

THE UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

English Language & Applied Linguistics

VACATION ESSAY

Term 1

Student Number: 1277536

MA - TEFL/TESL

Year 2012/2013

Title of Module: Syllabus and Material Design

Question: Strengths and weaknesses of a Notional/Functional Syllabus.

Show how the syllabus has been influenced by theories concerning language and learning/acquisition. Describe the teaching situation (or situations) best suited to this type of syllabus.

Number of Words: 4288

DECLARATION OF AUTHORSHIP

I declare:

- a. that this submission is my own work;
- b. that this is written in my own words; and
- c. that all quotations from published or unpublished work are acknowledged with quotation marks and references to the work in question.

Date: 20.12.2012

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INTRODUCTION

Syllabus is defined by Dubin and Olshtain (1986: 27) as “ the vehicle through which policy-makers convey information to teachers, textbook writers, examination committees and learners concerning the program.” According to Brown (1995: 7) “ a syllabus provides a focus for what should be studied, along with a rationale for how that content should be selected and ordered.” Dubin and Olshtain (1986) outlines the essential features of a syllabus. Firstly, a syllabus specifies the objectives and outcomes of the course. Then, what and how it is to be taught, which materials and techniques are applied during the process is defined. Lastly, evaluation of learners is identified in a syllabus.

A notional/functional syllabus was developed in 1970s when Europe had crucial alterations in some areas such as, economy and politics. These alterations had an impact on language and it began to change simultaneously with these alterations. It was realised that Europeans who were monolingual would have difficulty in understanding the changing language even though they were educated. Therefore, the Modern Language Project was supported financially to develop a new syllabus which Europeans could encounter their needs. As a result of this the notional/functional syllabus was created. It was basically created for adults who used the language in specific purposes rather than secondary or high school students who learn a second language in general as a part of their education at school. (Markee, 1997).

A notional/functional syllabus is identified by White (1988) that it consists of two main components which are called notional and functional. While notions are general concepts such as, “time, space, cause and effect” and functions are the more social concepts such as, “invitation, suggestion and refusal.” Its main focus is on these concepts that learners need to communicate about.

Overall, notional/functional syllabus focuses on “ what people want to do or what they want to accomplish through speech” (Finocchiaro and Brumfit, 1983: 13). Its content is composed of notions that is mentioned above and functions that is provided by Finocchiaro and Brumfit (1983: 65) (appendix 1).

This essay will discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the notional/functional syllabus. In the first part the features of the notional/functional syllabus will be explained. In the second part the strengths and weaknesses of the notional/functional syllabus will be

argued with some comparisons. In the third part the main factors that influence the applicability of the functional/notional syllabus will be highlighted and the features of suitable and unsuitable teaching situations for the notional/functional syllabus will be summarised with a table. In the final part the teaching situations from my own experience will be presented.

1. NOTIONAL/FUNCTIONAL SYLLABUS

1.1. An Analytic and a Synthetic Approach

In an analytic approach the teaching process is arranged according to the learner's communicative purposes in different settings. In this syllabus language is taught with chunks and the major goal is to be able use these chunks in suitable situations. That is to say, the main focus is on communication rather than grammar structures (Wilkins,1976). In contrast to an analytic approach, in a synthetic approach the teaching process is organised step by step by teaching the language components such as lexis and morphology. The aim is to teach the whole language gradually (Markee, 1997).

Wilkins (1976) claims that the notional/functional syllabus is based on an analytical approach since its aim is to teach how to communicate in certain situations by using chunks. However, it is argued by Widdowson (1979) that notional/functional syllabus does not rely on the analytic approach as it provides limited communication that could be achieved only in certain settings but learners are incapable of interacting in different situations as they do not know how to use the language. He remarks that the learner is the centre of the teaching process in the analytic approach and if the notional/functional syllabus relies on that, the learner should be taught to use the language in all circumstances not only certain situations.

In addition to Widdowson, Markee (1997: 17) postulates that even though the notional/functional syllabus provides more interaction than a syllabus which is based on the synthetic approach, it is not possible to accept it as an analytic approach based syllabus since the notions and functions are the linguistics components of language. As a result of this, it might be also considered as a synthetic approach based syllabus.

1.2. Needs Analysis

Needs analysis is defined by Brown (1995) as a term that is used to collect information about a certain learner group to plan a syllabus that will be suitable for their needs. According to Brown needs analysis refers to the knowledge that the students have already had and what they expect and need to learn further. White (1988: 84) summarizes needs analysis as “the teacher or planner that investigates the language required for performing a given role or roles.”

Richards and Rogers (1988) state that the needs of learners, their levels, aims and what they expect from the language must be clarified before the syllabus is prepared. Notional/functional syllabus is designed in terms of the learner’s needs. In this syllabus learner’s communicative needs, what he/she intends to achieve in target language are taken into account when the syllabus is organised. Moreover, learners have the responsibility of controlling their own needs during the teaching process.

1.3. Theories of Language

The number views in language teaching is high. The three major views are structural, functional and interactional view. The notional/functional syllabus is based on the functional view. In the functional view, language is seen as a tool for communication. It is stressed in this theory that the main objective of language is to be able to communicate in the target language rather than focus on grammatical items of language. Therefore language is taught in specific contents according to learner’s communication needs (Richards and Rogers, 1986).

However, this does not mean that grammar has no importance in this syllabus. It is remarked that grammar is presented by chunks or lexis in terms of the topics and notions that learners need. As the chunks are grammatically correct sentences the notional/functional syllabus is also related to the linguistic theory (Markee, 1997). In addition to this, Markee (1997: 16) states that “The notional/functional syllabus was one of the first syllabuses to be theoretically based on a learner-centered, communication-oriented approach to language instruction.” As a result, it is seen that the notional/functional syllabus is based on the communicative approach by the aspect of communication-oriented feature.

1.4. Theories of Learning

According to Richards and Rogers (1988) there are two main learning theories. These are process-oriented and condition-oriented theories. While the focus is in the process “such as, habit formation, induction, inferencing hypothesis testing, and generalization” in process-oriented theory, in condition-oriented theory the focus is on the “human and physical context” where the language is taught (Richard and Rogers, 1988: 18). Teachers who accept the view that functional/notional syllabus is based on the process-oriented theory consider that functional/notional syllabus relies upon behaviorist approach since human behaviour is important in the learning process (Richards and Rogers, 1988). Also, according to Finocchiaro and Brumfit (1983: 22) the notional/functional syllabus theoretically is a “combination of communicative grammar” with “cognitivism and humanism.”

It is pointed out that the early 1970s are the times that importance of developing communication skills in a foreign language was understood. From that time the methodologies and syllabuses that give importance to meaning and communication rather than structures have been developed and notional/functional syllabus is one of them which was developed to teach effective communication to learners in terms of their needs (Kumaravadivelu, 2006).

2. STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF A NOTIONAL/FUNCTIONAL SYLLABUS

The major goal of describing strengths and weaknesses of a syllabus or a programme is to determine the positive and negative aspects of it. This is also identified as a “SWOT” analysis which examines the factors that a syllabus is influenced internally and externally (Klinghammer 1997 cited in Richards 2001). In this part of paper strengths and weaknesses of a notional/functional syllabus will be highlighted with the arguments.

The notional/functional syllabus has been developed to provide purposeful communication in a foreign language. The language is taught with meaningful chunks in terms of the learners’ needs. Therefore meaning takes presence over the grammar in the notional/functional syllabus and it is identified as an analytic approach based by Wilkins (1976). However, it is argued by Richards and Rogers (1986) that it is not only analytic approach based but synthetic approach based also. The reason why Richards and Rogers

disagree with the the view of Wilkins is, even though these chunks are purposeful, they consist of grammar units, so it is not possible to accept that the notional/functional syllabus solely reflects the features of an analytic approach. It has also features of a synthetic approach in which grammatical structures are given importance during the teaching process.

In general a notional/functional and a structural syllabus could implement a learning environment by taking into account the learner needs. Brown (1987) remarks that learners at least need to have elementary knowledge of grammar or lexis in order to communicate. On the other hand, it might be discussed that a notional/functional syllabus is feasible to teach grammar and purposeful communication as well. By this way they might obtain both meaningful grammar and improve their communication abilities.

According to Widdowson (1990) the functional/notional syllabus enables learners to develop grammatical competence. However, this does not only mean that they obtain the grammar structures exactly, but they might categorise these grammar structures mentally in terms of their context. As a result of this the notional/functional syllabus provide pupils a framework of structures as regards to their functions and teach to use them orally and written. However Hedge (2000) criticised the view that communicative competence may be incapable of assisting learners to produce their own sentences since they do not have knowlege about using grammar rules but commnicate with particular grammar chunks.

A further aspect debated by White (1988) is the difficulty of designing a functional/notional textbook as its content organised in terms of learner needs. For instance, the content of a structural syllabus deals with the grammar step by step, from simple items to comlex ones. On the other hand, the notional/functional syllabus is organised according to learners needs. Therefore, a grammar strucure in spite of its comlexity could take place at the early units of book. White (1988: 79) illustrates this with the example of “Would you like?”. He states that as request is one of the basic communication function it is possible see this strucure at the beginning of the textbooks, albeit its complexity.

What is more, it is important to plan a syllabus with a clear framework that learners understand easily. For example, when structural syllabuses are examined, it is generally seen that they are organised systematically beginning from basic grammar rules to complex ones. Hedge (2000) suggests that it is more favourable to use a syllabus having a systematic content both for teachers and learners because it enables them to feel comfortable during the teaching process as they aware of what they have covered and what they will cover next.

In addition to this, Hutchinson and Waters (1987) comment on the fertility of textbooks that are based on a functional/notional syllabus. They state that the textbooks may seem to be beneficial for learners since they show how to use the language rather than use the grammar. Having said that they might fail to help learners because they do not depend on a regular basis. Pupils thus might have problems to control their knowledge of language.

It has been noted that the notional/functional syllabus is more useful for learners than the structural syllabus as the former is designed in terms of learner needs and this is the reason for it being widely applied in foreign language classrooms. Nonetheless Markee (1997) criticises the notional/functional syllabus as it has not been used only owing to the advantages that present to the learners but also thanks to the salient materials that are produced for notional/functional syllabuses.

As previously mentioned needs analysis refers to the language skills that learners are lacking while living in a place where English is widely spoken. Wilkins (1976) declares that notional/functional syllabus is inadequate to predict all kinds of learner needs. To exemplify this Auerbach (1995 cited in Rodgers, 2001: 55) remarks that people who belong to an immigrant group have variety of needs to maintain their lives except for linguistic ones.

It is obviously seen that the vital point that should be taken into account when designing a syllabus is to reply to the question of what learners do with the language. However, the contents of syllabuses are generally arranged by stakeholders or designers. That is to say, the fruitfulness of a functional/notional syllabus depends upon the ability and vision of these people and this links to the problem that the syllabus might not always meet learners' needs (Richards, 2001). Due to these reasons it is indicated that the functional/notional syllabus does not provide a permanent benefit but temporary benefit (Brumfit, 1980).

Moreover, so as to increase the efficiency of the notional/functional syllabus it is postulated that a notional/functional syllabus could be combined with a structural syllabus. To illustrate this, by the application of a structural syllabus at the early stages of teaching process it is possible to raise grammar awareness to learners and when notional/functional syllabus is utilised in the next stages, learners may have better understanding of chunks and expressions. Additionally, they may obtain the ability of producing their own sentences in different situations thanks to the knowledge of grammar that they have obtained at the early stages of the teaching process (Dubin and Olshtain, 1986).

Lastly, the notional/functional syllabus evaluates learners in terms of their communicative competence. Their ability of understanding and using communicative expressions in suitable settings is tested (Finocchiaro and Brumfit: 1983). It is seen that there is no formal testing method in the notional/functional syllabus and it only tests learners' communicative competence but their linguistics knowledge.

3. THE MAIN FACTORS INFLUENCING THE APPLICABILITY OF THE NOTIONAL/FUNCTIONAL SYLLABUS

The major aim of analysis of teaching situations is to describe the elements that influence the syllabus. In this part the factors that teaching situations are affected will be dealt with and suitable and unsuitable teaching situations for the applicability of the notional/functional syllabus will be explained in terms of these factors.

3.1. Institutional Factors

While some institutions utilise a syllabus that is organised by the Ministry of Education, some produce their own syllabuses in terms their learners. For example, a state school which adapts a notional/functional syllabus presented by the Ministry of Education might have difficulty in using it. The reason why is, in general the number of students in a class at a state school is high and in a consequence of this, the variety of needs increase. As a result a notional/functional syllabus is more suitable for small classes where learners have common needs for learning the foreign language.

On the other hand Richardss (2001) points out that, prepare a beneficial syllabus also depends upon physical conditions of the institution. In order to desing such a syllabus, teachers need a convenient working area and available resources. When looked at the private institutions it is possible to see the teachers collecting information about their students and doing researches so as to preapare a syllabus according to learners' needs. They also might choose the suitable units from the syllabuses that have been organised by the Ministry of Education or other institutions besides their own syllabuses, as long as they meet their learners' needs.

As an example for this point, I would like to compare state and private schools in my country, Turkey. In Turkey general situation is, the majority of state school students are incapable of speaking English while private school students are capable doing this. The number of students in a class at a state school is 30-40 or higher and physical conditions are not as convenient as the private schools. Owing to these reasons teachers do not have chance to do need analysis for students and they use grammatical syllabuses as applicability of a notional/functional syllabus in such large classes is difficult. On the other hand a notional/functional syllabus is more adaptable in private schools as the student numbers are small and teachers could observe students to choose a suitable coursebook or design a proper syllabus.

3.2. Socio-cultural Factors

It is difficult to design a syllabus that could be used in all societies as each society has a different culture. It is pointed out by Oxford (1996: 12) that “Each culture has its own approach to learning and thus to learning strategies, and therefore no single formula for assessing and instructing learning strategies exists.” Therefore while a syllabus fits learners’ needs, it might not be fit well to another culture due to the different learning strategies. According to Brown (1995) some societies inclined to use a traditional syllabus. In contrast to this some tend to use a syllabus that they learn actively rather than being passive recipients. In the notional/functional syllabus learners have opportunity to learn the language actively. Therefore, it is easier to use this syllabus in the societies which people prefer to be active learners. Additionally the role of teacher differentiates in terms of cultures. Brown (1995) points out that teacher is seen as a facilitator and guide and counselor in the Western culture but in another cultures students may see him/her as the controller. Therefore it appears to me that a notional/functional syllabus is easier to adapt in a western society than the others.

One another significant point is the majority of English teachers in the world is non-native. In my country, Turkey, the general assumption is that a native speaker English teacher is more successful in teaching English as non-native teachers could not be as fluent as the natives. This assumption is true, but partially. It is true by the aspect of teaching speaking or pronunciation but it is not absolutely true by the aspect of teaching how to communicate in the society. It is highlighted by Dubin and Olshtain (1986) that non-native teachers could be more successful in using communicative based syllabuses since they share the same cultural

background with the learner group. This enables teachers to teach communication according to culture of the society. Thus, when the notional/functional syllabus is used by a non-native teacher it could be more effective for learners.

3.3. Teacher Factor

It is emphasised that teachers are as crucial as learners when deciding the fruitfulness of a syllabus because they have different backgrounds and attitudes towards to language teaching. Teachers not only the figures of a foreign language but, they have also many responsibilities such as, organising the class and preparing lesson plans according to their learners (Finocchiaro and Brumfit 1983). Additionally, their experience and levels of proficiency influence adaptability and usefulness of a syllabus.

For instance, an inexperienced teacher might find the notional/functional syllabus is difficult to utilise as it requires different roles such as, organiser, counselor and faciliator. However, using a structural syllabus from a coursebook by following the instructions and behaving as an authority might be easier for an inexperienced teacher since he/she does not need to create communicative tasks. Thus, the notional/functional syllabus requires more than one role for teachers and inexperienced teachers may have difficulty in using it.

3.4. Learner Factor

Learners have a great impact on the usefulness of a syllabus and their levels, learning styles, beliefs and expectations are the factors that affect the syllabus. Richardss (2001) outlines the basic questions for a satisfactory syllabus by the aspect of learners.

- What are their expectations for the program?
- Are they a homogenous or a heterogeneous group?
- What type of learning approach do they favor (e.g. teacher-led, student-focused, or small-group work)?
- How motivated are the learners to learn English?

(Richards, 2001: 101,102)

Answers of these questions provide information about the learner profile and help designers to plan an effective syllabus. When design a notional/functional syllabus it is important for learners to have same or similar expectations for the language. If they do not have common expectations or needs, as it is described in section 2, this may result in failure of the functional/notioal syllabus. The notional/functional syllabus serves better in a homogenous group as students have the same abilities or levels. For example it is more appropriate for intermediate learners because basic grammar knowledge is necessary to comprehend the meanings of functions.

As it is stated in socio-cultural factors, while some learners are favour of teacher-oriented teaching, others are student-oriented. Apart from the socio-cultural factors it also depends on the learning styles of pupils. According to the learning styles outlined by Kolb there are four types of learners. These are conformist, convergers, concrete and communicatives. Willing (1987 cited in Skehan, 1998: 247) explains conformists are “authority-oriented” learners and convergers are “analytic” learners who prefer to learn “about language” rather than how to use it. Concrete learners are “people-oriented” and commnicatives are the learners whose” integrated skills” are developed. As a result, it is understood from Willing’s definitions that the notional/functional syllabus is more adaptable to concrete and communicative learners.

Motivation is another parameter in language learning. Gardner’ s model of motivation consists of two main concepts: instrumental and integrative. The former is a term that is utilised for the aims such as, learning English in order to obtain a good progress in the job and the latter term is utilised for the situations such as, when a person desire to enter a new community and adapt to it. (Brown, 1987: 115)

Furthermore, Brown (1987: 114) postulates that “It is easy in second language learning to claim that a learner willl be successful with the proper motivation.” It is also has a close relationship with needs analysis. Ausubel (1968 cited in Brown, 1987: 114) identifies constuct of motivation with the needs of “exploration, manipulation, activity, knowledege, stimulation and ego enhancement. For example, if a person desire to speak a foreign language and manages to speak properly, ego enhancement appears.

Nevertheless when a syllabus is planned by the authorities, it is likely to be an unmotivated syllabus for learners as it might not meet their expectations. For example, majority of primary school students are unable to be aware of their needs. Therefore designers

prepare coursebooks in terms of their own assumptions. However, parents could be asked for their children's needs so as to plan an appropriate syllabus (Richards, 2001). Therefore before the notional/functional syllabus is planned, it is crucial to gather correct information about learner needs.

3.5. Suitable and Unsuitable Situations for a Notional/Functional Syllabus

By taking into consideration all the information above, the features of suitable and unsuitable situations for the notional/functional syllabus could be summarised as it is in the table.

| Suitable Situations | Unsuitable Situations |
|---|--|
| Private institutions | State institutions |
| Small and homogeneous classes | Large and heterogeneous classes |
| Traditional, teacher-centered cultures | Traditional, teacher-centered cultures |
| Non-native and experienced teacher | Native and inexperienced teacher |
| Intermediate level | Elementary level |
| Concrete and communicative learners | Converger and conformist learner |
| Instrumental and integrative motivation | Possible motivation |

4. MY TEACHING SITUATIONS

In this section of my essay I would like to give two examples from my own teaching experience in Turkey and compare them to show the suitability and unsuitability of the notional/functional syllabus.

My first experience was teaching to young learners at 13 years old in an English language course that students attended at weekends. They had been learning English for five years. The majority of my students were from state schools and the student number in my

class was 15. The timetable was divided into sections based on the four skills and my class was speaking. As it was speaking class I considered that notional/functional syllabus would be useful. In the first lesson my goal was to teach make a request with some sample sentences such as “Would you mind opening the window?” or “Could you please open the window?” However I had difficulty in teaching these chunks as they always thought about their grammatical structures instead of using these chunks communicatively. I encountered with the questions such as, “What is would mean?”, “Why do we use –ing?” The reason of this situation resulted from the grammatical syllabus that they were adapted at school. They had been exposed to grammatical syllabus since they began to learn English. Therefore their expectations from English was learning grammar rather than speaking. As a result the notional/functional syllabus did not contribute to their English.

My second experience was with adult learners who wanted to learn English only for communication. My learners were 25-40 years at intermediate level. When I taught them English I had no difficulty since they were willing to communicate rather than focus on the grammar. In the first session of my teaching I taught them the same function of request with the same chunks that I used in young learners’ session, but they did not ask questions about grammar. They were successful in having conversations with each other by using functional expressions that I taught them. I believe that, this might stem from learners’ being aware of importance of communication in the foreign language rather than learning its rules.

CONCLUSION

Due to the changing targets in foreign language learning the notional/functional syllabus has been developed and its main goal is to teach purposeful communication to learners. It has variety of strengths and weaknesses. From my perspective it is an effective syllabus that could make a strong contribution to learners communication ability. On the other hand it appears that it is not always feasible to utilise the notional/functional syllabus because of the varieties in institutions, societies, cultures, teachers and learners. Also, although teaching situation is suitable it may be difficult to organise a fruitful content for a notional/functional syllabus as learner needs vary. To sum up the notional/functional syllabus could be seen as an ideal way of teaching purposeful communication as long as all suitable circumstances are implemented.

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Appendix 1

Functional Categories of Language

Mary Finocchiaro: *The Functional-notional Approach: From Theory to Practice* (1983, p. 65-66) has placed the functional categories under five headings as noted below: personal, interpersonal, directive, referential, and imaginative.

1. Personal

Clarifying or arranging one's ideas; expressing one's thoughts or feelings: love, joy, pleasure, happiness, surprise, likes, satisfaction, dislikes, disappointment, distress, pain, anger, anguish, fear, anxiety, sorrow, frustration, annoyance at missed opportunities, moral, intellectual and social concerns; and the everyday feelings of hunger, thirst, fatigue, sleepiness, cold, or warmth.

2. Interpersonal

Enabling us to establish and maintain desirable social and working relationships:

The interpersonal category includes:

- greetings and leave takings
- introducing people to others
- identifying oneself to others
- expressing joy at another's success
- expressing concern for other people's welfare
- extending and accepting invitations
- refusing invitations politely or making alternative arrangements
- making appointments for meetings
- breaking appointments politely and arranging another mutually convenient time
- apologizing
- excusing oneself and accepting excuses for not meeting commitments
- indicating agreement or disagreement
- interrupting another speaker politely

- changing an embarrassing subject
- receiving visitors and paying visits to others
- offering food or drinks and accepting or declining politely
- sharing wishes, hopes, desires, problems
- making promises and committing oneself to some action
- complimenting someone
- making excuses
- expressing and acknowledging gratitude

3. Directive

Attempting to influence the actions of others; accepting or refusing direction:

- making suggestions in which the speaker is included
- making requests; making suggestions
- refusing to accept a suggestion or a request but offering an alternative
- persuading someone to change his point of view
- requesting and granting permission
- asking for help and responding to a plea for help
- forbidding someone to do something; issuing a command
- giving and responding to instructions
- warning someone
- discouraging someone from pursuing a course of action
- establishing guidelines and deadlines for the completion of actions
- asking for directions or instructions

4. Referential

Talking or reporting about things, actions, events, or people in the environment in the past or in the future; talking about language (what is termed the metalinguistic function.): talking or reporting about things, actions, events, or people in the environment in the past or in the future:

- identifying items or people in the classroom, the school the home, the community
- asking for a description of someone or something
- defining something or a language item or asking for a definition
- paraphrasing, summarizing, or translating (L1 to L2 or vice versa)
- explaining or asking for explanations of how something works
- comparing or contrasting things
- discussing possibilities, probabilities, or capabilities of doing something
- requesting or reporting facts about events or actions
- evaluating the results of an action or event

5. Imaginative

Discussions involving elements of creativity and artistic expression:

- discussing a poem, a story, a piece of music, a play, a painting, a film, a TV program, etc.
- expanding ideas suggested by other or by a piece of literature or reading material
- creating rhymes, poetry, stories or plays
- recombining familiar dialogs or passages creatively
- suggesting original beginnings or endings to dialogs or stories
- solving problems or mysteries

