

Syllabus Design in the Action-oriented Curriculum¹

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Abstract

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) introduces a new goal for language teaching, that of training social actors rather than mere communicators. Thus, social action as a new reference action corresponding to this new reference goal in English language teaching necessitates a departure from taking interaction or communication as the ultimate goal in an ELT curriculum. This paper argues that mini-projects, which are the best models of social action compatible with the constraints of school education, should be the basic units in an action-oriented curriculum. Syllabus in such an action-oriented curriculum functions primarily as linguistic resources needed by the students to be able to carry out the proposed mini-projects. Thus, the task of the syllabus designer is to select and grade the language content according to the mini-projects proposed in an action-oriented curriculum, even in a second phase, a posteriori control of this content and its progression must be carried out, which may lead, in a third phase, to modify the mini-projects or even their chronological order.

Keywords: Action-oriented Approach, Syllabus Design, Curriculum Development, Social Actors

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Introduction

In one of the Council of Europe documents, which contributed significantly to the development of the communicative approach (CA), namely, ‘The Threshold Level in a European-Unit/Credit System for Modern Language Learning by Adults’, Van Ek (1975) illustrates the characteristics of the learners for which this document was developed as follows:

1. they will be temporary visitors to the foreign country (especially tourists);
2. they will have temporary contacts with foreigners in their own country;
3. their contacts with foreign-language speakers will, on the whole, be of a superficial, non-professional type;
4. they will primarily need only a basic level of command of the foreign language. (p.9)

Such a characterization indicates that the type of action for which the learners will be prepared is language interaction, the type of situation where the learners will use the target language is a short term contact situation and the reference objective is to enable the learners to communicate in the target language (Puren, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c, 2020a). Thus, the ultimate goal is to equip the learners with a basic level of proficiency in the target language so that they can communicate later on with the users of the target language in temporary contact situations. Foreign language curricula, syllabus design as well as textbooks in the early versions of the CA are also affected by such characterizations since the goals and objectives of the curricula are stated only in terms of communicative goals and objectives, syllabus content is largely specified in terms of functions, notions and/or situations, unit objectives of communicative textbooks are also stated in terms of communicative objectives.

Developments on the Threshold Level document came with the two further documents of the Council of Europe, namely, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CoE, 2001) and CEFR companion volume (CEFR CV) (CoE, 2018), where a new reference action and a new reference goal are set for the language learners, social action and social actors, respectively, both of which indicate that there is a rupture between the CA and the action-oriented approach (AoA). Due to this new reference action (social action), Puren (2020a) renames the AoA as the social action-oriented approach (SAOA) and Acar (2021c, 2021d) uses the term social action-based learning (SABL). Thus, the AoA is used in this article to refer to SABL.

Training Social Actors as a New Goal in ELT

CoE (2001) introduces the AoA in the following quote, where there is a clear departure from (1) the reference action of the CA, interaction described in terms of speech acts to that of the AoA,

social action, and from (2) the reference goal of the CA, training communicators, to that of the AoA, training of a social actor:

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. (p.9)

While speech acts are carried out within language activities, “the reference act is extended in the AoA to social action which is an act with the other” (Puren, 2006, p.6). Thus, speech acts have their full meaning when they are part of social actions. Puren (2006), furthermore, explains the rationale underlying the break between the CA and the AoA in the above quote as the evolution of social needs in the European integration process: “It is no longer just a matter of preparing European citizens to communicate during punctual meetings, but to work between them in the long term (a shift in objective from "talking with" to "acting with")” (p.8).

Both the CA and Task-based language teaching (TBLT), which is considered as a strong form of the CA (Ellis, 2003) can be considered within the communication paradigm since their reference action is language interaction and their social reference objective is to prepare the learners to meet the others and to be able to communicate with them. Ellis (2003), for example, puts forward that “a task seeks to engage learners in using language pragmatically rather than displaying language. It seeks to develop L2 proficiency through communicating” (p.9) and Willis (1996) argues that “tasks are always activities where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose (goal) in order to achieve an outcome” (p.23). Thus, communication is not only the means but also the goal in TBLT.

Meeting the challenges of a multilingual and multicultural society, however, is the main reason why CoE (2001) and especially CoE (2018) move towards a new reference action, mediation. CoE (2001), in its notes for the user, puts forward that

Chapter 8 discusses the principles of curriculum design involving the differentiation of language learning objectives, especially in the context of building an individual’s plurilingual and pluricultural competence in order to deal with the communicative challenges posed by living in a multilingual and multicultural Europe.

Thus, the social reference objective in such a multilingual and multicultural society like Europe is *living with the others*, and the reference action at the service of this objective is *mediation*. The AoA, on the other hand, indicates a new social reference objective, which is *acting with the others*, and a new reference action, which is *co-action* or *social action* (Puren, 2004, 2020a). Consequently, the action for which the students (social actors) will be prepared is social action in the AoA. Puren (2015, p.6) indicates coherently the social reference objectives, the necessary language and cultural competencies necessary for coping with the challenges of these objectives, and the related reference actions in table 1 below:

Table 1. Current Objectives of Language and Cultural Education in a Plurilingual and Pluricultural Society



Social action training, or co-action, consists of training to make society as good citizens with others in the public domain and training to work effectively with others in the professional domain. In the educational domain, social action brings together the two educational challenges: students have to ‘make a class society’ (together) in their ‘mini-classroom society’ in order to be trained as good citizens, and to work effectively with others (and the teacher) - this work consists of learning the target language and culture effectively in their ‘mini-classroom company’ - in order to be trained as good professionals in their future professional company later on since they are equipped with the transversal competencies, the ones that are required both in the collective learning of the target

language and culture and in a company. This is the reason why Puren (2021b) considers the language classroom, in the AoA, as a *co-cultural incubator*:

...by exploiting the homology between the classroom micro-society and the outside society, one can consider and make the language classroom function as a “co-cultural incubator”, i.e. of social action culture, i.e. a place and a time where students, in an intensive and secure manner because mediated by the teacher, have the opportunity to train themselves in competencies that will be necessary later on in their professional and civic lives: adapting to other ways of working, working in groups, facing the unknown, uncertainty and complexity, learning from one’s own mistakes and the mistakes of others, producing while making the most of limited means, conceiving and conducting collective projects, self-evaluation individually and collectively, etc. The language-culture teacher can then fully claim a role as an educator in school teaching, and as a trainer in vocational teaching (2019b, p. 59).(p.37)

From a pedagogical perspective, more specifically in the teaching and learning of languages and cultures, Puren (2009a, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c, 2016, 2017, 2019) puts forward that pedagogical projects and mini-projects are two possible forms of implementing the AoA in and/or outside the language classroom. Pedagogical projects cannot be presented to the students in a preprogrammed way in a textbook or curriculum since they offer maximum autonomy to the students by allowing them to choose, design, implement and evaluate their projects autonomously (with the help of the teacher). Mini-projects, however, can be presented to the students in a pre-programmed form by the teacher, textbook, or the curriculum, and hence they offer the students limited autonomy compared to the pedagogical projects. The rationale behind choosing the pedagogical projects and mini-projects in the implementation of the AoA is that they serve the educational goal of training critical but responsible, autonomous but supportive social actors (Puren, 2017), who will act according to these values in the major domains of social life proposed in the CEFR: personal, public, educational and professional.

Puren (2009a, 2019, 2021a) dealt with the implementation of mini-projects in language textbooks and provided the pedagogical advice for the French textbook *Version Originale 4 - B2* (Paris: Éditions Maison des Langues), which is based on the AoA. Acar (2020), similarly, proposed a social action-based textbook design, which is guided by mini-projects, and Acar (2021a, 2021b, 2021c) offered mini-projects for some English textbooks used in Turkey to illustrate how to make these textbooks action-oriented in accordance with the Turkish ELT curriculum for the primary and secondary schools (MoNE, 2018), which claims to adopt the AoA.

Consequently, the clear implication of the shift from speech acts to social action and from training communicators to training social actors is that communication is no longer the ultimate goal

of language learning and teaching but is put at the service of social action, which have further implications for language curriculum development and syllabus design.

Syllabus Design in the Action-oriented Curriculum

Curriculum planning is a broad concept which not only includes the specification of syllabus but also needs, educational and linguistic goals and objectives, approach/method, and assessment and evaluation (Eryaman, 2010). In this line, both Nunan (1988) and White (1988) differentiate between curriculum and syllabus. Nunan (1988), for example, defines syllabus as the selection and grading of content.

Here, we shall take as our point of departure the rather traditional notion that a syllabus is a statement of content which is used as the basis for planning courses of various kinds, and that the task of the syllabus designer is to select and grade this content.(p.6)

Thus, a syllabus is a sub-component of curriculum, which “is concerned with the planning, implementation, evaluation, management, and administration of educational programmes” (Nunan, 1988, p. 8). In this article, the syllabus is used to refer to the specification of language content (morphosyntactic, notional-functional, lexical content), which functions as resources for the students to be able to carry out the mini-projects, in other words, language content is at the service of social action.

Needs analysis is essential in the action-oriented curriculum since the students as social actors should have a margin of autonomy in the design of their actions so that they become partners in the process of developing effective language curricula. Consequently, a needs analysis, which offers the students themes, and for each theme, numerous proposals for possible mini-projects in different domains of the CEFR (personal, public, educational, professional), should be conducted as a first step in preparing the action-oriented curriculum. The students are required to classify them in order of personal preference, and even can propose other mini-projects that they prefer. Thus, the students can decide on what themes they would like to work on and what social actions they would like to perform according to their interests and their environment. It is also necessary to point out that for the very young learners and their mini-projects from the professional domain can be excluded but they are essential for the students at high school when they are oriented towards a certain professional domain.

The students’ preferred themes and the corresponding mini-projects from different domains serve the specification of the language resources (morphosyntactic, notional-functional, lexical content) that the students need to be able to carry out the mini-projects as well as the cultural, documentary, and methodological resources. It is also important to note that since the theme is accompanied by different variants of social actions from different domains, full pre-specification of language content may not be possible so a margin of autonomy should be given to the textbook

writers and the teachers so that they can deal with such language content in the textbook or the classroom as the need arises. The other reason why the authors of official programs must give the textbook writers a certain amount of autonomy is that the specification of language content also depends in part on the documents that are finally chosen.

The corresponding communicative language activities as communicative objectives (can-do objectives in the form of oral and written comprehension and production activities as well as mediation) are also specified according to the themes and mini-projects. Since communicative language activities are also determined by mini-projects, the status of communication in the action-oriented curriculum changes: It is a means at the service of social action. In short, in the action-oriented curriculum, both the language content and communication are put at the service of social action, which reflects the theory of language in the AoA: Language is a means of action as Puren (2021b) explains:

The above-stated is reminiscent of what happens in the didactic reflection when one passes from the paradigm of communication to the paradigm of action: one realizes then immediately that, when it is not only a question of communicating, but of acting in a foreign language, the language is first of all an instrument of action, an instrument of work, before being a tool of communication. (p.28)

This view of language also shapes the goal of the action-oriented curriculum: training social actors, who can act together effectively both in the target language and their native language and the task of the syllabus designer is to select and grade the language content according to the mini-projects proposed in an action-oriented curriculum, even in a second phase, a posteriori control of this content and its progression must be carried out, which may lead, in a third phase, to modify the mini-projects or even their chronological order. Table 2 below presents a model of a social action program by didactic sequences, which includes a syllabus as a resource, and which is part of the curriculum:

Table 2. A Model of a Social Action Program by Didactic Sequences

Themes	Social Actions (Mini-Projects)	Communicative Language Activities	Resources			
			Cultural	Documentary	Linguistic	Methodological
	Educational domain : Public domain: Personal domain: Professional domain:	Reception Production Interaction Mediation				

The order of the columns is important since it is the action that determines the communication and the language resources. In other words, communicative language activities are determined by the themes and the corresponding mini-projects from different domains. Similarly, morphosyntactic, notional-functional, lexical content (syllabus) is specified based on the themes and the corresponding mini-projects as well as the cultural and documentary contents.

Cultural resources indicate the co-culture according to which the mini-project will be carried out. If the theme is *birthday party*, cultural resources indicate the main specific features of the Turkish, American, or Indian, etc., way of celebrating the birthday party. Documentary resources indicate the documents that the students will work on while preparing for the final product or performance of the mini-project. It is important to note that in the AoA, the documentary resources are not only those provided by the curriculum, the textbook, and the teacher but also those provided by the learners themselves.

Methodological resources refer both to learning methodologies and teaching methodologies. The necessary activities that the students will be involved in should be indicated and, in the activities, there must be activities of reflection (metacognitive) by the learners on the learning strategies they have implemented. This section relates to everything that concerns the teaching-learning co-culture: teaching-learning process or collective teaching-learning of the target language: indications on methodological components or components from different approaches and/or methods (pluri-methodology), information management activities (information literacy), advice on the organization of classroom activities (individual and group work, whole class). The choice of the methodological resources also depends on the documents that the students will work on.

Table 2 indicates that mini-projects are the organizing tools in the action-oriented curriculum. These mini projects put the students in actional-reuse situations where they will reuse the language content learned during the unit and in this respect, they differ from the communication situations or tasks of the CA, which are mostly artificially simulated. It is also important to note that mini-projects have an educational dimension, which contributes to training learners as social actors. While the students realize the mini-projects through the language resources that they learn, they also learn how to act together effectively both in their mini-society (classroom) and the outside society as real citizens. The action-oriented curriculum, thus, contributes to citizenship education. The educational dimension of the mini-projects is also what differentiates them from simulated communication situations or tasks of the CA.

A language textbook written in line with the action-oriented curriculum is thus organized around the mini-projects proposed in the curriculum. If, for example, the theme is *kitchen* in the social action program, the corresponding mini-project for the public domain could be *As a whole class, prepare a cookbook with local recipes to promote Turkish cuisine to the world and share it on social*

media like Facebook (Acar, 2021a). Developers of the action-oriented curriculum can just state this objective of the social action in the program and leave the design of the mini-project to the textbook writers or they can give the whole design of the mini-project in the curriculum themselves. Acar (2021a), for example, gives the full design of the mini-project for the above action objective as follows:

A: As a whole class, prepare a cookbook with local recipes to promote Turkish cuisine to the world and share it on social media like Facebook.

B: Open up Facebook account with a title you choose (e.g. Turkish cuisine, recipes for the world, etc.). You can also seek ways to invite your peers from other countries to share their cuisine on your Facebook account. Decide collectively on a title for your cookbook which reflects the content of your cookbook and add some inspiring subtitles on the cover to reflect your class identity (e.g. best recipe suggestions from class 8A of secondary school X).

C: Search the internet as to what a recipe includes (e.g. The name of the meal, the number of people the meal can serve, ingredients and amount of ingredients, the steps of preparation instructions for cooking, the statement of cooking time, etc.) and decide collectively on the criteria for evaluating the recipes of the groups and agree on a format for your cookbook.

D: Search the internet and/or consult your parents as to which recipes best represent your local cuisine. If your parents suggest recipes in your native language, write down every detail you searched in C and translate, as a group, the parents' recipes into English. Search the internet for the relevant pictures to accompany your recipe.

E: In groups, write the recipe for your meal in the format you collectively agreed on in C.

F: In groups, present your recipes in the class.

G: The other classmates will listen to you, take notes, and evaluate your recipes by using the evaluation grid you formed collectively. Make suggestions to the groups whose recipes are not in line with the criteria and format you formed and developed collectively.

H: As a whole class put together all the recipes in a single word or PDF format.

I: Share your cookbook on social media.

J: Follow up (as a whole class) on the likes and dislikes and the comments received from people about the cookbook on the social media. (p. 312)

This mini-project addresses the public domain but the variants of this social action can also be proposed for the other domains in the curriculum: *As a whole class you will carry out a survey to specify the favorite meals of each person in the classroom* (educational domain); *you will help your mother in cooking a new dish that your family has never tasted before* (personal domain); *(imagine that) you are the owner of a restaurant. You will collectively invent a new recipe to offer to your clients* (professional domain).

Concerning the above mini-project from the public domain whose complete design is given, the objective of the action *As a whole class, prepare a cookbook with local recipes to promote Turkish cuisine to the world and share it on social media like Facebook* is announced at the beginning of the textbook unit as well as the communicative language activities to be realized and the language content that the students need to learn and use during the unit to be able to carry out this mini-project. The unit content, thus, prepares the students to be able to carry out the final social action, while the students carry out the steps of the mini-project during the unit simultaneously. At the end of the unit, the students will carry out the final social action, *share your cookbook on social media*.

Conclusion

The action-oriented curriculum no longer aims to prepare the learners to move across countries and be involved in short term contacts with the users of the target language as indicated in the Threshold Level document (Van Ek, 1975) but rather aims to prepare the learners to act together effectively by using the target language in their home or target culture, in short, to train them as social actors. Since mini-projects are the best models of social action compatible with the constraints of school education, they have the potential to train social actors as Puren (2009b) argues that

Project pedagogy is the most historically accomplished form of school implementation of this co-action, because it strictly applies the principle of the homology between the end and the means: the students are trained in social action in society by acting in the very space of the classroom as full-fledged social actors. (p. 12)

Thus, the model of a social action program by didactic sequences in the action-oriented curriculum illustrates that communication is not the ultimate goal of this curriculum but that it is at the service of social action. Action-oriented textbooks to be prepared in accordance with this action-oriented curriculum model will be guided by the model of a social action program by didactic sequences in Table 2. Accordingly, such textbooks will state the unit objectives in terms of social actions rather than communicative objectives, which will be secondary objectives stated below the social action. Similarly, language resources will also be stated at the beginning of each unit to indicate that they are the language content that the students need to be able to carry out the mini-project.

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