

Action-oriented, Plurilingual and Intercultural Education: A new association—API Forum

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Despite developments over the past 20 to 30 years in theories that inform language education, the predominant pedagogical approach in English Language Teaching (ELT) has not changed radically since the introduction of the coursebook-dominated 'mature version' of communicative language teaching (CLT) in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In the field, the CEFR appears to have been perceived mainly as a set of proficiency levels and descriptors (common reference points) to guide assessments, provide standards and align planning, teaching and assessment. In great part, implementation of the CEFR overlooks the action-oriented, plurilingual approach to language education advocated in the 2001 original, and even more so in the 2020 CEFR Companion Volume. After outlining why that might be the case and briefly summarising the key aspects of the CEFR pedagogic vision – action-orientation, the social agent, mediation and plurilingualism – this article introduces a new international association for language educators and researchers, API Forum, dedicated to promoting, implementing, researching and further developing this vision.

Key words: Innovation; CEFR; Action-orientation; Plurilingualism; Mediation; Professional Associations

1. Impediments to moving forward in language education

Over the past 20 to 30 years, there has been a somewhat static situation in the evolution of second/foreign language teaching practices, when compared to the radical advances made in the 1970s and 1980s that led to the communicative approach, which then became 'in vogue' during the 1990s (Pearce 2024). It is true that pedagogy for many languages¹ went through a 'catch up' transformation in the early 2000s, largely due to the influence of the CEFR, but since the spread of the communicative approach in the 1990s, rather little has changed in classroom practices, particularly in English Language Teaching (ELT) (Piccardo 2024). This is partly because, following the sweeping success of *Headway* (Soars & Soars 1987) the first 'mega coursebook' (Kedde 2004), which reverted to a grammatical progression rather than authentic materials (Kedde 2004), most publishers quickly followed suit (Jordan & Gray 2019; Thornbury 2016). The result was that, as Jordan and Gray suggest, already by 2008 "communicative language teaching (CLT) had been so completely replaced by coursebooks that CLT was now 'part of history'" (2019: 438). It is true that some ELT publishers have since become more adventurous – perhaps starting with the *Speakout* series (Clare & Wilson 2011), but as Jordan and Gray summarize "it is fair to say, following Akbari (2008), that the methodology these coursebooks implement is the current model for ELT worldwide" (2019: 440). The effect has been to reinforce a *deficiency perspective* focused on mistakes rather than the

1. From the early 1980s both English and German had well-established applied linguistics cultures, empirical second language acquisition research, analysis of classroom discourse, teacher training institutes, curriculum approaches, and course book expertise – including, for German, a well-developed course book evaluation methodology. This was far less the case for Romance languages before the CEFR and presumably this was the case for other languages as well.

proficiency perspective promoted by the CEFR: what you ‘can do.’ Such conservatism is further reinforced by the dominant culture of standardised tests, which still follow Lado’s (1961) model of separating the ‘four skills’ with decontextualized test tasks and sometimes even separate language papers. As Akbari pointed out 15 years ago, “the profession has not yet been able to counter the destructive effects of standardized tests” (2008: 649). Since then, things have not greatly improved. The CEFR Expert Group give the PISA 2025 Framework as an example, since it “eschews interaction and continues to test the four skills (listening, reading, spoken production, and writing) in complete isolation, using picture-based item types to do so that would not have been out of place in the 1970s” (2023: 28).

Another factor impeding a move forward in language education is the way that, despite the CEFR’s provision of a common metalanguage, in teaching, teacher education, and testing, languages still tend to be kept in complete isolation from one other. This is partly due to the influence of the monocultural/monolingual institutes and examination bodies associated with each language (e.g., British Council, Cambridge, France-Éducation-Internationale, etc.), which leads to the maintenance of separate pedagogic cultures for different languages. The separation of languages at a school level impedes the leveraging of new learning in relation to language(s) known, hindering the development of metalinguistic awareness on the part of both teachers and learners. The form taken by teacher education also exacerbates the isolation problem since it generally takes place separately for different languages. In addition, pre-service education institutes often lack the power to select the teachers that host trainees for teaching practice. This fact – plus the power of textbooks and tests and the way new teachers are influenced by the way they themselves were taught languages – contributes to the tendency for new teachers to fall back on outdated methodologies. Then again, continuous professional development is not as common as it could and should be and often involves one-off events like conferences rather than opportunities to work with other teachers on new ideas, try them out in class, and return to discuss experiences.

2. The CEFR project

It is important to raise awareness of these challenges and share possible solutions to them. In this respect, it is worth remembering that the CEFR project² was always intended to help in such a process. The CEFR 2001 had two aims: (a) to provide a common metalanguage (descriptive scheme) and common references points (levels) to increase transparency and coherence within and between institutions/educational systems; and (b) to stimulate reflection and reform in language education, which is why each chapter ended with questions for the reader to consider (generally referred to as ‘reflection boxes’). At the intergovernmental Forum held in 2007 to take stock of implementation of the CEFR, member states made clear that, while they recognised that it was important to respect the integrity of the scheme and levels in respect of the first aim, they were *far* more interested in the second (Goullier 2007a; 2007b). Unfortunately, as many have pointed out, in practice success with the first aim largely eclipsed the second³ (see Byram & Parmenter 2012; Coste 2007; North 2014; Piccardo 2020; Piccardo & North 2019; Savski 2019, 2020). There are of course CEFR-focused Special Interest Groups (SIGs) in some national teacher associations, which concern themselves with educational aspects of the CEFR (e.g., the JALT CEFR LP SIG that is the parent of this journal), but these are the exception.

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment –

2. By CEFR project I refer to the ongoing development of ideas in the CEFR, which includes the CEFR 2001, the CEFR Companion Volume and the CEFR website (www.coe.int/lang-cefr). In Chapter 1 of the CEFR 2001 it was made clear that the Framework was seen as an open-ended project “open: capable of further extension and refinement; dynamic: in continuous evolution in response to experience in its use.” (Council of Europe 2001: 8)
3. This process can be seen to be continuing with, for example, the publication of the recently published handbook for Aligning Language Education with the CEFR (Figueras et al. 2022), which is essentially an update of the manual for relating assessments to the CEFR (Council of Europe 2009), and which interprets ‘aligning language education’ purely in terms of levels, without considering educational aspects.

Companion Volume (CEFR/CV: Council of Europe 2020) was produced in an attempt to address this problem by spelling out and further developing the key concepts of the CEFR vision – such as the action-oriented approach, the learner as a social agent, mediation and plurilingualism – which can help to address the problems mentioned above. These key concepts, which are explained and illustrated on the CEFR website (www.coe.int/lang-cefr), are very briefly outlined below.

Action-orientation: A few pioneers in French as a foreign language (Bourguignon 2006, 2010; Piccardo 2005; Puren 2004, 2009; Richer 2009; Rosen 2009) as well as van Lier (2007) saw the implications of an action-oriented / action-based approach in the early 2000s but it was not until more recently that the approach was explained (Piccardo 2014) and theorised (Piccardo & North 2019) or that scenario-based, action-oriented classroom materials have begun to appear (e.g., Collins & Hunter 2013, 2014; Hunter et al. 2019; Lebrec et al. 2024; Piccardo et al. 2022a), often in the context of teaching adult immigrants (e.g., Durham Immigration Portal 2016; Hunter et al. 2017; Piccardo & Hunter 2017; Schleiss & Hagenow-Caprez 2017). The action-oriented approach aligns completely with an ecological approach (van Lier 2000, 2004, 2010), complexity theories (Larsen-Freeman 1997, 2011, 2017) and the socio-cultural theory (Lantolf 2000, 2011; Lantolf & Poehner 2014). Unlike the communicative approach, it foregrounds learner agency in situated, collaborative learning (Webb 2009). Learning needs to be experiential, rooted in *dynamic learning situations* (Masciotra & Morel 2011).

The social agent: The action-oriented approach sees the learner as a social agent: acting collaboratively and responsibly with others in a specific context to complete tasks that build up to the production of some kind of performance or artifact, and – through a process of drafting/redrafting/rehearsing, with scaffolding from the teacher – mobilising and extending all their linguistic resources and general competences. In the socio-cognitive theory of agency (Bandura 2001, 2018) agency is developed through forethought (including having some kind of plan); self-reactiveness (self-regulation) and self-reflectiveness. The effect of having such agency is to promote engagement and self-efficacy (the belief in success based on experience of success).

Mediation: This concept was introduced in the CEFR 2001 in a limited form and has been incorporated in assessment in Germany (Katelhön & Marečková 2022; Katelhön & Nied Curcio 2013; Kolb 2016; Reimann & Rössler 2013), Greece (Dendrinou 2013, 2022, 2024; Stathopoulou 2015), Austria (Piribauer et al. 2015; Steinhuber 2022) and more recently Spain (Berceruelo Pino et al. 2024; Sánchez Cuadrado 2022). Central to the sociocultural theory, mediation was theorised and further developed in a 2014-2020 Council of Europe project (North & Piccardo 2016) and is a core feature of the CEFR/CV. It encompasses both intralinguistic mediation and cross-linguistic mediation and can be seen as linguistic, textual, social, cultural and pedagogic. The CEFR/CV provides a wealth of mediation descriptors articulated into different aspects of mediating a text, mediating concepts, and mediating communication. The descriptors have stimulated considerable innovation (see North et al. 2022; Stathopoulou et al. 2023) including articles in this journal (e.g., Berceruelo Pino et al. 2024; Jiménez Naranjo et al. 2024; Lankina & Pect 2020; Lontou & Braidwood 2021; Pavlovskaya & Lankina 2019; Perevertkina et al. 2020; Stathopoulou 2020).

Plurilingualism: Plurilingualism posits a single, holistic linguistic repertoire encompassing all the languages, varieties and registers encountered in one's life trajectory (CEFR 2001; Beacco 2005; Piccardo 2018). The concept aligns with complexity theories (Piccardo 2017; Larsen-Freeman & Todeva 2022) and with developing creativity and interculturality (Furlong 2009; Piccardo 2017, 2019). Plurilingualism as an educational philosophy implies the valuing of home languages in the class, a coherent approach to language across the curriculum and the development of openness to new languages and cultures (Beacco et al. 2016). However, although it was well presented in the CEFR 2001 (unlike the action-oriented

approach, social agent or mediation), plurilingualism took some time to take off despite the fact that, as John Trim, the father of the CEFR project, stressed in 2007:

“Both at individual and societal levels the concept [of plurilingualism] is dynamic, since the components from the experience of different language and cultures interpenetrate and interact, forming something new, enriched and in continual development. This approach meets better the realities of globalisation than various forms of purism which regard each language and culture as a separate entity, to be preserved and protected against the threat offered by alien forces. Most users of the CEFR have applied it only to a single language but its descriptive apparatus for communicative action and competences, together with the ‘can-do’ descriptors of levels of competence, are a good basis for a plurilinguistic approach to language across the curriculum, which awaits development.” (Trim 2007, emphasis added)

Although there is a substantial literature on plurilingualism, at least in French (see Moore 2019; Moore & Gajo 2009), apart from *Eveil aux langues* (Candelier 2003), CONBAT (Bernaus et al. 2011) and CARAP/FREPA (Candelier et al., 2012), it is not until more recently that one has seen a ‘language across the curriculum’ approach and the development of plurilingual classroom pedagogies (see Beacco et al. 2016; Brinkmann et al. 2022; Camilleri Grima 2021; Choi J. & Ollerhead 2018; Corcoll López & González-Davies 2016; Daryai-Hansen et al. 2015; Galante et al. 2019, 2022; Jentges et al. 2022; Lau & Van Viegen 2020; Lory & Valois 2021; Piccardo 2013; Piccardo & Langé 2023; Piccardo et al. 2022b: Part V; Prasad 2014, 2015).

3. A New Association: API Forum

In order to provide an international network for those working with, conducting research on and further developing the core concepts described above and, in general, contributing to a conceptual shift towards action-oriented, plurilingual and intercultural education, the association API⁴ Forum was formally founded at its first General Meeting on 3 February 2025. The Forum has grown from a network of language professionals who have been working with the CEFR/CV, which aims to redress the balance in the exploitation of the CEFR, emphasising its conceptual vision rather than just its Common Reference Levels (North 2007a, 2007b), as described above. Following an online conference in December 2020 at which 800 people participated, the CEFR Expert Group organised a 2021-2023 series of monthly online workshops explaining the key aspects of the CEFR vision – such as transparency and coherence; the learner as social agent; action-orientation; mediation; plurilingualism – and the way in which the CEFR/CV further develops these. The materials for all these workshops, as well as other useful videos, key documents, articles, and training materials on these CEFR key concepts, plus ideas for implementing them, are all available on the CEFR website (www.coe.int/lang-cefr).

On 15 June 2023, the CEFR Group held a hybrid Reflection Day in Strasbourg, *“The CEFR Companion Volume: Enhancing engagement in language education,”* which was attended by 40 experts in language policy, curriculum design, and teacher education from 20 countries, and at which it was decided to form a network. At the same time, the Group was preparing a *Guide to Action-oriented, Plurilingual and Intercultural Education* (CEFR Expert Group 2023), which is now available online on the CEFR website in English and French. The network met again online on 4 June 2024 and decided to form an association, which has been since formalised as API Forum, with its seat in Lausanne, Switzerland. As mentioned, the first General Meeting was held recently, at which the Articles of Association and Founding Committee were confirmed. The first API Conference *“Action-oriented Plurilingual and Intercultural Education: A needed shift in Language Education”* will take place in hybrid form at La Sapienza Università di Roma on 19-20 June 2025. The full programme is available on the conference website.⁵

4. An api in Italian is a bee. We see ourselves as ‘pollinators’.

5. The link to the conference website is: <https://sites.google.com/view/api-conference-2025>

4. Aims of API Forum

API Forum aims to publicize and promote the latest research in the field of language education oriented to action, plurilingualism and interculturality, as well as innovative projects and relevant resources developed in different contexts, in order to support policy development and implementation. Above all, the Forum aims to provide an international, collaborative space – physically and virtually – for members in different contexts to discuss aspects of action-oriented, plurilingual and intercultural education, reflect on the challenges and opportunities that they present at the classroom, institutional and policy-making levels, and share practical examples of implementation and other resources. In the process the Forum will draw attention to and collaborate in relevant academic research, as well as development projects. In the longer term we aim to create, share and disseminate resources, including exemplar action-oriented scenarios and tasks, as well as to support the further development of teacher competences in pre- and in-service teacher education, particularly competences in relation to action-orientation, plurilingual pedagogies and intercultural approaches.

In the context of supporting education for democracy, respect for human rights, inclusive education, learner agency and the valuing of learners' plurilingual and pluricultural repertoires in line with the Council of Europe's Recommendation CM/Rec (2022) *The Importance of Plurilingual and Intercultural Education for Democratic Culture*,⁶ API Forum aims to promote activities such as the following:

- the networking of initiatives and projects concerning the key concepts of the CEFR/CV;
- the integration of the CEFR/CV into the professional development of teachers of all subjects in initial and in-service training;
- the development of the role of mediation as a facilitator for learning across the curriculum, encouraging research and case studies;
- the development of the knowledge of and uses of technologies, multimodality as well as Artificial Intelligence for action-oriented, plurilingual and intercultural education;
- the creation of communities of practice for people working according to the principles of action-oriented, plurilingual and intercultural education at local and regional level; and:
- collaboration between educational institutions and sectors from the local to the global level.

The fact of the matter is that in language education, at an international level, there has, up until now, been no association that brings together policy makers, researchers, curriculum developers, teacher educators and teachers of different languages, let alone one dedicated to innovation. There is AILA (*Association internationale de linguistique appliquée*), but it is academic and expensive; there is FIPLV (*Fédération internationale de professeurs de langues vivantes*), but it is an association of associations; there are national and international language teachers' associations, but usually for just one language. Whereas European language testers have ALTE (*Association of Language Testers in Europe*) and EALTA (European Association for Language Testing and Assessment), language education has only EAQUALS (formerly *European Association for Quality Language Services*, and now *Evaluation and Accreditation of Quality Language Services*), but its members are largely private sector language schools and the focus is on quality management, not innovation.

API Forum aims to fill this gap, becoming a space to exchange the latest news, research and ideas as well as to be a catalyst that broadens the scope of language education, giving learners agency in their learning process through an action-oriented approach and promoting plurilingualism and interculturality. In a world increasingly dominated by the overwhelming spread of English, to the extent that the learning of other additional languages is seriously endangered, and in which nativist, xenophobic, neo-fascist ideologies are gaining ground, the promotion of an inclusive rather than instrumental approach to language education is more important than ever.

6. The link to the Recommendation is <https://rm.coe.int/1680a967b4>

New members are welcome and applications can be made to the Secretary (rmargonis*[admark]*hotmail.com) or President (brianjohnnorth3*[admark]*gmail.com).

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5. Biography

Brian North has been an English teacher, project coordinator, course director, development manager and researcher, spending his career at the interface between research, practical implementation of innovation, and quality management. After implementing a 'can-do' curriculum for different languages in the schools of the Eurocentres Foundation, he was chair of Equals, the international quality assurance association for language programmes from 2005 to 2010. He coordinated the 1991 intergovernmental Symposium that recommended the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)* and *European Language Portfolio (ELP)*, for which he developed the levels and descriptors in his PhD (*The Development of a Common Framework Scale of Language Proficiency* 2000: Peter Lang) as part of a Swiss National Science Foundation project. He co-authored the CEFR, the prototype ELP, the Manual for relating examinations to the CEFR, and Equals' CEFR Core Inventories for English and French. More recently he coordinated the 2013–20 project that produced the *CEFR Companion Volume* and is main editor of *Enriching 21st century Language Education: The CEFR Companion Volume, Examples from Practice* (2022, Council of Europe). Other publications include: *The CEFR in Practice* (2014: Cambridge); *Language Course Planning* (co-authored: 2018: Oxford), and *The Action-oriented Approach* (with E. Piccardo, 2019: Multilingual Matters).

Appendix

API Mission statement

API Education Forum is an international community of academics, teachers, teacher educators, curriculum developers, administrators, and policy makers in the broad field of language and literacy education. This community is dedicated to the promotion of **Action-oriented, Plurilingual and Intercultural (API) Education** at primary, secondary and tertiary levels as well as in adult education, including the integration of migrants within these sectors. API's work is grounded in promoting and protecting linguistic and cultural diversity, which is crucial to equitable, inclusive, quality education. It is also vital for developing mutual understanding and overcoming barriers in order to collaborate and thrive together in today's complex world.

API aims to provide a forum to bring together the latest research in language education, innovative projects across different contexts, and cutting-edge resources in order to support policy development and implementation. A crucial resource for the realization of API Education is the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR) project. This ongoing and open-ended project includes the CEFR 2001 publication and its 2020 extended edition – the CEFR Companion Volume.

The Forum aims to become an interactive, collaborative space for members to:

- discuss aspects of action-oriented, plurilingual and intercultural (API) education;
- reflect on the challenges and opportunities they present at the classroom, institutional and policy-making levels;
- share practical examples of API implementation and other resources;
- draw attention to and/or collaborate in both relevant academic research and also development projects;
- create, share and disseminate resources, including exemplar scenarios/tasks and/or training modules;
- support the further development of teacher (pre-service and in-service) competences for API education.

Activities within the API Education Forum aim to contribute to the further development of the following key areas within the field of language education:

- awareness-raising and networking concerning projects and initiatives relevant to the CEFR/CV and API education;
- design and development of curricula and resources that promote inclusivity, develop student agency, and foster linguistic and cultural repertoires;
- coverage of the CEFR project and API education in pre-service and in-service professional development;
- development of teaching and learning materials;
- promotion of languages across the curriculum, the development of partial competences in multiple languages, and the use of multiple languages in the classroom;
- support for language education and education for democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, and decolonialization;
- exploration of the potential of multimodality, technology, and large language models (such as ChatGPT) for API education;
- investigation of the role of mediation in plurilingual education, not only as a tool for the language learning classroom, but also as a cross-curricular resource;
- encouragement of communities of practice for teachers working with API education at a local and

- regional level;
- collaboration between institutions and educational sectors at the local and regional level.