

COGNITIVE OPERATIONS (PROACTION, METACOGNITION, REGULATION) AND FUNDAMENTAL ACTIVITIES (TASKS, FEEDBACK, ASSESSMENTS) IN THE PROJECT APPROACH

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Table of contents

Abstract	2
Acronyms	2
1. Introduction: the project approach.....	2
1.1 Modeling.....	2
1.2. Features	2
2. Proaction, design and initial assessment	3
2.1. Proaction	3
2.2. The design	3
2.3. Initial assessment.....	4
3. Metacognition and regulation	5
3.1. Metacognition	5
3.2. Regulation	5
4. Intermediate assessment and feedback	6
4.1. Intermediate assessment	6
4.2. Feedback	6
5. Final assessment	6
6. Conclusions and further developments	7
6.1. The functions of the various assessments and project assessment	7
6.2. Project drivers.....	8
6.3. Project and different task types	8
6.4. Project approach and social action-oriented perspective	9
Bibliography	9

ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to provide an overview of the various concepts that designate the cognitive operations and activities that are fundamental to the project approach. In my view, this overview is important in order to make a clear distinction between the Social Action-Oriented Perspective outlined by the 2001 CEFR and the Communicative Approach and the Task-Based Learning, with which it is still often confused. In fact, this presentation highlights the strong intellectual and civic training dimension of the action-oriented perspective, which makes it much better suited than the communicative approach to the educational goals of school systems. The high standards it implies, particularly in terms of individual and collective autonomy and responsibility, cannot of course be achieved with young beginners, but even with them, these values constitute the horizon towards which teaching practices must constantly be oriented. [August 2024 abstract]

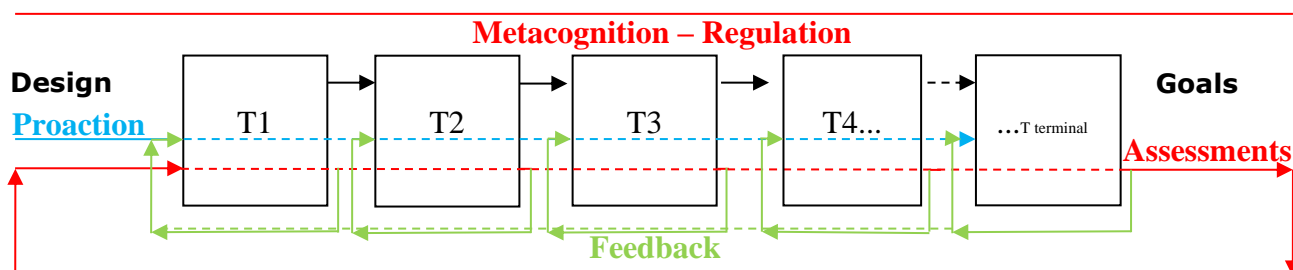
ACRONYMS

- DLC : Didactics of Languages-Cultures
- SAOA: Social Action-Oriented Approach

1. INTRODUCTION: THE PROJECT APPROACH

The aim of this article is to provide an update on the various concepts that designate the cognitive operations and activities that are fundamental to the project approach.

1.1 Modeling



$T = \text{task}^1$

-The blue dotted line represents the proaction operation, which may be taken over during the course of the project.

-The red dotted line represents the assessment activities that are repeated at the end of each task.

-The green dotted line (from right to left) represents feedback activities that are likely to lead to the revision of several previous tasks, or to the resumption of the proaction operation on several previous tasks, or even to the partial or total revision of the project design.

1.2. Features

The project is an approach designed for complex action in a complex environment, and which partly manages this complexity by designing its own environment². In this approach, it is not

¹ On the notion of task, I now refer readers to [PUREN 2016g](#) (chap. 1, pp. 8 ff) and [PUREN 013](#) (entry "task", pp. 8-10), where I analyze it in detail.

² Sociologist and philosopher Edgard MORIN, France's best-known epistemologist of complexity, talks of the need to take into account the "ecology of action", which means that its effects are always likely to escape its authors, sometimes to the point of being contrary to their intentions (e.g. 1990 p. 109, among

possible to *program* in advance everything that is to be done, by whom, how and in what order (as is the case in a procedure); it is only possible to *plan* ahead on a provisional basis (this is the activity of *conception*, which calls on the cognitive operation of *proaction*, cf. point 2.1 below). Forecasts are always likely to turn out to be provisional, due to the various characteristics of complexity³, but they must nevertheless be taken as seriously as possible. It may seem paradoxical that the relevance of the revision depends on the rigor of the forecast, but this is only apparent: the degree of relevance of the latter logically depends on the degree of precision of the former. This is why tasks in progress must be constantly monitored (using metacognition, see point 3.1 below) and evaluated separately (see point 4.1 below), so that the necessary feedback activities can be carried out (see point 4.2 below): project management, in other words, is not a matter of applying a (linear) *procedure*, but of implementing (recursive) *processes*⁴.

2. PROACTION, DESIGN AND INITIAL ASSESSMENT

2.1. Proaction

Proaction is a cognitive operation concerning the action to come: learners project their future global action with their partial actions (or "tasks": T1, T2...,) and project themselves into it, mentally examining them not from the present –i.e. at the start of the project, at the moment of proaction– but retrospectively from the end of the project –i.e. at the moment of the final assessment (cf. point 5 below). As the German sociologist Alfred Schütz wrote, the time of proaction, which is the characteristic time of the project, is *the future perfect*⁵: having acquired the project approach means being able, at the very start of the project, to collectively ask questions such as the following, and to provide answers to them, however provisional: "What *will we have achieved* by the end of our project? What resources (see point 2.2. below) *will we have needed*? What successive tasks *will we have had to carry out*? How *will we have organized* ourselves? What difficulties *will we have encountered*? How *will we overcome* them? What success criteria *will be guided* us? Etc. Having acquired the project approach also means being able to look ahead to the future final assessment of the completed project.

2.2. The design

Design is the activity carried out by means of the cognitive operation of proaction: it determines the project's objectives, resources, planning (in particular the various tasks and their sequence), organization, follow-up and final assessment criteria. Pedagogical projects must be designed according to interests and constraints⁶ (including learner level, language progression and curricula), but also according to available resources and necessary resources⁷:

others). One of the main advantages of the project approach is that, because its action is complex, it creates its own environment –its "device", which it can itself constantly modify, unlike the predefined device of a preprogrammed class sequence– and is thus better able to control its effects. On the notions of environment and device in DLC, see [PUREN 030](#).

³ These are multiplicity, diversity, heterogeneity, variability, interrelation, instability, sensitivity to the environment, contradiction and the inclusion of the subject (observer or actor). These characteristics are illustrated in [PUREN 046](#) using the example of learners in a class group, but they also apply to all tasks within any project.

⁴ On the distinction between *process* and *procedure*, see [PUREN 013](#), p. 6.

⁵ "But what is the temporal structure of a projected action? When I project my action, I'm rehearsing my future action in my imagination. In other words, I anticipate its outcome. In imagination, I see this action, anticipated as the thing that will have been done, the act that will have been performed by me. By projecting it, I see my act in the future perfect tense" (SCHÜTZ Alfred 1987, pp. 112-113, quoted by [PERRICHON 2008](#), pp. 37-38).

⁶ As far as possible: see point 6, last paragraph.

⁷ The term "resources" refers, in the general pedagogical conception of competence as "complex knowing how to act", to everything that the learner must be able to mobilize and combine effectively for this action.

Christian PUREN, "Cognitive operations (proaction, metacognition, regulation) and fundamental activities (feedback, assessment) in the project approach".

-*both internal resources*: in Jacques TARDIF's model⁸, these are the learners' "knowledge, attitudes, values, schemas"; the list is not closed: we can also think of motivation, attention and energy, and, in didactics of languages-cultures (DLC), acquired language and cultural knowledge and know-how, the indispensable part of which for initiating the project corresponds to what we call the "prerequisites";

-and *external resources*, made up of everything that learners can mobilize in terms of time, space, tools, documentation, help and guidance from the teacher and other learners, and so on.

Depending on whether we take an individual or collective perspective, (other) learners correspond to external or internal resources. Depending on whether we adopt a negative or positive attitude (cf. the glass that can be seen as half-full or half-empty), we will consider the same elements as resources or constraints, even if both the optimism inherent in pedagogy and the proactive posture characteristic of commitment to the project should in principle always tip the balance in favor of the second attitude...

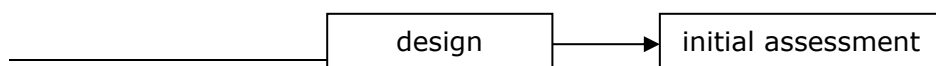
Design is different from *preparation*. The latter consists of acquiring the necessary knowledge and know-how in advance, right from the start of the project as it was initially conceived (others may be acquired during the course of the project, and others will prove necessary during the course of the project as the design changes: cf. *infra* point 4.2, last paragraph); even if, in a recursive manner, the realization that preparation is impossible, too difficult or too time-consuming may lead to an immediate review of the project design⁹.

It may be useful to distinguish between *remediation*, which is oriented upstream of the project -i.e., the learner's task is to make up for shortcomings or errors in the knowledge and know-how considered prerequisites- and *preparation* itself, which is oriented towards the future project - i.e., the learner's task is to acquire new knowledge and skills. While the reference time for conception, like that of proaction, is the future perfect (cf. point 2.1 *above*), that of remediation is the past, and that of preparation the simple future.

2.3. Initial assessment

The design activity must itself call on another activity, the initial assessment. This assessment is diagnostic in nature, since it involves taking stock of prerequisite knowledge and know-how, as well as available resources: in other words, the initial assessment focuses not only on what the learners have already learned, but also on the environment, the importance of which we have already seen in the project approach (see point 1.2 *above*). This assessment therefore consists in gathering the information needed to answer the question "what do we need to know and master, and what resources do we need to have at our disposal before starting our project?"

But this initial assessment is just as much *prospective*¹⁰, in that it collects the data needed to answer the question "What should we have known and mastered to make our project a success?"¹¹. This question opens up the possibility of planning the acquisition of new resources at the start of the project (in the preparation phase) and during the course of the project, or conversely of modifying the project design, once initiated, according to available and foreseeable new resources. Recursivity is therefore present right from the start of the project, because it's the only way to manage the complex question (the "problem") of project *feasibility*:



⁸ TARDIF 2006, p. 16, diagram reproduced in [PUREN 2016g](#), p. 48.

⁹ On this difference, specific to project pedagogy, between conception and preparation, see [PUREN 025](#). On the various cognitive models that have succeeded one another in the history of DLC, including that of proaction, see [PUREN 016](#).

¹⁰ It is sometimes even called "predictive". I may have used the term "predictive assessment" on a few occasions in the past (no doubt because it was used by experts in the Diplôme de Compétence en Langue: cf. [PUREN 065](#), "Assessment" entry, p. 4), but I feel it should be avoided now: in DLC, it's essential to "prospect", difficult to "foresee", and "predicting" is clearly a fantasy.

¹¹ In "prospective" we find the same logical operator (*pro-*) as in "project" and "proaction".

3. METACOGNITION AND REGULATION

3.1. Metacognition

Metacognition is a cognitive operation on the action in progress. Stricto sensu, the term refers to cognition about cognition itself; this highly abstract operation involves reflecting on one's own reflexive processes, so as to become aware of them and thus be able to control, adapt and ultimately improve them. But the term "metacognition" is also commonly used in pedagogy to designate the concrete observation and analysis of the action in progress by the subject himself. The subject reflects on how he is going to act, how he is acting and how he has acted in the course of his project, from conception and initial assessment to final assessment, including successive tasks, their intermediate assessment and feedback¹²: even if metacognition also concerns the action and the various tasks to come or completed, it considers them all "in progress" in the sense that it is interested in their realization process, i.e. how they are going to be carried out, are being carried out or have been carried out.

The operation of metacognition, taken over by the learners, is the essential means both of self-regulation of the project and of learning –to which the activities of mediation and interaction (see point 3.2 below), intermediate assessment and feedback (see points 4.1 and 4.2 below) also contribute– and of self-training in the operations and activities of the project approach and in learning strategies.

3.2. Regulation

Regulation is the activity of maintaining, controlling and adapting the action in progress, with the aim of ensuring that the process runs as optimally as possible; in the project approach, it is implemented in what is known as "project management"¹³.

As the project is also a means of learning –in this case, a foreign language-culture–, regulation concerns not only the various project tasks, but also the learning processes. For Philippe PERRENOUD (1993) "the regulation of learning processes, in a rather broad sense, [is] all the metacognitive operations of the subject and his interactions with the environment which influence his learning processes in the direction of a defined goal of mastery. Indeed, there can be no regulation without reference to an optimal state or process. Regulation is part of a teleonomic causality, with loops that modify the present according to a reference to the future."

This is not really a definition: these operations and interactions are means of regulation, not regulation itself. Moreover, recursive loops modify not only the present –with the resumption of the current task - but also both the past (with the possible resumption and/or modification of previous tasks) and the future (with the possible addition of further tasks, or even a possible modification of the overall project design (cf. point 4.2 below). On the other hand, as proposed by Ph. PERRENOUD, it is highly relevant to include interactions with the environment in the means of regulation, provided that mediations are included, and, as we saw in the description of the project approach (see Introduction above), to include in the overall environment not only the external environment, but also the internal environment of the project (its own device)¹⁴.

¹² These last two types of assessment –intermediate and terminal– are presented *below* in sections 4.1 and 5 respectively.

¹³ Although it doesn't deal specifically with project-based pedagogy, and its title announces the theme of "formative assessment", Maria-Alice MÉDIONI's 2016 book is well worth reading, as it deals extensively with the issue of regulation in the language classroom, and illustrates it with numerous concrete examples of classroom sequences.

¹⁴ Interactions with the environment include the learner's interactions with the teacher and other learners, who are part of the project's internal environment. But it is possible, and probably useful, to distinguish between *interactions* (which are two-way) and *interventions* (which are one-way; for example, an instruction).

4. INTERMEDIATE ASSESSMENT AND FEEDBACK

4.1. Intermediate assessment

To distinguish this assessment from the initial and final assessments, I call it "intermediate" here, in the sense that it takes place between the other two, throughout the project¹⁵. The expression is in the singular ("intermediate assessment") because it refers generically here to a particular type of assessment, but in practice it corresponds to the whole series of intermediate assessments.

Because project management is not a procedural but a recursive process, each task must be evaluated before moving on to the next. These intermediate assessments are particularly complex: they operate in a *summative* mode (i.e., they evaluate the task itself, establishing its own assessment), a *retrospective* mode (i.e., they evaluate the task in relation to all previous tasks, i.e., the project as it has been carried out up to that point) and a *prospective mode* (i.e., they evaluate the task in relation to all subsequent tasks, i.e., the continuation of the project). The data gathered during the intermediate assessment activities are used to feed the feedback operation (see next point 4.2).

4.2. Feedback

Feedback is an operation based on the action performed and evaluated. Unlike reaction, where subjects simply react to actions produced on them by their environment, and unlike *feedback*, which is a simple return of information, feedback is *an action in return on the action of the project*¹⁶. Learners will decide:

- if to return to the completed task, or go back to a previous task (possibly modifying it), or even add a task not foreseen in the initial design before the completed task;
- or if they can move on to the next task, possibly by modifying it or another subsequent task, or by adding a task not foreseen in the initial design after the completed task.

With the future tense, during the initial design phase, they place themselves in the future to conceive of the present as if it were the past; just as a "retroactive" law begins to apply from a date prior to its publication, feedback leads them to place themselves in the past to conceive of the future differently.

The two decisions, downstream or upstream, can of course be combined. Feedback can therefore lead to a partial or complete redesign of the project: it is this feedback that ensures the recursiveness that differentiates a complex *process* –such as that conducted in the project approach– from a *procedure*, in which the tasks and their linear succession are perfectly predefined from the outset, and do not have to be modified subsequently.

5. FINAL ASSESSMENT

The final assessment of a project is summative in nature, but it is also retrospective in that it feeds metacognition applied to the project as a whole, enabling us to look back critically at

¹⁵ Continuous assessment" might have been a more appropriate name, but the term is already used to designate assessments carried out by teachers during the year and taken into account in the annual assessment. [August 2014 translation note: in the French text of the original article, the term translated here as "feedback" is "rétroaction". In systemic theory, we distinguish in French between "feedback", which is the return of information (in this sense, we borrow the English word), and "rétroaction", which is the action taken in return for this information to influence the rest of the process.]

¹⁶ In terms of systems analysis, feedback corresponds to "dynamic re-entry". On this concept, cf. [PUREN 2015a](#), chap. 5.1. p. 30, where it is applied to the analysis of the general system of research in DLC.

Christian PUREN, "Cognitive operations (proaction, metacognition, regulation) and fundamental activities (feedback, assessment) in the project approach".

project design, implementation and assessment. It is also prospective: its summative and retrospective perspectives are designed also to draw lessons for future projects.

The metacognition operation carried out on the final assessment activity is what really closes the project: it's the moment when learners can self-assess the various projects it covers (the pedagogical project, the common teaching-learning project and the individual learning projects), and their progress in their capacity for individual and collective self-assessment. The ultimate retroactive loop in the project approach is the one that links this final assessment with the students' initial conception of this same final assessment (cf. the last sentence of chapter 2.1 above).

6. CONCLUSIONS AND FURTHER DEVELOPMENTS

6.1. *The functions of the various assessments and project assessment*

The usual terms of "diagnostic" at the beginning, "formative" or "formative"¹⁷ assessment during the course and "summative" at the end of a sequence are very simplistic, in that they fail to take into account the diversity of functions assumed in projects by these assessments, whose complexity is a reflection of the complex action they address. In an article published in 2001 ([PUREN 2001e](#)), I showed that the same is actually true of all school-based assessments, quite simply because, even if they are not part of a project-based approach, they are part of the overall teaching-learning project for the year, the cycle or the whole school curriculum.

Any summative assessment during the course of the year, for example, provides the teacher with information on how well the learners have worked (retrospective assessment of the learning process), on how he or she has carried out the sequence and designed the final tests (retrospective assessment of the teaching process... and of the assessment itself), on what the learners have learnt before the next sequence (diagnostic assessment), and finally on how he or she will be able to prepare the learners for it (prospective assessment). The same is true of the final certification assessment of the school curriculum, the French baccalaureate, which is not only summative (an assessment of what has been learned), but retrospective (and here again, it is as much about the learning process –the learner's entire schooling– as it is about what has been taught¹⁸), as it is diagnostic and prospective: as the French baccalaureate is the first university diploma, its results are supposed to provide information on the learner's ability to pursue language studies at university, or to use this language in higher education.

One of the functions attributed to assessment in the school environment is the normative, or "control" function: it consists in evaluating learners' productions in relation to the knowledge, know-how and/or competences expected in the language at a given point in time by the teacher. It is when (and only when) this function and this object are taken on in this perspective by the terminal assessment (and by it alone), that the teacher can in principle envisage grading it. This is not the place, in this article, to develop the well-known critical analyses of assessment, particularly when it takes the form of grading, but it does seem necessary to recall them here briefly¹⁹ :

- the difficulty and fragility of any normative assessment in terms of reliability and validity, even when based on criteria defined by language proficiency descriptors;
- the very crude nature of grading as such, which gets so bad as the "averages" are calculated that it no longer has any legitimacy other than administrative;

¹⁷ Some educationalists distinguish between *formative* and *formative* assessments. In her aforementioned book (2016, p. 20), Maria-Alice MÉDIONI reminds us that the former concept was introduced by Michael SCRIVEN in 1967 to promote, based on a trial-and-error conception of the learning process, an assessment that does not penalize learners at the end of a learning sequence, but rather trains them in learning during the sequence by relying on the positive role of errors. Formative assessments, on the other hand, are so named because they are carried out by the learners themselves, with the aim of training them in self-assessment.

¹⁸ See how this is interpreted by schools, parents, the media and the Ministry...

¹⁹ For a slightly less schematic presentation of the various points that follow, see [PUREN 2001e](#).

Christian PUREN, "Cognitive operations (proaction, metacognition, regulation) and fundamental activities (feedback, assessment) in the project approach".

-plurality of heterogeneous and in part conflicting criteria and requirements that the teacher is necessarily led to take into account in summative assessments during the year: the learner's individual effort and progress, the maintenance of his/her motivation, his/her performance with regard to the language content of the sequence, his/her positioning in relation to the other learners in his/her class, his/her level in relation to institutional expectations...;

-unmanageable complexity of the messages that grading sends out to its various recipients according to the different and even opposing interpretations that they may make of it depending on their interests, expectations and perspectives: learners in the class, teachers (the author of the grading... and his colleagues), parents, school administration, external examiners, members of baccalaureate juries...).

This reminder is here all the more necessary as each of the fundamental orientations of the project approach –educational goals, learning processes and social action competences– makes normative assessment problematic, if not inadequate. In fact, all these orientations lead to a massive emphasis on *individual and collective formative self-assessment*.

The following hypothesis for DLC would need to be validated or invalidated by meta-research into the long historical experience of project pedagogy at all levels of schooling and in all disciplines: the more complex the task planned for the end of a sequence, the more autonomy it demands and the more individual and collective responsibility it engages the learners –in other words, the more it is part of a genuine project approach–, and the more normative assessments of learners' individual language productions need to be decoupled from the project itself. Large-scale projects spanning several months, or even an entire year, will mobilize language and cultural content according to an internal logic that differs from the logic of linguistic progression and alignment with official programs and certifications: in this case, it is undoubtedly better to plan normative assessments on content worked on from a textbook in sequences alternating with those devoted specifically to the project.

6.2. Project drivers

As announced in the introduction, the aim of this article was to focus on the fundamental concepts of the project approach. I have not addressed the question of the agents (teacher, learners, groups of learners or class-group) at the origin of, or in charge of, the various cognitive operations and activities. This question, like all those concerning the project approach, needs to be addressed from a complex perspective, in this case that of a complex relationship between teaching and learning processes, as I proposed in [PUREN 022](#); however, given the priority aims of project pedagogy, particular importance is attached to the process of empowerment (the "evolution" mode, in this model) and to the collective dimension (not taken into account in this model). The specific formative challenge of project pedagogy emerges at the intersection of these two characteristics: that of *collective autonomy* (see [PUREN 2010f](#) and [PUREN 2014d](#)).

6.3. Project and different task types

Following its use in the 2006 *Socle commun de connaissances, de compétence et de culture*" (*Common core of knowledge, competence and culture* of the French national education system), the notion of the "complex task" has become widespread in current thinking and proposals in France concerning school teaching in all disciplines: "Mastering the *Common core of knowledge and competence* means being able to mobilize one's acquired knowledge in complex tasks and situations, at school and in life" (M.E.N. 2006, p. 3). At the same time, when language textbooks moved from the communicative approach to the social action-oriented perspective (SAOA)²⁰, the "final task" took the place of the final simulation at the end of the didactic unit. The various cognitive operations and activities of the project approach presented here seem to me to be able to constitute an analytical grid for assessing the actual degree of complexity of the tasks

²⁰ This is the "Action-Oriented Approach" described in the 2001 CFER (COE 2001). "Social Action-Oriented Approach" better distinguishes it from the task-based approach (cf. ACAR A. & PUREN C. 2014). [August 2024 note]

Christian PUREN, "Cognitive operations (proaction, metacognition, regulation) and fundamental activities (feedback, assessment) in the project approach".

proposed. For the analysis of language textbooks, this grid could be cross-referenced with the one I have already developed in [PUREN 050](#).

6.4. Project approach and social action-oriented perspective

The reference learning action in the SAOA is the project approach, because any social action -for which SAOA is intended to prepare learners or invite adults- is by nature complex. In the SAOA, the specific operation and activity of the project approach, namely proaction and conception, apply not only to pedagogical projects designed and carried out collectively by learners in and out of class with the help of their teacher, but also to collective teaching-learning projects and individual learning projects.²¹ This identical approach to the different types of project underway in a language-culture classroom is the very positive consequence of the return, in the SAOA, to the homology between the situation of use and the situation of learning -the classroom micro-society is the image of the outside society- and between the action of use and the action of learning -social action in the classroom is the image of social action outside the classroom.²²

In addition to the various means of regulation described above (cf. point 3.2), we must add the learners' interactions with the object of their project (*i.e.*, its contents and goals). Jean-Louis LE MOIGNE, another French complexity epistemologist (he was Edgar MORIN's "fellow traveler"), sees the project as the indispensable mediation between subject and object: in a lecture, he speaks of "projectivity" as a way out of the "sterilizing alternative of the binary choice between objectivity and subjectivity" (2005, p. 427). He then was addressing researchers in DLC, but his advice applies to any social actor: the project approach is fundamentally educational because it both leads students into thoughtful collective action and trains them to be at the same time autonomous and cooperative, critical and responsible within a mental space of regulation that will later be indispensable to them, as citizens, so that they can chart their own course between fatalistic passivity and disorganized activism, the paralyzing excess of realism and the thoughtless idealism that condemns them to failure in advance. It's up to the language teachers themselves, in their classrooms, to guide and support their learners on their necessarily multiple, diverse and intersecting paths, between the more punctual, individual and directive tasks of language exercises, and the collective social projects.

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²¹ The authors of the 2001 *CEFR*, who remain constantly determined by the "individualistic gene" of the communicative approach (see [PUREN 2014a](#)), refer in their text only to individual learning projects, and on only one occasion, when they write, p. 140: "However, relatively few learn *proactively*, taking initiatives to plan, structure and execute their own learning processes. Most learn *reactively*, following the instructions and carrying out the activities prescribed for them by teachers and by textbooks" (p. 141).

²² On these homology relationships, see e.g. [PUREN 2014e](#), particularly pp. 7-8.

Christian PUREN, "Cognitive operations (proaction, metacognition, regulation) and fundamental activities (feedback, assessment) in the project approach".

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