

A NOTIONAL-FUNCTIONAL SYLLABUS IN ENGLISH TEACHING (ICT-BASED INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN AND MATERIAL DEVELOPMENT)

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Abstract

A notional-functional syllabus is based on learning to recognize and express the communicative functions of language and the concepts and ideas it expresses. In other words, this kind of syllabus is based more on the purposes for which language is used and on the meanings the speaker wanted to express than on the forms used to express them. These method of language teaching is categorize along with others under the rubric of a communicative approach. The method stresses a means of organizing a language syllabus. The emphasis is on breaking down the global concept of language into units of analysis in terms of communicative situations in which they are used.

Keywords: English Teaching, Notion, Function, Notional-Functional Syllabus

A. INTRODUCTION

One of the most basic process in language teaching is the design of curriculum and syllabus. When we talk about syllabuses, we should have a clear idea of the definition. 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. Then, Syllabuses defined by Richards (2001: 2) as “a specification of the content of a course of instruction which lists what will be taught and tested”. So, it can be defined that a syllabus is as document and instruction which says what will be learnt and taught.

Language syllabus can be defined as a general outline of language teaching program which guides a teacher what to teach and how to teach in a language program. There are some types of language teaching syllabus which can be adopted and applied to develop language teaching. According to Krahnke (1987) there are six types of language teaching syllabus. They are structural, notional-functional, situational, skill-based, content-based, and task-based syllabus. Then, this paper will discuss one of them. It is about notional-functional syllabus. A notional-functional syllabus is based on learning to express the communicative functions of language and the concepts and ideas it expresses. In other words, this kind of syllabus is based more on the purposes for which language is used and on the meanings the speaker wanted to express than on the forms used to express them. “..... National-functional has been closely associated with what has been called communicative language teaching”(Brumfit & Jhonson 1979 cited by Krahnke 1987, p.28).

Based on the syllabus type mentioned, some parts will be discussed in this paper to comprehend how and when a teacher should adopt the type of syllabus. In the first part, it will show about theoretical concept of notional-functional syllabus; the second part will

present about its characteristics and show the example of the notional-functional syllabus; the third part mentions about its advantages and disadvantages; and the last part is the conclusion.

B. DISCUSSION

1. Theoretical Concept of Notional-functional syllabus

a. History of Functional-Notional Syllabus

Traditionally, language learning syllabuses were structured around grammar of the target language. By the 1970's language educators were increasingly dissatisfied with such formalistic views. In the seventies, second language students were quite capable of imitating and memorizing the language. In 1971 a group of linguists studied the needs of European students. A group of experts began to investigate the possibility of developing language courses on a unit-credit system.

The information gotten from <http://www2.vobs.at/ludescher/grammar/functional.htm> by the writer that is in 1972, the British linguist D.A. Wilkins published a document that proposed a radical shift away from using the traditional concepts of grammar and vocabulary to describe language to an analysis of the communicative meanings that learners would need in order to express themselves and to understand effectively. This initial document was followed by his 1976 work Notional Syllabuses, which showed how language could be categorised on the basis of notions such as quantity, location and time, and functions such as making requests, making offers and apologising. Wilkins' work was used by the Council of Europe in drawing up a communicative language syllabus, which specified the communicative functions a learner would need in order to communicate effectively at a given level of competence. At the end of the 1970s, the first course-books to be based on functional syllabuses began to appear. Typically, they would be organised on the basis of individual functions and the exponents needed to express these functions. For example, many course-books would begin with the function of 'introducing oneself', perhaps followed by the function of 'making requests', with typical exponents being 'Can I?', 'Could you?', and so on. These would often be practiced in the form of communicative exercises involving pair work, group work and role plays. The need to apply a grammatical name or category to the structure is not considered important within the framework of a purely functional syllabus.

b. A Notional-Functional Syllabus

In language teaching, a notional-functional syllabus related to communicative language teaching (CLT). Richards (1986 :....) told that CLT which is an approach to the teaching of second and foreign languages, emphasizes interaction as both the means and the ultimate goal of learning a language. It is also referred to as "Communicative Approach". Historically, CLT has been seen as a response

to the Audio-Lingual Method (ALM), and as an extension or development of the Notional-Functional Syllabus. So in this syllabus, language teaching should focus more on the purposes (functions) of using the language and the meanings (notions) expressed through the language rather than grammatical forms. Brown (2000: 252) told that grammar is the primary element in the structural syllabus but in the notional-functional syllabus, it is the secondary focus. 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.

Krahnke (1987: 10) told that a notional-functional syllabus is one in which the content of the language teaching is a collection of the functions that are performed when language is used or of the notions that language is used to express. Then Notional-functional syllabus reflects a broader view of language provided by philosophers of language and sociolinguistics. Functions may be described as the communicative purposes for which we use language, while notions are conceptual meanings expressed through language (Nunan, 1988: 35). A notional-functional syllabus is based on learning to recognize and express the communicative functions of language and the concepts and ideas it expresses. In other words, this kind of syllabus is based more on the purposes for which language is used and on the meanings the speaker wanted to express than on the forms used to express them. This syllabus consists of a list of functions and notions together with the linguistic exponents required to realize them in communication.

As we see from the above, the functional-notional syllabus has something different inside and each presents a specific trend. 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, the conceptual meanings are expressed or what ideas and meanings people want to say, such as time, size, age, equality, color, frequency, existence, ownership and so on. Then functions are the more social concepts or the communications are focused, such as making invitation, asking questions, expressing opinions, expressing wishes, making suggestions, inquiring, complaining, and apologizing and so on. It can be said that function is what people want to do with the language. So, 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).

From those theories above which talked more about notional-functional syllabus in language teaching, especially English, the problems are in linguistics items that mean this approach neglects linguistics items and gives more attention to fixed expression and formula although grammar has role here. In this type of syllabus is dividing language into items may misrepresent the nature of language as communication. It is because the lists of functions and notions do not reflect the way languages are learned. The further problem is grading of this type of syllabus becomes more complex and subjective. It is different from structural syllabus that had traditionally been graded according to frequency of occurrence, linguistic complexity, and natural order of acquisition and had sequencing material. In sequencing problem, it will be faced by the difficulty in deciding the order in which different functions should be presented, for example is it more important to be able to complain or to apologise? So that in this type of syllabus, grading and sequencing in material do not seem to be the major concern.

c. **Explanation of Notional and Functional Categories of Language**

Notions are meaning elements that may be expressed through nouns, pronouns, verbs, prepositions, conjunctions, adjectives or adverbs. A notion is a concept, or idea: it may be quite specific, in which case it is virtually the same as vocabulary (dog, house, for example); or it may be very general – time, size, emotion, movement – in which case it often overlaps with the concept of topics. A notion may be “time past”; this may include past tenses, phrases like a month ago, in 1990, last week, *etc* (<http://www2.vobs.at/ludescher/grammar/functional.htm>).

Finocchiaro (1983: 65-66) has grouped the functional categories under five headings: personal, interpersonal, directive, referential, and imaginative. Here are the further explanations. (1) Personal, it is Clarifying or arranging one’s ideas or expressing one’s thoughts or feelings, such as love, joy, pleasure, happiness, surprise, likes, satisfaction etc. (2) Interpersonal, it is enabling us to establish and maintain desirable social and working relationships, including : greetings, introducing, offering, sharing wishes, etc. (3) Directive, it means attempting to influence the actions of others; accepting or refusing direction, for examples: making request, persuading someone, asking for direction, etc. (4) Referential, it means reporting about things, actions, events, or people in the environment in the past or in the future, for examples : identifying items, summarizing, evaluating, etc. (5) Imaginative, it tells about discussions involving elements of creativity and artistic expression, for examples: discussing a poem, a story, film or a TV program, creating rhymes, poetry, stories or plays, etc.

2. **The Characteristic of Notional-Functional Syllabus**

The major characteristic of the functional-notional approach to language teaching is sensitivity to the individual needs of students. Based on the idea that the ability to use real, appropriate language to communicate with others is the primary goal of most foreign language learning, the design of a functional-notional curriculum

contributes to the goal of communication and interaction from the first day of study. Major emphasis is placed on the communicative purposes of a speech act. The following are the main characteristics of the functional-notional syllabus (Ningsih, 2011):

1. A functional view of language focusing on doing something through language, it means someone's act in using the language.
2. A semantic base, as opposed to a grammatical or a situational base, here meaning is as the focus than the structure in the use of language as communication.
3. A learner-centered view of language learning, so in this case the learners are more active in communication and the teacher is as facilitator or guide. Then they can be motivated by the opportunity to use language to express their own purposes, ideas and emotions.
4. A basis in the analysis of learner needs for using language that is reflected in goals, content selection and sequencing, methodology, and evaluation, it means that before teaching, the teacher should know what the learner's needs or what kinds of materials should be prepared well which include those criteria.
5. Learner-centered goals, objectives, and content organization reflecting authentic language behavior and offering a spiraling development of content, the learning process that especially related to communication should be reflected to the real life.
6. Learning activities involving authentic language use, so the language use in communication must be authentic that can be used in the learners' daily life. It means the learners learn how to use language to express their ideas or authentic communicative purposes.
7. Testing focused on ability to use language to react to and operate on the environment, when the teacher evaluates, it has to focus on the learners' ability in communication on the environment. They have to be able to apply the language use in their environment.

Then the following is some tables of the examples of syllabuses that adopted a notional-functional approach that can be seen in appendixes. Then in the assessment of the syllabus example, the writer includes performance as the forms of instrument and also as the technique in assessment. Why are the technique and the forms of instrument that is used performance? It is because to know their ability in this kind of syllabus must be performed, then it will be seen how to express the language meaning in short simple various speech act involving the speech act. The term of "performance" is one which requires students to demonstrate that they have master specific skills and competencies by performing or producing something. Then in this method, the form of performance used is oral conversation or communication. Then the criteria of performance (oral conversation) itself is adapted from Brown (2003: 172-173). They are fluency, pronunciation and vocabulary which is each of them has one to five score. Then the categories of the scores are:

CRITERIA OF PERFORMANCE (ORAL CONVERSATION)

| Score | Fluency | Pronunciation | Comprehension |
|--------------|---|---|--|
| 1 | Difficult to communicate | Not able to pronounce well at all | Not understand the conversation and the statement delivered with slowed speech, repetition or paraphrase |
| 2 | Able to communicate but not have confidence | The pronunciation is little bit good but it's still in faulty | Understand the conversation but the statement delivered with slowed speech, repetition or paraphrase |
| 3 | Able to communicate and has little confidence | Accent is intelligible though often quite faulty | Comprehension is quite complete at a normal rate of speech |
| 4 | Has confidence but less fluent | Error in pronunciation are quite rare | Can understand the conversation but sometimes still get confused |
| 5 | Fluent and confidence | Well pronunciation | Understand the conversation well |

3. The Advantages and The Disadvantages of Notional-Functional Syllabus

The advantages of the notional syllabus include that it could consider the communicative facts of language from the beginning with concerning of grammatical and situational factors. So it is superior to the grammatical syllabus possibly (Wilkins, 1976). In the grammatical syllabus language elements are demonstrated more in complete possibilities of the language than the use of it needed in conversation. So learners would complain that foreign language learning is not practical and they have few opportunities to use out of it. However, a functional-notional syllabus would teach language to use it rather than instructing the use of its exclusive forms. As teaching the language through its uses, learners would consider the utility and the relevance of their study (Wilkins, 1976).

Language functions in a real-life setting would generate a special kind of excitement for learning and leads to productive learning. Therefore, as comparing to the structural syllabus where elements of language are learned in an isolated way from real life, students' communicative competence and confidence can be well developed, and teachers can revitalize teaching materials to meet learning objectives in functional-notional approach study.

From above it can say that this type of syllabus has some significant merits as follows:

The first merit of the notional-functional syllabus is that it emphasizes the fact that students and their communicative purposes are at the very core of the teaching program. The learner's actual and foreseeable academic, social, and vocational needs will underlie all aspects of the programs of linguistic and cultural content. While due

attention is given to certain aspects of selection and grading of linguistic cultural content, the primary consideration is those functions that persons of a particular age level, in a particular situation, would wish or need to express. Thus, it suits the need of learners'. This syllabus is extremely useful for ESP classes in which the learners can learn part of the language which they are badly in need without wasting their time and energy for detailed study of the whole language system.

The second merit of this syllabus is that the act of communication, even at the elementary levels, will be intrinsically motivating. Unlike the grammatical syllabus which separates the language into discrete items and from which the learners have to communicate competence at the very beginning, the language forms, its functions, and communicative skills they have learned can be used immediately in the communicative activities and in role plays, or even in the real world. This direct effect of language use motivates the learners. They feel quite satisfied and are eager to learn as much as possible according to their needs because they are not passive listeners but active participants.

The third merit is that language functions are quite generalizing. According to Wilkins (1976), eight types of communicative functions are recognized, that is, eight kinds of things learners can do with language, such as: (a) Modality, it is to express degrees of certainty, necessity, conviction, obligation, and tolerance. Examples: for expressing obligation "we must pray 5 times a day as Muslim". (b) Moral, it is about discipline and evaluation like judgment, approval, and disapproval. Examples: do you mind if borrow your note? (c) Suasion, it is about how to express persuasion, recommendation, and predictions. Examples: I think, this building should be renovated. (d) Argument, it relates to information asserted or sought, agreement, denial, and concession. Examples: will u come to my party? How do you think about having dinner tonight? (e) Rational inquiry and exposition, author's note is similar in sub-categories to argument and evaluation. Examples: it is better if you (f) Personal emotions, it is to express positive and negative sides. Examples: how wonderful this place is! (g) Emotional relations, it is to express greeting, flattery, hostility etc. examples: hi! Hello! (h) Interpersonal relations, it is to express politeness and status: degree of formality and informality. Examples: would you give me the water?

Finocchiaro and Brumfit (1983:17) suggest that notional-functional has the "tremendous merit" of placing the students and their communicative purposes at the center of the curriculum. They list the following benefits of adopting a notional-functional orientation:

1. It sets realistic learning tasks.
2. It provides for the teaching every day, real-world language.
3. Students may be motivated by the opportunity to use language to express their own purposes, ideas, and emotions.
4. It recognizes that the speaker must have a real purpose for speaking and something to talk about.

5. Communication will be intrinsically motivating because it expresses basic communicative functions.

What could make learners be able to communicate best in the foreign language decide the process of what to teach (Wilkins, 1976). So when we can decide the most appropriate forms for each type of communication, we can establish the syllabus. Although Hedge (2000) claims that structural syllabuses are amendable to planning, provide systematicity and make learners feel secure, the symbol of the each learning unit is semantic basically (Wilkins, 1976). Nunan (1988) asserts that an alternative to the grammatically-oriented textbook may not solve all of the problems in language teaching. These lists of functions and notions do not reflect the way languages are learned. Dividing language into discrete units of functions may misrepresent the nature of language as communication (Widdowson, 1978; Nunan, 1988). Therefore, the structural syllabuses coverage with notional-functional ones, they are both product-based, synthetic syllabuses. In short, the semantic needs of learners decide the planning of the linguistic content.

Above all, it is ensure that this type of syllabus has some weaknesses as follows:

The first problem is that language functions alone are not a satisfactory organizing principle. In the first place some realizations of functions are in fact little more than fixed phrases (e.g. 'You must be joking!' 'Come off it!'). It may be important to learn them, but that is all we learn! In other words, some functional exponents are just single items. We cannot use them to generate more language as we can with grammatical structure.

The second problem lies in the selection of items for the syllabus and the grading and sequencing of the items. Which should be selected and come first? As White (1988) notes that there was "a dearth of evidence for the frequency of functions" and when selecting which forms should be used to realize functions, textbook writers had to "depend on intuition". What order should the grammar be taught in for students to be able to apply it to functions? White also notes that the small amount of empirical evidence regarding the natural order of acquisition of functions by children was not directly applicable to adult language learning (White, 1988). The further problems are between notions and functions are quite abstract and some learners may have difficulties thinking of communicative function outside a specific context. And different kinds of structures are often used to express the same communicative function, so that it is difficult to follow a progression from simpler to more complex structure.

From explanation above, the following is table below, the points of advantages and disadvantages of notional-functional syllabus in order to make both easier to be comprehended and perhaps it is clearer.

ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF NOTIONAL-FUNCTIONAL SYLLABUS

| Advantages | Disadvantages |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It sets realistic learning tasks. • It provides for the teaching every day, real-world language. • Students may be motivated by the opportunity to use language to express their own purpose, ideas, and emotions. • It recognizes that the speaker must have a real purpose for speaking and something to talk about. • Communication will be intrinsically motivating because it expresses basic communicative functions. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some functional exponents are just single items. We cannot use them to generate more language as we can with grammatical structure. • The selection of items for the syllabus and the grading and sequencing of the items are more complex. • Notional and functional are quite abstract • Different kinds of structures are often used to express the same communicative function. |

C. CONCLUSION

A notional-functional syllabus is a type of syllabus which is closely associated with communicative language teaching. Then its focus is on communicative purpose and the conceptual meaning of language. It holds that the classification of skill levels should be based on what people want to do with the language (functions) or in terms of what meanings people want to convey (notions). This type of syllabus is conscious that it is almost impossible to cover the whole language because some disadvantages of it. It also focuses on the content of the language not the form. And the main purpose of this syllabus type is that students will be able to communicate appropriately in real life.

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