragmatic aspects of the language).

Tasks in the action-oriented approach often involve the creation of a product as the students perform the task. This product may be a brochure for tourists, a blog entry, or a fundraising project for a humanitarian cause. "However, not only the specific outcome, but also the process, which leads to the final result, is important for communication in the language classroom: this involves a step-by-step organisation, learners' activation of strategies and competences, consideration of the setting and social forms, as well as materials and supports" (Piccardo et al., 2011, p. 39).

In the action-oriented approach, the path is not clearly marked and the outcome is not really predictable. The role of the student has changed: he or she is expected to act effectively and autonomously in the choices he or she makes and to work in a group and interact with others.

The student is expected to:

- Make judgments about the situation in which he or she finds himself or herself and the issues involved in the task
- Quickly size up the tools at his or her disposal (both linguistic and non-linguistic; for example, general factual knowledge and procedural knowledge, such as where to find information, understanding the cultural context, etc., as well as the ability to organize and plan) and the tools that he or she needs but does not have



- Think about and reflect on how to mobilize the tools at his or her disposal and on the best way to achieve the goal

Obviously, this is not a straightforward process; the learner may encounter difficulties along the way. He or she will need to be guided through the steps in a complex task. Here, the teacher has an essential role to play. Instead of transmitting knowledge and skills and know-how and checking learners' acquisition through exercises and activities with more or less pre-determined outcomes, the teacher is a blend of coach, resource person, advisor, organizer, and facilitator. This is indeed a diverse role. There will, of course, be times when the teacher must also convey a concept or provide an explanation (for example, a grammatical or lexical concept or a suitable text form). There will be times when he/she will have to train learners on the appropriate use of tools (for example, linguistic tools such as a verb form, or other tools such as a reading or listening strategy) in exactly the same way as an athletic coach would explain the function of a muscle or have an athlete execute a specific motion. However, this does not happen in a vacuum, and it does not happen for the sole purpose of accumulating knowledge or performing exercises. Just as the coach's goal is to win the championship, the teacher's role is to increase the likelihood that the student will successfully perform the task. The task becomes the federative moment of both the learner's work and the teacher's work.

Organizing a curriculum around tasks is not straightforward:

Task familiarity, together with prior activation of the learners' competences, can affect the successful performance of the task. Learners' self-esteem, involvement, motivation, states and attitudes towards a task are all affective factors which play a role in task performance. Task difficulty is directly related to learners' competences and individual characteristics. The teacher must therefore take into account all these factors to establish the level of task difficulty, which can be adjusted upwards and downwards. Successful task performance also depends on learners' general and communicative strategies. (Piccardo et al., 2011, p. 39)



In spite of this complexity, this level of planning is completely worthwhile; it enables the teacher to have a long-term vision and to ask him/herself a wide range of questions beyond those that involve language — questions that have to do with cognition, emotion, strategy, relationships, organization, and so forth. **In terms of language, this level of planning provides an opportunity to explore the nature of the texts. This, in turn, provides an opportunity to weave a context for grammatical and lexical content.**



Moving away from the idea of cumulating notions and exercises makes way for the idea of text as a vehicle for learning. In the CEFR, the concept of text is vast: it includes oral texts and written texts, such as business cards, bus tickets, newspaper articles, book excerpts, and wikis, to name just a few. Tasks and texts are closely linked, and both play an important role in everyday life. Most of the tasks we perform involve some sort of text, and all texts have the purpose of performing (and enable us to perform) tasks. Examples of texts in everyday life include bus schedules, city maps, bulletin boards, voice messages, and announcements over a PA system. Planning a task provides an opportunity to think about these different types of text and their linguistic and cultural characteristics. Instead of presenting students with (more or less) authentic materials in order to give them a taste of the target culture, or worse, a semblance of that culture, students work with real texts in order to accomplish real tasks. For example, the act of looking at a train schedule in another language/culture requires a greater level of focus and enables learners to activate a series of strategies for comparing and understanding.

As will be seen from the examples of tasks that follow, these are complex tasks that require the students to make decisions, search for documents and information, work as part of a group, and interact with others. Each of these examples entails a final product or performance. However, they do not all have the same level of linguistic difficulty. Example 5 can be adapted to very low levels; Examples 2 and 3 can be proposed at various levels of difficulty.

As mentioned, **the teacher plays an essential role in deciding what level a particular task is suitable for and how to make it doable — for example, suggesting resources, models of subtasks, dialogues, documents, and so on. Texts also play an essential role; this type of task requires the students to put down their textbooks and venture forth, exploring authentic texts from real life.**



One can see that the choice of tasks makes it possible to work on different aspects of language, such as grammar. For instance, Example 2 allows students to work on the present tense; Example 3 allows them to work on past tenses; Example 1 deals mainly with vocabulary, but also numbers; Example 4 draws on different verb tenses, especially the future and conditional tenses in Phase B. The choice of tasks also makes it possible to work on the sociolinguistic dimension (for instance, the dialogue between teenagers will be different from the conversations with adults, the letter to the supermarket managers will require a very formal tone, and so forth) and the pragmatic dimension (for example, asking a salesperson for help picking out a gift). Various tasks also make it possible to work on the cultural dimension, while avoiding stereotypes: the students will always start with what they know,



gradually discovering what they do not yet know. Thus, the teacher must keep in mind the communicative objective (communicative activities to be given priority: reception, production, interaction), the linguistic objective (vocabulary, grammatical structures, sociolinguistic competences, and/or pragmatic competences), and the cultural objective (awareness of cultural differences).

As we shall see in Chapter 8, organizing the course around tasks also makes it possible to link teaching and assessment right away. In fact, the teacher must choose targeted descriptors that make it possible to assess the way in which the student has performed the task, the competences he or she has activated, and the strategies he or she has used.

In order for students to work efficiently, particularly when they are not accustomed to an action-oriented approach, the teacher must help them with their strategic approach, notably during the stages that involve planning the task, making decisions, realizing which competences to activate, understanding their strengths and weaknesses, conducting searches, and reflecting on what they have learned, what they are able to do, and how they do it. Lastly, the teacher must help them to systematize what they have learned from performing the task, in terms of thinking about language structures, sociolinguistic aspects of language, pragmatic aspects of language, the strategies they used, and the cultural aspects they learned.

In Chapter 7, we will focus on strategies. Before doing so, we will see how the new understanding of the task and of the learner as a social agent redefine the function of language and language learning, revealing a more open, dynamic, and evolving vision — a vision of plurilingualism.

Here are some examples of tasks:

Example 1.

The holiday season is fast approaching, and relatives from New Brunswick are coming to stay with your family over the holidays. Your parents are very busy at work—too busy to organize every detail, including the holiday meal. You have three cousins and you need to find a gift for each of them. Your parents need your help. They have asked you to think of a menu and make a shopping list. They have also asked you to buy gifts for your cousins. For this, they have given you a total budget of \$100.

You must prepare a menu for the meal, create a shopping list for the ingredients, and come up with gifts for your cousins to suggest to your parents. You are going to shop for the gifts, asking the salesperson to help you. Unfortunately, one of the gifts that you thought of is not available and you have to find an alternative. Once you have finished, you will show your parents the menu and the shopping list, as well as the gifts you purchased and why you made the choices you did.



Example 2.

Your school has been twinned with a school in Quebec City that is sending a delegation consisting of three teachers and three student representatives. The purpose of the visit is to create exchanges: first, virtual exchanges in the form of emails and computer projects, and then, if possible, student exchanges. The delegation will be staying for three days. You are going to organize the schedule for their visit, including work sessions, an outing in town, a shared meal, and a cultural evening. You will work in small groups, with one organizing the content of the work sessions, one organizing the outing, one organizing the meal, and one organizing the cultural evening. Each group will prepare at least two options and present them to the class. As a class, you will choose one of the options presented by each small group. You will define the entire program and prepare a written document to send to the delegation in Quebec City.

Example 3.

Your school has organized a celebration on Canadian history over the past 60 years. Each class will work on a different aspect (economic development, social trends, lifestyle, etc.) and submit a maximum of three student productions to a final jury. With a group of friends, you will each work on researching your families and their immigration to Canada. You will create your family tree and describe your family's life before and after immigrating. You will create a portrait of your family today (language[s] spoken, traditions, food, etc.). You will prepare a poster and have five minutes to present your work to the class. The class will choose three posters to give the school principal to be posted in the gym. You will also prepare a letter for the posters that are chosen, explaining your choices.

Example 4.

With your Science teacher, you have learned about the problem of intensive farming, or factory farming, of livestock. You were really struck by this problem and you discovered that many of your fellow students didn't know about it or didn't think it was a problem. You decide to take action.

Phase A. Prepare a presentation illustrating the key aspects of the problem. Create a two-page pamphlet that will make readers aware of the problem. Include statistics, studies on the advantages and disadvantages of intensive farming, excerpts of interviews with stakeholders, and photographs of intensive farming. Your pamphlet will summarize the key points of your presentation, which you will present to the entire school.

Phase B. Next, you decide to write a letter to the managers of various supermarket chains, asking them to carry more meat and poultry that has not been produced intensively and to make consumers aware of the problem. You attach a copy of your pamphlet to the letter.

**Example 5.**

You are planning to spend the weekend with your cousins, who live two hours away. Sunday is the birthday of one of your cousins. To get to your cousins' place, you and one of your parents will take the train. He or she asks you to pack your backpack, reminding you that you don't have to take everything, as your cousins will have many of the things you need such as towels, toothpaste, and soap.

However, you have already assembled lots of things and your backpack isn't very big. In addition, each of you wants to bring a birthday present for your cousin, and these presents have to be packed somewhere. Each of you will have to bring a backpack and make sure that it isn't too full.

You create a list of the things that you want to take. You discuss this list with one of your friends, asking for help to decide what to take and what to leave at home. Then, you get help choosing a nice gift for your cousin that is not too big so that it will fit in your backpack. Next, you get your backpack ready and answer questions from your Mom or Dad, who wants to make sure that you have everything you need.





Chapter 6. Language Diversity, Linguistic Profiles, and Plurilingualism

The vision of the learner as a social agent, which is at the centre of both the action-oriented approach and the CEFR, has brought with it a radically new understanding of language teaching. As we have seen, the nature and role of the task have been redefined; the vision of competences is at once richer and more diverse; and the function and typology of communicative activities have far greater specificity. Beyond these changes, however, there is a profound new understanding of the function of languages and how we learn them.

[...] the aim of language education is profoundly modified. It is no longer seen as simply to achieve ‘mastery’ of one or two, or even three languages, each taken in isolation, with the ‘ideal native speaker’ as the ultimate model. Instead, the aim is to develop a linguistic repertory, in which all linguistic abilities have a place. (CEFR, p. 5)

The learner is seen as a social agent acting in and upon his or her environment and is, in turn, influenced by this environment.

Language learning does not happen in a vacuum; it always happens in relation to a context that each individual perceives differently, based on his or her own life experience, expectations, prior knowledge, and disposition.

In today’s society, this context is increasingly characterized by diversity in terms of both language and culture.

The CEFR makes a distinction between multilingualism and plurilingualism. Multilingualism does not take into account the relationship between languages; consequently, it is used to describe “the **coexistence** of different languages in a given society” (CEFR, p. 4). Plurilingualism, on the other hand, emphasizes the relationship between languages; it emphasizes their interdependence and the fact that, for the learner, they are in a dynamic relationship. Indeed,

[...] the plurilingual approach emphasizes the fact that as an individual person’s experience of language in its cultural contexts expands, from the language of the home to that of society at large and then to the languages of other peoples (whether learnt at school or college, or by direct experience), he or she does not keep these languages and cultures in strictly separated mental compartments, but rather builds up a **communicative competence to which all knowledge and experience of language contributes and in which languages interrelate and interact**. (CEFR, p. 4; our emphasis added)

It is important to point out that “acquiring competences in another language and in another culture is not made to the detriment — or even independently — of a student’s own language. It is not about two separate languages and cultures. On the contrary, each language modifies the other (or several others) and this contributes to developing plurilingual competence and intercultural awareness” (Piccardo et al., 2011, p. 21).

The learner/social agent is not an empty vessel; he or she has a mental context, which can be seen as a network with multiple connections in which the mother tongue is (or mother tongues are) ever present. The learner/social agent’s learning experience is structured on the basis of his or her interactions with the context, with others, with institutions, and with texts. Making mistakes is part of the journey, and rather than having a negative connotation, they are seen as a necessary part of learning and as opportunities for transfer. The path of learning is one of reflection and self-examination, and the learner’s growing awareness of his or her successes, failures, strengths, and weaknesses enables him or her to advance along that path.

At one time, it was believed that a learner could (and should) keep each language separate, in order to avoid any mingling or cross-contamination: an idealized “native fluency” was seen as the aim of language learning.








It is now believed — more authentically and realistically — that “the aim is “to develop a linguistic repertory, in which all linguistic abilities have a place” (CEFR, p. 5). For the CEFR, bilingualism is but one example of plurilingualism.






The myth of perfect bilingualism and balanced mastery of two languages has been replaced by the notion of language competence as something that evolves over time.

The notion of evolving competence includes, for example, the understanding that one learner may be better at reception (written or oral or both) than at production or interaction, while another may be better at written activities (comprehension or production) than at oral activities.

Language ...

	A1	A2	B1	B2	C1	C2
						
						
						
						
						

Language ...

	A1	A2	B1	B2	C1	C2
						
						
						
						
						

It is also important to understand that these competence profiles change over time: they document specific moments in time along a learner’s path and may vary based on the circumstances of exposure to the language at school and outside of school. In other words, they evolve. Not only will different learners have different profiles, but each learner will have different profiles at different points in time in the various languages with which he or she comes into contact or that he or she learns formally or informally.

In addition to language profiles, there are cultural profiles. Sometimes the two are superimposable or overlap substantially; however, sometimes they are quite different. An individual may master a language yet have little awareness of the culture(s) of the communities that speak it. Conversely, he or she may be quite familiar with the culture(s) of the communities, yet have little knowledge of the language.

This vision is a far better fit with the new reality of the classroom and the linguistic and cultural diversity of its students. As students now understand that they are not starting from scratch and that they will be using their prior knowledge of various languages to learn a new language, they feel acknowledged and supported in what they can do and in what they have the potential to accomplish. Instead of being seen as additional obstacles, the other languages that learners bring to their learning experiences are now seen as potential resources.

Furthermore, the awareness that languages are not stored in discrete parts of the brain, but rather that languages interact, reframes the learner’s errors as efforts at transfer and hypotheses about the new language rather than as deviations from the norm.

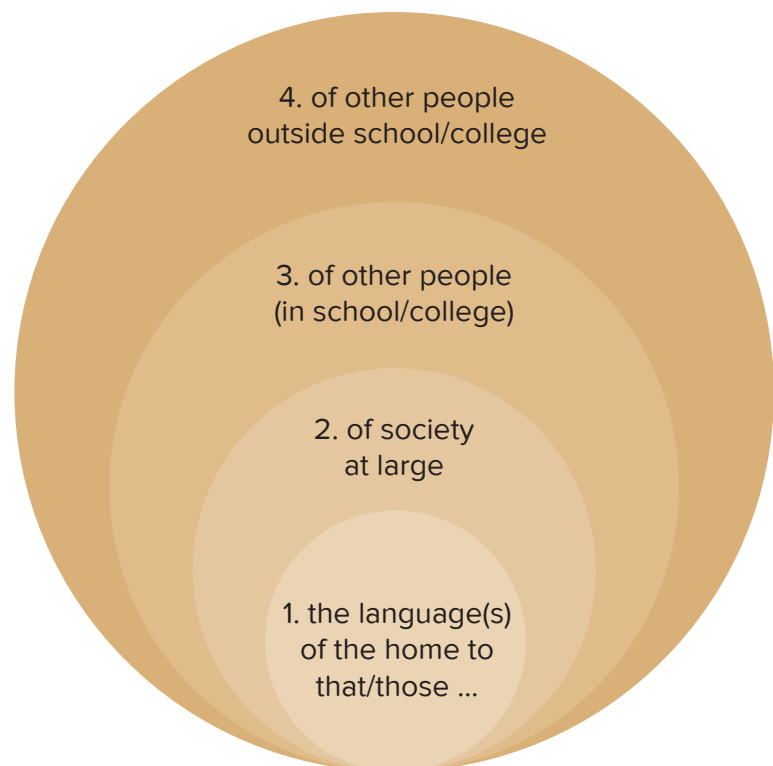


Swain & Lapkin, 2013

Once again, the awareness that trying to maintain strict boundaries between languages is unrealistic and counterproductive makes it possible to work from a perspective of comparison and commonality, rather than distinction and separation. As far as vocabulary is concerned, for example, cognates or words that are similar in both languages, also referred to as ‘true friends,’ can be a boon to learning. Where syntax is concerned, awareness of similarities and differences can also be a powerful tool for learning.

Finally, when it comes to task accomplishment, the use of the language of schooling (i.e., English in an English-language school or French in a French-language school) or of a language shared by students instead of the target language in group work does not mean that less learning is taking place; on the contrary, this allows for more in-depth discussion and sharing, with a view to better performance in the target language. This has been demonstrated in the research

To sum up, plurilingualism, the notion of evolving competence, and the notion of dynamic profiles are part of a vision that offers language learners far more reassurance and support than was available to them in previous visions. This is a vision that values the learner, seeing him or her as an individual capable of thinking, reflecting, making decisions, and questioning the wisdom of his or her own choices. As we shall see in the next chapter, this is a vision that supports and fosters strategic learning.



An individual's language experience...



Note

1. In fact, often there is too much emphasis on ‘false friends,’ i.e., words that have a similar form in two languages but very different meanings.





Chapter 7. Learning as a Reflective, Strategic, and Transferable Process

As we have seen in previous chapters, one of the fundamental characteristics of social action is its dynamism and its adaptability to the context and situation consequently, it is impossible for social agents to anticipate every contingency or to foresee the exact outcome of their actions.

This is the logic that informs the action-oriented approach, which sees the task as a tool for creating conditions conducive to social action. As we have seen, the task is not a pretext for communication. Quite the opposite: effective communication is what enables social agents to be effective in completing a task and achieving a specific goal or goals.

Communication plays such a central role that social agents will do whatever they can to communicate as effectively as possible. They will make choices, watch for reactions to these choices, and modulate their actions based on the reactions they observe. In fact, they will think before, during, and after the action. In other words, they will act strategically.

Strategies are a means the language user exploits to mobilise and balance his or her resources, to activate skills and procedures, in order to fulfil the demands of communication in context and successfully complete the task in question in the most comprehensive or most economical way feasible depending on his or her precise purpose. (CEFR, p. 57)

The strategies are “seen as a hinge between the learner’s resources (competences) and what he/she can do with them (communicative activities)” (CEFR, p. 25)

Strategies play a key role in the successful completion of the task. A strategic learner/social agent knows where he or she is coming from and where he or she wants to go. A strategic learner/social agent is also aware of his or her strengths and weaknesses, how to adapt to the situation and, if unsuccessful, how to further adapt in order to be successful.

According to the strategic vision of learning, the learner is always aware of what he or she is doing, what is happening in the classroom, the reasons why he or she does certain things, and the goals he or she sets. This vision is diametrically opposed to the vision of the learner as someone who is carried along by the current, absorbing language passively by virtue of being immersed in it and automatically transferring unconscious learning to communication situations that require him or her to be active, capable of oral and written productions, and capable of participating in a discussion. The strategic vision represents a giant step toward learner autonomy and a transfer of responsibility from the teacher to the learner. The learner takes charge of his or her own learning experiences.



Oxford, 1989, 1990
O'Malley & Chamot, 1990
Cyr, 1998

The teacher creates conditions conducive to this learning by offering adapted tasks that create logical sequences of experiences that move the learner toward targeted learning goals. The teacher acts as a resource, as a guide, and as an observer able to offer effective feedback.

There are a great many different strategies. Researchers have categorized them and produced lists to help teachers and learners to identify them and use them more intentionally and effectively.

These strategies can be divided into two broad categories: communication strategies and learning strategies.

The CEFR further divides communication strategies into four subcategories: **planning**, **execution**, **evaluation**, and **repair**.

Let's examine what this means in practical terms. When we prepare to read a text, we look at its format (newspaper article, memo, poem, etc.), its title, any images it contains, and perhaps certain key words. In the process, we set expectations and find clues. As we begin to read, we check to see whether our expectations match what we are reading and whether the clues we found assist us in our understanding. We begin to formulate hypotheses and make deductions to construct meaning. We evaluate to determine whether we have understood correctly. Evaluation can involve the use of other texts, for example, questions that guide and/or confirm understanding. Evaluation can also take the form of co-operation with other learners. If necessary, we repair, or revise, our initial assumptions.

It might appear that a learner has the time to perform all of these steps, using strategies intentionally and also evaluating his or her use of them, only when confronted with a written text. In reality, however, the process of planning, execution, evaluation, and repair and the strategies that accompany it are activated for each communicative activity.

For example, when we are called upon to produce an oral text, we think about what we are going to say, about the message and its form, at a pace determined by the time at our disposal and then we make a plan — at least mentally. We begin to speak, trying to follow this plan. Our listeners' facial expressions — the nodding of heads and the taking of notes, or perhaps their blank stares indicating a lack of understanding or interest — help us to determine whether or not we are getting our message across and sparking our listeners' interest. If their response is a blank stare, we seek to repair, for instance, by repeating passages, providing more explanation, and using images and diagrams.

In addition to each of these strategies, for activities that involve interaction we will also need specific strategies such as speaking, co-operation, and requests for clarification.



Now, let's explore the other strategies, those that favour the accomplishment of the task.

As we saw earlier, task performance is not limited to the dimension of communication, as important as this dimension is.

Task performance is a complex process, therefore, involving the strategic interplay of a range of learner competences and task-related factors. In responding to the demands of a task the language user or learner activates those general and communicative strategies which are most efficient for accomplishing the particular task. The user or learner naturally adapts, adjusts and filters task inputs, goals, conditions and constraints to fit his or her own resources, purposes and (in a language learning context) particular learning style. (CEFR, p. 159)

In the strategic vision of language learning found in the action-oriented approach, the learner thinks about what it takes to complete the task, taking into account any external conditions and constraints. The learner also thinks about his or her own strengths and weaknesses, about the resources that he or she will need and to which he or she will have access, and about making the best possible choices, taking all of these factors into consideration.

What does this mean in practical terms?

Let's go back to one of the examples of tasks presented in Chapter 5. In Example 1, the learner has the task of organizing a holiday dinner and purchasing gifts for his or her teenage cousins.

While reading the instructions for Example 1, the learner must think about the requirements of the task: he or she must think about the situation, any useful and available resources, the competences (linguistic and general) that he or she must activate, any conditions and constraints, and the final products that he or she must produce.

This involves thinking about:

- What constitutes a realistic and feasible holiday meal (obviously, filters from his or her own culture will shape this meal)
- What kinds of gifts his or her teenage cousins would like and what he or she can buy within the budget his or her parents have provided (situation and conditions and constraints)
- What competences to activate. These may include linguistic competences in the form of asking questions and answering them using the present tense; knowledge of the vocabulary for food and gifts; knowledge of numbers so that he or she can discuss prices; etc. They may include sociolinguistic competences, such as knowing when to use the formal tone and *vous* to speak to a salesperson and when to use the informal tone and *tu* to speak to a parent. They may include pragmatic competences, such as knowing how to start and end a conversation, knowing how to present something to another person, etc.
- Resources that could help him or her to complete the task (for example, consulting menus for holiday meals online, visiting websites for stores that cater to teens, etc.)
- What strategies to use for organizing the work involved (for example, individual research, sharing, negotiating to arrive at a shared list, assigning roles for the presentation, etc.)

Nevertheless, in a classroom learning situation, the student is not alone: the teacher is there to accompany him or her in this experience and to ensure that he or she has as many opportunities as possible to successfully complete the task. Thus, the teacher's role is not limited to choosing and suggesting adapted and realistic tasks conducive to the learners' involvement and autonomy. The teacher must also anticipate which aspects of the task will pose difficulties, help the students to organize their work, choose resources, and even plan brief periods of preparation (what the CEFR refers to as pre-communicative pedagogic tasks).



These preparations help make certain aspects of the task easier (for instance, viewing a document on a family reunion during the holidays, reading a holiday menu, doing a short role-play in a store, etc.). In order to help all students succeed, the teacher may plan individualized supports that will make the task more or less challenging. Lastly, the teacher will prepare evaluation grids and checklists that contain clear descriptors for the competences and skills that are activated during the task. The checklists will include the strategies.

If the goal is to foster student autonomy, why would the teacher focus on the strategies and choices that the learner makes in completing the task? The answer to this question helps to illustrate why the teacher has such a fundamental role to play. Autonomy is not innate, it is learned. Similarly, the awareness that some strategies are more effective than others — whether these are communication strategies or learning strategies or the awareness that some work methods are more effective than others — is also learned. Explicit work on strategies is not a “waste of time” nor is it time taken away from language learning, even though it might seem this way since the learner is not working directly on language. Quite the contrary: **explicit work on strategies is a valuable tool for the learner. He or she will learn to recognize strategies, use them more effectively, and transfer them to other learning at school and outside of school, in a process of lifelong learning.**



In many learning experiences it may seem preferable, at one time or another, to focus attention on the development of strategies that will enable one or other type of task having a linguistic dimension to be carried out. Accordingly, the objective is to improve the strategies traditionally used by the learner by rendering them more sophisticated, more extensive and more conscious, by seeking to adapt them to tasks for which they had not originally been used. Whether these are communication or learning strategies, if one takes the view that they enable an individual to mobilise his or her own competences in order to implement and possibly improve or extend them, it is worthwhile ensuring that such strategies are indeed cultivated as an objective, even though they may not form an end in themselves. (CEFR, p. 137)

As we have seen, even though there are many different strategies and they fit into many different categories, work on strategies takes learners in the direction of a common goal: developing awareness and the ability to think and reflect. This is why the awareness of the strategies used to complete a task shares many features with work on learning strategies. In the example we just considered, the



learner becomes aware of how to organize resources; steps to follow in making a presentation or creating a written document; communication structures to employ for the interaction required to make a purchase; his or her own personal preferences for learning vocabulary; aspects that he or she needs to spend more time on; and so on. This work of developing awareness will be useful in the process of learning the language; becoming aware of the universals of language and of any communication; becoming aware of the synergy between linguistic and non-linguistics aspects of language in the completion of tasks; understanding cultural similarities and differences; and learning many other aspects of language. This work of awareness also helps the learner understand his or her own work methods, strengths, and weaknesses, along with what it takes to improve and make progress. Lastly, because of its applicability to other disciplines, this work will enable the learner to transfer this awareness and to apply it to his or her own learning.

Learning that is autonomous and intentional benefits from transparent assessment performed with assessment tools that are clear and effective. We shall explore the dimension of assessment in the next chapter.





Chapter 8. Assessment: A Pathway to Autonomy

As can be seen from the description of language teaching in previous chapters, both the teacher and the learner have constant control over the teaching/learning process. The learner/social agent is able to set realistic objectives and pursue them. He or she is able to recognize his or her strengths and weaknesses; use the right strategies; and determine whether or not he or she has reached the level strived for. The teacher plays a key role in all of this. As we have seen, autonomy is learned, not innate, and learners need constant guidance along the path to autonomy.

Clearly, this is an ambitious undertaking for teacher and student alike. It requires tools that show the way and add coherence and transparency. This is precisely what good assessment tools can do.

In this chapter, we shall see how they achieve this. First, however, let's look at the CEFR's vision of assessment.

Assessment: An Innovative Vision

Assessment is an integral part of the learning and teaching process and it is present from the outset. Any discussion of assessment necessarily involves the entire teaching and learning process.

Traditionally, assessment was considered separate from teaching and learning and was the exclusive responsibility of the teacher. In the new vision proposed by the CEFR, assessment of the learning process and assessment of the level of language achieved are interdependent. Moreover, learner participation in assessment is fundamental: this is how the learner develops reflexive and metacognitive skills in the target language.

Issues integral to assessment are numerous and complex, but the CEFR uses the term “assessment” to refer to the implementation of language competence, thereby focusing on learner performance and its analysis. This focus contrasts with the more global term, “evaluation.” Assessment refers only to analyses about the level of learners’ proficiency evident in their performance, whereas evaluation can also refer, for instance, to the quality of a course, the effectiveness of teaching, or the appropriateness of pedagogical materials. (Piccardo et al., 2011, p. 42)

According to the action-oriented approach, assessment is based on what the social agent is able to do in a real situation. The teacher's task is to assess the social agent's performance and, based on this performance, to infer or deduce what competences were put to use and at what level. This assessment also fosters an understanding of the difference between knowing the structures of a language or the words in its vocabulary, and knowing how to use these appropriately in authentic situations with an objective to be pursued. While knowledge is necessary in order to perform tasks, having knowledge does not necessarily mean having the ability to apply it or, in the case of the social agent, having knowledge does not necessarily mean having the ability to complete tasks.

With this distinction firmly in mind, we move away from a logic that states that assessment consists of monitoring acquisition and learning and toward a logic of process or of “competence put to use” (CEFR, p. 187) to achieve a goal or objective. This logic links assessment to the use of competence, helping us to “determine the extent to which each student has been able to mobilize and use his or her knowledge” (Bourguignon, 2010, p. 55; our translation). In other words, what matters is the learner's performance — what he or she is able to do in the language, rather than what he or she knows of the language.

To help us to embrace this new logic of assessment, the CEFR uses positive wording for all of its descriptors. Even at the lower levels, these descriptors start with the word “can” or, in the case of self-assessment, with



the words “I can.” This is a powerful way to characterize the learning process, progress, and the ability to activate competences in order to complete tasks.

Assessment: Two Central Questions

The CEFR is particularly interested in two central questions about assessment (p. 178):

- what is assessed
- how performance is interpreted

Thus, the CEFR can be used to specify the content of tasks (what is being assessed) and to formulate criteria that will determine whether the learning objective has been achieved (how performance is interpreted).

Effective assessment implies the ability to describe what the learner can do and how he or she is able to do it. To help the teacher with this twofold task, the CEFR places descriptors in two separate chapters: Chapter 4 (descriptors of communicative activities) and Chapter 5 (descriptors of aspects of competences).

Descriptors of Communicative Activities

In the action-oriented approach, a precise description of what happens when a task is accomplished is essential, whether it involves reception, production, or interaction. This provides a reliable description of what is expected of the learner. In turn, the descriptor becomes a support that is used in defining the task itself and in developing targeted tests. For the purposes of assessment, the teacher must describe and keep a record of what the learner is able to do at a particular moment in time. Chapter 4 contains a long series of descriptors of what the learner can do in the language.

The [descriptors of communicative activities found in Chapter 4] are very suitable for teacher- or self-assessment with regard to real-world tasks. Such teacher- or self-assessments are made on the basis of a detailed picture of the learner’s language ability built up during the course concerned. They are attractive because they can help to focus both learners and teachers on an action-oriented approach. (CEFR, p. 180)

The CEFR groups examples of descriptors in scales according to activities of reception (oral and written), production (oral and written), and interaction (oral). For each, there is both a general scale and specific scales for certain types of activities. Let’s look at a few examples:

1. Examples of activities involving oral production (p. 59):

Sustained monologue: describing experience

For this activity, we find:

At Level A2+:

Can tell a story or describe something in a simple list of points. Can describe everyday aspects of his/her environment e.g. people, places, a job or study experience.

Can give short, basic descriptions of events and activities.

At Level A2:

Can describe his/her family, living conditions, educational background, present or most recent job.

At Level A1:

Can describe him/herself, what he/she does and where he/she lives.



As can be seen, these are descriptions of what the learner/ social agent is able to do at a particular level, and the examples are fairly typical and common for each type of communicative activity.

2. Example of activities involving oral interaction (p. 77):

Informal discussion (with friends)

At Level A2+:

Can discuss what to do in the evening, at the weekend.

Can make and respond to suggestions.

Can agree and disagree with others.

At Level A2:

Can discuss everyday practical issues in a simple way when addressed clearly, slowly and directly.

Can discuss what to do, where to go and make arrangements to meet.

As we saw in previous chapters, an action-oriented approach requires careful attention to strategies. Thus, Chapter 4 of the CEFR provides scales of descriptors of strategies and scales of descriptors of communicative activities. For instance, for oral interaction, the scales provided illustrate strategies for taking turns speaking, co-operating, and asking the other speaker to clarify something. Here is an example:

These descriptors of strategies are particularly important for promoting learner autonomy and metacognitive awareness. Inserting descriptors of strategies next to descriptors of communicative activities makes it easier to focus on the process, not just the product. For example, in oral interaction, the assessment criteria also deal with the process, namely how to conduct the interaction to ensure that it is effective. This means, for example, being able to say that one didn't follow, being able to ask for a reformulation, being able to reformulate, and so forth.

3. Example of strategies (p. 86):

Execution

Co-operation

At Level B1:

Can repeat back part of what someone has said to confirm mutual understanding and help keep the development of ideas on course. Can invite others into the discussion.

At Level A2:

Can indicate when he/she is following.

Repair

Asking for clarification

At Level A2:

Can ask very simply for repetition when he/she does not understand.

Can ask for clarification about key words or phrases not understood using stock phrases.

Can say he/she didn't follow.



Descriptors of Aspects of Competences

The second central question about assessment is “How performance is interpreted?” This means:

- Knowing how to go beyond the simple description of what the learner knows how to do with the language when completing tasks
- Being able to determine how much progress the learner has made in building up his or her communicative linguistic competences, particularly his or her linguistic, sociolinguistic, and pragmatic competences (see Chapter 4 for details on competences)

Moving from description to interpretation requires another support: that is, tools that enable the teacher to develop criteria and to transform impressions into well-grounded judgments. This is precisely the support provided in Chapter 5. The descriptors presented in this chapter help the teacher explain and categorize what can be deduced or inferred from the performance. They also make it possible to define a competence profile.

[...] to report on proficiency, the assessment should not be primarily concerned with any one particular performance, but should rather seek to judge the generalisable competences evidenced by that performance. (CEFR, p. 180)

A more obvious use for scales of descriptors on aspects of competence from Chapter 5 is to offer starting points for the development of assessment criteria. By guiding personal, non-systematic impressions into considered judgements, such descriptors can help develop a shared frame of reference among the group of assessors concerned. (CEFR, p. 181)

Here are some examples of descriptors of competences:

1. Linguistic Competence:

General Linguistic Range (p. 110):

At Level B1:

Has enough language to get by, with sufficient vocabulary to express him/herself with some hesitation and circumlocutions on topics such as family, hobbies and interests, work, travel, and current events, but lexical limitations cause repetition and even difficulty with formulation at times.

At Level A2+:

Has a repertoire of basic language which enables him/her to deal with everyday situations with predictable content, though he/she will generally have to compromise the message and search for words.

At Level A2:

Can use basic sentence patterns and communicate with memorised phrases, groups of a few words and formulae about themselves and other people, what they do, places, possessions etc.

Has a limited repertoire of short memorised phrases covering predictable survival situations; frequent breakdowns and misunderstandings occur in non-routine situations.



As can be seen, the difference between B1 and A2 is the fact that B1 can communicate his or her message, even with some hesitations and difficulty, whereas A2 can “get by,” but has to compromise on the message. In other words, A2 cannot communicate 100% of the message because he or she is still reliant on memorized phrases and cannot deal with unpredictable situations.

This is still at the general level. If we go into detail and look at grammatical accuracy, for example, we find the following descriptors:

Grammatical Accuracy (p. 114):

At Level B1:

Uses reasonably accurately a repertoire of frequently used ‘routines’ and patterns associated with more predictable situations.

At Level A2:

Uses some simple structures correctly, but still systematically makes basic mistakes — for example, tends to mix up tenses and forget to mark agreement; nevertheless, it is usually clear what he/she is trying to say.

At Level A1:

Shows only limited control of a few simple grammatical structures and sentence patterns in a learnt repertoire.

2. Pragmatic Competence

a) Discourse Competence

Coherence and Cohesion (p. 125)

At Level A2+:

Can use the most frequently occurring connectors to link simple sentences in order to tell a story or describe something as a simple list of points.

At Level A2:

Can link groups of words with simple connectors like ‘and’, ‘but’ and ‘because.’

At Level A1:

Can link words or groups of words with very basic linear connectors like ‘and’ or ‘then.’



b) Functional Competence (p. 129)

Spoken Fluency

At Level B1:

Can keep going comprehensibly, even though pausing for grammatical and lexical planning and repair is very evident, especially in longer stretches of free production.

At Level A2+:

Can make him/herself understood in short contributions, even though pauses, false starts and reformulation are very evident.

At Level A2:

Can construct phrases on familiar topics with sufficient ease to handle short exchanges, despite very noticeable hesitation and false starts.

At Level A1:

Can manage very short, isolated, mainly pre-packaged utterances, with much pausing to search for expressions, to articulate less familiar words, and to repair communication.

As can be seen, all of these descriptors focus on the way a performance is accomplished: they focus on the *how*, not on the *what*.

Assessment: A Matter of Choices, A Matter of Moments

The descriptors of communicative activities and descriptors of competences complement one another. Transitioning from one to the other implies moving from something that is tangible and visible — an action — to something that is in general less tangible—a deduction. Other distinctions are made during assessment. For example, a distinction is made between assessment over time, focusing on the progress that has been made, and assessment at a specific point in time, focusing on the standard. Similarly, a distinction is made between subjective assessment, based on impressions, and more objective assessment, based on predefined criteria. Lastly, a distinction is made between less formal formative assessment, in order to see how things are going and to get feedback on the course, and summative assessment, in order to assess learning acquired at the end of a course, module, or teaching unit.

In every case, assessment means making choices based on the time, the constraints, and the goals of the assessment.

Every time a teacher engages in assessment, he or she must be aware of the goal being pursued. Is the teacher assessing competences by observing the performance of learners engaged in complex tasks? Or is he or she assessing and checking knowledge and learning? Is the goal to provide learners with feedback or to prepare them to assess themselves? Assessment is a formidable and flexible tool that makes it possible to monitor learning on a constant basis. Assessment serves to foster learning itself: it provides the teacher with feedback on his or her teaching activities, the choices of objectives, the timing of the teaching process, etc. Assessment is also a means of documenting the work that has been accomplished within the school, first of all, as well as outside the school, when a learner is introducing himself or herself to an employer or pursuing further education.

Assessment draws on a set of “data” or “evidence” that the teacher collects from various student performances over a period of time. The more data and evidence the teacher has, and the more differentiated this information is, the more precise the portrait of the learner’s level of achievement will be.



The learner can play an important role in the assessment process, too. First, the learner can contribute data and elements through a process of self-assessment. Second, by sharing responsibility for his or her own assessment, the learner becomes aware of his or her strengths and weaknesses, the objectives he or she needs to give priority, and the progress that he or she has made or still needs to make. In other words, self-assessment enables the learner to become more autonomous and responsible.

How can all this be enhanced? As we have mentioned, clearly defined descriptors and adapted criteria are fundamental to transparent and objective assessment, bearing in mind that absolute objectivity is a myth and that a more realistic goal is to guarantee a good level of transparency and to limit subjectivity or, worse yet, arbitrary judgments.

Clearly, the way in which criteria and descriptors are organized also plays a role, depending on the objective of the assessment. If the goal is to have an overview and to place the learner at a certain level, a scale is the preferred choice (for example, the CEFR global scale, p. 24). If it is to see what objectives have been achieved and what objectives remain to be achieved, a checklist is the preferred choice. Checklists are very analytical; as a result, they can be used for self-assessment, too. Finally, if the objective of the assessment is to consider several different aspects at once (for example, aspects of competences), assessment grids are the preferred choice because they provide a more detailed and analytical vision.

From the CEFR Descriptors to Your Own Assessment Grids

The CEFR is a framework — a resource. As such, it does not provide ready-to-use assessment grids, nor does it provide every descriptor for every competence. Rather, it offers a large number of descriptors organized into scales and grids. It is up to each individual teacher to select and adapt the relevant material, creating his or her own assessment grids to reflect his or her own context, teaching objectives, and institutional constraints.

The creation of assessment grids is an extremely useful and indeed necessary exercise. The definition of assessment criteria requires a great deal of attention; however, it is central to the entire teaching/learning process.

First, there are certain essential characteristics that all descriptors must have. They must display:

- **Positive formulation:** be positively worded to describe what the learner can do rather than what he or she can't do.
- **Precision:** describe concrete aspects. They should not be vague and should avoid the use of words that are open to different interpretations.
- **Clarity:** be clear and accessible, not jargon-ridden.
- **Brevity:** which makes descriptors easier to use and maintains the distinctions between them. The longer a descriptor is and the more components it has, the harder it will be to find a performance that matches the descriptor exactly.

Second, assessment criteria must be closely linked to the learning objectives. This automatically means that general objectives must be subdivided into specific objectives, thus making it easier to determine whether an objective has been met or not.

Consider this general objective: “At the end of the unit, the learner will be able to participate actively in a debate, expressing and defending a point of view, reacting to the opinions of other participants, and contributing arguments.” This general objective needs to be broken down into specific objectives: “Can follow a discussion on a topic related to his or her field, asking questions and giving appropriate answers”; “Can express his or her opinion”; “Can express agreement or disagreement”; “Can contribute arguments”; etc.



Objectives must also be worded in such a way that they can be assessed. For example, in a situation involving interaction, such as the debate just described, the criterion “can distinguish between formal language and informal language” is an inadequate description. How is the teacher to determine whether or not the learner can make this distinction? If the objective were worded, “can use formal expressions when the context and interaction situation call for this”, the teacher would be able to determine whether the learner can distinguish between formal and informal language.

Lastly, linking the objectives to the assessment implies that the teacher is asking himself or herself a number of questions (see Chapter 4):

- What linguistic competences, but also what sociolinguistic and pragmatic competences, must the learners acquire?
- What tasks are best able to help the learners to develop these competences?
- What are the most appropriate strategies?
- What criteria and descriptors will enable me to make or see distinctions and, therefore, to assess the learners appropriately?
- What are the most appropriate assessment tools? What are the goals? What moments in time am I assessing?

The action-oriented approach proposed by the CEFR links curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment to a far greater extent than was previously the case.

Assessment informs every stage of the teaching/learning process, yet it remains highly complex. As previously mentioned, assessment requires the teacher to make careful choices constantly. Obviously, a vast number of categories can be assessed; however, the teacher must choose only a reasonable number of these. Once again, this requires the ability to see and make distinctions and choices. The teacher’s choices must reflect the objectives he or she is pursuing, the needs of the learner, the situation, the conditions and constraints, and the nature of the task. Sometimes, the teacher will focus more on fluency than accuracy, more on range than vocabulary mastery, or more on interaction than coherence.

Sometimes, the teacher will assess several competences at the same level, while at other times he or she will follow the same competence across several levels.

The CEFR provides a fairly clear example of a grid for assessing several aspects of competence at a single level:

	RANGE	ACCURACY	FLUENCY	INTERACTION	COHERENCE
A2	Uses basic sentence patterns with memorised phrases, groups of a few words and formulae in order to communicate limited information in simple everyday situations.	Uses some simple structures correctly, but still systematically makes basic mistakes.	Can make him or herself understood in very short utterances, even though pauses, false starts and reformulation are very evident.	Can answer questions and respond to simple statements. Can indicate when he/she is following but is rarely able to understand enough to keep conversation going of his/her own accord.	Can link groups of words with simple connectors like ‘and’, ‘but’ and ‘because’.

Excerpt from:

Table 3 – Common Reference Levels – Qualitative aspects of spoken language use, CEFR p. 29



As we have seen above, the CEFR provides several examples of scales that can be used to situate competences at different levels.

Again, the teacher must have a very clear understanding of what he or she wants to assess and why; use this understanding to create his or her own grids; and ensure that these grids are consistent with the teaching/learning objectives and adapted to the institutional constraints.

It is also important for the teacher to have a clear understanding of the relationship between assessment and marking. Once again, **flexibility is key. The teacher must weigh the criteria on the basis of the objectives and proposed tasks.** For example, if the activity in question is open oral production or interaction, fluency and range of vocabulary will be more important than mastery of vocabulary or grammatical accuracy.





Conclusion

In recent decades, the vision of language teaching/learning has become increasingly complex.

The grammar – translation method held that learning a language was an intellectual exercise, and according to the audio-lingual method and the audio-visual method, learning a language involved acquiring automatic linguistic reflexes. It was with the communicative approach that the vision of language teaching/learning began to develop more complexity. The communicative approach introduced the notions of language needs and learner-centredness. It introduced the importance of using authentic materials and of considering language as a tool for communication, with components and forms that learners needed to build up. Finally, the communicative approach started to open the classroom doors, opening up learning to the world beyond. But it would be some time before the classroom doors were flung wide open.

This process truly began with the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*.

This framework proposes an “action-oriented” approach, making it possible to connect what happens in the classroom with what is happening in the outside world. This action-oriented approach also makes it possible to give learning meaning that is grounded in real life. It makes it possible to take into account all of the complexity of language, language use, and language learning.

In this document, we have guided teachers and indeed all stakeholders involved in language teaching/learning at all levels through the developments that have marked advances in language education, and most notably the transition from the communicative approach to the action-oriented approach.

We have attempted to illustrate the synergy between the notions presented, and how this pathway is more complex yet not more complicated. This complexity is richer, more flexible, and more able to fully acknowledge the work of teachers and learners alike.

This approach requires teachers to reflect on the implications of the pedagogical choices they make, the needs of their learners, the goals, the constraints, assessment, and much more. It requires them to design tasks that will engage learners in their learning, encouraging them to take initiative and responsibility.

This approach requires learners to become more fully aware of their strengths and weaknesses and to play an active role in their learning that will enable them to become more autonomous.

The action-oriented approach topples the walls of the classroom and places language where it naturally belongs — in the lives of individuals. Far from being reduced to an object of study, language — all languages — reclaim their key role of enabling users/social agents to act in society, interact with others, and advance along a personal path, constructing a richer and more open identity.



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