

The Action-Oriented Approach

The Communicative Approach

In the communicative approach to second language acquisition, students learn by communicating in the target language rather than by practicing language skills in isolation. Learning activities are selected to build communicative proficiency by engaging the learner in meaningful, authentic language use. Until recent years, language instruction usually has placed greater emphasis on oral production than on spontaneous and authentic oral interaction.

The Action-Oriented Approach

The action-oriented approach to language acquisition views communication as a social activity designed to accomplish specific tasks. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) advocates going beyond the communicative approach to emphasize active language use that develops five language skills – spoken production, spoken interaction, listening, reading, and writing which includes the skills required for writing to interact. It recognizes students as active participants in the learning process.

Communication as a Social Act

Communication is a purposeful social activity, and in this context, language learners are considered social agents or actors who have tasks to accomplish “in a given set of circumstances, in a specific environment, and within a particular field of action” (CEFR, p. 9). Students in the English classroom are not only accumulating banks of new vocabulary, they are developing competence, along with strategies, to communicate effectively and to manage their use of the language within the context of various situations and the tasks to be accomplished. Students interact through listening, speaking, reading, and writing in actual or simulated real-life situations.

Action-Oriented Tasks

Action-oriented tasks are purposeful acts set in a context that students could face in everyday life in a variety of situations. These tasks are open-ended and complex, requiring a variety of knowledge and skills, and there are many possible paths leading to attaining the specific end goal. To accomplish these action-oriented tasks, students require knowledge of the language and appropriate use of that language within a given cultural and social context. Each of these social tasks consists of acts of speech, or words and groups of words that enable them to communicate for a specific purpose in a real-life interaction. Examples include offering an apology, greeting, request, complaint, invitation, compliment, or refusal.

Action-oriented tasks actively involve learners in meaningful communication, are relevant and challenging but feasible, and have identifiable outcomes which are real and practical. Students can track their progress in developing language skills by their ability to carry out realistic tasks (“I can ask for details about a product at an electronics store and inquire if it can be placed on hold using the verbs need, want, look for correctly”) rather than their ability to complete grammar quizzes on verbs (“I can conjugate the verbs need, want, look for in the present and conditional tenses”). Learning how to get something done in English empowers students.

Building Proficiency through Action-Oriented Tasks

Introducing Students to Action-Oriented Tasks

At the beginning stages of developing language proficiency, students learn to interact in English in order to have basic needs met, to make introductions, and to ask and answer simple personal questions about family, home, neighborhood, school, friends, and personal interests. These are all topics of immediate personal relevance. Students may be learning to carry out the following acts of communication in English:

- Greeting someone
- Making introductions
- Asking and answering simple questions about familiar topics
- Completing simple registration forms
- Writing simple descriptions to inform someone about an event
- Asking for help
- Requesting and giving directions
- Offering and responding to an invitation
- Offering and responding to an apology
- Reading advertisements
- Giving oral information, answering questions, and writing about oneself
- Understanding and following procedures to join a club, team, or other group
- Understanding and asking questions about tasks they are to perform
- Understanding safety rules and instructions
- Making purchases

Providing an Authentic Social Context

To emphasize the relevance of these acts of communication, teachers set a context for learning by providing a task for students to complete, usually in collaboration with one or more peers. Tasks and acts of communication can have multiple components and can be simple or complex depending on the level and interests of the students involved. For example, to make introductions, beginning students start by learning to say their name, age, and grade in complete sentences. As next steps, students might add what they are studying, talk about their hobbies, how they usually spend their free time, and describe chores or part-time jobs.

The teacher presents an authentic situation in which individuals might need to provide information, such as registering at a hospital, where students may need to give details such as the spelling of their name, their address and telephone number, email address, date and place of birth, and age, sex, and nationality. As students progress, the tasks become more linguistically and cognitively challenging.

In the communicative approach, students might be asked to turn to a partner and talk about their likes and dislikes, describe their family and what other people are like, and ask each other questions. By contrast, in the action-oriented approach, students are presented with a scenario such as planning a family

holiday, in which they must discuss their likes and dislikes and come to an agreement regarding their travel destination and details of their holiday.

Sample Action-Oriented Tasks

These examples of action-oriented tasks are set in a range of authentic situations to engage students in achieving various learning goals.

Learning Goal	Authentic Situation	Action-Oriented Task
	<i>When would this occur in real life?</i>	<i>What is the purpose? What will be accomplished?</i>
I am learning to describe my family.	Showing photos of my family to a friend and identifying each person	You have just set up an account on a social networking site. Discuss with a friend which family photos to upload. Explain your choices.
	Answering questions from an exchange student about my family members	You have enrolled in an exchange program and are speaking to your English-speaking partner on the phone for the first time. This person will be staying with you next month. Answer the exchange student's questions about your family.
	Buying a gift for a family member and having to describe the person to the sales assistant	You are in a department store and are having trouble finding the perfect gift for a family member. Describe the person to the English-speaking sales assistant, and answer questions about his/her likes and dislikes.
	Applying to be on a reality TV show	You are applying for your family to star in a reality TV show called "Costa Rica's Most Talented Family." Film a short video to describe your family to the English producers.
I am learning to ask and answer simple questions.	Meeting a new classmate on the first day of school	A teacher asks you to greet a new student from Minnesota, USA, and to give a tour of the school. Help this person feel at home by answering questions about the school.
	Asking a friend to borrow missing school supplies	You have arrived in the English class only to discover that you left your backpack at home. Ask three friends questions about your schedule for the day and whether they can lend you the materials you need to get through the day.

<p>I am learning to make simple purchases.</p>	<p>Buying items at a convenience store</p>	<p>You are driving to California for a family vacation and you stop for gas on the way. Go into the convenience store to buy some supplies for the journey. Ask the sales assistant for help finding these items. Discuss the price, quantity, and how you will pay for them.</p>
	<p>Ordering a pizza by phone</p>	<p>You and some friends are on an overnight trip to an English community. You have decided to order pizza. Phone in an order for three pizzas, making sure that they each have very different toppings to accommodate your friends' diverse tastes. Discuss the price, quantity, payment options, and how each person contributes.</p>
<p>I am learning to set a date for a meeting, to talk about dates and times, and to give directions.</p>	<p>Arranging to see a movie with friends</p>	<p>Your best friend has English-speaking cousins who are visiting from Washington D.C. and the group is having trouble agreeing on the details for going to a movie. Talk to them to decide when and where you will meet, how you will get to the theater, and what movie you will see.</p>
<p>I am learning to express my likes and dislikes.</p>	<p>Describing what you would like to receive as a birthday gift</p>	<p>An English-speaking friend of your family whom you have not seen for a long time phones to ask what you would like for your birthday. She seems to think that you still like the same things you did when you were five years old. Give her three or four ideas of what you would really like to receive as a gift. Explain your choices.</p>
<p>I am learning to request and follow detailed directions.</p>	<p>Travelling in a English speaking area</p>	<p>You are at Los Angeles, California. You're planning a visit to Las Vegas. You go to an Info tourist location and ask for directions using the visitor's guide/map. On the way to Las Vegas, you check these directions with a passerby.</p>
		<p>You are in a train station (or an airport) and you want to find an ice cream shop. You ask a person at the information kiosk how to find your destination. A little later, an English-speaking tourist sees you with your ice cream and asks you for the same directions. Explain how to get there</p>
		<p>You are going to visit a friend who lives in residence on a university campus in the southern region of United States. You have found the university campus, but are having trouble locating</p>

		the residence building. You stop a group of students to ask for directions.
I am learning to give or seek personal views and opinions in informal discussions with friends.	Discussing movies, books, music, etc.	You are visiting a friend in San Francisco and would like to see a movie this week. The friend wants to see an action film, and you would prefer a comedy. Have a discussion, giving your opinions and the reasons for them.
	Looking for others' input before making a purchase	You email some English -speaking friends to find out what kinds of phones and data plans they have and their opinions of the service offered by the various phone companies. Share the information with your parents and convince them to help you pay for the data plan.
I am learning to agree and disagree politely with someone.	Rejecting a meal in a restaurant	You ordered a vegetarian pasta in an English restaurant, but the server brings you meat lasagna, insists it is what you have ordered, and argues that it is delicious. Politely convince the server to bring the meal you ordered.
I am learning to ask someone to clarify or elaborate on what they have just said.	Buying additional components for your computer	You notice signs for a sale and decide to purchase components or software for your computer while on a student exchange. You are following the explanation of the English-speaking salesperson, but there are some particular words which you do not recognize. Ask the salesperson for an explanation of the unfamiliar terms.
I am learning to make myself understood even when I don't know the exact word.	Making a purchase at the garden store	You are visiting relatives in a small Californian town and would like to buy a particular plant as a thank-you gift. You don't know the correct name of the plant, but you know what it looks like. Describe what you are looking for to the English-speaking salesperson.
I am learning to write to express an opinion.	Writing to a newspaper editor	A developer would like to build a strip mall where there is currently a park in which many children and their families play. Write a letter to the editor of the local English newspaper giving reasons why the park and its green space should be preserved.
	Completing a survey	You and your family have completed a stay at a hotel in Miami. You are filling in the customer satisfaction survey before you leave.

Use of Technology in Action-Oriented Tasks

Technology can be a powerful learning tool for students. It can provide a risk-free environment for students to communicate, facilitate provision of feedback from teachers, enable students to review and self-assess their oral performance, and help motivate students by tapping into an area of interest, comfort, and expertise. Using a variety of technologies can enhance and complement the authenticity inherent in the action-oriented approach.

Cell phones are used by students for authentic oral interactions on a daily basis. They can be useful props in parts of many action-oriented tasks.

Media such as television, radio, newspapers, blogs, and websites provides authentic English texts and creates opportunities for action-oriented tasks in the English classroom. Whole-class discussions and informal, small-group debates and dialogues can be part of authentic, relevant, and spontaneous oral tasks related to using media.

Social media technologies such as blogs, email, music and picture sharing, voice-over Internet services, podcasts, and wikis have significantly changed how our students communicate. English language teachers can use these technologies to provide virtual exchanges with students around the world, promoting cultural literacy as well as providing authentic tasks.

Video and voice recorders allow students to record, re-record, and receive immediate feedback on their communication through self- and group evaluation, enabling them to create texts that can be shared within and beyond the classroom.

When designing tasks, let's keep in mind...

- **Tasks (not exercise).** The task is no longer seen as the equivalent of an exercise or a simple communication task. The task's goal is no longer limited to placing learners in a communication situation. **A task is not synonymous with an exercise.** It is not an excuse for using language forms and structures, orally or in writing. A task is a way to launch learners into action in the pursuit of a specific goal. And **action is always contextualized.**

- **A feature of everyday life.** Tasks are real; they are not simply an excuse for communication, even less for strict progression of learning. Tasks are real actions; they are anchored in everyday life. They relate to particular situations and they have specific goals. Tasks are not designed around a notion that the learner must learn, or even around a simple communication situation. Tasks recreate what social agents do in everyday life. In daily life, communication comes into play when necessary so that tasks can be performed.

- **Strategic activation of specific competences.** The learner/social agent chooses a goal, — one or more — objectives. In order to achieve these objectives, the learner must act strategically. In other words, he or she must make choices. The more the learner is aware of what he or she must do in order to perform the task, and what general competences and communicative language competences this will require, the more effective he or she will be.

- **A set of purposeful actions.** Instead of performing a series of exercises that do not share a connection, or even performing a series of organized steps in a language progression, the learner/social agent

performs a set of purposeful actions that point toward a clearly defined goal — steps that apply specific aspects of language, all of which contribute to a successfully performed task.

- **Extremely varied in nature.** Because each of the steps we have just described exercises different aspects, which implicate language use to a greater or lesser extent, the actions that the learner/social agent will accomplish may be very different.
- **Language activities are involved to a greater or lesser extent.** In the trajectory that leads to successful accomplishment of the task, there will be times when language is used heavily (reception, production, and/or interaction), and there will be other times when language plays a marginal role.
- **Quite simple or extremely complex.** Not all tasks are equivalent. Some are very simple, while others are more complex. In other words, some tasks will involve what can be referred to as sub-tasks, or steps, that make it possible for the learner to achieve the objective.

Bibliography

This document has been adapted from:

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Time to practice

Let's design our own Action-Oriented Tasks

Level: 7th

Unit: 1

Scenario: Here I am

Learning Goal	Authentic Situation	Action-Oriented Task
	<i>When would this occur in real life?</i>	<i>What is the purpose? What will be accomplished?</i>
I am learning to ask others for personal information (address, telephone, number, and nationality, country of citizenship, birthdate, age, family and hobbies).		
I am learning to introduce myself, for example: say my name, where I come from and what I do (address, telephone, number, nationality, age, family and hobbies).		

Level: 8th

Unit: 6

Scenario: Amazing Costa Rica!

Learning Goal	Authentic Situation	Action-Oriented Task
	<i>When would this occur in real life?</i>	<i>What is the purpose? What will be accomplished?</i>
I am learning to ask and answer simple questions about different tourist attractions.		

I am learning to suggest different things to do, places to go in the country.		
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Level: 9th

Unit: 2

Scenario: Online & Connected

Learning Goal	Authentic Situation	Action-Oriented Task
	<i>When would this occur in real life?</i>	<i>What is the purpose? What will be accomplished?</i>
I am learning to describe media, apps, virtual communities and networks.		
I am learning to describe experiences with media, apps, virtual communities and networks.		

Level: 10th

Unit: 1

Scenario: Love what we do!

Learning Goal	Authentic Situation	Action-Oriented Task
	<i>When would this occur in real life?</i>	<i>What is the purpose? What will be accomplished?</i>
I am learning to summarize what has been said and convey this information to another about job and occupation ads in dialogues and interviews.		

Time to practice

Let's design our own Action-Oriented Tasks

Level: 1st

Unit: 1

Scenario: All about me

Learning Goal	Authentic Situation	Action-Oriented Task
	<i>When would this occur in real life?</i>	<i>What is the purpose? What will be accomplished?</i>
I am learning to express a lack of understanding.		
I am learning to ask for something when pointing or gesturing to support the request.		

Unit: 2

Scenario: This is our classroom

Learning Goal	Authentic Situation	Action-Oriented Task
	<i>When would this occur in real life?</i>	<i>What is the purpose? What will be accomplished?</i>
I am learning to name some common objects in familiar environments, for example (e.g., It is a ruler. It is a book.)		
I am learning to ask what the object is using learned expressions of language and by pointing to it.		

Unit 4

Scenario: Going to school, so cool!

Learning Goal	Authentic Situation	Action-Oriented Task
	<i>When would this occur in real life?</i>	<i>What is the purpose? What will be accomplished?</i>
I am learning to respond in a predictable pattern to simple questions about familiar things (e.g., Where is the principal's office? Next to the library) if the other person speaks slowly and clearly.		
I am learning to name some common places and people at school.		

Unit: 6

Scenario: Playtime

Learning Goal	Authentic Situation	Action-Oriented Task
	<i>When would this occur in real life?</i>	<i>What is the purpose? What will be accomplished?</i>
I am learning to express likes and dislikes using simple, standard expressions.		