

A FUNCTIONAL/NOTIONAL APPROACH TO COURSE DESIGN

L.G. Alexander

THE PROTO-SYLLABUS AND ITS USES

There are currently numerous attempts to define what is involved in language teaching and learning in such publications as *Waystage*, *The Threshold Level* and *Un Niveau Seuil* of the Council of Europe and *Grundhaustein* of the Deutscher Volkshochschulverband. We should regard all these sets of specifications as 'proto-syllabuses' from which we can derive practical working documents to meet our precise needs when designing courses, planning curricula, devising tests and examinations and so on. The production and development of such specifications is ultimately a major move towards greater efficiency in the classroom. It is as if it has suddenly dawned on us all that we ought to be investing at least as much time and energy considering what we have to teach as we spend on creating materials which are based on nothing more than changing fashions, arbitrary examination syllabuses and market forces.

All these specifications have a common aim: they attempt to define objectives in terms of the presumed communication needs of the adult learner: their starting point is what the learner wants to do through language. 'The basic characteristic of the model,' writes van Ek in *The Threshold Level for Schools*, 'is that it tries to specify foreign language ability as a *skill* rather than *knowledge*. It analyses what the learner will have to be able to do in the foreign language and determines only in the second place what *language-forms* (words, structures, etc.) the learner will have to be able to handle in order to *do* all that has been specified.' The specifications therefore provide the basis for a 'functional/notional' syllabus rather than a structural syllabus. A common objection that is sometimes raised against such attempts to specify student needs is that these assessments are subjective, which is true. But at least they are usually *collectively* subjective, reflecting, as they do, the input of many experienced practitioners.

A COMPARISON BETWEEN STRUCTURAL AND FUNCTIONAL/NOTIONAL APPROACHES TO COURSE DESIGN

There are important differences between a structural syllabus and a functional/notional syllabus which need to be established. A structural syllabus generally consists of two inventories, one of structures (often in a presumed order of difficulty) and one of vocabulary, both of which

the course designer is required to bring together when writing a course. The main objective (for both course designer and learner) in such a course is to cover a grammatical syllabus and to build up a command of high-frequency vocabulary. Communication skills are often regarded as the by-product of this undertaking. By comparison, a course based on functional/notional specifications does exactly the opposite. It consciously sets out to teach communication skills. Structure and vocabulary, though carefully selected and graded, are the by-product of this objective. Whereas most structural courses deal primarily with two factors, structure and vocabulary, a course setting out to teach communication skills must take into account at least the following:

- 1 Functions: These are 'language acts': i.e. what we want to use the language to do: e.g. agreeing, refusing, offering, apologizing, expressing hope, fear, etc.
- 2 General notions: These are abstract time-and-space relations which connect with functions: e.g. existence/non-existence; presence/absence; mobility/immobility, etc.
- 3 Specific notions: These are items which are directly determined by the topic. The three factors can be exemplified as follows: Inquiring about (function) the existence (general notion) of a bank (specific notion): e.g. 'Is there a bank near here?'
- 4 Settings: That is, where people are when the transaction or interaction takes place and how (if at all) the setting influences what is said.
- 5 Social, sexual and psychological roles: That is, who is talking to whom, what their relationship is and how they feel: how these factors influence the language the speakers use.
- 6 Style: That is the way we express ourselves to reflect our attitudes which can range between extremes: e.g. formal - informal; serious - jocular; courteous - rude; positive - tentative, etc.
- 7 Stress and intonation: Attitude and emotion are conveyed not only by what we say but by the rise and fall of the voice. For example, a speaker may use polite expressions, yet his intonation may convey rudeness, irony, indifference, etc.
- 8 Grammar: i.e. the means we use to express ourselves, which is the product of the factors listed above. (General notions often have a grammatical content.)
- 9 Vocabulary: i.e. the lexical items we need, which are a product of the factors listed above. (These are often the same as the 'specific notions'.)
- 10 Paralinguistic features such as gesture, facial expression, etc., none of which has, as yet, been satisfactorily coded for language learning purposes.

It will be clear that a functional/notional approach to course design is concerned as much with the rules which are part of the system of social behaviour as it is with grammar rules: it requires the student to produce the language which is not only grammatically acceptable, but socially appropriate in any given situation. This is particularly important for the

adult learner who is acutely aware of the social rules, but in a foreign language cannot cope with situations which cause him little or no trouble in his mother tongue.

SOME MISCONCEPTIONS

Many misconceptions have already arisen regarding a functional/notional approach and it is vital to rid ourselves of them. It will already be clear from the above that this is *not* a 'utilitarian' approach to language acquisition (interpreting the word 'functional' in its lay sense to imply e.g. 'how to change money at a bank'.); it is *not* a 'method' (a viable alternative to e.g. 'the audio-visual method'); it does *not* imply a 'phrase-book' approach to methodology ('Today I'm going to teach you how to commiserate and tomorrow I'm going to teach you how to rejoice'); it does *not* devalue grammar or indeed any of the factors we have come to associate with sound course construction and traditional methodology. It is first and foremost an approach to syllabus design and therefore, in turn to course design, so it is only reasonable to examine some of the implications that might follow if we attempt to construct courses based on these principles.

SOME IMMEDIATE IMPLICATIONS

Attitudes: Comfortable routines give us a sense of security in the classroom and inevitably fossilize rapidly into dogmatism. If we become committed to audio-visual methodology, we are likely to accept as dogma such precepts as: 'Never use the mother tongue', 'Never explain the grammar' and so on. The first thing we must do is free ourselves from a restricted view of methodology. At the other extreme, we must abandon the stereotyped view of the teacher-as-provider-of-information injecting knowledge into empty vessels. Instead, we must see ourselves as managers, observing and manipulating our students so they can perform and interact among themselves.

Language activities: The four primary skills of understanding, speaking, reading and writing are all-too-frequently put into separate compartments because this happens to coincide nicely with prescribed sequences for presenting language in audio-visual methodology. ('Nothing should be written before it has been read; nothing should be read before it has been spoken; nothing should be spoken before it has been heard'.) But the four skills hardly ever exist in isolation. For example, the listening skill must be defined as 'Listen and ...': Listen and respond/assimilate/take notes/interpret/report, etc. The reading skill may involve skimming, detailed re-reading, taking notes, responding, etc. The writing skill may involve reading (e.g. in form filling), following a convention (e.g. in laying out a letter or writing a cheque), using reference books and so on. In other words, the student is faced with a wide range of *language activities* which reflect the sorts of things (s)he does with language in real life.

Varying methods: All methodology is based on two steps which can be broadly defined as *Presentation* followed by *Activation*. Audio-visual methodology has conditioned us into adopting repetitive and unvarying routines ('First present the dialogue, then ...') But if we accept the fact that there are different language activities, it follows that each activity demands its own appropriate methodology. In real life, for example, we would not expect first to *listen* to an extract from the telephone directory; we would expect to look up the information we want. If we are coping with materials like this in an exercise, the presentation method involves silent reading and the rapid discarding of redundant information. If, on the other hand, we are looking at a photograph, the appropriate presentation method might be 'Look and Say'. Far from being static and repetitive, our methodology will constantly shift to accord with the highly varied materials we will be handling. Any true language learning/teaching system will therefore subsume a large number of methods and the 'audio-visual method' will be just one of these, used only where it is required in e.g. the presentation of dialogue material. There will be instances when methods we thought we had once consigned to oblivion (like the 'grammar/translation method') will be highly appropriate: the skeleton may be in the cupboard, but the cupboard door won't stay shut!

What is 'conversation'?: We have been so eager to teach it that perhaps we have never paused to ask. A functional/notional syllabus can guide us towards an understanding of what it is we are doing, for 'listen and respond ...' can be expanded into a very general (if oversimplified) definition of 'conversation' to cover three important activities:

- 1 *Transactions:* (e.g. ordering a meal at a restaurant). Transactions tend to be broadly predictable and some of the people engaged in them serve only to enact the function of their job. Settings exert a considerable influence on the choice of language.
- 2 *Interaction:* The non-contentious exchange of information, relating to everyday life.
- 3 *Interaction:* Discussion and argument about current and past events, moral issues, etc. reflecting people's attitudes and opinions.

In these three areas (pragmatic, sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic) settings, social roles, psychological attitudes, etc. need to be carefully defined in any language course.

Receptive and productive skills: In traditional courses there is a tendency to assume that the student has to acquire productively everything that is in a course. We can expect functionally-based courses to present students with authentic or quasi-authentic realia for listening and reading comprehension to train them to listen or read *for gist* (as opposed to listening and reading actively within their productive command) so that they learn to get the global meaning and to discard redundant information. We actively exploit the fact that receptive skills run in advance of

productive ones and that though students may exercise control over what they produce, they cannot exercise the same control when they are listening or reading. We have long been conditioned to careful word-counting in language courses, but the introduction of authentic materials at the earliest stages means we have to train ourselves (and our students!) not to be alarmed at the proliferation of difficult items and to distinguish between those which need to be actively retained and those which can be rapidly discarded and those which can be totally ignored.

Improvisation: The core of any course based on functional/notional principles must be *improvisation* or *transfer* in which students are invited to cope with real-life situations (*transaction* and *interaction*). This requires them to recombine language learnt in one context to meet the exigencies of another. Transfer may be 'actual', in which students are invited to respond in their own persons ('No, I don't like ice-cream') or 'simulated', in which students are invited to role play in situations which might conceivably occur in real life. Improvisation can be problematical because you need a metalanguage to set up situations and this poses particular difficulties in mixed-nationality classes or in mono-lingual classes when the teacher doesn't speak the students' language. From a methodological point of view, the teacher needs considerable managerial skills to conduct improvisation successfully, particularly in large classes.

Relevant situations: Situations must be plausible and relevant to student needs. LI situation ('You are asking your bank manager for a loan') have no place in FL courses. Family-based pseudo-entertaining story-lines can also be highly inappropriate for adult learners, for they present a lot of language the learners are never likely to need ('Please pass me the marmalade, dear') and family-relationships they are never likely to experience. We need to develop the idea of the student-as-protagonist in situations which are highly motivating, precisely because they can be seen to be so relevant to actual communication needs.

Grammar: Far from being reduced to mere slot-and-filler status, grammar remains as important as ever. In a functional/notional approach, students learn to do things through language while at the same time mastering the grammatical structure necessary to achieve this end. This means they must learn to operate the grammatical system and chores like drilling, so necessary to achieve fluency, cannot (regrettably!) be dispensed with. But there is an important difference in the handling of grammar. In a traditional course based on a logico-grammatical progression, it is up to the learner to make his own connexions when communicating in real life: e.g. to see a practical application for, say, the present perfect. In a functionally-based course our teaching of grammar can be selective: we choose those items which will have an immediate application in communicative contexts and avoid practising low frequency utterances ('Are we tall?') merely 'for the sake of completeness'. Pen-of-my-aunt utterances may be

readily avoided: for example, the imperative is not taught for its own sake (yielding amazing exchanges like 'Open the window!' 'What have you done?' 'I have opened the window.') but because it is the by-product of a communicative act like e.g. direction giving ('Take the first turning on the left, then ...') Students may be referred to grammatical paradigms to study for themselves those elements we have not had time to drill. Some grammar will be learnt 'as a formula' very early-long before it is formally dealt with, because in a communicative course we cannot delay fundamentally important items like the past tense 'till Book 2'. Moreover, we must be constantly aware that a lot of grammatical practice will concentrate on the four 'superfunctions': *asking, responding to questions, negating and declaring.*

Grading: Up to the present time this has meant just one thing: the familiar logico-grammatical progression based on the reasonable assumption that it is easier to teach 'I am tired' before you teach 'I might have been able to see you earlier if you had given me a ring'. Structural grading might be described as the steps between these extremes. In a functional/notional approach, the concept of grading can be expanded to embrace complete situations. Situations may recur at different levels of complexity. For example, the act of paying a bill can be dealt with in a straightforward way at elementary level ('May I have the bill please?') and a highly complex way at an advanced level. (Your credit card is not acceptable and you are not carrying enough cash to meet the bill. Talk your way out of that one!).

Student-imposed language: There must always be scope for students to impose *their* choice of language on us and to ask us for reasonable 'personalised' equivalents. There is no point in making a student say, 'I'm a policeman', when what he is and what he wants to say is 'I'm an aeronautical engineer'.

Pacing: We have to decide whether we want courses arranged in 'lessons' on facing page layouts and so on, or in frames. A book arranged in 'lessons' (however artificial the arrangement) tends to pace the teacher. Because of the great variety of language activities, functionally-based courses can sometimes best be organized in frames. A course is then paced by the teacher.

Levels: If you drop out of a traditional course there is generally very little you can do with what you have been taught (for example, by the end of Book 1 you still might not have got on to the past tense so you are not yet ready to conduct a conversation at the most elementary level). If you drop out of a functionally-based course, even at an early stage, at least you have been taught to do *something*, like for example, finding the way. Levels can be identified as follows:

1 **Survival:** Pre-communication in which you can obtain food and shelter

and engage in 'language-like activities' through fixed phrases and slot-and-filler utterances.

2 *Waystage*: In which you have mastered the barest minimum necessary to cope with the simplest forms of transaction and interaction.

3 *Threshold Level*: In which you have mastered an adequate minimum for true but limited transaction and interaction in social terms.

A feature in functionally-based courses is bound to be their sign-posting: the students are made aware of what they are learning to do and why, so that we can engage their active participation in the learning process in order to reach defined objectives.

Testing: The three stages of testing can be described in the following terms:

1 *Pre-scientific* (translation, composition, précis, blank-filling).

2 *Psychometric*: 'discrete point' testing designed for objective marking based on Lado's dictum, 'Testing control of the problems is testing control of the language.'

3 *Psycholinguistic/Sociolinguistic*: communication-based 'integrative global' testing. It is a curious paradox that 3 is akin to 1, but we now have to re-define what we want to test and then evolve adequate testing techniques.

Correctness: We are not trying to create native speakers. We are teaching language to the majority not to an elite and we must ensure that the misuse of language doesn't interfere with communication. While we must draw the line at wholly unacceptable utterances, the degree of error we are prepared to tolerate is bound to vary in accordance with the abilities of individual learners. 'Defective but effective communication' is a worthy aim for us all and infinitely better than nothing!