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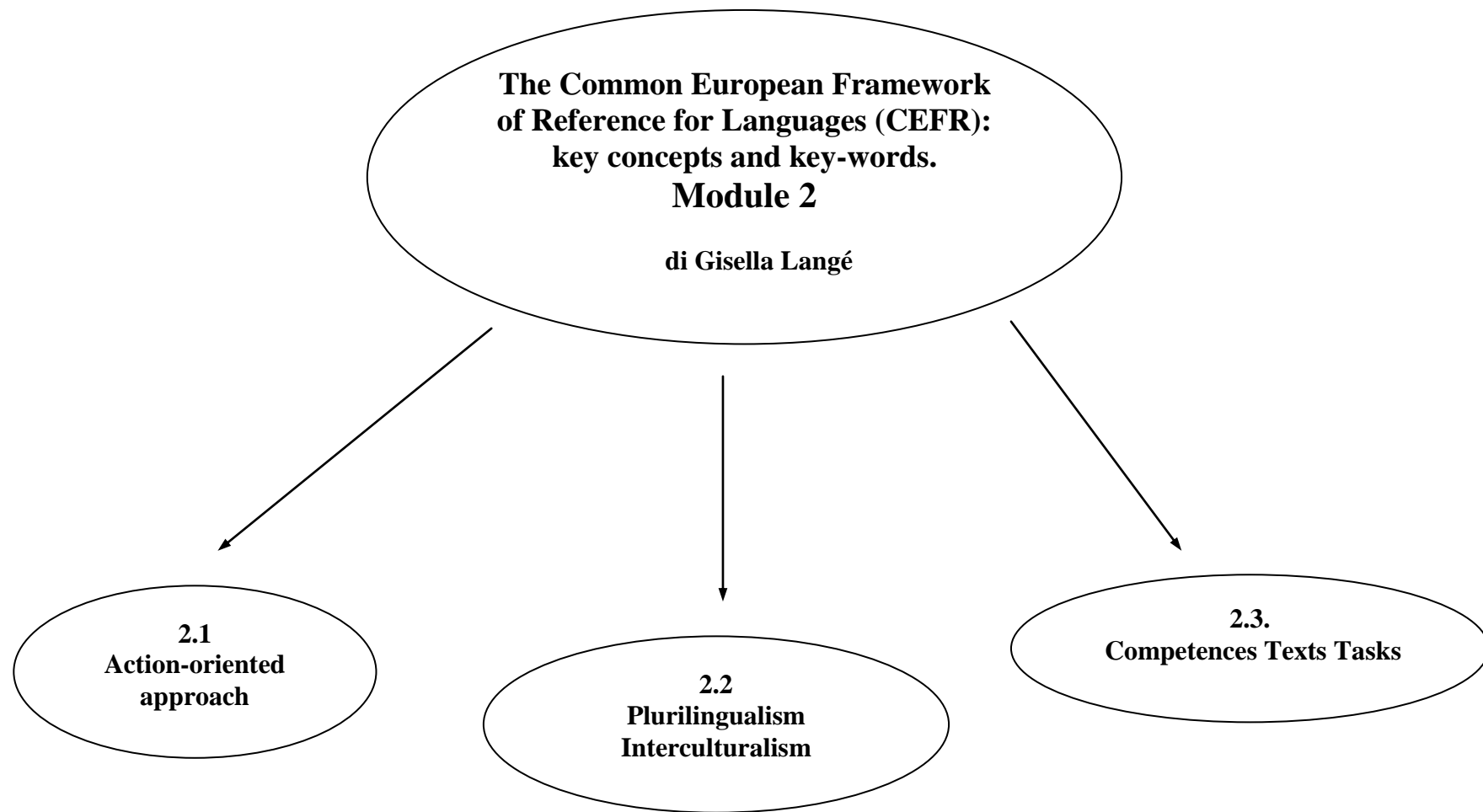


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PON LINGUA LETTERATURA E CULTURA IN UNA DIMENSIONE EUROPEA

THE COMMON EUROPEAN FRAMEWORK OF REFERENCE FOR LANGUAGES (CEFR): KEY CONCEPTS AND KEY-WORDS A CURA DI G. LANGÉ



2.1 Action-oriented approach

The *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR): *Learning, teaching, assessment*, published in 2001 by the Council of Europe, is the result of a long process that began in the early 1970s, when language teaching professionals from all over Europe were involved in different projects aimed at developing new tools for language practitioners in order to favour methodological innovations and new approaches to teaching programmes. In those years Van Ek and John Trim were working in the CoE Modern Languages Project and were specifying *learning objectives* for language teaching purposes.

An action-orientated approach marked and is still marking choices: language learning is based on **active use of the language for communication**, the so called “can do” approach. Preparing people for active language use involves the full range of human capacities (the intellect, emotions and the will as well as the exercise of practical skills). The “language user” is a person acting in a social context, as a 'social agent'. Out of these considerations the *Threshold Level* was published in 1975. The Preface to the 1980 edition of *Threshold Level English* recommends a functional approach to language teaching in order to ‘**convert language teaching from structure-dominated scholastic sterility into a vital medium for the freer movement of people and ideas**’; the main focus is on language in practical use, as it serves the daily personal needs of an adult living in a foreign country. Soon other level descriptions followed: the three

ascending proficiency level descriptions (*Waystage*, *Threshold* and *Vantage*) constitute one of the origins of the six-level scale of the CEFR.

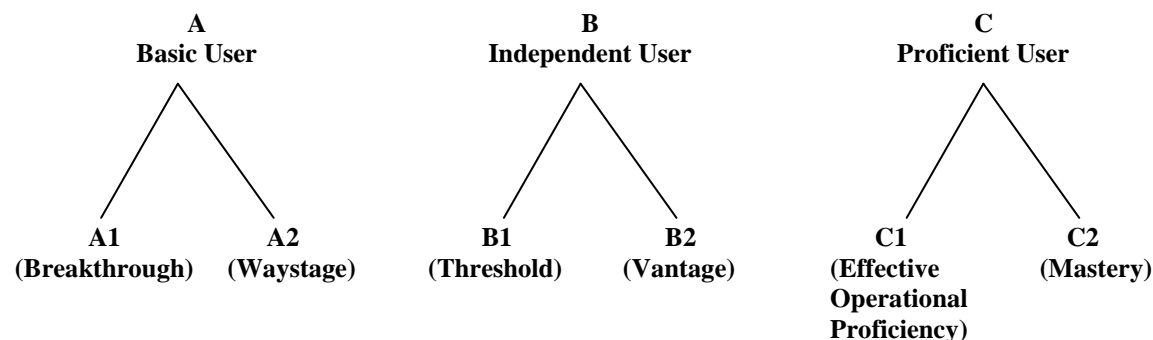
Developed through a process of scientific research and wide consultation, the CEFR provides a practical tool for **setting clear standards** to be attained at successive stages of learning and for evaluating outcomes in an internationally comparable manner. It sets clear objectives since it is a “comprehensive, transparent and coherent framework for language learning and teaching and assessment”. It offers well defined outcomes since it defines levels of proficiency which allow learners’ progress to be measured at each stage of learning and on a life-long basis.

The CEFR has become **a key reference document** for course designers, textbook writers, testers, teachers and teacher trainers, it is available in over *36 language versions* (cfr.CEFR Translations). Offering a coherent description of the language user, of language use and of options for methodological approaches, it facilitates a clear definition of teaching and learning objectives and methods and provides the necessary tools for assessment of proficiency.

The language competences and components of competences identified in the CEFR are:

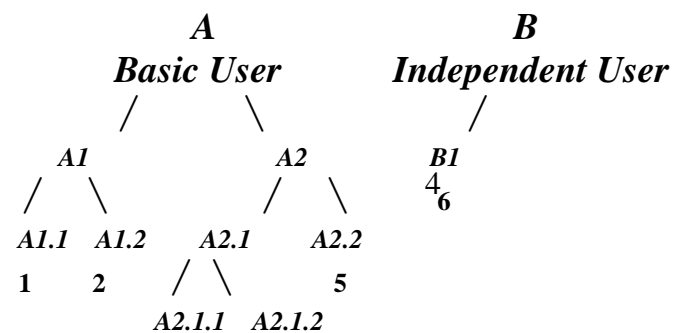
- Oral production (i.e. speaking)
- Written production (i.e. writing a text)
- Aural and visual reception (i.e. listening to a radio programme, watching television, etc)
- Reading comprehension (i.e. reading an article, a letter, etc.)
- Spoken interaction (i.e. taking part in a conversation, debate, etc.)
- Written interaction (i.e. taking part in an Internet *forum*, chat groups, writing e-mails, etc.)

These components have been described establishing 3 main broad levels based on a “hyper-text” branching principle.



In order to make it easier to communicate the system to non-specialist users, these common reference points have been summarised in Common Reference Levels: *Global Scale* (cfr. Global Scale CEFR). The GLOBAL SCALE is being used for setting target levels, measuring progress, evaluating achievement by schools and institutions not only in Europe but also in other parts of the world: official texts, programmes, syllabuses, textbooks, examinations, etc. are increasingly defined according to this six-level scale.

Since the levels are too broad to show progress over a short period, you can sub-divide them: schools and institutions can focus on different degrees of competence without losing the reference to the main objective. The following figure offers an example of subdivision of levels, from most general to most detailed, that could be used to facilitate description of progress in primary and lower secondary schools:



Summing up, characteristics of the descriptors may be summarised as follows: they are all positive; they are in a standard sequence: reception, production, interaction, mediation; they are flexible: the scale can be reduced to three levels, or expanded to 12 or more; they can be expressed as a scale for self-assessment "I can (do) something...."; they can be used as a basis for more specialised scales.

In the CEFR the action-oriented approach "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".

Language use and learning are then described using the following key words and definitions (CEFR, p. 9-10):

- **Competences** are the sum of knowledge, skills and characteristics that allow a person to perform actions.
- **General competences** are those not specific to language, but which are called upon for actions of all kinds, including language activities.
- **Communicative language competences** (*linguistic, sociolinguistic, pragmatic*) are those which empower a person to act using specifically linguistic means.
- **Context** refers to the constellation of events and situational factors (physical and others), both internal and external to a person, in which acts of communication are embedded.

- **Language activities** involve the exercise of one's communicative language competence in a specific domain in processing (receptively and/or productively) one or more texts in order to carry out a task.
- **Language processes** refer to the chain of events, neurological and physiological, involved in the production and reception of speech and writing.
- **Text** is any sequence or discourse (spoken and/or written) related to a specific domain and which in the course of carrying out a task becomes the occasion of a language activity, whether as a support or as a goal, as product or process.
- **Domain** refers to the broad sectors of social life in which social agents operate. A higher order categorisation has been adopted here limiting these to major categories relevant to language learning/teaching and use: the educational, occupational, public and personal domains.
- A **strategy** is any organised, purposeful and regulated line of action chosen by an individual to carry out a task which he or she sets for himself or herself or with which he or she is confronted.
- A **task** is defined as any purposeful action considered by an individual as necessary in order to achieve a given result in the context of a problem to be solved, an obligation to fulfil or an objective to be achieved. This definition would cover a wide range of actions such as moving a wardrobe, writing a book, obtaining certain conditions in the negotiation of a contract, playing a game of cards, ordering a meal in a restaurant, translating a foreign language text or preparing a class newspaper through group work.

All the dimensions mentioned above are interrelated in all forms of language use and learning and can be divided into subcategories. Teachers can find examples of this classification in different chapters of the CEFR.

2.2 Plurilingualism and Interculturalism

It has been widely recognised that plurilingual and intercultural education realises the universal right to a quality education since it covers different dimensions of learning experiences and the construction of individual and collective cultural identities. Its aim is to make teaching more effective and to contribute both to school success for the most vulnerable learners and to social cohesion. The Council of Europe offers a wide variety of definitions of plurilingualism, mainly focusing on how it differs from multilingualism, that some define on the basis of characteristics of a given society considering either the co-existence of different languages and/or the ability of societies, groups and individuals to engage, on a regular basis, with more than one language in their day-to-day lives.

According to the CEFR, plurilingual and pluricultural competence refers to an individual's linguistic *repertoire*, i.e. **the ability to use languages for the purposes of communication and to take part in intercultural interaction**. This definition stresses that there is neither "superposition nor juxtaposition of distinct competences, but rather the existence of a complex or even composite competence on which the user may draw " (CEFR, page 168). This implies that an individual does not possess a collection of separate competences in different languages but rather a "multiple competence" that encompasses all the languages he/she knows. This competence can vary in the different languages one knows and an individual should be encouraged to draw from his/her linguistic repertory of languages and cultures in order to communicate.

Teachers should therefore help pupils in understanding that **languages can be learned at different levels** and make them aware that they can attain greater or lower proficiency in one language than in another: for example, in one language a pupil may offer a good speaking competence but poor writing , whereas he may perform excellently in reading or may offer poor speaking in another language. This concept may be further developed if we consider that in some cases a language can be learned for specific language activities (for example, for reading purposes) in order to fulfil personal or

professional needs: in such case we can speak of “**partial competence**”. Different competences in different languages and experience of several cultures may offer varying degrees within the same individual.

How can intercultural dimension become part of the aims of language teaching? Michael Byram’s proposals in different publications of the Council of Europe offer good opportunities to teachers for reflection: learners need not just knowledge and skills in one language, they also need the ability to use the language in socially and culturally appropriate ways. The aim of learning a language is not to “imitate a native speaker”: learners should be aware of the complexity of identities and of the need to interact with people of different social identities on equal terms.

Citizenship education should be part of a language syllabus that expresses competences in terms of:

- Knowledge of ‘otherness’ (savoirs),
- Attitudes of curiosity/openness (savoir être),
- Skills of interpreting/relating (savoir comprendre),
- Skills of discovery/interaction (savoir apprendre / faire),
- Critical cultural awareness / critical activity (savoir s’engager) .

The final aim is to have a learner become an ‘intercultural speaker’, that is an interpreter/mediator with a decentred perspective. What’s at stake is the preparation of pupils for democratic citizenship, a priority educational objective that the European Commission and the Council of Europe have been stressing in the past twenty years: education systems should promote **methods of modern language teaching which will strengthen independence of thought, judgement and action, combined with social skills and responsibility.**

A complementary document to be analysed is the [White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue](#) launched by the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the 47 member states of the Council of Europe in Strasbourg in May 2008 and translated into 16 languages. This *White Paper* provides various orientations for the promotion of intercultural dialogue, mutual respect and understanding.

The title ***Living Together As Equals in Dignity*** focuses on the importance of managing Europe's increasing cultural diversity, rooted in the history of our continent and enhanced by globalisation, in a democratic manner. How shall we respond to diversity? What is our vision of the society of the future? The answer is "promoting intercultural competences" through education and developing inter-institutional cooperation in this area. This extremely useful tool provides policy makers and practitioners at national, regional and local levels with guidelines. Of great interest are suggestions offered in Chapter 4 where approaches to learning and teaching intercultural competences explore the following issues: a) key competence areas: democratic citizenship, language, history; b) primary and secondary education; c) non-formal and informal learning; d) the role of educators; e) the family environment.

The following *Contents* of ***Living Together As Equals in Dignity*** can further inspire teachers not only of foreign languages but also of other subjects.

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2.3 Competences, texts and tasks

2.3. 1 Competences

The CEFR in Chapter 2 page 9 states that “**competences** are the sum of knowledge, skills and characteristics that allow a person to perform actions” and makes a distinction between **general competences** (those which are called upon for actions of all kinds) and **communicative language competence** (those which empower a person to act using specifically linguistic means). A more detailed description of the **general competences of an individual** focuses on knowledge, skills and existential competence, that are thoroughly analysed in Chapter 5 of the CEFR.

Knowledge (“savoir”) is considered as resulting both from experience (empirical knowledge) and from more formal learning (academic knowledge): empirical knowledge may relate, for example, to knowledge about daily life or knowledge of the shared values held by a social group.

Skills and know how (“savoir faire”) refer to the ability to carry out effectively procedures or routine actions. They can include either practical skills (social, living, vocational, professional skills...) or intercultural skills (the ability to relate the culture of origin with the foreign culture, to overcome stereotypes,...)

Existential competence (“savoir être”) is the sum of individual personality traits and attitudes that are not immutable. They are related to culture and can be considered “sensitive areas” for intercultural education.

How do the definitions of “competences ” offered in the CEFR match with the definitions given in the European Framework for Key Competences for Lifelong Learning, the recommendation released in December 2006 and already mentioned in point 1.2?

In this latter document general competences are defined "... as a combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes appropriate to the context. Key competences are those which all individuals need for personal fulfilment and development, active citizenship, social inclusion and employment."

Focus on the second key competence, communication in foreign languages, stresses the fact that a foreign language "... shares the main skill dimensions of communication in the mother tongue: it is based on the ability to understand, express and interpret concepts, thoughts, feelings, facts and opinions in both oral and written form (listening, speaking, reading and writing) in an appropriate range of societal and cultural contexts (in education and training, work, home and leisure) according to one's wants or needs". A great emphasis is put on the importance of skills such as mediation and intercultural understanding, that is knowledge of societal conventions, and the cultural aspect and variability of languages. Essential skills for communication in foreign languages are identified with "the ability to understand spoken messages, to initiate, sustain and conclude conversations and to read, understand and produce texts appropriate to the individual's needs."

The definition of competences as mentioned in the CEFR and in the *European Framework for Key Competences* are taken into consideration in all documents accompanying education reforms all over Europe. The introduction of "**general language education**" is encouraged since it helps learners to establish metacognitive control over their own competences and strategies and situate them in relation to other possible competences and strategies, with regard to the language activities in which they are applied in order to accomplish tasks within specific domains. The final aim is to have competent citizens able to use several languages for the purpose of communication and to take part in intercultural interaction. (CEFR, pp. 174 and 168)

2.3. 2 Texts and tasks

As mentioned in point 2.1, “a **task is defined as any purposeful action considered by an individual as necessary in order to achieve a given result** in the context of a problem to be solved, an obligation to fulfil or an objective to be achieved. This definition would cover a wide range of actions such as moving a wardrobe, writing a book, obtaining certain conditions in the negotiation of a contract, playing a game of cards, ordering a meal in a restaurant, translating a foreign language text or preparing a class newspaper through group work.” (CEFR, p.10) Tasks require the activation of different general competences and may not be “solely language tasks even though they involve language activities and make demands upon the individual’s communicative competence”. They require the use of **strategies** in communicating and learning for a successful completion and they necessitate the processing (through reception, production, interaction or mediation) of oral or written **texts**.

Chapter 7 of the CEFR offers a detailed description of tasks and their role in language teaching, analysing their variety that “ may involve language activities to a greater or lesser extent, for example: creative (painting, story writing), skills based (repairing or assembling something), problem solving (jigsaw, crossword), routine transactions, interpreting a role in a play, taking part in a discussion, giving a presentation, planning a course of action, reading and replying to (an e-mail) message, etc.”. Suggestions are offered on the principles for the selection of “**real life**” (based on learners’ needs outside the classroom) and “**pedagogic**” tasks (aimed to actively involve learners in meaningful communication). Particular emphasis is given to the importance of taking into account learners’ needs and criteria before defining tasks (simplicity, complexity,...). Of interest are considerations offered on **task difficulty**:

“Individuals may differ considerably in their approach to the same task. Consequently the difficulty of any particular task for an individual, and the strategies which he or she adopts to cope with the demands of the task, are the results of a number of interrelated factors arising from his or her competences (general and communicative) and individual characteristics, and the specific conditions and constraints under which the task is carried out. For these reasons the ease or difficulty of tasks cannot be predicted with certainty, least

of all for individual learners, and in language learning context consideration needs to be given to ways of building flexibility and differentiation into task design and implementation". (CEFR, p. 159)

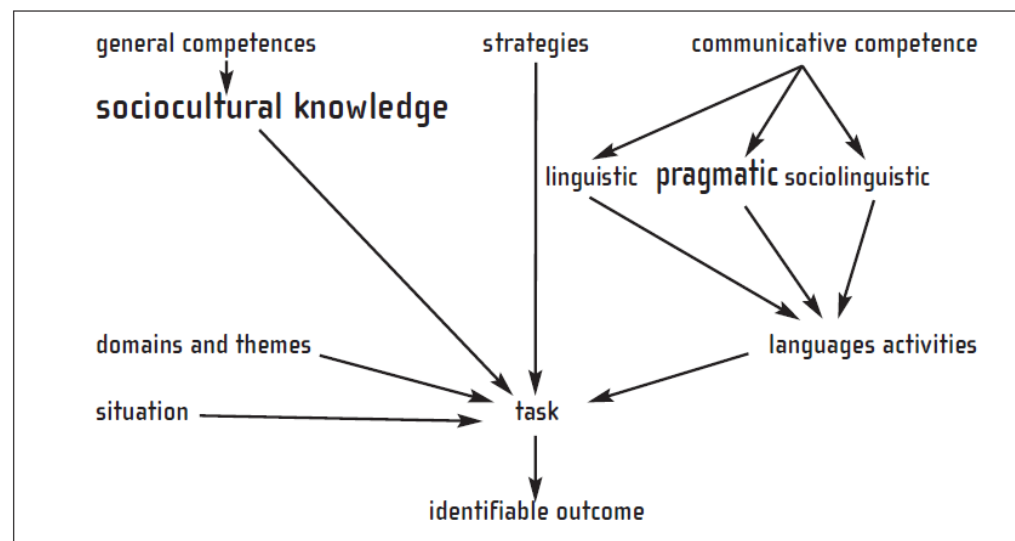
Teachers should take into account the importance of task selections and sequencing, focusing on learner competences and characteristics: cognitive factors (learners should be familiar with the type of tasks, operations involved, background knowledge, etc.), affective factors (self-esteem, involvement and motivation, emotional state, attitude, etc.) and linguistic factors (complexity, familiarity with the genre and domain, discourse structure, relevance to the learner, etc.).

The relationship between strategies, task and text depends on the nature of the task. A given task may be mostly **based on language activities** and strategies applied to these language activities (e.g. reading and commenting on a text, completing a 'fill in the gaps'- type exercise, taking notes during a lecture). In some cases language activities form only part of the given task and the strategies applied relate also to other activities (e.g. operating a machine by following an instruction booklet). In some case it is possible to carry out tasks without recourse to a language activity.

A detailed list of spoken and written text types is offered in Chapter 4 of the CEFR: teachers are guided in the choice of texts that are most appropriate to learners' needs or requirements and that best suit communicative purposes, context of use and media employed.

How can a teacher identify the difference between an exercise and a task? The question finds practical answers in Francis Goullier's publication [*Council of Europe tools for language teaching*](#) published by Didier in 2007. A clear definition is states that "... **a task exists only if the action is motivated by a goal or a need... and if such action leads to an identifiable outcome**" and exercises and activities taken from textbooks in different languages offer clear examples,

focusing on the different dimensions that a task involve. The following figure, taken from page 26, visualizes possible combinations of these dimensions, that can vary in forms and goals.



While designing or choosing a task from a textbook, a teacher may decide to focus on one particular dimension (it could be pragmatic competence, or strategies, or sociocultural knowledge), or to focus on a combination of competences and activities (for example focusing on both linguistic and pragmatic competence and organizing different activities): what is important is the identification of a clear outcome and the promotion of the learner's personal commitment for the fulfilment of the task.

Recently textbook writers have been developing qualitative materials that are task-based and that can facilitate teachers' work: what should be clearly defined are learning sequences that define clearly performances required in task completion with reference to the levels of the Global Scale of the CEFR.

Last but not least, the task-based approach to language teaching has been explored before and after the publication of the CEFR and has evolved in the past thirty years as a response to a better understanding of how languages are learnt. Task-based language teaching/learning publications by famous writers such as Rob Nolasco, David Nunan, Peter Skehan, Jane Willis, and others offer different frameworks of reference that can guide teachers' choices: "food for thought and action" to those willing to make their teaching more effectively task-based.