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A realistic View:
functions of another language

Second-language teaching is almost a major industry at universities all over the world, although it is conducted with a peculiar intensity in linguistically sensitive situations like Quebec's. Sivell has taught in the Middle East, Morocco, and Ontario, and makes here what may strike some as a fairly simple point about practice in the prevailing doctrine that one should teach communication functionally. The communication functions in a second language expected of a university student, though familiar to us all, are by no means always those assumed by the doctrinaire. As always with motivation - that critical element - neglect of a simple point can bring down the whole edifice of a curriculum.

Given the enormous sums of public and private money expended annually on foreign language (FL) instruction, it is hardly surprising that new approaches promising improved student motivation should be greeted with clamorous enthusiasm; nor that any apparent failure to realize such promise will occasion deep disappointment. The current debate over so-called functional FL teaching fits this common pattern perfectly, for functional FL instruction is variously praised for its special ability to "sustain the motivation of the learners" (Wilkins, 1976, p.19), and castigated for its discouraging tendency to leave "both students and staff" with an impression of "riding off in all directions at once" (Tyacke, 1979, p.38).

In fact, although teachers and linguists may feel that functional instruction ought prima facie to be powerfully motivating, there are important assumptions behind such a prediction, and when students do not share those assumptions, they do not necessarily experience the anticipated burst of motivation either.

Traditionally, language has been analysed from the viewpoint of grammar; the emphasis has been on a potentially rather abstract kind of "correctness" or "form". But the innovative functional analysis of language changes this, stressing rather the categories of actual language use, or functions; here, the emphasis is on language used for social action. And it is recognized that such categories of social action - greeting, eliciting information, reporting facts, expressing various emotions, and so on - will display no neat correspondence with the traditional grammatical categories of language analysis.

Of course, taken alone, functional categories may themselves seem as formal or abstract as the grammatical categories they have been proposed to supplement or replace. Thus, there is usually a concomitant analysis of the specific semantic context - the notions (very simply: vocabulary plus syntax) with which the speaker can fill out the framework of available functions according to his needs (Wilkins, 1972, pp.86-7). For this reason, we often see the terms paired in a reference to "notional-functional" FL instruction. Or else the two are subsumed under the broader term, "communicative" (e.g. Munby, 1978).

Teaching values as well

Whatever its title, the approach goes back to the basic perception of Austin (1962), who argued vigorously that language must above all be analysed as a form of practical social action. If we accept this premise, grammatical analysis is indeed likely to appear trivial and even irrelevant; functional analysis will surely seem better able to confront the problem of what language is "really" about.

Nonetheless, all this depends on acceptance of the principle that grammatical analysis actually is in some sense peripheral and that functional analysis is the main thing. This assumption is far from universally shared. And when, as not infrequently occurs, pupils cling to basicly grammatical prejudices while their instructor attempts to promote a function-oriented outlook, the latter is in the difficult position of having to teach not only the use of one particular FL, but also a complete set of values concerning language in general. Moreover, if the importance of this potential difference in assumptions is not recognized, the teacher may fail to realize just how complicated and demanding (and even threatening) his double lesson may seem to FL students whose basic presuppositions about language are being challenged.

I myself began using function-based materials for university-level EFL teaching four years ago in Iran. Since then, I have used them in Saudi Arabia, Morocco, and Canada.

All along, I have felt a certain degree of student uneasiness with these materials. I had always kept notes of student reactions, but this year in Morocco I decided to conduct a more explicit survey.

Sixty Moroccan students

I set a total of 60 second-year university students, to whom I taught both Composition and Spoken English, a pair of related essays. The first topic was "What do you think a really useful Spoken English course should offer? - how would you rate/improve ours?" The second was "What structure do you think a really well-organized Spoken English course should have? - how would you rate/improve ours?" The student responses were thought-provoking.

The first topic was, of course, deliberately calculated to evoke comments on the practical, functional use of language, and it did so. To quite an extent, students were prepared to pay at least lip service to the functional outlook. And in fact, in just over 30% of the essays, students gave interesting, specific examples of practical language tasks that a useful Spoken English course could present - so there did seem to be a genuine grasp of, and sympathy for, the merits of this approach. But about 40% of the students also commented, quite reasonably, that another useful goal of a Spoken English course could be the repetition and perfection of troublesome grammatical patterns that recur in the kind of written English needed for various parallel classes of theirs.

Moreover, this orientation towards grammatical structure was present as a primary concern in almost 65% of the essays on the second topic, organization, and received at least brief mention in **all but one** of the others on that topic. On balance, it was crystal clear that while these students were all more or less interested in the generally practical aspects of functional materials, they were also very much concerned with specific and short-term academic pressures which they appeared to feel could best be met by grammatically-organized classes.

This informal survey is not in itself conclusive. Nonetheless, it confirms a number of more subjective impressions that I have been getting for several years. And I suspect that many other teachers with experience in this area will agree that two basic points, not always given enough attention, will have to be taken into fuller account when judging the motivational effectiveness of the functional approach.

Two counter-factors

First. Although functional FL learning is commonly thought to have a high "surrender-value" (Corder, 1973, p.318), in that even if discontinued after only the early stages a fair amount of immediately useful material will have been made available, students may not in fact appreciate what is offered. If practicality is to be conceived in terms of everyday language skill for social action, students may feel that a more realistic analysis of their practical needs would have revealed that certain different and more academic linguistic skills were far more important to them.

Many students may sense - perhaps quite rightly - that the particular educational situation in which they find themselves actually requires somewhat artificial exercises to be carried out, rather than genuinely communicative activities. To an extent, this may be a fault in the system that could possibly be rectified; to an extent, it may simply be a fact of academic life. But in any case, there is no point in ignoring the situation, or pretending that idealized "real life" criteria apply when they obviously do not. For academic FL students, the idea of high surrender-value may well have to be re-considered, in order to adjust our perception of what kind of usefulness will really motivate them.

Second. My experience has largely been with Moslem students learning English as a language having a strictly foreign context. The powerful Moslem tradition of the formal study of classical Arabic is surely not irrelevant to my students' grammatical bias. Neither, probably, is the fact that in their own countries - like enormous numbers of EFL students all over the world - they will actually have precious little chance to engage in much real-life social action in English. For students learning a foreign language in these circumstances, the principles of the communicative approach to language study probably represent a "hidden curriculum" of values that just cannot be accepted.

Of these two factors influencing the effectiveness of the communicative approach, I believe that the academic learning environment is the more important. Teaching in Tyacke's interesting programme in Toronto, I myself noted the striking manner in which a very heterogeneous class group - with members from a wide range of different cultural and educational backgrounds - reacted to the academic environment of an intensive course given at a university by turning strongly towards grammatical measures of their own progress and of their needs. Bi-weekly questionnaires given in my class clearly reflected the students' feeling that despite their enthusiastic participation in function-oriented in-class and out-of-class activities, the most meaningful (or perhaps the simplest?) way

for them to explain their satisfaction or their wishes was in grammatical terms. Many of these students were French-speaking Canadian citizens, new immigrants to Canada, or foreign students planning to use English in Canada for a period of years. None of them were subjected to highly examination-oriented methods; assessment was low-key and partly voluntary. Every day, all of the students lived in anglophone environments on campus or elsewhere in the city. All of this might seem to favour a "real-life" functional attitude to learning. But in fact a combination of past assumptions and present conditions (day-long intensive classes, university setting) appears to have created a much more academic attitude.

Additionally, my experience with the British Council in Iran and Morocco confirms that it is students who are learning a foreign language for their work or for their personal interest who react more favourably to communicative materials than do their university-registered compatriots. It is surely no accident that much of the popularity of functional EFL teaching has centered on materials designed primarily for use in efficient but non-academic language schools, rather than in universities or ordinary primary or secondary schools.

None of this is to suggest that functional language analysis is faulty, nor that functional FL materials, syllabuses, or classroom techniques are useless. To the contrary. But there certainly have been disappointments, and we must ask why. It is rather ironic for us to possess the powerful tool of functional language analysis, and then not use it; a functional analysis of the **actual** language skills required of an academic student would in many cases turn up real surprises, in view of which we would want to adapt either the requirements of our courses or the materials used. If the functional analysis so indicates, we might find it necessary to encourage our academic students to adopt an attitude to language study quite unfamiliar to them. So be it, but at least, by making an objective study beforehand, we would not be rushing ahead on the strength of an only partly-assimilated theory, expecting motivation that we have no right to expect and perhaps even blaming our students for the subsequent failure.

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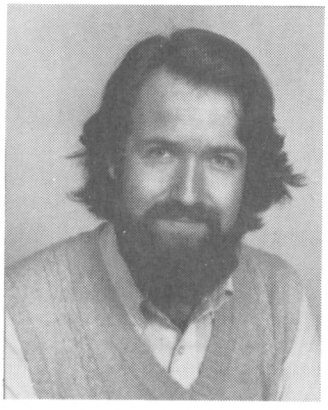

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