# Information Literacy in a Social Action-Oriented Approach:
# From Communicative Competence to Informational Competence

Christian Puren

Professor Emeritus of the University of Saint-Etienne (France)

christian.puren@univ-st-etienne.fr

www.christianpuren.com

**Abbreviations**

SAOA : Social Action-Oriented Approach

CEFRL : Common European Framework of Reference for Languages

## Introduction

The authors of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CFERL) present the new approach they are promoting at the very beginning of their text:

> *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)

It is really surprising that, twenty years after this publication, some didacticians still consider the "action-oriented approach" thus defined as a simple extension of the communicative approach. However, one does not need to be a specialist in hermeneutic analysis to see in this passage the affirmation of an essential difference between the reference actions of the two approaches: those of the communicative approach are the acts of speech; those of a new approach, called "action-oriented", are "tasks not exclusively language-related", activities (which) "form part of a wider social context" and are carried out "within a particular field of action" by "social agents".

Even if, as we can see in this passage, the authors use the notions of *task*, *action* and *activity* in a very confused way, even if afterwards, in their whole text, they are only interested in "communicative language competences", it seems that what they are opposing to **acts of speech** are **social actions**, even if they never use this last expression. This is why I propose to call this new approach the "Social Action-Oriented Approach" (SAOA). This name also distinguishes it from "Task-Based Learning", in which the tasks have been designed historically as communicative tasks.

This break, the implications of which the authors of the CEFRL were unable or unwilling to draw, is made necessary by the phenomenon which, in the course of history, is always at the origin of the emergence of a new methodology, namely a change in the social objective and the social situation. When the communicative approach was promoted by the Council of Europe in the mid-1970s, it was mainly to prepare citizens and professionals from European countries for travel to other European countries. Here

is, for example, what J.L.M Trim wrote in the preface of a 1980 English version of Threshold level English (J.A. van Ek, 1975):

> *Nevertheless, by far the largest single group of learners, everywhere, consists of people who want to prepare themselves, in a general way, to be able to communicate socially on straightforward everyday matters with people from other countries who come their way, and to be able to get around and lead a reasonably normal social life when they visit another country.* (Trim, 1980)

The political project of the Council of Europe is not at all the same at the end of the 1990s, because it takes into account the progress of European integration, with, in particular, the importance taken by migrations within Europe. This change of objective and social situation is now a matter of "meet[ing] the needs of a multilingual and multicultural Europe by appreciably developing the ability of Europeans to communicate with each other across linguistic and cultural boundaries" (p. 3).

That explains the importance given to the competence specifically needed for life in such a society, namely plurilingual and pluricultural competence. The authors of the English version of the CEFRL, including the same J.L.M. Trim mentioned above, write:

> *[…] in a person's cultural competence, the various cultures (national, regional, social) to which that person has gained access do not simply co-exist side by side; they are compared, contrasted and actively interact to produce an enriched, integrated pluricultural competence, of which plurilingual competence is one component, again interacting with other components.* (CEFRL 2001, p. 6)

The authors of the CFRL have also not been able, or willing, to draw all the consequences that appear if we consider the demands that a social actor must face in a multilingual and multicultural society. It is no longer just a matter of communicating with others (through communicative competence) or even living with others (through plurilingual and pluricultural competence), but of working with them and "making society" with them. The competence required for information literacy in the professional field and for civic engagement goes far beyond communicative competence: it requires **informational competence**, which can be defined as **knowing how to act on and through information as a social actor**.

**1. Information literacy, an informational competence**

UNESCO published in 2007 a book by Jr. Forest Woody Horton entitled *Understanding Information Literacy: A Primer*. Appendix B presents the "Information Literacy Life Cycle Stage" which is in fact what can be called an "action scenario" of information literacy:

1. Realize that a need or problem exists that requires information for its satisfactory resolution.
2. Know how to accurately identify & define the information needed to meet need or solve problem.
3. Know how to determine if the needed information exists or not, and if it does not, go to Stage 5.
4. Know how to find needed information if known to exist, and then go to Stage 6.
5. Know how to create, or cause to be created, unavailable information (*i.e.* create new knowledge).
6. Know how to fully understand found information or know where to go for help if needed to understand.
7. Know how to organize, analyze, interpret, and evaluate information, including source reliability.
**8. Know how to communicate and present information to others in appropriate/ usable formats/ mediums.**
9. Know how to utilize information to solve problem, make decision, or meet need.
10. Know how to preserve, store, reuse, record and archive information for future use.
11. Know how to dispose of information no longer needed, and safeguard information that should be protected.

I emphasize: the communicative approach, which largely favors activity #8, does not allow students to be trained in information literacy in a foreign language. As for the communicative textbooks for adults, they do not take into account all these different activities, so they do not even allow these learners to implement the informational competence that they have already acquired in their mother language.

We are no longer, in today's modern societies, in the situation that prevailed half a century ago, in the mid-1970s, when the "communication paradigm" prevailed. It was thought that the more we communicated, the more progress was assured. It was the time when, if a company was in trouble, the

managers invited a business communication guru; when, as another example that may seem incredible now, some psychiatrists assumed that autism in children could be caused by a pathogenic behavior of the mother, especially in the field of communication.

The disease that strikes us all now is so-called "infobesity". We spend more and more time deleting from our e-mail inboxes messages, as we say colloquially in French, "dont nous n'avons rien à **faire**" ("which we have no interest in at all"), literally: "of which we have nothing **to do":** the primary criterion for managing information is not communication, but action. This is why in companies, the instruction has been, for years, to limit itself strictly to "the right information to the right person at the right time", and in educational systems, the training of students in information literacy consists in teaching them first to evaluate and select information, before, eventually, communicating it to those who will be interested in it or who will use it to act.

## 2. The consequences of not including informational competence in the CEFRL descriptors

I chose the "Cooperating" grid to illustrate these implications because one would hope that in the 2018 Companion Volume (COE 2018, p. 101), which has an entire section on SAOA ("Implementing the action-oriented approach," p. 27), this grid would bring out the action-oriented purpose of all cooperation, which is to reach a decision, such as the ones that will necessarily have to be made together by students in order to carry out the tasks given as examples in the following passage from that section of the Companion Volume:

> *Above all, the action-oriented approach implies purposeful, collaborative tasks in the classroom, whose primary focus is not language. If the primary focus of a task is not language, then there must be some other product or outcome (e.g. planning an outing, making a poster, creating a blog, designing a festival, choosing a candidate, etc.).* (p. 27)

In the reproduction below, descriptors taken from the 2001 CEFRL appear in blue script, descriptors added in the 2018 supplemental volume in black:

| COOPERATING | | PRO**SIGN** |
|---|---|---|
| **Note:** This scale is developed further in the scales for *Facilitating collaborative interaction with peers* and *Collaborating to construct meaning*. | | |
| C2 | Can link contributions skilfully to those of other speakers, widen the scope of the interaction and help steer it towards an outcome. | |
| C1 | Can relate own contribution skilfully to those of other speakers. | |
| B2 | Can give feedback on and follow up statements and inferences and so help the development of the discussion. | |
| | Can summarise and evaluate the main points of discussion on matters within his/her academic or professional competence. | |
| | Can help the discussion along on familiar ground, confirming comprehension, inviting others in, etc. | |
| | Can summarise the point reached at a particular stage in a discussion and propose the next steps. | |
| B1 | Can exploit a basic repertoire of language and strategies to help keep a conversation or discussion going. | |
| | Can summarise the point reached in a discussion and so help focus the talk. | |
| | 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. | |
| A2 | Can indicate when he/she is following. | |
| A1 | *No descriptors available* | |
| Pre-A1 | *No descriptors available* | |

We can see that in all the descriptors from level B1 onwards, the cooperation is about communication ("the conversation", "the discussion"). And this is how the authors of the French translation of the text understood them:

- They have translated "evaluate" (B2) as "évaluer l'intérêt" ("evaluate the interest"): the criterion of evaluation is about the contents of the communication in themselves, and not in relation to an action to be performed, in which case the corresponding criterion would have been "évaluer la pertinence" ("evaluate the relevance").

- They translated "an outcome" (C1) not as "un résultat" ("a result"), which would have allowed an action-type interpretation (an outcome can be a written production, a decision taken) but as "une conclusion" ("a conclusion"), a term that closes the communication itself.

The set of descriptors from B1 to C2, as well as the French translation of these two terms, show that the authors of the *Companion Volume* have remained locked into the paradigm of communication, in which communication is both the means and its own goal. The conception of interaction betrayed by these

descriptors is that of interlocutors who talk to each other in order to exchange ideas and agree on them, and not that of social actors who consult each other before acting.

In an article published in 2009 on the website of the Association française des Professeurs de Langues Vivantes (APLV), I presented the following criticisms:

*The descriptor chosen for the highest level of competence (C1-C2, "Can relate own contribution skillfully to those of other speakers")[1], emphasizes individual competence and not the effectiveness of participation in joint work. On the scale of competences of a social actor, the descriptors proposed here for levels B1 and B2 are certainly more important than this personal know-how only in language proposed in C1 and C2.*

*This scale also considers another personal "skill" such as the one already retained above in the descriptor for level C2 of the "Overall spoken interaction" grid, p. 74 ("Can backtrack and restructure around a difficulty so smoothly the interlocutor is hardly aware of it."). The valorization of these two skills - placed as descriptors of the higher levels - apparently comes from a conception of collective work where the main issue would be to facilitate language communication and make it efficient.*

*But here we are really in the middle of a communicativist ideology, which the authors of the CEFRL have decidedly failed to overcome: in order to cooperate well, it is not enough to communicate well; knowing how to communicate obviously makes it possible to solve communicational problems, but it does not make it possible to solve, and may on the contrary have the effect of obscuring, the actional problems (i.e. the different conceptions of action) and the different stakes (personal, collective and social). Actional efficiency requires that these problems and stakes be made explicit and debated by the social actors, to the point of assuming the risks of confrontation and even rupture: it is precisely the competences necessary for these activities of explicitation, debate (confrontation of ideas) and management of what used to be called "group dynamics" (confrontation of persons and groups) that are the "high level" competences expected of a social actor[2].*

---

[1] Note: In the then current version of the CFERL, the C1 and C2 levels were presented as such: C1. *Can relate own contribution skillfully to those of other speakers. – C2. As C1.*

[2] At a conference of German-speaking academics at the University of Giessen (Germany) in 2002, which was

In the new version of the grid proposed by the 2018 *Companion Volume*, not only is this criticism of the C1 level descriptor ignored, but the C2 level takes the same orientation (cf. "Can link contributions skillfully to those of other speakers"). The opportunity was lost to propose for this C2 level an actional descriptor such as "Can propose to stop the discussion in order to make the necessary decisions or to write the expected common text."

Knowing how to manage communication in SAOA means knowing when to stop a discussion. It also means knowing when not to communicate so as not to hinder the discussion. It would have been necessary to complete the following levels as follows (my additions in bold italics):

> *B2. Can summarize and evaluate the main points of discussion on matters within his/her academic or professional competence.* ***Can avoid speaking on a point of discussion if unsure of his/her academic or professional competence***.

> *A2. Can indicate when he/she is following.* ***Can indicate that she is not following what is being said at any given time.***

At A1 and Pre-A1 levels, the authors of the *Companion Volume* have added "No descriptors available", whereas if a person is present at a discussion that is to lead to action, but does not have the level, by not communicating, he or she is not helping the discussion, but is helping the action by letting others discuss effectively. The following descriptors would also have been necessary from SAOA:

> *A1. Can decline the invitation to cooperate in language if he/she does not feel able to, so as not to disturb others.*

> *PreA1. Can indicate, if necessary, by mimicry and gesture, that he/she cannot cooperate.*

---

entirely devoted to a (very) critical analysis of the CEFR, Hans Barkowski remarked: "It is [in this document] a concept of ideal communication (in the sense of Habermas): the facts communicated are always real, there is a consensus between those who participate in the communication and who, moreover, consider themselves to be equal partners" (Friederike Delouis Anne, 2008, p. 25).

It was also an excellent opportunity to use "non-verbal communication", which is part of communicative competence.

### 3. Informational competence in a SAOA French certification, the "Diplôme de compétence en langue"

There are two official certifications for foreign languages in France:

– CLES, Certificat de Compétences en Langues de l'Enseignement Supérieur (CLES, www.certification-cles.fr/);

– Diplôme de compétence en langue (DCL, www.education.gouv.fr/le-diplome-de-competence-en-langue-dcl-2978).

These two certification assessments are of the SAOA type because they evaluate the degree of effectiveness of the use of the foreign language in the workplace: that of a university student, for the CLES, and that of an employee in a company, for the DCL. They were designed based on an identification and analysis of the different tasks they are likely to perform in a foreign language in their studies or in their professional activities.

The following table corresponds to the "assessment scenario" of the DCL, which is based on a simulated mini project.

| Phases | Activities | Duration |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Reading written material | 1h20 |
| 2 | Listening to/view audio materials | |
| Preparing the oral interview | Taking notes for the oral | 20 minutes (preparing the interview) |
| 3 et 4 | Presenting and proposing your choice | 20 minutes maximum |
| | Discussing and questioning | |
| 5 | Writing a text (letter, preliminary project, etc.) | 40 minutes |

The candidate's first document in the dossier is an assignment letter that gives him a fictitious identity and position in a company where he has been asked to write a working document, for example a letter or

a draft of the project (phase 5). In Phases 1 and 2, he/she will have to select only relevant information and eliminate irrelevant information from the reading and listening comprehension documents provided. Information can be important within the document, or interesting in itself, but it must be eliminated if it does not constitute a resource for the draft: this is an essential difference between comprehension in SAOA and comprehension in the communicative approach: in the latter, it is a question of capturing the maximum amount of information; the more information the document has communicated, indeed, the more successful the communication is.

In the first version of this scenario, there was an additional phase after the note-taking, which unfortunately had to be removed to lighten the certification tests. It consisted of a telephone interview between the candidate and an examiner playing the role of an informant within the company. The examiner was instructed to provide additional information to the candidate, but only that the candidate requested. What was evaluated therefore was one of the components of informational competence, namely the ability to identify in a dossier the missing information that would be necessary or at least useful to effectively carry out the work requested.

## 4. The implications of informational competence in the didactic units of language textbooks

In order for informational competence to be worked on in language textbooks, it is necessary that the didactic units be conceived on the basis of a "mini-project" with its action scenario (Acar 2020a, 2020b, 2021), and that they integrate a documentary dossier on which the students will be able to practice the different activities such as those proposed in the UNESCO book mentioned above.

Most of the textbooks of foreign languages currently published in France claim to be based on the SAOA without the following necessary condition being fulfilled: to integrate in each didactic unit documentary dossier at least one written or oral document on which the following instruction will be proposed: "**Listen to/read carefully this document and identify in it the information which is not there."** This instruction is absurd in the communicative approach, but it has an obvious meaning in SAOA, even if it is implicit: "[...] identify in it the information that is not there when you know that you need it to carry out your action".

If we want to train students to be information literate, *i.e.,* to be able to act on and through information as social actors, it is necessary that students should be asked then to fill in the missing information

themselves: They will have to research, evaluate, select, prioritize, and reformulate it before integrating it with available information already considered relevant.

In the French as a foreign language textbook *Version originale 4* (level B2, Paris: Maison des langues, 2012), after every two didactic units, a "Professional task" is proposed or interested learners on a specific "Documentary file", which is closely related to the themes of the two previous units, among which the learners will be able to find other elements of information and other examples that they will judge relevant for the task indicated below at the end of the scenario, in 3.B.

The scenario following didactic units 3 and 4 is as follows (pp. 54-55):

### *1. Introduction*

*Listen and select the words that you think represent the business world.*

> *A. Listen to these stories and then summarize the arguments of each. Discuss in small groups.*

### *2. Background information*

> *B. You will then choose the sentences that best express your point of view to propose an answer to the journalist's question.*

> *C. Read the following article. Identify the contexts in which the term "culture" appears.*

> *D. Look for terms in the text that are more specifically associated with business management and the workplace.*

> *E. Synthesize the most important elements of the text to make an account (written or oral) with the help of its articulations.*

### *3. Task*

> *A. Make a list of work attitudes that are characteristic of younger and older generations.*

> *B. You will be moderating one of the roundtables proposed by this company: gather your arguments and develop the outline of your argument.*

It can be seen how in this scenario the final task is prepared by activities representative of informational competence, in particular the search, selection, prioritization and reformulation of information; and how

the common task requires learners not only to talk to each other, but to work together with the goal of making common decisions.

## Conclusion

The shift from the communicative approach to SAOA leads to a paradigmatic break in information literacy: This has strong immediate implications for the activities required of students and the criteria for evaluating their production.

All learners need native language information literacy in their daily lives. While the communicative classroom prepares school students for possible future use of the foreign language, SAOA the classroom, because it requires learners to make a constant and conscious effort to seek out, understand, and manage information, can function not only as a foreign language-culture classroom, but also as an incubator of cross-cutting competencies. As for adults, their already acquired informational competence can be directly exploited in the service of their learning strategies.

## References

Acar, Ahmet. 2020a. "Transforming communicative tasks into mini-projects", *Elementary Education Online*, *19*(3), 1660-1668. doi:10.17051/ilkonline.2020.734694.

–2020b. "An analysis of the English textbook 'Let's learn English' in terms of the action-oriented approach", *Turkish Studies–Educational Sciences*, *15*(3), 1449-1458. https://dx.doi.org/10.29228/TurkishStudies.42832.

–2021. "An Alternative Mini-project Design Proposal for the English Textbook Mastermind", *Ahi Evran Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi*, 7 (1), 307-320; DOI: 10.31592/aeusbed.833588.

COE 2001. Council of Europe, *Common European Framework of reference for languages: learning, teaching, assessment*, Strasbourg, Language Policy Unit, 260 p., https://rm.coe.int/1680459f97.

– 2018. Council of Europe. *Common european framework of reference for languages: learning, teaching, assessment. Companion volume with new descriptors*, https://rm.coe.int/cefr-companion-volume-with-new-descriptors-2018/1680787989.

Forest Woody Horton, Jr. 2007. Undestanding Information Literacy: A Primer, Paris, UNESCO, 94 p, www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/resources/publications-and-communication-materials/publications/full-list/understanding-information-literacy-a-primer/.

Friederike Delouis, Anne. 2008. « Le CECRL : compte rendu du débat critique dans l'espace germanophone ». *Les Langues Modernes* n° 2, avril-mai-juin, Dossier : « Le Cadre européen : où en sommes-nous ? », Paris : APLV, p. 19-31. [Report of: Karl-Richard *BAUSCH et al.* (dir.), *Der gemeinsame europäische Referenzrahmen für Sprachen in der Diskussion.* Arbeitspapiere der 22. Frühjahrskonferenz zur Erforschung des Fremdsprachenunterrichts. University of Giessen (Germany), March 2002). Tübingen : Narr, 2003]. On line : www.aplv-languesmodernes.org/spip.php?article1779.

Puren, Christian. 2009. « Les implications de la perspective de l'agir social sur la gestion des connaissances en classe de langue-culture : de la compétence communicative à la compétence informationnelle", www.aplv-languesmodernes.org/spip.php?article1841.
– 2013. "The shift from the paradigm of communication to the paradigm of action, and its implications for practical implementation from the social action-oriented approach". On line: www.christianpuren.com/mes-travaux/2013e-en/.
– 2016. *Le travail d'élaboration conceptuelle dans la recherche en DLC. L'exemple de l'approche par compétences et de la perspective actionnelle*, 1e éd. numérique, septembre 2016, 81 p., www.christianpuren.com/mes-travaux/2016g/.

Trim, J.L.M. 1980. "Foreword" *in*: EK J.A., van, *Threshold level English: in a European unit/credit system for adults,* Oxford: Council of Europe-Pergamon, 1980, xi + 253 p.