

The role of action approach in the acquisition and assessment of a foreign language

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Abstract

In foreign language teaching programs, the action approach has been increasingly used in the teaching / learning methodology in school environment by putting into practice the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

However, end-of-year examinations and assessment tests continue to be traditional by analyzing particular aspects of a language, focusing more on knowledge control rather than student's performance in the use of a foreign language in different contexts of social life.

It is therefore necessary to find ways and tools to ensure coherence and harmonization between the action approach and the way of assessing communication skills in a foreign language. Foreign language tests should be drafted in form and content in the performance of the tasks, by giving priority to the action assessment approach.

In this paper, we will share our experience in order to make the foreign language tests for students who are tested as suitable as possible with the aim of having a transparent and objective assessment of their capacity in order to communicate appropriately in a specific communication topic within a given area of social life.

Keywords: role, action, foreign language, assessment.

Introduction

Based on the observations and surveys carried out with teachers, it has been observed that there is a need to recognize and apply the principles of the European Common Framework of Reference for Languages (CEMR) by the general public who is interested in increasing their level of foreign language learning according to European standards. These include:

- Implementation of action perspective focused on the accomplishment of specific tasks;
- - Explanation of tasks and the conditions for their implementation;
- - Relation between general knowledge and achievement of learning outcomes;
- A goal-based assessment, a positive assessment, pointing out and evaluating student's language knowledge and skills;
- Goals for teachers training
 - Training teachers about the concepts of Framework;
 - Teachers' awareness about the use of the Framework.
- Abilities which should be acquired by the teachers:
 - Using the Framework terminology;

- Integrating Framework concepts in the foreign language learning process;
- Developing practical activities in the classroom based on the five language skills of the Framework;
- Being trained to identify skill levels;
- Being able to analyze the existing texts in relation to the levels of the Framework;
- Sensitizing their students about the use of the European Language Portfolio;
- Applying the system of framework descriptors;
- Being trained in order to guide their students in using the Portfolio.

Basic notions of Framework related to action approach

In order to be more understandable by the users, the authors make a distinction of *communication skills* into language communication activities which relate to:

- Receiving the message: listening, reading
- Production: continuous oral expression, written expression.
- Interaction : taking part in a conversation
- Mediation: translation and interpretation activities.

The expression *language communication activities*, borrowed from the Framework, relates to the meaning which is usually given to the language skill: oral comprehension, continuous oral expression, oral interaction, written understanding, written expression. So, from now on we will talk about "a group of linguistic communication activities" instead of "a group of skills".

The term "skills" serves to define the most general components: socio-linguistic, pragmatic, linguistic skills (the latter includes lexicon, grammar and phonology) without forgetting the cultural ability (everything which should be known about the nation whose language is spoken without leaving apart its culture, the lack of which would lead to incorrect communication.

Notion of « task »

The task is related to the "action" methodology of the Framework in the sense of accomplishing something and fulfilling it through actions. In other words, the use of language is not detached from the actions of the person who is simultaneously a speaker and a social actor. This can go from the most pragmatic point of view (installing a piece of furniture following the instructions) to the most conceptual (writing a book, arguing, making a decision, negotiating, etc.) In this perspective, it can require a full language ability, (writing a book) a partial one, (the case of mounting furniture), or no language ability at all (making a dish from a cookie recipe which someone knows by heart). Linguistic ability is a type of skill which plays its function in the completion of a task.

Thus, we can summarize the notion of the Framework in this stage, as a sum of skill levels (linguistic or non-linguistic which affect the performance of tasks). This view has its effect on teaching / learning and their conception because this means listing language activities and intertwining them with one-another, by prioritizing the difficulties in order to relate the theoretical definitions to their actions.

The framework gives a re-definition of the communication skills which includes several scalable components from A1 to C2 level.

- **linguistic** component (knowledge and skills related to lexicon, syntax, phonology);
- **socio-linguistic** component (it is very similar to the socio-cultural component) should be considered, as language is a social phenomenon. Speaking does not just mean to create phrases. It includes features which relate to the use of language such as social relations indicators (the status of interlocutors), the rules of behaviour, the expression of popular wisdom, dialects, accents;
- **pragmatic** component has to do with acting performance and choosing discourse strategies to accomplish a certain purpose (organizing, adapting and structuring the speech). It makes the connection between the speaker and the situation. Social and pragmatic components can be rarely found in school education.

However, it is supposed as if they are present, especially in exams or in competitions. Communicating means to use a language code (language ability) associated with an action (pragmatic ability) within a given socio-cultural and linguistic context (socio-linguistic ability).

Determination of operational and fulfillment areas of language tasks

Every linguistic act is accomplished within a context and a given situation in the framework of one of the fields (spheres of activity or focus of interest) of social life. Selection of the areas, which a student is prepared to act for, influences the selection of situations, goals, tasks, topics, texts, not only for teaching, but also for the assessment and the activities which will be employed.

The number of possible areas is undefined: any kind of focus or sphere of interest for a certain activity could be the field of a language user or a course program. However, with regard to the teaching / learning of a language in general, the following areas are defined in the Framework of reference:

Personal, public, professional, and educational area

It should be emphasized here that the professional field for teachers matches the educational field where they practice their profession. They are interrelated with the following **14 topics** on the basis of which the curricula are compiled, along with the compilation of language text books and the assessment tests as well.

- Personal characterization;
- -home, family and environment;
- -everyday life;
- holidays and leisure;
- -Travelling;
- relations to others;

- -health and general welfare;
- -Education;
- -shopping;
- -food and drink;
- -Services;
- -countries;
- -foreign languages;
- -weather;

The European Framework for Reference of Languages is indispensable for curricula compilers, textbook authors, exam assessors, teachers and their trainers, along with every other interested party which operates in the field of language teaching and language proficiency assessment. Compiled on extensive research and consultation, the Framework is a practical tool which allows to build clearly the common elements which will be achieved during the learning stages. Besides, the Framework is an ideal tool to compare the assessment results in the countries of the Council of Europe.

The Framework provides a common ground for mutual recognition of language qualifications, thus facilitating educational and professional mobility between countries. It has been used increasingly to review national programs and large multinational companies for comparing language certificates they issue.

Use of assessment tools in accordance with the action approach in the process of foreign language learning

Teaching foreign languages at university aims to provide students with the necessary tools for communicating effectively and enable them to deal successfully with any kind of communication situations in a foreign language in everyday life.

Universities and other Academic Institutions give priority to the development of student's language competences in order that they attend foreign language studies. After their graduation, they should have the opportunity to practice the foreign languages in their future professions according to the international standards.

Based on our experience, we have observed that more and more students are recognized and assessed for the courses and obtained credits from foreign language lessons in the framework of international exchanges. In this respect, *the Framework* serves to compile a certification based on some criteria formulated in positive terms by highlighting the results rather than weaknesses. This approach helps the student to develop:

- awareness of the current state of his or her knowledge and skills;
- creating valid, realistic and feasible outcomes;
- choosing pedagogical materials for the purpose of performing tasks;
- Practicing self-evaluation.

According to the Common European *Framework* of Reference for Languages and the operational perspective that it supports, the language user is considered *a social actor*

who implements linguistic and non-language *tasks* within a given *context* and in a given *field*. The accomplishment of the task stands in the center of action perspective. The task is an action which requires that a student uses a foreign language to achieve a specific goal (Skehan 2003: 3). The extreme form of task assessment lies in the content of authentic tests which are considered as tests of performance assessment in realistic authentic situations.

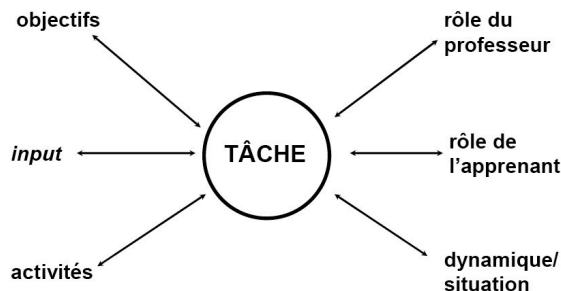
For example, students can be sent to the library and filmed by the examiner on how they have used the foreign language to search for a book that they need. In this case, the examiner would actually assess the use of the expressions by the students during the conversation with the librarian. So, in this case the students are assessed as they use the language. Additionally, in a written test, the examiner should consider which competences would be the core of testing and assessment.

The Common European *Framework* of Reference for Languages sets out 57 language competences which cannot be tested separately, but integrally, as language is a complex entity and an exam cannot be focused on a part of it, but on the whole of it. The success of a task accomplishment depends on the expected outcome of a discourse product, being it verbal or written. The action perspective goes beyond the communicative approach because it is not just a roleplay game or a classroom simulation to see if a student or a pupil has mastered vocabulary or grammar, but it is the achievement of a certain objective, which means it should integrate the knowledge within a context or a specific situation. For example, if a Level A student under the Framework is asked to find the way x where his post or bank is located, or a C-level student is asked to make a presentation on a specialized subject, both these students could not be judged and assessed based on their correct way of speaking, but they should be assessed on whether they have found the way (as in the case of level A) or whether the audience understands the contents of the presentation (as in the case of level C).

The relation between the communicative approach and the action approach can be presented as follows:

Communicative approach	Action approach
Goal: enables students to communicate within a given situations	Goal: enables students to express their ideas in real life

In the following scheme, Puren (2008: 12) sets the task in the context of the teaching / learning:



To accomplish the activities and tasks, the teacher and the student have their own clear roles: the teacher clarifies the requirements and lists the intermediate tasks until the students reaches the final goal and they accomplish the intermediate tasks at a certain time, step by step, until they achieve the specified goal, which is the macro task.

So, the analysis shows that this assessment approach is completely different from the traditional way of assessment which consists in error correction with the aim of penalizing students. Various activities which can be used to assess student's competencies are 1) case studies, 2) projects, 3) global simulations. The latter two are more creative and emphasize student's productive skills, while case studies are based on a problem which needs to be solved and its solutions starts with a receptive stage of receiving information which is very important for the ongoing of activity. Without a detailed analysis of the problem, the student may not be able to find a solution to it. As stated above, it is emphasized that the action perspective does not imply to "act upon it" but it implies "to act in co-operation with other perspectives". Consequently, it is not the case that the student should develop only one skill in order to produce sayings in selected communication situations, but he should adapt and connect what he says with the goal he has set to himself to produce an effective communication situation.

The above mentioned things show us how we can use the principles of the Framework in view of the learning objectives, that is language learning. This leads to the idea of learning as a scenario-action or project-based pedagogy which basically accomplishes tasks and solves problems by using a foreign language with a certain goal and function.

Let's take a simple example: the teacher asks two students *to buy a book as a gift for their classmate who has his birthday in order to entertain him by reading in the summer*; They go to the bookstore and read the titles and paragraphs on the book covers which can be found in the shelves, thus fulfilling a communicative task, reading, and finally buying the Framework! I'm not sure if the "entertaining" goal is really achieved and if the classmate would be satisfied. This means that communication skills must be developed to serve certain actions and goals.

Assessment in accordance to the action approach

First of all, we will define the term "assessment", which in most cases is used instead of the term "control", which is not the subject of this paper. We will consider the assessment in the meaning of the activity proposed as "assessment" or for assessment: We give for assessment a written or summarized text, etc. So it is not the activity in itself which poses a problem but it is "the validity" of what is proposed to be accomplished. So the activity I propose will allow me to really appreciate what I want to evaluate or I should evaluate, and especially assessment modalities. In this respect, I would like to see the assessment of action perspective. If we choose a scenario (project) to assess the students and put a mark to them for some grammatical errors, then this scenario or project would not have any interest.

What are the points to be taken into account for determining coherent modalities in

the assessment:

- In the action perspective, two dimensions should be considered: pragmatic dimension in relation to the accuracy of received information in the framework of mission and respect of cultural elements as well as the linguistic dimension. It happens that a product may be correct from a linguistic point of view, but not from a pragmatic one.
- The aim of the lesson is that the student passes from one level to another, so his assessment also serves to position him in a scale where the lowest point is the initial level at which students find themselves at the beginning of the lesson and the highest point is the level which they should achieve. So, we need to develop tables and assessment criteria which take into account both, the lowest and the highest levels, but also an intermediate level in order to position students in this assessment scale. Since we need to assess them by grades, we can write a number of points for each level without punishing someone who has not reached the required number of points and the required level. Tables and criteria are important both for formative and summarized assessment. It is advisable not to limit the assessment criteria only for the topics treated in the lessons, but also to include the previous lesson topics, so that the learner does not have the feeling that he starts every lesson from the beginning every time, but he should have a clear vision of his progress or failure at the time being. In this way the student becomes aware of the level of language he obtains.

Formative and summary assessment does not differ from one another for any specific reason. The only difference is that one is created during the learning process and the other at the end of a lesson or module; A summary assessment should not be considered as the ultimate result of learning, but as a stage of a process that should be developed throughout the year. In this regard, the Framework, as a useful tool throughout school life from elementary to university and subsequent formation, invites us to be on continuous formation. The same criteria can be used throughout the academic year so that the student has a total vision of his progress and not a partial one.

- These assessment tables should contain not only the criteria, but in particular they should contain the "skill indicators". In fact, we cannot assess a "correct grammar use" without those indicators which determine exactly what is to be understood by "correct grammar." If no indicators are defined, then we cannot speak for a qualitative and objective assessment, but for a subjective one which cannot become an objective and common reference point for all.
- This means that when creating an assessment table we should follow three stages :
 - Start with a scale of descriptors and a target level;
 - Set criteria;
 - Determine skill indicators in function of the target level and in relation to the pragmatic and socio-linguistic content which make the object of learning.

In the assessment process, case studies and projects are appropriate for competence-based testing and formation examinations. If a course is built based on a global simulation, a specific project integrated in it can serve as a final exam.

During testing and assessment according to the action approach, the linguistic

component of an individual's communication skill is apparent during the accomplishment of diverse and observable linguistic activities, which means contextual, engaging, productive, interactive or mediating linguistic activities.

The linguistic activities related to real-life actions and the language competences which each of these activities require to be practiced, are a priority for the examiners, teachers or lecturers. Language activities are observable accomplishments which enable to measure the linguistic level of acquisition ability of the individual.

What can be said about the *compilation of tests* and the concept of students' assessment tasks through the accomplishment of language activities?

It is quite common to encounter tasks such as: multiple choices or true and false, but they mainly focus on listening or reading comprehension.

In order to become more realistic and visible, they should be integrated and contextualized in various activities related to everyday life. By doing so that they make sense and are useful and valuable to meet student's needs and to be measurable. The assessment tasks proposed to students should simultaneously incorporate their capacity to recognize text typology and to be able and to associate the linguistic elements (phonetics, lexicon, grammar, syntax, language acts) and all the sociological and cultural elements in its composition with this type of text. The selection of oral or written text should be as close to the real life and student's interest as possible.

The compiler of the test should make a distinction between a task which relates to student's actions in everyday life, a task during the learning process, and an assessment task. The test requirements should clearly define:

- The role that a student has to play as a social actor, the circumstances and the environment in which this task will be performed, the action field which it belongs;
- Linguistic requirements to be developed for the accomplishment of this task;
- Which of these are receiving / understanding activities and which are productive ones;
- Does the student need further information and how can he access this information for the task accomplishment?

Conclusions

The teacher should create the appropriate working environment for his students to work as individuals, in pairs or in small groups in order to give them the opportunity to demonstrate their language abilities and their skills as language users and social actors who accomplish communicative tasks within a given context and in a given field of social life which he belongs to.

The descriptors of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* can serve as teaching objectives for teachers from one level to the other for the compilation of assessment tests, including all language activities, being them oral or written.

Sample tests which are used for student's assessment in action can be already found in a worldwide scale either in English, French or in other languages as well. We think it is high time for us to give our students real and useful knowledge, a thing which is really motivating for them, and not just writing these things in the framework of research for a doctoral study or other types of research.

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