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Hahl, Kaisa

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5. Active and Engaging Language Learning

Kaisa Hahl, university lecturer, University of Helsinki

Abstract

In this article, I discuss the benefits of action-based teaching strategies in foreign language teaching and how they are part of the action-oriented approach supported by the *Common European Framework* and Finnish core curricula. Active learning gives learners opportunities to have agency and autonomy in their language learning. It also brings joy and playfulness in the learning environment. Versatile activities with movement, drama, or playfulness range from necessary brain breaks in lessons to longer collaborative tasks and projects that engage and motivate learners in using the language in dynamic ways.

Keywords: active learning, action-based learning, action-oriented approach, drama, play

Tiivistelmä

Tässä artikkelissa tarkastelen toiminnallisen vieraan kielen opetuksen hyötyjä ja sitä, miten toiminnallinen lähestymistapa on nivottu osaksi *Eurooppalaista viitekehystä* ja opetussuunnitelmien perusteita. Toiminnallinen oppiminen mahdollistaa oppijoille toimijuutta ja autonomiaa kielen opiskelussa. Se tuo myös iloa ja leikillisyyttä oppimisympäristöön. Vaihtelevien liikettä, draamaa tai leikillisyyttä sisältävien tehtävien kirjo lyhyistä ”aivotauoista” pidempiin yhteistoiminnallisiin projekteihin osallistaa ja motivoi oppijoita käyttämään kieltä dynaamisesti.

Asiasanat: toiminnallinen oppiminen, toiminnallinen lähestymistapa, draama, leikki

Introduction

The increasing popularity of action-based tasks is visible if one follows different social media groups geared for language teachers or searches for active learning strategies online. Action-based tasks consist of various active, kinaesthetic, functional, drama, and a host of other learner-centred teaching and learning strategies. While research on using these teaching strategies in language class is still scarce, they are supported by brain research and in the fight against children's and youth's sedentary lifestyles. There are many reasons why these types of methods are well liked, and the diversity in task types is only limited by one's imagination. These methods also follow the guidelines in the Finnish national core curricula for basic education.¹

I use both active learning and action-based learning (in Finnish *toiminnallinen oppiminen*, in Swedish *aktiverande inlärning*) for these teaching and learning strategies. The Finnish concept *toiminnallisuus* can be understood and defined in different ways. It also has different counterparts in English. The English-version of the Finnish national core curriculum for basic education translates the concept as *functional working methods*, *functional approaches*, or as *active learning*.² I will describe how these approaches can be considered a part of the action-oriented approach supported by the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR). The action-oriented approach has been an important component in the CEFR since its inception in 2001. This approach places the learner in the focus and makes him/her a social agent who is simultaneously a language learner and a language user. Learners are “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.”³

In this article, I will discuss how the principles of the action-oriented approach are incorporated into the Finnish core curricula. I will explore how research supports the use of active learning strategies and how and why they enhance language learning. The range of teaching and learning strategies within the action-oriented approach is vast. They are not limited to activities that consist of movement, play, and drama. However, those types of activities are the focal points in this article. I will discuss how action-based learning makes foreign language learning more interesting and engaging for the learners, and – hopefully – makes them more committed to language learning. I will end the article with suggestions for sources with ideas for action-based tasks.

1. Finnish National Board of Education, 2016.

2. Finnish National Board of Education 2016.

3. Council of Europe 2001, 9; Council of Europe 2020.

From learning communication to communicating in action

The action-oriented approach in language teaching brought a change of a paradigm from the communicative language learning to one that is centred around action and activity. In the communicative approach, with its different variations such as task-based language learning, communication was the goal and the tasks given to the learners served this goal. In action-based tasks, communication is one of the means that the learners have at their disposal, but not the only one.

The action-oriented approach has more room for autonomy and creativity than communicative language teaching. Learning a foreign language is a non-linear process and that is why it requires plentiful opportunities for meaningful activities. Action-based learning challenges the traditional focus on language as an object or a product. The focus needs to move onto activity and process. Action-based learning is “a holistic, whole-person, whole-language and embodied approach”.⁴

Learners must be motivated to want to learn a new language, and, especially, to commit to it through the school years. Besides being motivated, they must be granted autonomy in order to have real agency in learning tasks. Learners need ownership and self-determination in studying in order for autonomy to develop.⁵ When learners are motivated and take ownership, they can become fully involved in the teaching-studying-learning process. Learning should not be understood as transmitting content and information from teacher to learner. Instead, learning is a dynamic process. It happens in interaction in teamwork and collaboration with other learners while using the language in achieving set objectives.⁶

In the action-oriented approach, students are social actors that fulfil both linguistic and non-linguistic activities simultaneously in diverse tasks. These tasks are such that combine communicative tasks with the practice of general competences. They consist of actions that are logically connected and have a clear purpose. Action-based tasks aim at offering authentic and plentiful use of target language for the learners. Teachers are managers who design versatile action-based tasks. These tasks allow learners to have autonomy, use their decision-making skills, and enjoy room for creativity. Purpose-

4. van Lier 2007, 62.

5. van Lier 2007.

6. Grosu 2019, 251.

ful activities challenge learners in positive ways so that they can genuinely engage in decision-making and negotiation of meaning, and act socially with others. It is also important that the learning environment is supportive and students are encouraged to try things out and make mistakes.⁷

The CEFR does not prescribe or ban any particular pedagogic practices. However, according to CEFR, “language learning should be directed towards enabling learners to act in real-life situations, expressing themselves, and accomplishing tasks of different natures.”⁸ The CEFR suggests activities that produce something or have an identifiable outcome, such as planning an outing, creating a blogpost, designing a festival, painting, role-playing, or building something. All of these activities require the use of target language, to a greater or lesser extent, while accomplishing the task.⁹

The action-oriented approach consists largely of project-type work that allows a wide range of language use and autonomy for learners. However, language learning requires also more mechanical and decontextualized language use when practicing. As much as possible, though, language is embedded in such tasks that are socially and culturally realistic, and close to the life worlds of the learners. That way language use is meaningful for learners and keeps them engaged. The core idea is that learners act and participate in tasks in order to learn the language. They do not learn the language in order to accomplish tasks.¹⁰

Active learning becomes part of Finnish core curriculum

Although the CEFR integrated the action-oriented approach into its framework in 2001, it did not yet show in the previous core curriculum in Finland in 2004 in language teaching. Active learning was mentioned in the teaching of languages only for grades 1–2 where teaching was to be functional and playful in nature.¹¹ In reality, learners in those lower grades were seldom offered teaching of foreign languages. Early teaching of foreign languages in grade 1 started nationwide in Finland in January 2020.

7. Piccardo & North 2019.

8. Council of Europe 2020, 29.

9. Council of Europe 2001; Council of Europe 2020.

10. Piccardo & North 2019, 139.

11. Finnish National Board of Education 2004.

Instead of the action-oriented approach, it was communicative language teaching that was emphasized in language learning in Finland in the early 2000's – at least in theory. However, foreign language teaching in Finnish language classrooms has been found to be quite traditional. Research shows that teaching is often textbook-based and tasks focus on grammar and vocabulary.¹² Although simple oral practices in pair work are often used in lessons, their effect on language development is highly questioned.¹³ There is thus need to make language learning more interesting and engaging with more diverse methods so that learners are provided with frequent opportunities for meaningful target language use.

The current core curriculum for basic education in Finland incorporates and supports active learning in all subjects to “promote the joy of learning and reinforce capabilities for creative thinking and perception.”¹⁴ The core curriculum gives an idea of what active learning is (or functional approaches are) by listing, for example, play, gameful learning, physical activities, creative work, and experimental approaches as some of the recommended working approaches.¹⁵

Meaningful language use in versatile activities

The Finnish core curricula encourage the use of target language in lessons as much as possible. In the core curriculum for basic education, teachers are advised to use a wide array of teaching strategies that cater to learners' different language proficiency levels. Teachers are also guided to create multifaceted learning environments:

The objective is that the language use is as appropriate, natural, and meaningful for the pupils as possible. Work in pairs and in small groups and learning together in versatile learning environments is emphasised in the school work. [...] Play, songs, gamification, and drama are used to provide the pupils with opportunities for experimenting with their increasing language proficiency and also for dealing with attitudes. A versatile range of communication channels and devices are used in the instruction. The pupils are guided to become active actors and to take responsibility for their own learning with the aid of the European Language Portfolio or a corresponding instrument. [...] Target language is used whenever possible.¹⁶

12. Harjanne, Díaz Larenas & Tella 2017.

13. Härmälä, Hildén & Leontjev 2016.

14. Finnish National Board of Education 2016, 24.

15. Finnish National Board of Education 2016, 21.

16. Finnish National Board of Education 2016, e.g., 221.

The core curriculum includes seven transversal competence areas and one of them is the combination of cultural competence, interaction and self-expression. These competences are tightly integrated to learning a foreign language as communicative competence and intercultural skills are inherently part of foreign language learning. The core curriculum for basic education guides teachers in selecting suitable methods in the following way in enhancing this transversal competence:

In school work, the pupils have the opportunity to express themselves and things that are important to them using diverse modes of presentation. The pupils are encouraged to enjoy progressing in their manual and physical skills and to practice different forms of presentation and performance. Imagination, creativity, and self-expression are supported, for instance, through play, adventures, music, drama, story crafting, media presentations, visual expression, handicrafts, building projects, and other handwork.¹⁷

All of these methods can be considered to be part of action-based learning, and teaching of foreign languages can be combined with all these tasks.

The addition to the core curriculum in relation to language teaching in grades 1–2 guides teachers to offer learners plenty of practice in communication and language learning skills so that learners become brave language users from the start. Teachers are guided to choose active working methods that enhance creativity, participation, and interaction. Playfulness, music, drama, games, movement, and using different senses are recommended methods for grades 1 and 2.¹⁸

The core curriculum for upper secondary education does not use the concept of functional methods although it guides teachers to choose active methods that are learner-centred and provide meaningful learning experiences that motivate and engage learners. Learners are given tasks that require inquiry, experimental and problem-solving methods, and skills across interdisciplinary topics. According to the core curriculum, languages offer possibilities to develop creative activities with the use of different kinds of learning strategies. The use of versatile methods should offer learners meaningful, open, and sufficiently challenging tasks.¹⁹

It is notable that the core curriculum for upper secondary education does not mention drama as a working method for foreign languages. There is no mention of playfulness in learning either. In general, it seems that there is quite a change in the methods when transferring from basic education to upper secondary school. The goal in basic education

17. Finnish National Board of Education 2016, 100.

18. Finnish National Agency for Education 2020a, 28.

19. Finnish National Agency for Education 2020b.

of having plenty of joy and playfulness in foreign language learning seems to fade as learners advance from basic language skills towards more academic language skills and transversal working life skills. Although the upper secondary school core curriculum also calls for meaningful use of language and various cooperative activities, the focus is much more on serious work on building academic content and academic language.

It should not be forgotten that some learners start learning a completely new foreign language in upper secondary school or continue a language that they have previously learned for only two years. In a regular language class, it is important to make space for learning tasks that bring the fun, pleasure, and enjoyable repetition and practice in learning. In teaching and learning a foreign language that learners started in grade 8 or in upper secondary school, the focus is on oral skills, at least in the beginning. Various action-based activities are well suited for practicing oral skills in meaningful ways that can be geared for learners at different levels and ages. Promoting the joy of learning at the upper secondary level of education might also help to retain those language learners who consider dropping out of language studies after the initial courses.

Using movement and play in language learning to engage the learner

We have come a long way from the times when schools first introduced the teacher-fronted method. Teacher is in front of the classroom asking questions from the learners while learners sit in their row of desks answering the questions, one at a time. Yet everyone still recognises the old type of a classroom. Decades ago in Finland it was likely nice for the learners to come to school and rest at their desks when at home they had to do a lot of physical work and make their way to school on foot. However, even today learners often sit still for many lessons a day although it is well known that this is no longer suitable for children and youth. Lessons are still very much teacher-regulated. This means that teacher gives the learners tasks one at a time. Once the learners are finished with one task, they come back to the teacher to ask for the next one.²⁰ Or, they might sit idle and start fiddling with their cell phones. In action-based learning, it is central that learners can become decision-makers. This way teachers' dominant role is diminished and learners gain autonomy in relation to the teacher.²¹ It is, however, important for teachers to consider the age of the learners and support their development in self-orientedness.

20. Westling, Pyhäntö, Pietarinen & Soini 2017.

21. Grosu 2019.

Brain research advocates activities that allow the learner to use movement in learning and practising. There are several reasons for this. Getting up and doing short physical activities or movements provide necessary breaks from learning that can refresh the learners' minds and help them refocus. These breaks are important brain breaks that help to empty learners' working memory and allow the brain to process information in order for learning to happen. Brain breaks also reenergize the learners and thus make studying and learning more efficient.²²

Using movement in learning is also supported by the Finnish Schools on the Move programme. The programme was started because schoolchildren and youth do not exercise enough. This national action programme run by the Ministry of Education and Culture aims at increasing physical activity during the school days and establishing a physically active culture in Finnish comprehensive schools (<https://www.liikkuvakoulu.fi/english>). It encourages teachers to add short active breaks in lessons to avoid sitting down for long periods. Just like brain breaks, these active breaks will invigorate and improve the learning environment and provide better opportunities for learning.

Using tasks with movement also allows learners to have a sense of freedom and autonomy in their work. These in turn bring joy in learning and in the classroom and improve the learning environment. When learners have a positive approach to learning and the learning content, they will learn better. Teachers can thus have a great impact on the learning achievements by their choice of learning tasks. Movement also engages the senses in a more wholesome way and enables the use of the body in learning. It thus supports diverse learners in their learning. An embodied experience enhances meaning-making and memorizing content.²³

The joy of learning is one of the central ideas in the conception of learning in the core curriculum for basic education in Finland.²⁴ Play is the basis for all learning and it should not be forgotten even with older learners. However, a lot of language learning in language classes still happens in isolation. Learners work on tasks that they study and complete on their own in order to learn the language to use it later. Learners need diverse tasks that allow them to try out the target language and make mistakes without the fear of a reprimand. Learners also need tasks that challenge them to be creative and stretch their abilities. Experimentation and experiences of success are important in learning and in supporting the development of learners' self-confidence and trust in one's own skills.^{25,26,27}

22. Lengel & Kuzcala 2010.

23. Lengel & Kuzcala 2010.

24. Finnish National Board of Education 2016.

25. Lengel & Kuzcala 2010.

26. Using music in language learning, see Heikkola & Allisaari in this compilation.

27. Language learning in digital games, see Ylinen & Junttila in this compilation.

Drama brings emotion and authenticity to foreign language communication

Language learning should be understood as a cultural process that goes much deeper than learning vocabulary and grammar. Learning foreign languages can have a great impact on a learner's identity and sense of self. At best, a foreign language enables learners to enter a new world. They can widen their perspectives as they communicate and interact with people and texts in ways that they could not do in the mother tongue. However, expressing oneself in the foreign language can be intimidating, in particular, when learners' language skills are still limited, learners are not comfortable with their pronunciation, or if they are unused to speaking in front of their peers.

Drama is a method that can encourage learners to use the foreign language more freely when they use alternative or made-up identities. Learners can put on a mask (either a real one or imagined) and hide their own identity behind it. This liberates them to use the target language more bravely and throw themselves safely in the process. Drama can be used for learning, experimenting, or negotiating about different concepts or values. It can also be used for practising interaction and collaboration skills. Drama is an embodied experience where the body's energies are channelled through playful and physical activities. Communication is also about using body language. Drama invites the incorporation of gestures, facial expressions, and other body language in communicating meaning and making oneself understood. These are important tools in interaction, especially when language skills are still lacking.²⁸

Drama in language education is usually not used as a practice and performance of plays but rather as process drama. Process drama is a pedagogy that is interactive and participatory. Using drama can help learners engage emotionally in language learning, which in turn makes learning more personal for them. When drama projects are planned well, they enable learners' authentic and spontaneous language use. Teachers can create such contexts that are dynamic, realistic, and relatable to learners. Drama also allows the use of all senses. It can be utilised for the differentiation of tasks. Learners at different levels can have different roles, or they can participate to the extent that feels suitable for each.²⁹

28. Winston 2012.

29. Winston 2012.

Drama activities can be combined, for example, with storytelling, craft making, drawing projects, or the use of digital media. Drama activities can be shorter or longer and they can be geared for different ages. Short drama activities work as brain breaks and getting bums off the seats. Using mimicry and pantomime as short active breaks are also perfectly suitable for a language class. The aim in action-based learning is to use natural language (body language included) in contexts that simulate real-world situations.

The critical voices say that simple role-plays use limited and fixed artificial language instead of natural communication.³⁰ However, such role-plays have their place in a language class and they can be useful as long as the tasks are meaningful for learners. Language learning, in particular at the lower language skill levels, requires repetitions that give the learners enough practice, for example, with pronunciation, language forms, and interaction. It is important for teachers to balance the variety of learning tasks so that learners also have opportunities to have autonomy, and that they feel empowered in decision-making in collaborative activities.

Active learning used by language teachers

According to the results of a study that I carried out with a colleague³¹, language teachers in Finland who use action-based activities find them online from different sites or groups geared for teachers where sharing of own ideas is encouraged (e.g., different Facebook or Pinterest groups). Just as many teachers also make their own activities when they cannot find suitable ones elsewhere. Teachers consider textbooks good resources for finding activities for pair work and dramatized reading of texts, but not so for other types of active learning. Some teachers modify other teachers' ideas in order to make them fitting for their own learner groups.

The teachers in the study used different word games with movement as the most common action-based activity. Most of these games are quite simple word games that allow learners to practice individual words, sentences, or word structures, and they all have some type of activity or body movement connected. Some include a form of competition. The most popular word games with movement were “running dictation,” “flyswatter,” and “fruit salad,” but the diversity of games was only limited by teachers' imagination (see the end of the article for links to these activities). The second most

30. Piccardo & North 2019, 134.

31. Hahl & Keinänen 2021.

popular action-based activity was role-play to simulate real-life encounters and situations. Some teachers also used pantomime. It was seldom that they used other types of drama, such as process drama. Most teachers in fact had never used process drama in lessons. The teachers wanted to use action-based activities because they felt that these strategies are “learning by doing,” they motivate learners and bring joy in the classroom. They improve learning by making things more concrete and personal. Teachers also felt that these strategies are suitable for different types of learners as differentiation often happens naturally in these types of activities. The teachers had realized that action-based learning makes learners active agents in their own learning.

Active learning is more common in language teaching in the lower grades in school and this is what we found in our study as well. Teachers at the upper secondary level felt that the pace is so fast in the courses that it is difficult to find time for creative work. Teachers feel the pressure to go through all the chapters in the textbook even though they think active learning would be effective. Some teachers felt that their group was too big or too small for active learning strategies, or that they did not have sufficient space in the classroom.

It is important to remember that taking brain breaks will enhance learning. So taking a little time away from serious studying can actually benefit the learners. Teachers can find suitable action-based tasks that take only a short time and require little space. Even getting up off the seats and stretching to target language music (chosen by students), or using action songs with body language can be a perfect fix to fight fatigue and boredom. Building longer projects with drama or other active learning will enable the learners to use their skills in versatile ways and communicate in the target language in purposeful activities.

Action-based tasks for all learners

Action-based tasks involve language activities but also a range of strategies that students learn to use through physical activity, cooperation, interaction, and problem-solving with others. Using action-based strategies in language learning enhances learners’ language competences in diverse ways. In particular, learners’ communicative competences improve. Vocabulary and sentence structures as well as interaction and mediation are practised when learners engage in meaningful activities and experiences with their senses and the whole body. Learners develop their self-esteem and self-awareness. Learners also improve other general or transversal competences that they learn to use when carrying out various tasks.

Action-based learning can be used for learners at all proficiency levels and of all ages. Younger children with shorter attention spans require shorter tasks with more teacher guidance, while older learners can be given tasks that demand more involvement and independence. The level of the complexity of the task, difficulty in language level, and the degree of autonomy are factors that can be adjusted so that tasks are sufficiently demanding for even older learners.

Language learning does not need to be confined inside the classroom. School hallways or other spaces can also be harnessed as learning environments. Outdoor learning is perfectly suitable to language learning with, for example, vocabulary related to biology, geography, or the arts. Digital tools (e.g., different applications, photos, filming, audio recording) can be incorporated meaningfully into action-based learning. Teachers can create cross-disciplinary escape rooms where the content is derived from another subject such as history or social studies, and where learners in collaborative groups solve problems to advance in the game.

Different plays and drama activities call for the use of imagination, curiosity, and inventiveness. The variety of tasks that can be considered action-based learning are numerous. Some of them are quite simple like the word games with movement mentioned earlier. These smaller tasks make it easier for teachers to start experimenting with active learning strategies if they have not used them before. Functional, active methods are particularly popular in foreign language learning in grades 1–2 where learners are not yet expected to be able to read and write, and thus working with textbooks is less used. However, it is important to include active learning regularly in all the other grades as well. When learners are given opportunities to use and try out their language skills in meaningful tasks that get them away from the textbook and desk, their motivation and engagement with language learning can rise to new levels. Traditional book-based language learning can be tedious and demotivating. Language learning must be made more fun and functional – and ultimately more effective – so that it will offer learners frequent opportunities to practice their language skills in safe and creative environments. Eventually, this could also attract more learners to optional foreign languages.

Sources and ideas for active learning

Books:

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Maunu, N., & Airaksinen, R. 2020. *Toiminnallinen kielenoppiminen* [Action-based language learning]. Helsinki: Otava.

Winston, J. 2012. *Second language learning through drama: Practical techniques and applications*. London: Routledge.

Websites:

eTwinning. A website by Erasmus+ (available in different languages) offers ready-made project kits for eTwinning projects that can be carried out as project learning between partner schools from different countries.
<https://www.etwinning.net/en/pub/get-inspired/kits.cfm>

Oriveden kielipolku. A website for a project that has plenty of ideas for language teaching for elementary school grades (in Finnish).
<https://peda.net/orivesi/hankkeet/oriveden-kielipolku236>

Playing CLIL E-book. Content and language integrated learning inspired by drama pedagogy. Drama games for classrooms, produced in an Erasmus+ project.
<http://www.playingclil.eu/this-is-the-playingclil-ebook/>

Upp och Repa. A project website that includes a handbook and material for beginning oral language learning in Swedish. <https://www2.helsinki.fi/sv/forskningsgrupper/mangfald-flersprakighet-och-social-rattvisa-i-utbildning/upp-repa>

Varpunen. A project website for Early teaching of foreign languages – Developing Language Teaching and Teacher Education. Lesson plans for early teaching of foreign languages (in Finnish).
<https://www2.helsinki.fi/fi/projektit/varhennettu-kieltenopetus/materiaalit>

The Internet has other excellent sources for **action-based tasks**.

Here are examples for the games mentioned in this article:

- **Running dictation:** <https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/running-dictation>
- **Flyswatter:** <https://comprehensibleclassroom.com/2015/08/10/sentence-flyswatter/>
- **Fruit salad:** <http://blog.sproutenglish.com/fruit-salad-vocabulary-game-for-yl/>

Facebook groups:

Examples of Facebook groups where Finnish teachers share their ideas (also) for active learning:

- Toiminnallinen kielen oppiminen
- Varhennettu kielenopetus ja kielirikasteinen opetus
- Yläkoulun kieltenopetus

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