**THE SHIFT FROM THE PARADIGM OF COMMUNICATION TO THE PARADIGM OF ACTION, AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICAL IMPLEMENTATION FROM THE SOCIAL ACTION-ORIENTED APPROACH**

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## Introduction

The idea of the social action-oriented approach (SAOA) was launched in 2001 by the *CEFRL[1],* which proposes the training of a social actor as a new purpose of language teaching and learning in Europe. However, the first French as a foreign language (FFL) textbook based on both the task-based approach and the social action-oriented approach, was not published until 2004 (*Rond-Point 1*, Paris: Éditions Maison des Langues). Moreover, some didacticians continue to view SAOA as a simple extension of the communicative approach (CA).

This is not my opinion, and here I will analyze what is probably the most important break between the communicative approach and the social action-oriented approach, *i.e.* the shift from the communication paradigm to the action paradigm, and its main implications, illustrated with excerpts from recent textbooks.

I have kept for my text the structure of the slideshow, which will therefore be mainly in the form of a commentary of visuals.

## 1. The communication paradigm

A "paradigm", in epistemology, is a principle or a limited number of principles that command the entire vision that one has of the field. In astronomy, for example, Ptolemy's "paradigm" considered that the earth was fixed at the center of the universe, the "Copernican-Galilean paradigm", that it revolved with other planets around the sun.

Here are two statements from the communication paradigm:

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[1] Council of Europe, *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: learning, teaching, assessment*, Strasbourg, Language Policy Unit, 260 p. On line : www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages.

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> - *We can't not communicate.* Paul WATZLAWICK, School of Palo Alto.

> - It is **certain** that learning or teaching a language can **only be** done within a communicative framework, since it is **necessarily a** question of communicating in a foreign language. Évelyne BÉRARD, *L'approche communicative. Théorie et pratique*. (Paris: CLE international, 1991, pp. 62-63).

In the second quotation above, I have put in bold the expressions that correspond to the three elements that, combined, reveal in a statement the presence of a paradigm: certainty ("certain"), restriction ("only"), and finally obligation ("necessarily"), which is also found in the quotation from Paul WATZLAWICK ("We can't not ...").

Paradigms are necessary for thinking, because they are principles of coherence, "reading grids" of reality, but these grids are also cages that imprison us and prevent us from grasping the complexity of reality. Here are two examples, which I will comment briefly:

> - *In a global way,* **the only skill targeted by the teaching of a foreign language is the ability to communicate**. *What the student wants, what he needs, immediately and for his future as an adult, is to be able to communicate with a native speaker of the language he is learning, that is to say, to understand him and be understood by him.*
> Louis PORCHER, *L'enseignement des langues étrangères*.
> Paris: Hachette Éducation, 2004, pp. 31-32, emphasis added).

It is clear, however, that the teaching of a foreign language is not "only aimed at the ability to communicate": some learners of a foreign language only want to be able to read texts written in a foreign language, be it literature or scientific documentation.

> - *Despite its special place, negotiation only covers cognitive processes that we have already mentioned: it "must be considered as a branch of interactive communication" (*BELLANGER, 1995, p. 119).

The second quotation above is taken from an article by Régine TEULIER-BOURGINE, who takes it up in an article in 2008.[2] However, it seems more logical to me to consider that communication is only a means at the service of negotiation, which is the real action carried out: in the "action paradigm" we will consider the action as first, and the means used to carry it out as second.

I will illustrate the influence of the communication paradigm, to the detriment of the action paradigm, in four recent FFL textbooks.

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[2] "Representations: mediating strategic action". Online (last consultation August 15, 2012): http://crg.polytechnique.fr/fichiers/crg/publications/pdf/2008-03-04-1435.pdf.

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**Example 1**



*Présenter des informations sur une ville*
Étape 1 : En petits groupes, on choisit notre ville préférée.
Étape 2 : On échange et on note les informations utiles pour visiter cette ville (moyens de transports, climat, visites...).
Étape 3 : On présente les informations sur la ville à la classe.
Étape 4 : On répond aux questions des autres groupes.

*Presenting information about a city*
*Step 1: In small groups, we choose our favorite city.*
*Step 2: We exchange and write down the useful information to visit this city (means of transport, climate, visits...).*
*Step 3: We present the information about the city to the class.*
*Step 4: We answer the questions of the other groups.*

Below I am taking up the commentary on this textbook reproduction that I made in a recent article, [3]where I present the different options currently available in language and culture didactics -in this case the "task-based approach" as it is still conceived in most FFL textbooks, *i.e.* as a communicative task:

> *The announced task ("Presenting information about a city") is communicative, and this is indeed the type of task aimed at: the real action (choosing a city) is done in small groups because it is in fact only a pretext to make the students interact linguistically with each other within each of these groups, and then to make each of them communicate with the class group. The real challenge for social actors (that of the learners in their class-society) would have been to decide collectively - and if possible really, or at least realistically - which city they would go to visit together. Realism would imply, in the example of this textbook task, that what is presented there as "useful information for visiting the city" (communicative approach) once the city is chosen, be integrated into the criteria mobilized to choose it (social action-oriented approach). (pp. 17-18)*

**Example 2**

**13** ⊖

**Formez des groupes de quatre ou cinq personnes pour choisir le dossier (1, 2, 3 ou 4) d'███ que vous avez préféré.**

**a) Chacun donne son avis, justifie ses choix. Vous exprimez votre accord ou votre désaccord. Vous faites un choix commun.**

**b) Chaque groupe communique son choix à la classe et explique ses raisons.**

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[3] "Configurations didactiques, constructions méthodologiques et objets didactiques en didactique des langues-cultures : perspective historique et situation actuelle". Online: www.christianpuren.com/mes-travaux/2012f/.)

> *Form groups of four or five people to select the folder (1, 2, 3 or 4) from the XXX manual.*
> *a) Each person gives his or her opinion and justifies his or her choices. You express your agreement or disagreement. You make a common choice.*
> *b) Each group communicates its choice to the class and explains the reasons*

The task proposed is this time a real action (choose the preferred folder) which has a real meaning in relation to the common project in progress in the classroom, namely the teaching-learning of a language-culture. But we see:

1) that the authors propose that this action be carried out only in small groups, and the reason for this is that it favours and multiplies communicative exchanges between learners; but this action in fact interests the whole class, so there should have been, at least at the end of the activity, a general discussion and a choice of the whole class (or, if not, a negotiation with the teacher on the implementation of differentiated pedagogy sequences);

2) that the large group is used only as a pretext to redouble communication (cf. instruction b), without this leading to action (which would have been the collective choice of the whole class);

3) that the activity thus ends with communication for communication's sake, which clearly indicates that it is communication, and not action, that is the true objective: action is a pretext for communication, whereas in a truly action-oriented perspective, communication is a means to the true objective, which is action.

**Example 3**
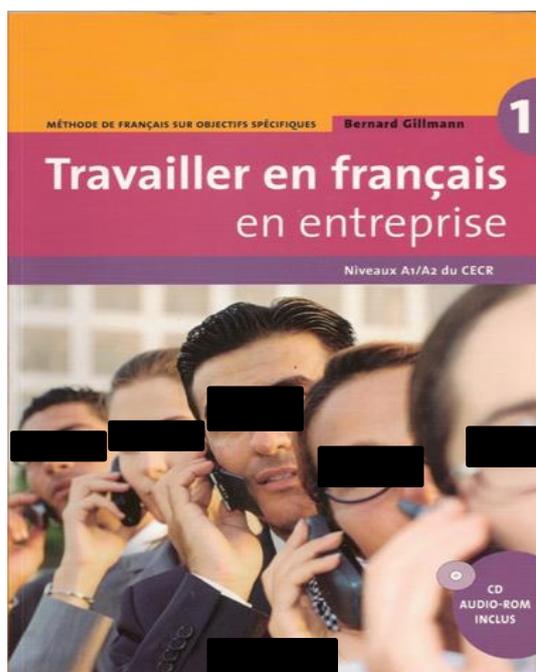


The title of this manual is "*Travailler en* français en entreprise" (*Working in* French in the workplace), but the photo on the cover page is not realistic: it is difficult to imagine the possibility of actually capturing a scene of this type. In fact, it is the paradigm of communication that

worked in the editor's mind: what he has represented here is not a scene of working in a company, but a scene of a foreign language class organized for the communicative approach, where the learners are all put in a situation of interindividual communication (in pairs), because it is there that the exchanges will necessarily be the most multiplied.

In the implementation of the communication paradigm in the language classroom, we find the scheme initially proposed by Shannon:
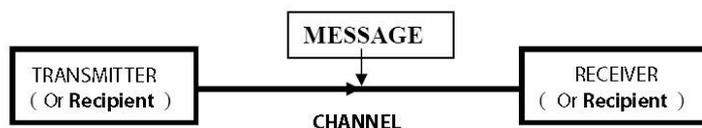


This model was based on the communication technology of the time, which was the telegraph, where communication was reduced to an exchange of information between two communicators who alternately exchanged the roles of transmitter and receiver.

## 2. The action paradigm

I will illustrate this paradigm, like the previous paradigm of communication, with a few "defining" statements.

*- Inflation of communication can hamper action.*

We are now in an era where information messages are attacking us from all sides: the concept of "infobesity" has been created to refer to this situation... We spend a long time every morning deleting unwanted e-mails (which French Canadians nicely refer to as "spam") from our e-mail inbox, as well as useless messages, the ones that "we have nothing to *do with*".

This change of era is reflected in the criticisms that many citizens now make of politicians. It used to be said of them that often "they talk for the sake of talking". They are now communication specialists (or at least they all have "communication advisers", but as a result, the criticism they now receive is that "they say a lot to *do nothing*"... These citizens now demand that their representatives do, that they act, and not just communicate. And these same citizens are no longer content to simply delegate the power to act to their representatives elected every 4, 5 or 7 years; they demand to be able to act themselves permanently on their society (on its choices, on its evolutions) as autonomous and responsible social actors. It is this new demand that explains, according to some political scientists, the "crisis of representative democracy" that European countries are currently experiencing. In other words, the citizens of democratic societies have also moved from the paradigm of communication to the paradigm of action...

*- Communication depends on upstream and downstream actions.*

Corporate sociologists - a workplace where the ultimate and constantly present criterion is the effectiveness of collective action - have shown in recent years that information depends on action upstream (it is produced by its author according to what he or she thinks the recipient will want or need to *do with it*) and downstream (it is received - understood and used - by the recipient according to what he or she will want or need to *do with* it). There was a time when, when a company was malfunctioning, the boss would bring in a communication guru, because the spontaneous hypothesis was that the malfunctions were due to a lack of communication in the company. The dominant theme in business management today is "The right information at the right time to the right person" .

*- Communication at the service of action is part of a global information management process.*

This is what we call, for the employee in a company, *Knowledge Management*, and for the citizen in his company, "information literacy". I have already quoted on several occasions, in my lectures and articles, this Annex (B) entitled « The information literacy life cycle explained » which can

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be found at the end of Jr. FOREST WOODY HORTON's 2008 *Understanding Information Literacy : A primer* (https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000157020) (pp. 59-60) :

1. Realize that a need or problem exists that requires information for its satisfactory resolution.
2. Know how to accurately identify & define the info needed to meet need or solve problem.
3. Know how to determine if the needed info exists or not, and if it does not, go to Stage 5
4. Know how to find needed info if known to exist, and then go to Stage 6.
5. Know how to create, or cause to be created, unavailable info. (*i.e.* create new knowledge)
6. Know how to fully understand found info, or know where to go for help if needed to understand.
7. Know how to organize, analyze, interpret, and evaluate info, including source reliability
**8. Know how to communicate and present info. to others in appropriate/ usable formats/ mediums.**
9. Know how to utilize info. to solve problem, make decision, or meet need.

10. Know how to preserve, store, reuse, record and archive info. for future use.
11. Know how to dispose of info. no longer needed, and safeguard info. that should be protected.

*(Emphasis added)*

We can see that the competence of a responsible citizen no longer consists - I was going to say does not consist of all above competencies - of simply being able to communicate information received immediately to others, but in being able to carry out all these pre- and post-communicative operations as well, what we can call "informational competence", in the sense of being able to act on and through information as a social actor. [4]

The same is true of those information professionals who are journalists. Here is the front page of the French newspaper *Libération* as it appeared on its website on September 4, 2009[5]:



Laurent Joffrin: "We seek to rehabilitate journalism against communication".

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[4] A few years ago I wrote an article entitled "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". On line: www.christianpuren.com/mes-travaux/2009c/.
[5] The article is still available as of the present date (2021/01/28) at www.liberation.fr/medias/1201177-la-nouvelle-formule-libe-papier-web.

What Laurent Joffrin, who was at the time the editor of this newspaper, means by this is undoubtedly that the journalist must, in his job, know how to act on and through information according to his ethical principles and standards.

## 3. The Paradigm of Action in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages

Clearly, the authors of the *CEFRL* have taken into account the paradigm of action. It is found as a central concept:

*a) in the definition of the action in the social action-oriented approach:*

> *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)

*b) and in the definition of all key concepts used throughout this document:*

> -Competences *are the sum of knowledge, skills and characteristics that allow a person to perform* **actions***.*
>
> -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.*
>
> -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 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.* (p. 9 and p. 10)

But the authors of the *CEFRL* are still under the strong influence of the communicative approach and its communication paradigm, as we can see:

> - in the competency descriptors, which, for the first levels, frequently use the description of the language inherited from this approach, namely the notional-functional grammar :

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Independent User | B2 | Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialisation. Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party. Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options. |
| | B1 | Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. Can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. Can produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes and ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans. |
| Basic User | A2 | Can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment). Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters. Can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate need. |
| | A1 | Can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type. Can introduce him/herself and others and can ask and answer questions about personal details such as where he/she lives, people he/she knows and things he/she has. Can interact in a simple way provided the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help. |

Table 1. *Common Reference Levels: global scale (p. 24)*

- or the inability of the authors to integrate action criteria, when the communicative criteria are no longer sufficient. The following example seems to me to be particularly telling:

| | NOTES, MESSAGES & FORMS |
|---|---|
| C2 | *As B1* |
| C1 | *As B1* |
| B2 | *As B1* |
| B1 | *Can take messages communicating enquiries, explaining problems.* |
| | *Can write notes conveying simple information of immediate relevance to friends, service people, teachers and others who feature in his/her everyday life, getting across comprehensibly the points he/she feels are important.* |
| A2 | *Can take a short, simple message provided he/she can ask for repetition and reformulation. Can write short, simple notes and messages relating to matters in areas of immediate need.* |
| A1 | *Can write numbers and dates, own name, nationality, address, age, date of birth or arrival in the country, etc. such as on a hotel registration form.* |

4.4.3.4, p. 84

I have already taken this grid as an example in a 2009c article cited above in note 1, and here I will simply copy the long analysis I made of it in that article:

*One will recognize, I hope, that an evaluation grid with six levels, four of which are defined by the same descriptors, constitutes a real docimological aberration: this means in fact that for the same observed performance (the one indicated here in B1), the evaluator could attribute to productions of certification candidates, as far as written interaction competence is concerned (since written interaction is concerned), as much level B1 as level B2, C1 or C2! But on which criterion? The "client's head", as we say colloquially?! […]*

*First question:] Why is it that the authors of the CEFR, on their six-level competency scale, are unable to find specific descriptors for the top three proficiency levels?*

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*The answer lies, in my opinion, in their unconscious and systematic application of the information-communication paradigm: all the descriptors they use here, as can be seen, relate to the punctual transmission of information content. However, this paradigm proves to be unsuitable in texts such as notes and messages, which as "working documents" are by their very nature part of a logic of social action, that is to say, collaborative and sustainable.*

*In this type of text, in fact, the information must be treated, from its elaboration to its transmission, in relation to its intended or foreseeable use by the recipient(s), in relation to what he/she will or can do with it. In other words, the notes and messages imply an action on the information that the informant must carry out in relation to the action by the information that he or she foresees that the addressee(s) will/will have to carry out. It is precisely in the joint consideration of these two actions (action on and through information) in different temporalities that the difference between what I will call "informational co-action", on the one hand, and communicative interaction, on the other, lies.*

*Second question: One really wonders what forms do in this gallery (in this case in this group of texts), even if, if we look hard enough, we can say that a form is a document characterized by a very strong upstream action on the information as we want the user to communicate it, by means of a very directional formatting (lines to be completed, check boxes, etc.) designed precisely according to the action we want to perform with the information thus collected. But there is still no interaction in the sense of reciprocity, and even less common action on and through the information thus transmitted.*

*The most plausible answer to this second question is that this is another effect of the information-communication paradigm on which the authors of the CEFRL have focused. What brought together notes, messages and forms in their minds, as I think we can see from the descriptors they use, is the simplicity of the information requested/transmitted (they assume that it is few and factual) and the simplicity of the language used to transmit it (they assume that it is written in short sentences or even telegraphic style). Hence, very logically there too, the impossibility they found themselves in by proposing in this grid more complex criteria and performance indicators for the three upper levels B2, C1 and C2, for which it would have been necessary to use criteria of informational competence such as the relevance in the choice or design of the medium, the information content, the recipient and the time of transmission.* (pp. 25-26)

## Conclusion

In the time allotted for my intervention (20 minutes) I was unable to address, after "the shift from the paradigm of communication to the paradigm of action", the entire second part announced in the title of my lecture, namely, "its implications in the practical implementation of the social action-oriented approach. I apologized to my listeners for this, and I apologize again to my readers.

However, I have addressed this issue in several articles available online on my personal website, to which I therefore refer students and interested colleagues:

– « Formes pratiques de combinaison entre perspective actionnelle et approche communicative : analyse comparative de trois manuels »,
http://www.christianpuren.com/mes-travaux-liste-et-liens/2008d/.
– « La nouvelle perspective actionnelle et ses implications sur la conception des manuels de langue. Analyse des mini-projets terminaux des unités didactiques de Rond-point 1 (Difusión, 2004) »,
http://www.christianpuren.com/mes-travaux-liste-et-liens/2009g/.
– « Construire une unité didactique dans une perspective actionnelle »,
http://www.christianpuren.com/mes-travaux-liste-et-liens/2010d/.

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– Mise en œuvre de la perspective actionnelle : analyse comparative de la tâche finale dans deux manuels de FLE, Latitudes 1 (2008) & Version Originale 1 (2009) », http://www.christianpuren.com/mes-travaux-liste-et-liens/2011d/.

**Note dated 2010-01-29**
For an updated bibliography on the action perspective, see:
www.christianpuren.com/bibliographies/perspective-actionnelle/.