

2.1 An action-oriented approach

A comprehensive, transparent and coherent frame of reference for language learning, teaching and assessment must relate to very general view of language use and learning. 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 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.

Accordingly, any form of language use and learning could be described as follows:

Language use, embracing language learning, comprises the actions performed by persons who as individuals and as social agents develop a range of **competences**, both **genera** 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.

Competences are the sum of knowledge, skills and characteristics that allow a person to perform actions.

General competences are those not specific to language, but which are called upon for actions of all kinds, including language activities.

Communicative language competences are those which empower a person to act using specifically linguistic means.

Context refers to the constellation of events and situational factors (physical and others), both internal and external to person, in which acts of communication are embedded.

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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.

Language processes refer to the chain of events, neurological and physiological, involved in the production and reception of speech and writing. *Text* is any sequence or discourse (spoken and/or written) related to specific domain and which in the course of carrying out a task becomes the occasion of a language activity, whether as a support or as a goal, as product or process. *Domain* refers to the broad sectors of social life in which social agents operate. A higher order categorisation has been adopted here limiting these to major categories relevant to language learning/teaching and use: the educational, occupational, public and personal domains.

A *strategy* is any organised, purposeful and regulated line of action chosen by an individual to carry out a task which he or she sets for himself or herself or with which he or she is confronted.

A *task* is defined as any purposeful action considered by an individual as necessary in order to achieve given result in the context of a problem to be solved, an obligation to fulfil or an objective to be achieved. This definition would cover a wide range of actions such as moving a wardrobe, writing a book, obtaining certain conditions in the negotiation of a contract, playing a game of cards, ordering a meal in a restaurant, translating a foreign language text or preparing a class newspaper through group work.

If it is accepted that the different dimensions highlighted above are interrelated in all forms of language use and learning, then any act of language learning or teaching is in some way concerned with each of these dimensions: strategies, tasks, texts, an individual's general competences, communicative language competence, language activities, language processes, contexts and domains.

At the same time, it is also possible in learning and teaching that the objective, and therefore assessment, may be focused on a particular component or sub-component (the other components then being considered as means to an end, or as aspects to be given more emphasis at other times, or as not being relevant to the circumstances). Learners, teachers, course designers, authors of teaching material and test designers are inevitably involved in this process of focusing on a particular dimension and deciding on the extent to which other dimensions should be considered and ways of taking account of these: this is illustrated with examples below. It is immediately clear, however, that although the often stated aim of a teaching/learning programme is to develop communication skills (possibly because this is most representative of a methodological approach?), certain programmes in reality strive to achieve a qualitative or quantitative development of language activities in a foreign language, others stress performance in particular domain, yet others the development of certain general competences, while others are primarily concerned with refining strategies. The claim that 'everything is connected' does not mean that the objectives cannot be differentiated.

Each of the main categories outlined above can be divided into sub-categories, still very generic, which will be looked at in the following chapters. Here, we are looking only at the various components of general competences, communicative competence, language activities and domains.

Common European Framework of Reference for Languages :learning, teaching, assessment

2.1.1 The general competences of an individual

The **general competences** of language learners or users (see section 5.1.) consist in particular of their *knowledge, skills and existential competence* and also their *ability to learn* :

Knowledge, i.e. declarative knowledge (*savoir*, see 5.1.1.), is understood as knowledge resulting from experience (empirical knowledge) and from more formal learning (academic knowledge). All human communication depends on a shared knowledge of the world. As far as language use and learning are concerned, the knowledge which comes into play is not directly related exclusively to language and culture. Academic knowledge in a scientific or technical educational field, and academic or empirical knowledge in a professional field clearly have an important part to play in the reception and understanding of texts in a foreign language relating to those fields. Empirical knowledge relating to day-to-day living (organisation of the day, mealtimes, means of transport, communication and information), in the public or private domains is, however, just as essential for the management of language activities in a foreign language. Knowledge of the shared values and beliefs held by social groups in other countries and regions, such as religious beliefs, taboos, assumed common history, etc., are essential to intercultural communication. These multiple areas of knowledge vary from individual to individual. They may be culture-specific, but nevertheless also and other knowledge. Careful consideration must then be given to the relationship between knowledge and communicative competence.

Skills and **know-how** (*savoir-faire*, see section 5.1.2.), whether it be a matter of driving a car, playing the violin or chairing a meeting, depend more on the ability to carry out procedures than on declarative knowledge, but this skill may be facilitated by the acquisition of 'forgettable' knowledge and be accompanied by forms of existential competence (for example relaxed attitude or tension in carrying out a task). Thus, in the example quoted above, driving a car, which through repetition and experience becomes a series of almost automatic processes (declutching, changing gear, etc.), initially requires an explicit break-down of conscious and verbalizable operations ('Slowly release the clutch pedal, slip into third gear, etc.') and the acquisition of certain facts (there are three pedals in a manual car set out as follows, etc.) which one does not have to consciously think about once one 'knows how to drive'. When one is learning to drive, one generally needs a high level of concentration and heightened self-awareness since one's own self-image is particularly vulnerable (risk of failure, of appearing incompetent). Once the skills have been mastered, the driver can be expected to be much more at ease and self-confident; otherwise this would be disconcerting for passengers and other motorists. Clearly, it would not be difficult to draw parallels with certain aspects of language learning (e.g. pronunciation and some parts of grammar, such as inflexional morphology).

Existential competence (*savoir-etre*, see 5.1.3.) may be considered as the sum of the individual characteristics, personality traits and attitudes which concern, for example, self-image. relate to more universal parameters and constants. Any new knowledge is not simply added onto the knowledge one had before but is conditioned by the nature, richness and structure of one's previous knowledge and, furthermore, serves to modify and restructure the latter, however partially. Clearly, the knowledge which an individual has already acquired is directly relevant to language learning. In many cases, methods of teaching and learning pre-suppose this awareness of the world. However, in certain contexts (e.g. immersion, attending school or university where the language of tuition is not one's mother tongue), there is simultaneous and correlated enrichment of linguistic and one's view of others and willingness to engage with other people in social interaction.

This type of competence is not seen simply as resulting from immutable personality characteristics. It includes factors which are the product of various kinds of acculturation and may be modified.

These personality traits, attitudes and temperaments are parameters which have to be taken into account in language learning and teaching. Accordingly, even though

they may be difficult to define, they should be included in a framework of reference. They are considered to be part of an individual's general competences and therefore an aspect of his or her abilities. In so far as they are capable of being acquired or modified in use and through learning (for example, of one or more languages), attitude formation may be an objective. As has frequently been noted, existential competences are culture-related and therefore sensitive areas for inter-cultural perceptions and relations: the way one member of a specific culture expresses friendliness and interest may be perceived by someone from another culture as aggressive or offensive. **Ability to learn** (*savoir apprendre*, see 5.1.4.) mobilises existential competence, declarative knowledge and skills, and draws on various types of competence. Ability to learn may also be conceived as 'knowing how, or being disposed, to discover "otherness"'. Whether the other is another language, another culture, other people or new areas of knowledge. Whilst the notion of ability to learn is of general application, it is particularly relevant to language learning. Depending on the learners in question, the ability to learn may involve varying degrees and combinations of such aspects of existential competence, declarative knowledge and skills and know-how as:

.Existential competence: e.g. a willingness to take initiatives or even risks in face-to-face communication, so as to afford oneself the opportunity to speak, to prompt assistance from the people with whom one is speaking, such as asking them to rephrase what they have said in simpler terms, etc; also listening skills, attention to what is said, heightened awareness of the risks of cultural misunderstanding in relations with others.

.Declarative knowledge: e.g. knowledge of what morpho-syntactical relations correspond to given declension patterns for a particular language; or, awareness that there may be a taboo or particular rituals associated with dietary or sexual practices in certain cultures or that they may have religious connotations. Skills and know-how: e.g. facility in using a dictionary or being able to find one's way easily round a documentation centre; knowing how to manipulate audiovisual or computer media (e.g. the Internet) as learning resources. For the same individual there can be many variations in the use of skills and know-how and the ability to deal with the unknown:

.Variations according to the event, depending on whether the individual is dealing with new people, a totally unknown area of knowledge, an unfamiliar culture, foreign language.

.Variations according to context: faced with the same event (e.g. parent/child relationships in a given community), the processes of discovery and seeking meaning will doubtless be different for an ethnologist, tourist, missionary, journalist, educator or doctor, each acting according to his or her own discipline or outlook.

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