**CEFR Companion Volume implementation toolbox**

Video scripts for “The action-oriented approach and the social agent”

This is the script of the videos in the VITbox module on the “The action-oriented approach and the social agent”. The scripts follow the order of the videos, starting with a very brief introduction that summarises the topic for those who are interested in becoming familiar with it but do not wish to go any further and a second video that presents the topic in more detail. There is also a list of references in each of the sections.

# Video 1: The “The action-oriented approach and the social agent” in a nutshell

## Slide 1

This short video summarises key aspects of the action-oriented approach and may serve as an introduction to the topic.

## Slide 2

One of the key aspects of the Companion Volume is its focus on the action-oriented approach. This approach constitutes a paradigm shift in language teaching, learning and also assessment as it requires teachers to consider learners as social agents who use their own ideas and skills to handle real-life issues in communication. Teachers therefore need to use real-life situations and create scenarios based on realistic, meaningful and challenging tasks.

## Slide 3

When applying the action-oriented approach learners are given authentic tasks simulating a situation of communication they might encounter in their individual contexts.

## Slide 4

In this setting the learners are considered to be social agents who interact in realistic situations using their individual skills and knowledge and expressing their personal interests and ideas. They work in pairs and teams on authentic topics and collaboratively co-construct knowledge and develop ideas and solutions to given problems.

## Slide 5

When we consider learners as social agents, we allow them to mobilise their individual linguistic and pragmatic resources when they work together on real-life tasks or projects. This allows them to use their pluricultural and plurilingual repertoire. When they interact with their peers they will negotiate meaning, and when it comes to mediation they will co-construct meaning.

## Slide 6

It is therefore important that in the classroom and in assessment learners are confronted with real- life situations and scenarios that are meaningful to them and that motivate them, for example, to find a solution to a given problem or develop ideas concerning a specific topic.

## Slide 7

The tasks need to be realistic and meaningful to the learners in order to assure that they motivate the learners

* to engage in realistic situations of interaction and
* to discuss specific topics with their peers
* in order to develop together a specific output or product or find a solution to a given problem.

## Slide 8

Chapter 2 of the CEFR Companion Volume provides a short description of the action-oriented approach, which is the underlying rationale of the publication.

More detailed information on the action-oriented approach can be found in a publication by Enrica Piccardo and Brian North entitled “*The Action-oriented Approach. A Dynamic Vision of Language Education*”, published in 2019.

# Video 2: The action-oriented approach and the concept of the social agent

## Slide 1

Since its publication in 2001, the CEFR has aimed at promoting an action-oriented approach in language teaching, learning and assessment. The CEFR Companion Volume published in 2020 stresses the action-oriented approach even more.

## Slide 2

This quote from Chapter 2 of the Companion Volume describes the underlying action-oriented approach of the CEFR.

I will highlight relevant aspects in red:

## Slide 3

The text points out that syllabuses should be based on a thorough needs analysis and oriented towards real-life scenarios and activities in teaching, and that teaching should NOT follow a deficiency perspective in which the focus was put on mistakes. Instead, teaching should rather focus on proficiency and highlight what learners “are able to do”, using “can do” statements.

Furthermore, the text points out that in course planning teachers need to start looking at the needs of the learners, then define their learning objectives (based on these needs), and finally develop their curricula, courses and examinations.

## Slide 4

Key aspects of this quote are therefore aspects like “real-life tasks”, a “proficiency” perspective, purposefully selected notions and functions, and real-world communicative needs.

By “purposefully selected notions and functions”, the Companion Volume understands that teachers need to decide which mode of communication to address, which activity, strategy and competence to aim at, and what the purpose of the task is, i.e. what learners should achieve when completing the task.

## Slide 5

So, this means that we need to first analyse the needs of the learners, then provide them a real- world scenario and ask them to carry out purposeful and meaningful tasks with a clear aim in mind, so that they can simulate a realistic situation of their personal context and show what they are able to do in the language or with the language. This allows the learner to become a social agent.

## Slide 6

In order to prepare meaningful tasks we need to think of a specific context and develop a scenario in which the learners have to analyse a specific issue or problem in a given situation and complete a task with a specific aim. In order to do so, they will activate their individual knowledge, cultures, skills and their personal interests. They will then interact with their partner or group and mediate

## Slide 9

the information they gathered; together they will co-construct meaning and concepts, and then present their outcomes to a specific target group. This makes them “social agents” who follow an aim in their exchange with their group and the target audience.

The three key notions in this description are the words “scenario”, “task” and “social agent”, which we will now analyse in more detail.

## Slide 7

The aspect of the “scenario” is very important: this provides the framework in which the learners will interact. They are put into a concrete real-life situation and will simulate interaction within their team and with the target audience. A scenario needs to provide clear information about: the context, the situation they have to analyse, the roles of the learners and of the target audience, the tasks and the objectives.

## Slide 8

As far as “tasks” are concerned, we refer to these two definitions by Peter Skehan, which stress the importance of “meaning as their primary focus”, but also that an activity requires learners to use language to attain an objective and that success is evaluated in terms of achievement of an outcome, and that there should be resemblance to real-life language use. A task-based approach therefore takes – I quote – “a fairly strong view of communicative language teaching”.

As stated in the introduction of the Companion Volume on page 22, the CEFR aims at broadening the perspective of language education by promoting an action-oriented approach to teaching, learning and assessment. It aims at empowering learners to become social agents, who co-construct meaning with their peers, use their individual plurilingual and pluricultural competences and mediate their ideas and findings. As far as the action-oriented approach is concerned, the two aspects that are particularly relevant are the notion of “social agent” and the idea of “co- constructing meaning”.

## Slide 10

This quote stresses the importance of the action-oriented approach.

## Slide 11

The idea of the “social agent” aims at empowering the learner: he or she acts in the social world and plays an active role in the learning process. His or her contribution to the activities in the classroom has an impact on the development of the activities: as learners they act, i.e. they take decisions that impact all activities in the classroom.

When we look for example at the use of project work in the classroom, it’s the learners who should decide about the exact project to carry out, obviously within a given framework. This means that the decisions taken by the learners on the project to develop require the teacher to integrate relevant and useful activities. This requires active engagement by the learner, i.e. learner agency, and it enhances learner autonomy.

## Slide 12

But what exactly do we understand by “social agent”?

## Slide 13

This diagram shows that each learner has his or her own knowledge and skills, his or her personal interests and objectives, individual language skills, but also a personal learning style, and lives in his or her individual context.

## Slide 14

To summarise: learners as social agents mobilise their individual linguistic and pragmatic resources drawing upon their pluricultural and plurilingual repertoire while they are completing real-life tasks or projects in groups or pairs. In interaction they will need to negotiate meaning with their team mates, and in mediation they will co-construct meaning.

## Slide 15

In the language classroom, when it comes to teaching, learning and assessment, the learners are confronted with a certain context and a specific situation, they have to complete a task, which requires them to activate their knowledge in order to solve a problem or to work on a specific topic. This will then allow them to present their outcomes or findings to the target audience. In this concept, the learner is put at the centre of the learning process.

And as all learners bring their individual knowledge, skills, interest and objectives with them, this will influence the activities carried out in class.

## Slide 17

Furthermore, one activity leads to another one. This means that the outcome of one activity or project has an impact on the next one, and all activities are interrelated.

## Slide 18

So, the teaching and learning activities follow a cycle that finally leads to the final exam, as represented in this graph.

## Slide 19

Therefore, coherence between teaching, learning and assessment is necessary. When developing a syllabus, we first need to define our learning objectives, based on the results of the needs analysis, and then develop the tasks for teaching and also for assessment, and regularly provide feedback to the learners.

## Slide 20

This is described by the concept of constructive alignment, first presented by John Biggs in 1996, and it constitutes the framework for all our learning, teaching and also assessment activities, where one activity (or project) leads to the next one and where the learner is a social agent who is at the centre of these activities.

## Slide 21

To summarise, we can say that the following aspects are key elements in task development when we apply an action-oriented approach:

* The learners are given a scenario that explains the issue to develop or the problem to solve.
* They complete realistic tasks of a certain complexity in their field of study, or corresponding to their future profession or their societal setting.
* They will then activate their individual knowledge, culture, skills and interests, and then develop individual solutions to a given task or problem.
* The tasks therefore need to be relevant and meaningful to the learner.

## Slide 22

The key aspects of a successful scenario are therefore:

* the context, i.e. the broader context in which a specific activity takes place, e.g. the implementation of the sustainable development goals;
* the situation, i.e. a specific situation learners have to analyse, e.g. the impact of a new factory on a specific region;
* the role(s) of the learners, i.e. the roles they are supposed to simulate, e.g. students doing a placement at a company;
* the overall task and the build-up tasks the learners have to carry out;
* the definition of the target group (an aspect frequently neglected but very important), i.e. to whom the learners will address e.g. their written report and their presentation, e.g. the line manager of the company, and
* the expected outcomes or outputs the learners have to produce, e.g. a written report on their findings, a presentation of their ideas, the minutes of their meeting with the line manager etc.

## Slide 23

We would like to finish with a quote by James Purpura on scenario-based assessment, stressing again the importance of scenarios.

## Slide 24

James Purpura writes that for example in assessment – and this is also true for classroom activities – when you use real-life tasks, learners will use source material and communicate certain aspects in writing and / or speaking, i.e. the different language skills will appear in an integrated way. The scenario-based approach therefore goes one step further than a task-based approach as it requires learners to integrate different skills, work on a specific issue with a pre-defined objective. They have to complete a sequence of subtasks in order to reach “the overarching scenario goal”.

## Slides 25 and 26

If you want to know more, have a look at the following references:

Biggs, John B. (1996): Enhancing Teaching Through Constructive Alignment. *Higher Education* 32, 247-264.

Council of Europe (2001): *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment*. Cambridge: CUP.

Council of Europe (2020): *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment. Companion Volume*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.

Fischer, Johann (2021): The underlying action-oriented and task-based approach of the CEFR and its implementation in language testing and assessment at university. *Language Learning in Higher Education* 10 (2), 301-316.

Fischer, Johann (2021): The Language Learner as a Social Agent – neuer Blick auf die Lernenden dank des Companion Volumes zum GER. In: Brandt, Anikó / Buschmann-Göbels, Astrid / Harsch, Claudia (eds.): *Rethinking the Language Learner: Paradigmen – Methoden – Disziplinen. Erträge des 7. Bremer Symposions*. Bochum: AKS-Verlag, 246-259.

Fischer, Johann / Wolder, Nicole (2022): Implementation of the CEFR Companion Volume in the UNIcert® and NULTE Networks. In: North, Brian / Piccardo, Enrica / Goodier, Tim / Fasoglio, Daniela / Margonis-Pasinetti, Rosanna / Rüschoff, Bernd (eds.). *Enriching 21st century language education. The CEFR Companion volume in practice*. Strasbourg: Council Europe Publishing, 185-201; [https://rm.coe.int/enriching-21st-century-language-](https://rm.coe.int/enriching-21st-century-language-education-the-cefr-companion-volume-in/1680a68ed0) [education-the-cefr-companion-volume-in/1680a68ed0](https://rm.coe.int/enriching-21st-century-language-education-the-cefr-companion-volume-in/1680a68ed0).

Fischer, Johann / Wolder, Nicole (2021): Erfahrungen in der Umsetzung der Inhalte des Begleitbands zum GeR im Hochschulkontext – Ergebnisse eines Projektes des Europarates und Handlungsbedarf für Hochschulsprachenzentren. *Fremdsprachen und Hochschule* 96, 7-27.

Graves, Kathleen (2008): The language curriculum: A social contextual perspective. *Language Teaching* 41 (2), 147-181.

Piccardo, Enrica / North, Brian (2019): *The Action-oriented Approach. A Dynamic Vision of Language Education*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.

Purpura, James E. (2016): Assessing Meaning. In: Shohamy, Elana et al. (eds.): *Language Testing and Assessment, Encyclopedia of Language and Education*. Basel: Springer International Publishing, 33-61.

Skehan, Peter (1996): Second language acquisition research and task-based instruction. In: Willis, Jane / Willis, Dave (eds.): Challenge and Change in Language Teaching. Oxford: Heinemann, 17-30.

Skehan, Peter. 2003. Task-based instruction. *Language Teaching* 36, 1-14.

Van den Branden, Kris / Bygate, Martin / Norris, John M. (eds.) (2009): *Task-Based Language Teaching. A Reader*. Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins.