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Language Instruction to Change the World: Possibilities for Action-Oriented Language Instruction in Your Classroom

ABSTRACT

Action-oriented language instruction (AOLI) is a teaching approach that aims to make language learning impactful beyond the classroom and contribute to building a better world. Rooted in the philosophies of Dewey, Decroly, and Freinet, AOLI now uses Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) descriptors and focuses on realistic, authentic tasks that foster learner agency and embrace complexity. While challenges exist for implementing AOLI in Japan, many teachers are already taking steps to address these challenges. This article reports on those efforts presented at the LD30 Conference and other recent conferences, as well as the brainstorming session that took place during the author's LD30 Conference session. Through discussions of these ideas, this article provides additional suggestions for bringing AOLI into our classrooms and making our teaching more impactful one step at a time.

Keywords: action-oriented language instruction, EFL pedagogy in Japan, SDGs

Many of us wish to make our day-to-day teaching matter more, not only in terms of helping our students learn but also in terms of making a better world. This wish was reflected in the LD30 Conference theme "Learning for Change and Action, Making a Difference for the Future," and I attended many sessions in which speakers presented their efforts to realize this goal. My contribution to the conference and to this volume is to introduce action-oriented language instruction (AOLI) and suggest ideas to increase our positive impact on the world through our teaching. To this end this article begins with a description of AOLI, followed by a report from my conference session, along with instructions on how to implement AOLI in your classroom. Then, the article addresses challenges to implementing AOLI in Japan through what I learned from this and other conferences about what people are already doing in Japan.

ACTION-ORIENTED LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION

Acar (2019) characterizes action-oriented language instruction (AOLI) as having the dual aim of teaching languages and educating citizens for a democratic society with the emphasis that the first aim is subservient to the second. He traces its theoretical grounding to the philosophies of Dewey, Decroly, and Freinet and notes its present practices as most closely associated with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The most recent edition of the CEFR companion document (North, et al., 2022) describes AOLI as having the following seven characteristics: rejection of a grammar-based linear syllabus, objectives inspired by CEFR

descriptors, realistic and authentic tasks, learner agency, focus on the task rather than language, authentic materials with scaffolding, and acceptance of complexity by teachers and learners. What these characteristics mean for us teachers is that we need to start with learners' lives and what's relevant to them, and align their interests with what the world needs. To the extent possible we want to let the learners take the initiative in choosing their projects and relevant CEFR "can-do" statements (Council of Europe, 2020) in consultation with us, the teachers. These descriptors should serve as both language goals and transparent assessment criteria.

Piccardo (2014) emphasizes the use of "authentic materials" in AOLI, but "authenticity" is a deeply problematic notion. A grammar substitution exercise is a classic case for inauthentic language use, but it can be legitimate in the context of an EFL classroom, thus "authentic." Pinner (2016) argues that authenticity should be reconceptualized as "a socially mediated and contextually dynamic process of investment" (p. 8). He sees authenticity in continua as it relates to motivation and autonomy, and he argues that the material becomes more authentic if it relates to the learner personally as an individual. Following Pinner's argument, we should choose "authentic" materials based on how relevant they are to our learners' lives and to the projects they choose to undertake.

The above description of AOLI incorporates elements of other approaches, such as task-based learning (TBL), project-based learning (PBL), content and language integrated learning (CLIL), service learning, and experiential learning among others. These overlaps exist because they all arose out of dissatisfaction in the traditional grammar-based language instruction, and they all share their roots in communicative language teaching.

In the sections that follow, I report what transpired in my session at the LD30 Conference, and I show how AOLI offers a particular lens to imagine certain possibilities in our pedagogical practices.

POSSIBILITIES FOR ACTION-ORIENTED LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION

During my conference session, I invited the participants to discuss how they could incorporate AOLI in their current environment in Japan, and they came up with several themes. Peter Chin and Jennie Roloff Rothman started a lively conversation on fair trade as a theme. Buying decisions are certainly something that contemporary Japanese university students can relate to in their everyday lives, and fair trade is connected to larger issues of fair pay, labor, and capitalism. But the present practice of fair trade itself is also problematic, Rothman argued, since the farmers still receive very little of the fair-trade price. A theme on fair trade within an English class or a CLIL class on business or economics has the potential to engage learners and transform them to become more critical and responsible citizens, and their actions could contribute to addressing the problem in the long term. To make the class action-oriented, however, I suggest incorporating an assignment where the learner must make at least one conscious buying decision and reflect on that choice: Why did they choose to spend their money there? Where do they think their money will go? What do they hope that their money will contribute to in the end? The act of spending their own money would make them realize that our lessons are relevant outside the classroom and that they can act upon the world through seemingly mundane choices.

Richard Walker raised charity as another possible theme, which also can be taught as a CLIL class in business or economics. Like fair trade, charity is a complex issue, and simply giving money to charity does not solve all the problems. One can also argue that the root cause of poverty is capitalism or its present manifestation of it, and charity is a tool used by the beneficiaries of the system to placate the economically oppressed and distract their attention from systemic reforms (like wage reforms) or an outright revolution against capitalism (Ashford, 2018). We can hope that such a discussion may spark learner interest in charity and help learners think about why charity is needed in the first place and what we could do to address the fundamental problems. To make the class action-oriented, I suggest requiring the learner to donate something, be it money, goods, labor, or time. This assignment can lead to a further discussion on their choices: Why did you choose this charity? What did you choose to volunteer and why? What did you learn as a result of your action? Would you consider doing it

again? Why (not)? I agree with William James (1890), who conceptualized a person's character as an accumulation of all the small choices throughout one's lives. By making our students actually perform these actions that are consistent with their values, we are helping them become the people they aspire to be.

But how can we design an action-oriented language class for our particular learners who may have limited language proficiency and perhaps limited world knowledge? North et al. (2022) suggest the following steps:

1. Identify learners' real-life communicative needs by considering the contexts learners are likely to encounter.
2. Establish clear and specific goals for the lesson and use the CEFR descriptors to define these goals.
3. Work with learners to create a scenario that simulates a real-life situation.
4. Incorporate specific language skills (e.g. vocabulary, grammar, communicative strategies).
5. Set conditions and constraints for the task.
6. Incorporate assessment tools using CEFR descriptors.

Starting with the learners' needs and contexts is the key to making the task relevant, but teachers should consider pushing the learners a little both in terms of their language and their world knowledge. The CEFR descriptors are often the most useful starting point because they have "can do" statements at all levels. For the sake of example, the following tables are given to show different "can do" statements for informal and formal discussions for learners in the B2-A2 range.

INFORMAL DISCUSSION (WITH FRIENDS)

Descriptor Numbers	Levels	Descriptions
462	B2	Can account for and sustain their opinions in discussion by providing relevant explanations, arguments and comments.
465	B1+	Can explain why something is a problem.
471	B1	Can express beliefs, opinions and agreement and disagreement politely.
473	A2+	Can exchange opinions and compare things and people using simple language.

FORMAL DISCUSSION (MEETINGS)

Descriptor Numbers	Levels	Descriptions
495	B2	Can contribute, account for and sustain their opinion, evaluate alternative proposals and make and respond to hypotheses.
498	B1	Can take part in routine formal discussion of familiar subjects which is clearly articulated in the standard form of the language or a familiar variety and which involves the exchange of factual information, receiving instructions or the discussion of solutions to practical problems.
502	A2	Can express what they think about things when addressed directly in a formal meeting, provided they can ask for repetition of key points if necessary.

Finding the level-appropriate descriptors allows us to find Krashen's (1985) "i + 1," the kind of language input that learners can manage with scaffolding, and these descriptors should guide us in designing the language components of the task.

A similar approach can be used for learners themselves. We may lament our learners' limited life experience or world knowledge, but we still have to take them as they are. Our job is to push them a little, expose them to the world but only to the extent they can handle. That may not be much, but we are still helping the learners to push their limit to become what they can be for the time being.

More detailed instructions on how to teach AOLI can be found in the handbook *From Communicative to Action-Oriented* (Piccardo, 2014), and a lesson plan template is available online (Piccardo & Hunter, 2021).

ADDRESSING CHALLENGES TO IMPLEMENTING ACTION-ORIENTED LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION IN JAPAN

It is true that there are challenges to implementing AOLI in Japan. Hirose (2022), for example, argued for the existence of a number of challenges, which can be summarized as the following: Japan is a high-context, collectivist culture with strong top-down power relationships, and the Japanese are uncomfortable with dialogue-style discussions. In particular, they lack the skill to ask good, probing questions, fearing that such questions disrupt group harmony.

Whether or not these stereotypically Japanese characteristics are overstated, many of us, language teachers in Japan, already recognize the need to address these issues, and we are already doing many things to overcome these challenges. At a recent CUE SIG conference, Christopher Modell (2023) presented little tricks he uses in his classroom to prod his learners to speak up and make positive contributions, and at our LD30 conference, Dexter da Silva and Ted O'Neil held a learning café to explore how to ask good questions. Adrienne Johnson and Cecilia Smith Fujishima presented project-based learning that emphasizes developing learners' critical thinking, especially their ability to recognize the divergent perspectives of multiple stakeholders (see their chapter in this volume). Many presenters discussed their work grounded in SDGs. Neil Cowie (see his chapter in this volume) presented his work on coordinating an international SDG Master's program that involved international students visiting local Japanese organizations and reflecting on SDG practices that could be applied in their home countries.

Also at the LD30 Conference, social activist Taichi Ichikawa narrated his personal journey of finding his mission to turn the world into one big school and how he set up his organization called World Road Inc. His most recent book, *We Have a Dream* (World Dream Project, 2021), is a collection of aspirations by young people around the world, intended as a textbook on SDGs to be used by learners around the world. He told us about a global youth movement called "One Young World," through which many young people today are trying to make meaningful changes for the better. Another language textbook that uses SDGs was recently put together by Goodmacher (2023), who incorporates AOLI. In his chapter on food waste, for example, he asks the learners to make a list of food and drink items they typically throw away (e.g., apple cores) and look into ways to use them (p. 65).

At another recent conference on "Peace as Global Language," Paul Duffill (2023) inspired us with the idea of teaching peace studies as a CLIL class, and Tom Fast (2021, 2023) described his involvement with the Japan University English Model United Nations (JUEMUN), which is "an annual, collaborative and student-organized conference held in the Kansai region of Japan" (Japan University English Model United Nations, n.d.). Fast's students researched gender inequality in Japan, and they drafted resolutions as themselves, i.e. concerned young women who would have to live with gender inequality in Japan. They submitted their resolutions with recommendations to the Okayama prefectural government, they testified in front of the government officials, and many of

their recommendations were actually adopted as prefectural laws in Okayama. This is a perfect example of AOLI in action.

All these examples show that Hirose's (2022) obstacles are not impenetrable walls, and at the LD30 Conference Sylvain Bergeron invoked Parker Palmer's (2007) "Courage to Teach" to discuss what it takes for us, teachers, to take the lead in changing the world by involving our students in SDG projects and encouraging them to go further on their own.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

"Language instruction to change the world" is a grand proposition, and there are certainly great programs we admire that live up to that label. But those big programs may discourage us, thinking we cannot possibly mount such a grand project. On the other hand, modest and achievable actions may seem too small to make a difference. When dealing with big issues like helping the world, I agree with popular author Colin Beavan (2016), who wrote *How to be alive: A guide to the kind of happiness that helps the world*. What's most important is taking the first step, no matter how small. The question you should ask is not whether your action will make a difference but whether your action will make you happy. A simple lesson on giving directions can be turned into a lesson in kindness by assigning a task to actually help someone who looks visibly lost on the street. I know there are a lot of people who are looking for directions in Tokyo not only because I see them all the time but also because I am one of them. Think about the times in which you wished someone had offered you a hand. Could you make an assignment out of that? It will make a difference to that person—and perhaps to the student too.

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