

THE DISADVANTAGES OF THE FUNCTIONAL APPROACH

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The current notional or functional approach to teaching English is very much in vogue. As opposed to units on present tense or passive voice, books have different units such as giving opinions, agreeing, complaining, being angry or being sad. The student is supposed to learn how to express himself according to his social role, his psychological role, the setting he is in, the topic he is speaking about and the language function he is performing. Popular though it is, this approach has not always met with great success, either with teachers or students. I should like to suggest why this is so and why I think too much importance is being attached to the functional method of teaching.

One of the functional approach's main tenets is that people speak in a different way to each other according to the roles they are playing at that moment. The same person plays many different roles in the course of one day: he will play the husband and father at breakfast, the traveller and stranger on the bus, sometimes the superior and sometimes the inferior at work, the partner and opponent in a tennis game, the flirtatious customer in a pub and so on. But the point is that when we think of people playing these roles we think of English people playing them with other English people or Americans playing them with other Americans or Mexicans with Mexicans, not a Mexican playing these roles with an English person or an Italian playing them with a Swede. This is because the role of, for example, a Mexican in London is primarily the role of a foreigner. The hotel receptionist, the bus conductor, the girl he meets at the discotheque all expect him to speak in an un-English way. It is therefore only necessary to know one register, the "English as a foreign language register", the "Text-book register". A foreigner should speak a fairly neutral, classless, polite, fairly formal English. People reading this might begin to expostulate and say that everybody has his own idea of what is classless English or polite English. I agree, but I think there is a general consensus of opinion on these matters.

With the functional approach, a student might be taught over a dozen ways of asking for a pen, ranging from the very informal (Oh dear, I haven't got a pen) to the very formal (Sorry to trouble you but I wonder if it might be at all possible for you to lend me a pen). It seems to me to be quite unnecessary to teach upper-intermediate students all these ways of asking for a pen. In many cases, the student would sound false, ridiculous or impudent. Imagine a burly Turk saying, "Oh dear, I haven't got a pen." Or a rather hippy-looking Mexican at the police station in some difficulty and thinking he had better be as polite as possible saying, "Sorry to trouble you, but I wonder if it might be at all possible for you to lend me a pen." To an intermediate student I would teach just one way of asking for a pen in accordance with the rules of grammar and common sense. The student should be aware that the conditional form is used when we wish to be more polite, that English

people are fond of saying "please". A useful formula then would be, "Please would you lend me a pen." This could be used whether the student were speaking to the Queen Mother, the man in the postoffice or the girl he meets camping out under Brighton pier.

Teaching this neutral tone means that the student will not learn slang or obscenities. A teacher using the functional approach might want to teach: For crying out loud! Don't make me laugh! Good grief! Damn! Blast! Bloody hell! You stupid bloody idiot! But the foreigner sounds particularly ridiculous using such phrases with his foreign pronunciation. Imagine an elderly Mexican lady saying, "You stupid bloody idiot" to an English friend she was at finishing school with in Switzerland. Another big problem with slang is that it tends to date very quickly. An old French lady who speaks excellent English told me the other day that she was going to tell me a "juicy story". I had not heard this expression for twenty years and it immediately started me thinking of the quaintness and foreignness of the lady and reminded me of twenty years ago when there were such things as juicy stories. So what slang does is very often the opposite of what the foreign speaker intends: it does not make us feel intimate and involved in what he is saying; it distracts us, puts him at a distance from us and makes us laugh at him.

Another advantage of using a neutral tone is that it is more likely to be sexless. At a seminar I attended it was suggested that it might be a good idea to teach, "Got a light, mate" for students to use in pubs. I think this is very definitely what a man would say. Most English women could not carry this expression off with aplomb, far less a foreign woman. On the other hand, most EFL teachers are women. Have we ever thought that we may be teaching our students slightly effeminate speech? When practising for the "situations" for the First Certificate Cambridge Examination, this did occur to me. The situation I had given to the students was: You have trodden heavily on an old lady's foot in a cinema queue, what do you say? One student said he would say, "I'm sorry". I suggested that it might be better to say, "Oh, I'm terribly sorry. Are you all right? I hope I didn't hurt you." The student protested that he just wouldn't feel like saying that. I think here I was teaching him a rather feminine reaction. Conversely, could a man teach the appropriate language to use at a ladies' hairdresser, a shower tea or in a gynaecologist's waiting room?

It is not just a question of sex either. Teachers usually only have a limited social range themselves. Can they in fact teach students how to speak in exactly the most appropriate register to debutantes at the Eton and Harrow cricket match, to a group of labourers on a building site, to a group of enthusiastic spiritualists at a seance? We ourselves make mistakes in register. I was reproved by a dour, Northern cousin of mine for "gushing" when I over-profusely thanked a Blackpool tram conductor for telling us where to get off the tram. I think appropriate speech is a very subjective and subtle matter which has not been studied enough for teachers to jump on the bandwagon and use functionalism as a basis for teaching English. In fact, I think the foreigner as a classless person is often at a distinct advantage to the native in many social situations.

If we want to interfere too much with our students' register and make them use appropriate language with a girlfriend at the National Theatre or at Battersea Pleasure Gardens or with the principal of their Language School, whether in the classroom or at a rugby football match, we must also interfere in the rest of their lives. The student must lose his role as foreigner and become English. Thus we would have to teach faultless pronunciation. We should have to teach all kinds of non-verbal communication. For example, the clothes foreigners wear in England are often inappropriate. Most middle-class Englishmen do not wear pale blue suits and strong after-shave lotions, but this is perfectly all right in México. English people usually stand further apart from each other than Mexicans. They do not touch each other so much. It seems to be a mark of respect in México not to look a person in the eyes, whereas this is generally considered the mark of a shifty character in England. Imagine a foreigner using all kinds of appropriate registers, but inappropriate non-verbal gestures.

Far more important than teaching different ways of saying something is teaching the correct intonation. Germans often sound hectoring and aggressive in English and Spanish speakers often sound obsequious. The average English person thinks the foreigner is using this intonation intentionally and will not be as tolerant of this as he is of incorrect grammar and lexis and mispronunciation of words.

Of course, students can be helped to avoid certain pitfalls, but perhaps only in a more unstructured way as part of general conversation between teacher and students. For example, it would have helped me to know that in Mexico it is de rigueur to say "Salud" if someone sneezes. I wish I had known Mexican "telephone rules", that you should ask about all the family before asking to speak to the person you really want to speak to. Reading the literature of the country helps enormously and may give the student a true feel of the language more than grafting formulas on to him. It is impossible to deal with all social contingencies in the classroom and very often the teacher himself is not aware of them.

To conclude, it is advisable for a foreigner to be a real foreigner. People are tolerant of foreigners. They expect them to say and act in their own way. Gradually as the foreigner spends more time in the country he may lose his foreignness, not just in register, but in pronunciation and grammar too, and in clothes, actions and subjects of conversation. This is something that may be done in the future in the classroom when EFL teachers and textbook writers have a far greater knowledge of verbal and non-verbal communication - always supposing that the language student really wants to change his personality! I can visualize a time when foreign students will be given precise measurements on how close they should stand to an interlocutor, exactly when, where and how they can use "Pleased to meet you", "Bloody" and so on. Meanwhile, register is best learnt by the foreigner living in an English-speaking country and becoming aware of the different ways of expressing himself. His varieties of English will increase as his general knowledge of English grows. The more he speaks English grammatically and with the right pronunciation, the more people will expect of him with correct register and correct behaviour in general. It might even be an interesting thesis subject for a would-be Linguistics or Sociology Ph.D.: "The correlation between acceptable register, acceptable pronunciation and acceptable behaviour."

It is not necessary to fill up the foreign student with formulas, particularly if he is not living in an English-speaking country. Functional textbooks can too easily turn into foreign phrase books; our students can too easily sound like foreign waiters. The functional approach may be a viable way of teaching in the future, but not yet.