



Transforming communicative tasks into mini-projects

Ahmet Acar, Dokuz Eylül University, Turkey, ahmet.acar@deu.edu.tr ORCID: 0000-0001-8940-4359

Abstract. With the action-oriented approach first introduced by the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages), the goal of language teaching witnessed a transition from the transmission of information (exchange of information) in the classroom to acting together (social action) in and/or outside the classroom and hence from training successful communicators to training social actors. The implementation of the action-oriented approach in language textbooks in the form of mini-projects, however, is an issue not addressed commonly in the ELT field. This study critically analyses the tasks named as 'projects' at the end of the first and eighth units of the English textbook 'İngilizce 7' used in the secondary schools in Turkey to show that they do not reflect the characteristics of mini-projects as a form of the application of the action-oriented approach in language textbooks. Secondly, how these tasks can be transformed into mini-projects is explained.

Keywords: The action-oriented approach, communicative task, mini-project, English textbook

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INTRODUCTION

In this article, the term action-oriented approach is used to refer to the social action perspective to mark a departure from both the communicative approach and task-based language teaching, both of which also have an action perspective but the action being the communicative action (speech acts or speech action) or interaction (talking with each other), which is essentially an exchange of information. The social action perspective (the action-oriented approach), however, deals with the social action, "which is an act with the others" (Puren, 2004, p. 20), in which communicative action is just a means, not a goal.

In line with the increased economic and social integration process among the European countries in recent years, the Council of Europe introduced a new approach, namely, the action-oriented approach in its common European framework of reference for languages (CEFR, 2001) and its companion volume (CEFR CV, 2018). The most important characteristic of this approach is that it sets a new goal for language teaching and learning, training of a social actor, a goal which mainly differentiates the action-oriented approach (the social action perspective) from both the communicative approach and task-based language teaching (the communicative action perspective), both of which focus mainly on training successful communicators. Thus CEFR (2001) and its companion volume (CEFR CV, 2018) is involved in a paradigm change in language teaching: a shift from communication paradigm to action paradigm. With regard to the paradigm shift in and/or outside the classroom practice, Puren (2014a, 2014b, 2017, 2018, 2019a, 2019b) puts forward two forms of the application of the action-oriented approach: educational projects in which the students are involved in projects which they choose and design themselves autonomously (with the help of the teacher) and the implementation of the action-oriented approach in language textbooks in the form of mini-projects, which are designed, limited and directed by the time frame of the textbook or curriculum. This study aims to critically analyse the tasks named as 'projects' proposed in the units (first and eighth) of English textbook 'İngilizce 7' used in the secondary schools in Turkey to show that they do not reflect the characteristics of mini-projects as a form of the application of the action-oriented approach in language textbooks. Secondly, how these tasks can be transformed into mini-projects is illustrated.

The implementation of the action-oriented approach in language textbooks: mini-projects

Training 'language learners as social actors' means training language learners who can not only communicate successfully with each other but also live and work together with foreigners in their home or target culture, a goal in line with the multilingual and multicultural societies of Europe. The parallelism between the goal of training social actors and multilingual and multicultural structure of European societies, thus, is not a simple coincidence since both CEFR (2001) and its companion volume (CEFRCV, 2018) put a heavy emphasis on linguistic diversification, plurilingual and pluricultural competence (CEFR, 2001, chapter 8) and the detailed treatment of mediation in the CEFR companion volume (2018).

Thus, in training learners as social actors, the transition from communication paradigm to action paradigm means a transition from the reference situation of a tourist trip to the multilingual and multicultural society of Europe and from the reference action of language interaction (talking with each other) to social action. Besides, the criterion of success for the social actors is not only the successful exchange of information but also the main skills that social actors develop in the language learning process such as the design, management, and implementation of complex actions, both personal autonomy and collective responsibility, and information management. Thus, the approach to be adopted in training social actors is no longer the communicative approach but the action-oriented approach. Language teaching has, thus, a more general educational goal, that of training learners as democratic citizens who can live harmoniously and work together effectively in their multilingual and multicultural societies.

Puren (2014a, 2014b, 2017, 2018, 2019a, 2019b) puts forward two forms of the application of the action-oriented approach: educational projects, in which the students are involved in educational projects which they choose and design themselves autonomously (with the help of the teacher) and the implementation of the action-oriented approach in language textbooks in the form of mini-projects, which are designed, limited and directed by the time frame of the textbook. Educational projects require maximum autonomy from the students since social actors search for, select, organize, analyze, interpret and evaluate information (what Puren (2008) calls informational competence or what Horton (2007) calls information literacy), design, manage and implement complex actions autonomously and collectively in their various domains of social life: personal, public, educational and occupational. Thus, to Puren (2009), in the implementation of the action-oriented approach in terms of project pedagogy, "all student activities are organized according to 'educational projects' which have a real (and not simulated) dimension and which they design and conduct themselves with the help of the teacher" (p. 126). Since projects are complex actions, their realization reflects this complexity. To Puren (2014b, 2019a), a project has a design stage in which the action is defined, objectives of the action and the final language products are specified, the necessary resources for carrying out the action are negotiated, a plan which outlines the different sub-tasks and in which allocation of responsibilities to each learner is made and evaluation criteria are specified. The second stage is the implementation (the realization of the design), at which phase the project is implemented as sub-tasks to give a final product, which is evaluated collectively in the final evaluation stage.

Since educational projects can not be limited and directed by the time frame of a textbook or curriculum, mini-projects are generally given a place at the end of the textbook units or used in the organization of language curricula. They, however, still reflect the characteristics of educational projects since mini-projects also have a design stage, which is

followed by the actual realization of this design (implementation) to give a final product, which is evaluated collectively. Thus, Puren (2019b) describes a mini-project as a social action which has a design stage with a certain level of complexity (the number of intermediate tasks, the number of participants, the duration of the mini-project, final productions with a collective decision or action), a certain level of student autonomy and responsibility and a collective self-evaluation phase at the end of the final product, which also has a collective dimension. Collectivity and autonomy (both individual and collective autonomy) are of great importance in the application of the action-oriented approach in terms of both projects and mini-projects since the main goal of the action-oriented approach, namely, training of social actors, requires training learners in realizing autonomous and collective actions in their external multilingual and multicultural societies. Acar (2019) argues that

The action-oriented approach aims to train learners for both individual autonomy and collective autonomy in both as groups and as whole class and this autonomy is given to the individuals and the whole class in the initial stage of a class by allowing them to choose their projects that they will work on and learners can search and add their own documents (informational competence) (p. 132).

In this respect, a mini-project, which has a design stage with the above characteristics and which thus is the best candidate to train social actors, is different from a communicative task, which does not have a design stage and which has the sole aim of training communicators. In a mini-project (social action), on the other hand, communication is not abandoned but put at the service of the social action. Thus the implementation of the action-oriented approach in language textbooks can not be realized by employing educational projects in language textbooks but by employing mini-projects.

METHODS

This study is based on qualitative research and document analysis is used as a research method. It critically analyses the tasks named as ‘projects’ in the first and eighth units (selected randomly among ten units) of English textbook ‘İngilizce 7’ used in the seventh grades of public secondary schools in Turkey to show that they do not reflect the characteristics of mini-projects as a form of the application of the action-oriented approach in language textbooks. Secondly how these tasks (named as projects) can be transformed into mini-projects is illustrated. Bowen (2009) defines document analysis as “a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents—both printed and electronic (computer-based and Internet-transmitted) material” (p. 27). The research question of this study is: Do the tasks named as ‘projects’ in the first and eighth units of English textbook ‘İngilizce 7’ used in the public secondary schools in Turkey reflect the characteristics of mini-projects to train social actors and how can these tasks be transformed into mini-projects?

RESULTS

An analysis of the 7th grade ELT textbook ‘İngilizce 7’ in terms of the action-oriented approach

The English textbook ‘İngilizce 7’ is used in the seventh grades of public secondary schools (for the students at the average age of 12) in Turkey. Since the teachers using this textbook were not given the teacher’s book by the Turkish Ministry of National Education, no information can be obtained through the teacher’s book about the approach the textbook adopts. In Turkey, however, textbook writers must follow the Turkish ELT curriculum so it is

necessary to investigate the approach adopted in the primary and secondary school ELT curriculum to know about the approach the textbook 'İngilizce 7' follows. 2018 ELT curriculum states the approach adopted in the following way:

As no single language teaching methodology was seen as flexible enough to meet the needs of learners at various stages and to address a wide range of learning styles, an eclectic mix of instructional techniques has been adopted, drawing on an action-oriented approach in order to allow learners to experience English as a means of communication, rather than focusing on the language as a topic of study (p.3).

Thus it is understood that while an eclectic mix of instructional techniques has been adopted, the main approach is the action-oriented approach in the curriculum. 'İngilizce 7' organizes content around themes and at the end of each unit there is a section titled 'Let's do it', which requires students to carry out tasks which the textbook names 'projects'. This is a subject of criticism in terms of the action-oriented approach since projects, according to Puren (2014b, 2017, 2019b), can not be limited and directed by the time frame of the textbook but must be chosen, designed and implemented as autonomously as possible by the students. The maximum a language textbook can employ in terms of the action-oriented approach is mini-project.

The analysis of the proposed project in unit one

In unit one 'appearance and personality', the proposed project is 'Choose a famous person you like. Make a poster describing that person (his/her appearance, personality, family members, his/her likes & dislikes, hobbies, etc.). Present your poster to your classmates.'

The design of the task does not reflect the characteristics of social action in terms of the level of complexity (the number of intermediate tasks, the number of participants, the duration of the mini-project, final productions with a collective decision or action) since the sub-tasks leading to the final production (poster) are restricted (choose a famous person and make a poster describing that person). Since there is no instruction as to whether the students will work in pairs, groups, or as a whole class, it is difficult to conclude whether the production has a collective dimension. In this respect, autonomy is also individual autonomy rather than a collective one as expressed in the first step: 'Choose a famous person you like'. The other step 'Make a poster describing that person (his/her appearance, personality, family members, his/her likes & dislikes, hobbies, etc.)' does not allow students to make choices in groups but rather directive since this step imposes on the students what they will describe e.g. his/her appearance, personality, family members, his/her likes & dislikes, hobbies. In the action scenarios of the mini-projects, however, the students are presented with choices to help them in the process of designing their final production and to guide them towards autonomous choices but within a predefined framework. Regarding the issue of informational competence, there is no sub-task that requires information management (informational competence) within the design. The design ends with the instruction 'present your poster to your classmates', which is one-way communication: one student or groups of two students (depending on what is understood from the instruction) transmitting information to his/her/their classmates. There is not even interaction during this presentation, as one might have expected from a communicative perspective since the classmates who listen to the presenter(s) do not show any reaction to the presentation. Thus the so-called project in the textbook is a pretext for communication. In the action-oriented approach, however, communication is a means to the real objective, which is social action, in other words, communication is put at the service of

social action but this criterion is not met in the proposed project. Lastly, there is not a collective self-evaluation of the final product in the design. Thus the proposed project is far from reflecting a realistic action scenario by leaving many questions unanswered: What is the objective of the poster? Where should it be displayed? What audience does it target? What message does it want to convey? What are the criteria for evaluating the quality of the poster? What is the role of the other students who listen to the poster presentation? And could it possible to see such situations in the real world (people preparing posters of famous people and presenting them to each other for no obvious reason)? etc. The proposed project in the textbook puts the students in a purely academic setting and its only function is to enable the students to reuse the language content presented in the unit. Thus the proposed project is neither a project nor a mini-project. This task, however, can be turned into a mini-project by forming a design stage which reflects the characteristics of mini-projects as follows:

A. In the context of exchanges between English students in schools in different countries in the world, it is planned that each school presents the posters of famous actors/actresses on social media like Facebook?

B. Discuss as a whole class whether you can look for ways to make this social action real: whether you can search for partnerships of schools in other countries and create a common Facebook account where you can share your posters of famous actors/actresses.

C. Discuss as a whole class from which countries/cultures you will select the famous actors/actresses and in your class, each group will select a famous actor/actress and a movie in which he/she performed well by discussing and finally taking a common decision.

D: As a whole class, decide on the criteria for evaluating the quality of the poster of the famous actor/actress by developing a grid. (This grid should include criteria related to what information should be in the poster. Choose among such information: the actor/actress's appearance, personality, family members, his/her likes & dislikes, hobbies and the message of the movie in which he/she starred and/or choose the information you would like to include by taking into consideration the variations of the cultural content reflected in the posters of famous actor/actress in different cultures).

E. Work in groups and organize your work within the groups (what each group member will collect information about and write which part of the text in the poster). Make a search and collect the relevant pictures and the necessary information about that actor/actress (by taking into consideration the information you chose in D) and a movie in which he/she starred (necessary information about the message of the movie) (through the magazines, the internet, etc.).

F. Write a text about or make a list of the characteristics of the famous actor/actress (by taking into consideration the information you chose in D and made a search about in E) by adding a short text about the message of the movie in which he/she starred.

G: Make your poster in groups.

H: Present your poster (as a group) orally to your classmates.

I: Your classmates will be the evaluation jury to select the best poster of an actor/actress and thus they will listen to you, take notes on your presentation, ask you questions about your presentation and you will answer the questions of the classmates. Finally, your classmates will evaluate your presentation using the grid you developed collectively (in D).

J: Select collectively the best poster of an actor/actress based on your collective evaluation and make it public on social media.

The design of the mini-project reflects a certain level of complexity (the number of intermediate tasks, the number of participants, the duration of the mini-project, final productions with a collective decision or action), a certain level of student autonomy (both

individual, the group and the whole class) and responsibility, a collective self-evaluation phase at the end of the product (the poster), which also has a collective dimension. In the design of this mini-project, the collective dimension is present throughout the action scenario (the students work in groups and as a whole class). The autonomy is also stressed since the students are presented with choices to help them in the process of designing their products and to guide them towards autonomous choices. Autonomy and collectivity are also present in the collective self-evaluation of the product in the design. The students use their informational competence (the students search for, select, organize, analyze, interpret and evaluate information, in short, they seek and manage the necessary information). The sub-tasks lead to a final social action, which is the collective choice of the whole class and making the poster public on social media. Thus 'presenting the poster to the whole class' is not an objective in itself but serves the final social action, which is the objective of the action-oriented approach. In other words, the mini-project does not serve as a simple pretext for communication, as in the case of communicative simulations. Lastly, this is a mini-project that can be done in reality, that is, the students can look for ways to make it real: search for partnerships of schools in other countries, create a common Facebook account where they can share their posters of famous actors/actresses.

The analysis of the proposed project in unit eight

In unit eight 'public buildings', the proposed project is 'Imagine that you're working in a tourist information office. Prepare a map of your city for the tourists and mark the public buildings. Write why they should go to these public buildings in your city.'

The objective of the action 'preparing a map of the city for the tourists and marking the public buildings' is guided by the theme of the unit, which is 'public buildings' but it is a matter of another debate whether the tourists' preferences would be public buildings (bakery, chemist's, grocery, city hall, etc. in the textbook) or tourist attractions and/or cultural attractions in a city. The other vague issue in the objective of the action relates to the question: Who are the targeted tourists (from which country or culture?) for whom the students are going to prepare the map? Since the design of tourist information will depend on the 'tourist culture' in question, it is necessary to decide in advance on the type of tourists and tourism targeted (the culture of tourist action). From the objective of the action, it can be said that the main aim of the proposed project is to enable the students to reuse the language content of the unit as in the case of communicative simulations, in which case, the action is put at the service of communication. The first instruction 'Imagine that you're working in a tourist information office' indicates that the action is going to be simulated but the possibility of making this action real is not mentioned in this so-called project, which suggests the idea that the authors of the textbook do not consider the priority of the real actions in the action-oriented approach. There is no intermediate task which requires the students to search for and manage information (informational competence) before preparing a map of their city. The students jump into preparing a map of their city for the tourists and marking the public buildings. There is no instruction as to whether the students will prepare the map individually, in pairs, groups or as a whole class, in which case the collectivity of the action is not stressed. It can be said that autonomy is restricted to individual autonomy rather than a collective one as indicated in the instruction 'Prepare a map of your city for the tourists and mark the public buildings'. The instructions 'mark the public buildings, write why they should go to these public buildings in your city' are very directive since they do not allow students to make choices in groups. As indicated earlier, however, in the mini-projects, the students are presented with choices to help

them in the process of designing their final production and to guide them towards autonomous choices. In this respect, even individual autonomy is restricted in the so-called project of the textbook. There is not even interaction among students during the preparation of the map and a collective self-evaluation of the final production is absent. This task, however, can be transformed into a mini-project in the following way:

- A. In groups, design a tourist map for the tourist information office in your local area to promote the local tourist attractions and/or cultural attractions (depending on your choice in B) in your city. Discuss as a whole class whether you can make this social action real.
- B. Discuss and decide as a whole class on the type of tourists (from which country or culture) and tourism targeted (historical tourism or cultural tourism or any other type of tourism you choose).
- C. Discuss as a whole class what tourist maps are useful for and what is indicated on these maps.
- D. As a whole class, decide on the criteria for evaluating an informative tourist map by searching for well-prepared tourist maps through the internet (This grid should include criteria related to what information and pictures should be on the map).
- E. Work in groups and organize your work within the groups (what each group member will collect information about and write which part of the map).
- F. Search for information about the local tourist attractions and/or cultural attractions of your city (depending on your choice related to the type of tourists and tourism targeted).
- G. Decide, in your groups, on which of this information you would like to include in your map.
- H. As a group, write the text about the local tourist attractions and/or cultural attractions of your city (depending on your choice related to the type of tourists and tourism targeted).
- I. In groups, make your map.
- J. As a group, present your map to the class by clearly specifying the target audience, the objective sought, and by justifying your choices.
- K. The other groups will listen to you, take notes, evaluate your map, ask you questions about your map and you will answer the questions of the classmates.
- L. Select collectively the best map based on your collective evaluation and send it to the tourist information office in your local area.

In the mini-project, the sub-tasks lead to a final social action, which is the collective choice of the whole class and sending the map to the tourist information office in their local area. Thus 'presenting the map to the class' (step J) is not an objective in itself but serves the final social action, in which case, communication is put at the service of social action and the mini-project does not serve as a simple pretext for communication. This is a mini-project that can be done in reality, as proposed in step A. In the design of this mini-project, the collective dimension is present throughout the action scenario (the students design a tourist map in groups and the students discuss as a whole class and make decisions). The autonomy is also present since the students are presented with choices in the subtasks. There is also a collective self-evaluation of the product in the design and the students use their informational competence (they seek and manage the necessary information) as indicated in the steps D and F.

DISCUSSION and CONCLUSIONS

In Turkey, there is no study analyzing the proposed projects of English textbooks used in secondary schools in terms of the action-oriented approach. To compensate this gap, this study critically analyses the proposed projects at the end of the first and eighth units of the English textbook 'İngilizce 7' used in the secondary schools in Turkey to show that they do not reflect the characteristics of mini-projects as a form of the application of the action-oriented approach in language textbooks. Secondly, how these tasks can be transformed into mini-projects is illustrated.

Educational projects require maximum autonomy of the students in designing, implementing and evaluating the social actions and thus they can not be limited and directed by

the time frame of a textbook and curriculum. Mini-projects, however, are generally given a place at the end of the textbook units or used in the organization of language curricula and hence their design is predetermined by the textbook or curriculum. In this respect, it is suggested that curriculum developers and textbook writers should present a coherent design of mini-projects which will reflect the characteristics of mini-projects as a form of the application of the action-oriented approach in language textbooks as outlined in this article. 2018 primary and secondary schools ELT curriculum of Turkey does not give a detailed treatment of the action-oriented approach but mentions it as follows:

As no single language teaching methodology was seen as flexible enough to meet the needs of learners at various stages and to address a wide range of learning styles, an eclectic mix of instructional techniques has been adopted, drawing on an action oriented approach in order to allow learners to experience English as a means of communication, rather than focusing on the language as a topic of study (2018 ELT curriculum, p. 3).

Thus the action-oriented approach is misleadingly presented in the curriculum as having the goal of 'allowing learners to experience English as a means of communication'. The curriculum does not set the goal of training social actors, which is the main goal of the action-oriented approach. In the prespecified syllabus of the curriculum, there is a section 'suggested contexts, tasks and assignments' and under the title of 'assignments' (in unit one of the seventh-grade syllabuses), there is an instruction: 'Students prepare a poster of a famous person they like. They describe his/her appearance and personality, which does not reflect the real design of a mini-project. Besides, the term 'mini-project' is not used to refer to these instructions but the preferred term is 'assignment'. In fact, an assignment is not a mini-project. Since textbook writers in Turkey must follow the curriculum, this time unit one (appearance and personality) of the seventh-grade textbook 'İngilizce 7' deals with the same instruction in the curriculum as a project ('Do tangible projects!' p. 6) under the section 'Let's do it!': "Choose a famous person you like. Make a poster describing that person (his/her appearance, personality, family members, his/her likes & dislikes, hobbies, etc.). "Present your poster to your classmates" (p. 22). It seems that the curriculum developers and textbook writers are not in agreement with each other in naming these instructions. As discussed in this article, on the other hand, neither of these tasks (both in the curriculum and the textbook) reflects the characteristics of mini-projects.

Given that both the curriculum and the textbook do not successfully present the design of mini-projects as an implementation of the action-oriented approach, the English teachers may naturally find it difficult to implement the action-oriented approach in and/or outside the classroom. It is, however, still possible to transform these tasks in the textbook into mini-projects by adding the characteristics of mini-projects to the tasks, which is the main objective of this article. In this respect, it is hoped that the article will show the teachers how to transform these tasks into mini-projects.

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