

BOOK REVIEWS

FUNCTIONS OF ENGLISH

Leo Jones
Cambridge University Press
1970

The notional/functional syllabus continues to be a "hot topic" among language teachers and program designers alike. The sceptics protest that we simply don't know enough about the nature of discourse and language use, that functional categories seem to be either too broad or too abundant, that we don't have enough contrastive studies, etc. to make building a syllabus along purely notional/functional lines either practical or even desirable. The enthusiasts, however, claim that it is more than clear that the student who spends years studying English with a basically structural approach may still be unable to communicate effectively in the language. What is perfectly grammatical may not be perfectly communicative. What's more, there is not a one to one relationship between form and function. Choice of form often depends on a combination of factors like social and psychological role, cultural norms, setting, topic, and language function. Not only do we have to teach students how these factors operate, but we must give them the opportunity to practice using language in situations where any or all of these factors must be taken into consideration.

The teacher who feels at least partially convinced of this last argument and who would like to build an advanced conversation course along those lines, or complement whatever material he or she may already be using for advanced students should consider a recent British publication - FUNCTIONS OF ENGLISH by Leo Jones. The book consists of 15 units, each of which presents three different language functions. Chapter 5, for example, is on conversation techniques and includes sections on "hesitating," "holding the floor," and "bringing in another speaker." Other chapters have sections on apologizing, being sarcastic, complaining, agreeing, disagreeing, etc. In the

author's words the material is geared to students "interested in using language rather than learning more about structure."

Each unit is accompanied by a tape of what Jones calls an "illustrative conversation" which demonstrates some of the language items that can be used to perform the functions introduced. The obviously crucial purpose of the tapes is to illustrate the stress, intonation, hesitations, false starts, etc. that are all part of natural speech and which cannot easily be conveyed by the written word.

Each presentation section is followed by one or two practice exercises, moving from teacher-controlled to free practice to be done in pairs or small groups. The final practice incorporates all three of the language functions presented in the unit. At the end of each unit there are suggestions for written work to help consolidate the material.

The illustrations by Peter Kneebone are amusing (as are many of the dialogues) and there are lots of them! In addition to the illustrations, there are maps, photographs, advertisements, newspaper clippings, and cartoon strips to accompany both the presentation and the transfer sections.

The book starts off with two good introductions - one for the student and one for the teacher. The student's introduction explains briefly the meaning and importance of some of the "extralinguistic" factors mentioned above and further emphasizes the need for the student to be willing to experiment and make mistakes if he or she is to learn to communicate effectively in the language.

The teacher's introduction offers a recommended classroom procedure, while at the same time suggesting that the material will work best if the teacher feels free to select from the language items and practice exercises according to the needs and capabilities of the students. In fact, selection and successful handling of much of the material may depend largely on the language capabilities of the teacher.

Here perhaps we should introduce a few cautionary words about the usefulness of this text. The language usage, as well as much of the vocabulary, is British and at times quite idiomatic so that a native speaker of American English might have difficulty in using or adapting the material. The non-native

speaker too might find some difficulty as much of the language depends on delivery if it is to be effective, e.g. "How very considerate of you!" is presented in the section on sarcasm, but will come across very differently if stress and intonation are not right. The author himself suggests that when in doubt, the teacher should check with a native speaker - which is not always possible here in Mexico.

Again we have a reason for urging the use of the tapes in conjunction with the text. Not only will they be extremely helpful for the teacher who is not a native speaker, but even the native speaker could not read all the parts of the dialogue, maintaining the rhythm and overlapping, etc. of a natural conversation.

Another weakness of the book is the "presupposed knowledge" section which appears at the beginning of most units and is supposed to indicate the structures and/or vocabulary the student should have mastered in order to be able to do the work in the unit. In most cases this section is scanty and only minimally useful to the teacher. Of course, it is understood that the material is intended for "advanced" students, but that term in itself may mean different things to different people. The presupposed knowledge for unit one, for example, is "the necessary vocabulary to describe your background, job and interests." The introductory conversation, however, includes seven verb tenses, subordinate noun clauses, conditionals, and several instances of idiomatic usage. The students had better be fairly fluent in the use of these forms if they are to concentrate on conversation openers like "Sorry, I couldn't help overhearing - did you mention something about ...?" or making a date using "Um, I was thinking of going to the cinema this evening, would you like to come?", etc. An ideal addition to this book would have been a structural index to help the busy teacher working with students with a structural background or trying to complement a structural syllabus by incorporating the really excellent presentation and communicative exercises aimed at bridging the gap between form and function.

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