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ASSOCIATION ONTARIENNE DES
PROFESSEURS DE LANGUES VIVANTES

SINCE / DEPUIS 1886

Action-Oriented Tasks in the International Languages Classroom

SHIFT FROM COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH TO ACTION-ORIENTED TASKS

The revised Ontario Curriculum Grades 9 to 12, Classical Studies and International Languages 2016 presents a shift in the approach to language instruction: from one of passive acquisition to active interaction, from grammar-based instruction to language rich instruction, from the teaching of isolated concepts to contextualized learning. While students are developing competencies, they practice skills in a variety of contexts, but in order for them to develop all competencies in their second language, they "need to see themselves as social actors communicating for real purposes." (Curriculum p.9)   Learning should occur within the framework of "a task to be accomplished, a problem to be resolved, an obligation to be fulfilled, or an objective to be achieved." (CEFR p. 10)

COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE COMPETENCIES

"Teaching language as a system of disconnected and isolated components gives learners some knowledge of the language, but does not allow them to use the language effectively. In contrast, communicative and action-oriented approaches to teaching second or additional languages put real communication at the centre of all learning activities." (Curriculum p. 10)

Linguistic competencies are only one part of a larger set of competencies that students need in order to communicate effectively. Equally important are **socio-linguistic competencies** (i.e. register, recognizing accents and dialects and forms of politeness) and **pragmatic competencies** (i.e. using the right language for the purpose or situation, cohesion). All competencies, including lexical and grammatical competencies, should be taught explicitly, but within a communicative context and not in isolation.

ENDURING IDEAS

The following Enduring Ideas in the curriculum (pages 8 – 13) provide a framework for the creation of Action-oriented tasks:

Authentic communication: Wherever possible, action-oriented tasks should provide an authentic social context; that is, a situation that a student could actually imagine participating in outside the classroom. For example, instead of just writing a paragraph to describe themselves, students can fill in an application where they convince someone why they deserve a scholarship.

Development of language learning strategies: Language learning strategies should be explicitly taught to students as they practise the skills they need to complete their task. As students move from guided practice to spontaneous

communication, they will need to continuously apply language learning strategies to become independent learners.

Development of intercultural understanding: Carefully planned action-oriented tasks provide opportunities for students to demonstrate their understanding of intercultural concepts in context, rather than just answering questions on a test. For example, during a role play, students use correct forms of address to indicate different social status.

Critical and creative thinking skills and metacognition: Action-oriented tasks should be designed to be open-ended, allowing students the opportunity to think critically to complete their communication task. Students may need to mediate or repair language, or solve an unforeseen problem in order to achieve the goals of the task. A well-designed task allows students with varied levels of competencies to complete it, with greater or lesser degrees of sophistication.

Making real-life connections: There is a wealth of authentic material on the internet, including audio, video and items such as advertisements, schedules, posters, newspapers, magazines, signs, etc. These materials provide important modelling, particularly of socio-linguistic and pragmatic competencies.

STEPS IN CREATING AN ACTION-ORIENTED TASK

Action-oriented tasks should be created using a Backward Design model and should create a context that a student might reasonably expect to encounter.

1. Identify the curriculum expectation you wish to address.
2. Think of an authentic context that would provide the students an opportunity to demonstrate those skills. *"…tasks which are purposeful and meaningful for the learner, and provide a challenging but realistic and attainable goal, involving the learner as fully as possible, and allowing for differing learner interpretations and outcomes."* (CEFR p. 167)
3. Anticipate the speech acts, skills and strategies that will need to be explicitly taught in order for students to meet the communication goal.
4. Articulate the Action-Oriented task to students – this is your Communication Goal.
5. Articulate the Success Criteria to students. Success criteria can be in the form of "Can do" statements and should include linguistic, socio-linguistic, and pragmatic competencies.
6. Co-construct vocabulary lists, anchor charts, and assessment rubrics with students in order to take into account student interests and skills. "In the international languages classroom, it is often necessary to support learning across a range of language levels – there are often a wide variety of students with diverse language backgrounds, strengths, needs, and motivations." (Curriculum p. 37)
7. Model the task for students, either through teacher talk, guided reading, authentic texts or audio/video, across all four strands (listening, reading, writing, speaking). Endeavour to provide 'comprehensible input': language that students can understand but that demonstrates competencies that are just a bit beyond their current skill level.
8. Provide multiple opportunities for student practice in as many different ways as possible and with as many different partners as possible, moving from guided practice toward spontaneous communication.

DOCUMENTS TO CONSULT WHEN CREATING ACTION-ORIENTED TASKS:

> *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment EAQUALS Bank of Descriptors*

> Council of Europe (2016) *Collated Representative Samples of Descriptors of Language Competences Developed for Young Learners aged 11-15.*

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS FOR TEACHERS WHEN DEVELOPING ACTION-ORIENTED TASKS:

> When faced with this task, what can my students already do?

> What are the social relationships between the parties in the interaction, and how will those relationships affect the language needs of my students?

> What are some leading questions that will help students to identify gaps in vocabulary?

> How will they open the interaction?

> What expressions and reactions will they need to know so their speech sounds natural?

> How will the interaction end?

EXAMPLES OF ACTION-ORIENTED TASKS

Course: Level 2, University Preparation

Curriculum Specific Expectation B2.2 Speaking - Interacting: engage in structured and spontaneous spoken interactions in the target language about academic and familiar topics, with teacher modelling and support as appropriate. (e.g.) role-play inquiring about the price, availability, and/or types of items for sale in a variety of locations, such as a department store, farmers' market, or street vendor.

Action-oriented task: You are at the mall to buy someone a birthday present but you have a budget of $20. Discuss the gift recipient's likes / dislikes and prices of possible items with the clerk in order to find the best gift. Make a decision and purchase an item from the clerk.

Anticipated skills required:

Linguistic: > Lexical: clothing, sizes, numbers

Sociolinguistic: > Formal language conventions when addressing a stranger

Pragmatic: > Greetings > Asking for help > Asking for prices > Making a transaction > Thanking someone > Leave-taking

Course: Level 1, Open

Curriculum Specific Expectation D1.2 Writing in a Variety of Forms: write a variety of level-appropriate texts in the target language, applying their knowledge of the basic structural and stylistic elements of each form.

Action-oriented task: Write a text message to a classmate, inviting him/her to attend an event. He/she cannot attend and proposes another event at a different day and time.

Anticipated skills required:
Linguistic: > Lexical: days of the week, telling time, locations > Negative constructions

Sociolinguistic: > Informal language conventions when texting a peer

Pragmatic: > Informal Greetings > Extending an invitation > Accepting or refusing an invitation > Leave-taking

Course: Level 3, University Preparation

Curriculum Specific Expectation B1.2 Writing in a Variety of Forms: produce planned, detailed, and spontaneous messages in the target language to communicate information and ideas about a variety of topics, with support as appropriate

Action-oriented task: After returning home from the movies, you realize you have left your wallet behind. Make a phone call to the cinema and leave a message in their voicemail. Give them your personal information, say what day and time you were there, what movie you saw, describe the object you left behind, and leave your contact information.

Anticipated skills required:

Linguistic: > Lexical: colours, sizes, days of the week, telling time, telephone numbers
> Verbs: past tenses, present tense

Sociolinguistic: > Use of polite language conventions

Pragmatic: > Expressions used when using the telephone > Giving clear, detailed descriptions

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