Author(s): deBoer, Mark; Leontjev, Dmitri; Friederich, Lee

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From language to function: Developing self- and peer-assessment tools

Mark deBoer, Dmitri Leontjev, Lee Friederich

Action-oriented Approach (AoA) is a powerful basis to inform teaching, learning, and assessment in the classroom and identifies learners as social agents and focuses on language learning through language use. This paper answers the call for developments helping teachers teach and learners learn in an AoA-informed way. We argue that cognitive discourse functions (CDFs) align with AoA, helping to develop learner thinking by focusing on their language use. We complement our conceptual discussion referring to the process of developing a self- and peer-assessment tool informed by AoA and CDFs and the initial application of this tool in an advanced academic writing course in a Japanese university with B1 and B2 level students. We discuss how this tool can guide learners' understanding of their writing process and fosters learners' responsibility for deciding how they mobilize their linguistic resources to express particular language functions.
Key words: AoA, Cognitive Discourse Functions, Academic Writing, Assessment

Introduction

There has recently been a renewed interest towards the Action-oriented Approach (AoA; Piccardo & North 2019). However, one challenge pertaining to the Japanese context, but is also true elsewhere, is that 'people tend not to pay due attention to important concepts ... such as the 'action-oriented approach' or 'learners as social agents'' (British Council 2020: 3).

The same is true for academic writing in higher education, which, despite an impressive body of research exploring it, still has challenges to address, including students' dissatisfaction with feedback they receive on their writing and students and teachers alike focusing on assessment of learning outcomes rather than that supporting and promoting learning, known as assessment *for* learning (A*f*L) (Lee and Coniam 2013; Wiliam and Leahy 2015).

Lee and Coniam (ibid.), namely, reported on an implementation of A*f*L principles in schools in Hong Kong, which was not fully successful due to the examination-driven culture in the country, which should be equally true in examination-driven cultures such as Japan (Green 2016). Lee and Coniam (ibid.) suggested that for a successful implementation of A*f*L principles, students should become active agents in assessment, recognizing its purpose being beyond listing deficiencies in a piece of writing. In the single-draft approach, students are used to, this is impossible. Students, thus, should be gradually guided through multi-draft writing to gain more responsibility for their performance, internalizing teacher guidance and that from their peers to self-assessment. Furthermore, for learners to transfer competencies to other pieces of writing, we argue, moving away from focusing on single features (such as grammatical tenses, cohesive devices, and spelling) to language *use* is required (Piccardo, North, and Goodier 2019).

In this paper, we reflect upon how AoA principles alongside the construct of cognitive discourse functions (CDF; Dalton-Puffer 2013) can serve a basis for the shift in both teachers' and learners' understanding of the purpose of classroom assessment, from measuring learning outcomes to promoting learning. We argue that CDFs (a) provide a basis for systematic guidance to learners, (b) allow for conceptualizing actions as an integrated construct of content and language, and (c) create conditions for intersubjectivity to emerge. We will illustrate our discussion with details from our ongoing collaboration focused on developing an existing assessment rubric in academic writing courses at a university in Japan into a self- and peer-assessment tool that encourages student reflection and agency, focusing functional over formal considerations in language use, and allowing for unique developmental trajectories to emerge.

Initially, the first and third authors, both instructors at the same University, were engaged in the course development. The second author joined them soon after the start of this collaboration. We will use 'us' to refer to ourselves as the three authors of the paper and as the analysts of the data.

Action-Oriented Approach: Creating conditions to support learning

The Action-oriented Approach goes beyond the communicative approach advocated in the 1970s (CoE 2020). Namely, it considers language learners as agents acting to accomplish tasks in a specific context. This implies that learners mobilize their own resources, linguistic and otherwise, to complete their writing tasks. The goal of teaching then becomes not teaching language as a subject, but engaging learners in meaningful collaborative tasks in which they can use these resources to develop their competences. 'Above all, the action-oriented approach implies purposeful, collaborative tasks in the classroom, the primary focus of which is not language' (CoE ibid.: 30). At the core of the Action-oriented Approach is *action*. As Piccardo and North (2019: 53) explain, as no action is 'fully predictable, different competences need to be mobilized at different moments and for different purposes both in a proactive and a reactive way.' Hence, the AoA shifts the view of development towards a complex process 'where the object of study (language), the subject learning it (language user), the action (language use) and the reflection (metacognitive/metalinguistic phase) are interconnected and interdependent' (ibid.: 52).

Despite the growing understanding that classroom assessment should, above all, support learner development (Wiliam and Leahy op.cit.), it still oftentimes focuses on gaps in the learners' knowledge (Lee and Coniam op.cit.). This understanding, Piccardo and North (ibid.: 161) argue, views learning from a 'deficiency perspective focusing on what the learners have not yet acquired.' The concept of learning underlying the AoA is different. No longer is the L2 development understood as a learner moving along a linear path of gradually acquiring linguistic, grammatical, and syntactic competence of native speakers. Instead, language development happens as learners use language for a meaningful purpose.

The learner in this view is a social agent involved in co-construction of knowledge. As Piccardo and North state, 'unless a learner is self-directed ... he/she will be unable to take the initiative necessary to exert agency and thus profit from the learning opportunities offered' (ibid.: 51). The teacher's goal, then, is to help the learner take charge of their learning by guiding learners towards self-regulation, as 'social actions always have a goal other than language' (Piccardo and North ibid.: 176). This implies that the teacher's goal is to create conditions for the learner to mobilize their own resources in a unique way to reach a meaningful objective.

Furthermore, learner reflection and the ability to make their own decisions are necessary preconditions for development. As a result, each learner moves along unique development trajectories. Therefore, in AoA-informed assessment, teachers work together with learners, guiding their learning and gathering information about them which, integrated with teaching, is used to give learners more responsibility for their performance, enabling self- and peer-assessment and learner reflection. Assessment does not penalize learners for gaps in performance, but helps learners move along their unique developmental trajectories (Piccardo and North ibid.; Piccardo, North, and Goodier op.cit.). In our own thinking, the goal of assessment should be to find out how well learners are able to mobilize their available resources. The inferences made based on this information should be used then to guide learners' development.

This view aligns well with assessment *for* learning. In fact, the iterative process of classroom-based assessment discussed by Davison and Leung (2009) with regard to assessment *for* learning culture has informed our thinking as to how assessment should be organized in the AoA-informed classroom—as a set of cycles involving planning, collecting information, giving feedback to learners, and making adjustments to the subsequent teaching and learning as a result.

Pedagogically, a principle of AoA is backwards design, meaning the teacher works backwards from the course learning goals to the starting point of learners entering the course. The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR; CoE op.cit.) 'can-do' statements, for example the descriptors for writing of reports and essays (CoE op.cit.: 68), do include actions which can serve as a basis for teachers developing classroom practices such that the focus of teaching, learning, and assessment shifts to language functions. However, the CEFR is meant to be applied to a broad spectrum of educational contexts and activities (CoE op.cit.), meaning that its descriptors are broad. Hence, for example, the CEFR does not elaborate what it means to 'synthesize' in a specific academic context and what previous steps or actions are required in order to verbalize this action in writing or speaking appropriately in this context. Considering the academic context in which our development work took place, that is, within advanced academic writing courses for college students in a liberal arts setting, we turned our attention to the construct of cognitive discourse functions (Dalton-Puffer op.cit.). As we will elaborate, CDF eliciting *both* content and language knowledge affords the emergence of teachers' and learners' joint understanding of what these functions mean in an academic context.

From form to function: Cognitive discourse functions

In the current L2 teaching, learning, and assessment, there may be too much of a focus on language, which leads to missed opportunities to assess how language is used to externalize learners' thinking and develop their thinking. We argue that while AoA principles form a powerful basis for transforming classroom assessment practices, CDF originating in content and language integrated learning (CLIL) can serve as a useful heuristic for understanding how language functions can be expressed in specific academic L2 contexts.

The development of the CDF construct emerged from (a) understanding the value of performative verbs in externalizing learner thinking, (b) the competence-orientation of modern pedagogy, and (c) the desire to assist CLIL teachers who are subject, not language-specialists. Even though the construct is a relatively recent development in understanding academic language proficiency, its basis traces back to Bloom et al.'s *Taxonomy educational objectives* (1956).

Dalton-Puffer (op.cit.) suggested a shorter, non-hierarchical list of seven performative verbs, each representing a category of communicative intentions as well as externalizations of learners' understanding of subject matter: classify, define, describe, evaluate, explain, explore, and report. Each category is expanded with further performative verbs indicating how these communicative intentions can be realized, for example, the category 'evaluate', includes 'judge', 'justify', and 'critique'. (Dalton-Puffer ibid.). We, following Dalton-Puffer (ibid.) argue for their value as a connection between cognition and language.

Certainly, focus on language use is at the core of AoA, not least because of its intellectual roots in communicative language teaching (Canale and Swain 1980) and functional notional approach (Finocchiaro and Brumfit 1983). However, we argue that it is namely that the CDF comes from the realm of content and language integrated learning that it has value for academic L2 classes. To elaborate, CDFs are conceptualized as a transdisciplinary construct, characterizing both discipline-specific ways to convey knowledge and linguistic resources needed to convey this knowledge. Above all, it allows instructors to focus on how language functions are realized in specific disciplines. Indeed, as Breeze and Dafouz (2017) found, learners' challenges do not necessarily stem from the lack of linguistic competence but also from the lack of understanding of what functions are required to complete the task successfully. CDFs, then, create a powerful basis for creating a joint understanding between the teacher and learners, and among learners, of the actions which are required to effectively communicate their ideas to the academic community they are learning to interact with. In higher education academic writing courses, oftentimes, learners from different disciplines take part. CDFs, therefore, help teachers become both content and language aware, so they start appreciating different ways knowledge is conveyed in different disciplines. Furthermore, teachers can build on *learners'* resources and foster different developmental trajectories.

In other words, CDFs create powerful affordances for guiding learners' understanding while giving them agency to act. For example, to compare concepts, learners need to possess an understanding of these concepts, the language to express this understanding,

and knowledge of conventions of the specific discourse community they deliver this understanding to. This conceptualization, thus, shifts the focus from learners' linguistic competence to how they mobilize their available resources, linguistic or otherwise, at that moment. This aligns with the premise of AoA that the classroom is a space for students to act in the here and now in authentic situations.

To summarize, the AoA principles, including backwards design and focus on learner reflection and agency, inform how L2 classrooms can be orchestrated for student engagement and growth. Cognitive discourse functions, in turn, allow for identifying actions required to reach the set goals as well as understanding what these actions/functions of language mean in a specific context. We next discuss a practical application of CDFs in an L2 classroom, showing how they inform AoA assessment, and consequently, teaching and learning.

Illustrative example: Developing a self- and peer-assessment tool

The context for the development was an Advanced Research Writing course at a Liberal Arts university in Japan required for all undergraduate students, who earn a BA - in either Global Business, Global Studies, or Education. Most students in the course are L1 Japanese estimated to be at levels B1–B2 of their English proficiency on the CEFR scale. Most have spent time abroad.

In this course, the students are required to submit a multi-draft 3,500 word research paper. Previously, learners were given direct feedback on their drafts by their instructors, and the assessment rubric used in the course focussed on the product of writing. Our work was guided by the desire to develop learners' competence to mediate and construct meaning, as it was our belief that the competence nurtured in an academic writing course should stretch beyond the mechanics and technical aspects of writing to 'social, pedagogic, cultural' contexts (CoE op.cit.: 90). The development process included orchestrating classroom activities to enable learner reflection, creating new activities to enable peer feedback, creating self- and peer-assessment tools, and working with other instructors willing to adopt and adapt the AoA-informed principles and tools in their classrooms. In this paper, we focus on the development of one tool in this process. The starting point for us was a rubric used for rating writing products (both in teacher and self-assessment for instructors who opted to use this course rubric). This rubric focused on the introductory sections of academic papers. In Table 1, we illustrate the rubric with reference to (a) development of arguments and (b) text coherence and organization.

/insert Table 1 about here/

Our goal was to develop this rubric (Table 1) into a self-, and peer-assessment tool focusing on the process of learner writing rather than evaluating writing products, to help learners understand *how* they can externalize their thinking rather than focusing on deficiencies in their pieces of writing.

The original rubric was written in the teacher's voice (e.g. 'Your central thread is clear'), despite being a tool intended for learners' self-assessment. Hence our first step was

making sure that the statements in the tool are written in the learners' voice, that is, in the first person (e.g. 'I have presented all the arguments in a coherent manner').

Having analysed the learning outcomes and learner pieces of writing in the previous years, we concluded that the original rubric reflected levels B1 and B2 descriptors of the 'Writing Reports and Essays' scale (CoE op.cit.: 68), even if it was missing the verbs eliciting action, for example:

- 'Can **synthesise** information'
- 'Can **evaluate** different ideas'.

These can-do statements informed the formulations signifying excellent quality of the students' writing affording the further development required in subsequent papers in this and the following academic writing courses. That is, we considered what cognitive discourse functions / verbs eliciting actions required, for example, for the learners' writing to have 'clear structure, paragraphs, headings' (e.g. 'identify how arguments relate to one another') as well as to lead the reader through their argument clearly. We note that, informed by the conceptualization of CDF, we considered these action verbs to be externalizations of learners' thinking processes, reflecting their understanding of functions of various sections of academic papers, as well as learners' understanding of the writing process leading to these products. Having determined which CDFs would relate to the different aspects of the introduction, working backwards from the CDFs signifying higher quality of the text, we explored (a) how language use for particular functions become the building blocks for language use further along the scale and (b) how to inform learners what they can do next to improve the quality of their writing. Parallel to this development, the CDFs and the text surrounding them were discussed with reference to the mediational competence scales of the new companion volume (CoE op.cit.). We will next present an excerpt from the self-assessment tool created around the use of CDFs.

/insert Table 2 about here/

The excerpt from the tool in Table 2 illustrates how we realized the goal to help learners organize their thinking about how to develop their writing rather than focusing on deficiencies in their texts. Namely, we sequenced the CDFs such that those that reflect a more developed text (on the right-hand side) require CDFs emerging earlier on the scale (on the left-hand side). For example, to **synthesize** the arguments, the learner first needs to **describe** the relationships between them. Applying backwards design, we constructed our formulations such that learners could display competencies relevant to writing academic papers at least at the B1 level, for example, 'Can summarize, report and give their opinion about accumulated factual information...', but also some at level B2, for example, 'Can synthesise information and arguments from a number of sources' (CoE op.cit.: 68). Finally, building on the principles of assessment *for* learning (Wiliam and Leahy op.cit.), the tool elicits both what learners can already do and suggests what they can do next in order to develop. Interestingly, in our early use of the tool, some learners either freely highlighted what they had done *or* what they needed to do (not necessarily both). While this showed the flexibility of the tool and students' agency in using the tool

in a way that was meaningful for *their* writing process, this also helped us realize that the self-assessment tool might serve them best if we made use of the CDFs to suggest 'next step' strategies that would guide students in developing and refining their ideas.

The resulting self-assessment tool suggests guidelines for learners to help them see the connection between what they are writing and how they are expressing their thinking. We ask them to notice which of the CDFs they are using to make their points, enabling a shift in their thinking about their writing. We have also used this template for peer-assessment, so that students can understand how others see their writing through the lens of CDF, so that they can develop a common vocabulary through which to discuss their own and each other's writing.

Our observations and informal learner feedback after our initial trial of the rubric show learners using the rubric in unique ways to develop their texts. We found some students not only beginning to better envision what they could specifically do to revise their essays, but also building on what they had accomplished so far. For example, recognizing the strength of her research question in her essay investigating how educators impact self-esteem, one student reflected that 'while there can be some progress in Japanese education, currently whether self-esteem can be raised depends on the educator. Considering these, I have written a research question to explore the progress common through the nation. I hope this 'shows a gap.'' She goes on to write, 'on the other hand, I have to connect this question to primary research.' This is what we hoped to achieve with this rubric—learners assessing where they are in their writing and how they can make improvements by reflecting on their writing process. In other words, the self-assessment tool can become a part of their learning cycle (O'Dwyer and Runnels 2014), guiding their goal setting, self-assessment, and reflection, as well as a part of the classroom-based assessment cycle (Davison and Leung op.cit.). This should help teachers collect and systematize information about learner performance, as well as to trace and guide learner development. Such guidance, including feedback (helping learners recognize where they are now) and 'feed forward' (guiding them to achieving the goal) (see Hattie and Timperley 2007), would not prescribe the actions the learners should take but would help learners find *their way* to improve their writing.

Our thoughts on helping learners develop in AoA-informed way

As we hone in on further developing a CDF- and AoA-informed self- and peer-assessment tool that keeps the learner at the heart of the assessment process, we envision it as a useful tool for communication between students and teachers, and also between students during peer-review. Through the development of the self- and peer-assessment tool, we have moved away from focusing on a set of features corresponding to a particular evaluation of a text (see Table 2) to eliciting the process of development, as the tool encourages students to reflect more actively and critically on their writing. Watching learners over the semester, we envision that, eventually, learners will be able to use CDFs as a springboard to meaningfully articulate other areas of concern in their peer-review workshops. Responding to comments learners receive as they work toward the final draft, the tool becomes a feedback loop that begins and ends with the learner.

Action-oriented Approach is a powerful mediational means for changing both the teaching and learning of languages, which our collaboration outlined here also shows. However, at this point, we would like to get back to the original argument in this paper, namely, how CDFs can inform the AoA in the academic L2 classroom.

We would like to highlight that the CDF construct is commensurate with the premise of the AoA, as both:

- move the focus from linguistic, grammatical, and syntactic features to the use of language
- give the learner the responsibility in deciding which resources to mobilize to express their understanding and knowledge.

CDFs are particularly relevant to academic language classrooms, as they explicitly elicit how language is used to verbalize conceptual knowledge in various disciplines. CDFs allow for intersubjectivity to emerge, as learners and teachers work towards a joint understanding of how various CDFs are expressed in academic disciplines and what conceptual knowledge they convey.

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The authors

Mark deBoer, Akita International University, Japan, is a Ph.D. Candidate at the University of Jaén. He is co-editor of the recent volume *Assessment and Learning in Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) Classrooms: Approaches and Conceptualisations*.
Email: markdb@aiu.ac.jp

Dmitri Leontjev is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland. His research interests include language teaching, learning, and assessment from the perspective of sociocultural theory and teacher development through praxis.
Email: dmitri.leontjev@jyu.fi

Lee Friederich Earning her Ph.D. in Japanese and Comparative Literature at Washington University in St. Louis, Lee Friederich teaches courses in Japanese and English-based literatures, composition, and ESL. She currently teaches at Akita International University, Japan.
Email: lfriederich@aiu.ac.jp