

TEACHING FUNCTIONS OR FUNCTIONAL TEACHING?

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1. Opportunities and Dangers

The new guidelines for the SPM 122 examination offer both opportunities and dangers.

The opportunity comes from the fact that the examination requires students to prove that they can use language for certain purposes and in certain situations, i.e. to prove that they can function in English.

The danger lies in the fact that students are also required to be analytical: they have to be able to discriminate between various functions of language in use. This presents a new task for teachers and students; the danger is that it may be given too much attention, just because it is new, unfamiliar and misleadingly clear-cut at first sight.

BEWARE: as the Lembaga Peperiksaan's own guidelines point out (p.6), being able to label an utterance (e.g. to say *That's an apology*) is not the same as being able to use one (e.g. to apologize). The syllabus, and the new guidelines, are intended to make us concentrate on **getting students to function in English**; the attention given to functional labels is simply a device to test how well they can do so.

2. Teaching for a Functional Examination

Our focus, therefore, is on functional teaching, i.e. how to help your students to function in English.

You may already be able to do this, but with the new examination format, you are going to have to do it even more effectively. The exam format is much more demanding than it appears. Quite apart from the very heavy weighting (75%) of marks for productive use of the language, a student must be able to demonstrate quite sophisticated interpretive skills.

Students will need to widen and deepen their knowledge of English very considerably. We think this is possible (although demanding) and that it can be effected in several ways, including these:

(a) *Wide reading*

A very great deal of reading is important. We are lucky to have, in the Schools Division's English Language Reading Programme, an extensive reading programme that works.

(b) *Reading for meaning*

Thoughtful and intelligent reading habits can be trained. Alan Moore's article in the next issue suggests some ways of doing this.

(c) *Active participation in speaking*

Our students are often shy and reluctant to speak, but teachers have found that given suitable tasks, they will lose their shyness and participate. You will need a range of task-oriented activities to encourage this. Articles on communication games and on group activities in earlier issues contain many ideas of this kind.

(d) *Developing analytical skills*

Students will have to be able to analyse the functions of language in use. We shall offer some ideas about how these skills can be trained.

In this paper we discuss the last of these, which will also be the last stage in your teaching: the preparation for the examination itself. Some new approaches seem to be needed to enable your students to learn about functions and functional labels and to develop the analytical skills required.

3. Teaching about Functions and Teaching Functionally

To help students use the functional labels successfully, a certain amount of teaching about functions will be needed, but this will not be effective unless the students already have a good command of the language. To be able to distinguish between various uses of language, we must first be able to interpret accurately the way it is used by competent speakers; and to produce on request an appropriate utterance, we must first be able to use a wide range of language appropriately in a wide range of situations. It is just as easy to teach badly with a functional syllabus as it was with a structural one, and for similar reasons: it is just as easy to have lessons about the language (teaching about functions) instead of lessons that improve the student's command of the language (teaching how to function).

In short, TEACHING ABOUT FUNCTIONS is not the same thing as TEACHING FUNCTIONALLY, any more than LABELLING FUNCTIONS is the same thing as FUNCTIONING. Our emphasis will be, as the syllabus and examination guidelines intend, on FUNCTIONING, not on labelling. If the student is able to function in English, teaching him about functions and providing him with a vocabulary of functional labels can easily be covered in the term before the mock examination. But two years of such teaching will not equip students to pass the examination if they lack the basic functional competence.

4. Learning about Functions

Your students are going to be faced by a number of difficulties when this stage of exam preparation arrives. Here are some of them:

- (a) *Recognizing that a certain utterance is intended by the speaker for a certain purpose*, i.e. identifying the function of an utterance. This is a problem because many different sentences can perform the same function; and a single sentence can perform many different functions. It depends entirely on the situation.
- (b) *Mastering the metalanguage*, i.e. the vocabulary needed for talking about functions.

These words are listed in the guidance notes from Lembaga Peperiksaan. There are 89 terms, and the Lembaga says only these will be used in the examination. Even so, it is quite a learning load, especially as some of the vocabulary would not normally be considered very important for students at this level. Moreover you will probably want to add others in the course of your teaching, e.g. make excuses, doubt, admit.

- (c) *Distinguishing between similar functions*, for instance, differentiating between:
- asking/requesting/questioning/inquiring
 - denying/refusing/rejecting/disagreeing
 - complimenting/congratulating/approving/praising

The various kinds of behaviour for which we use these various forms can, of course, be found in Malaysian society just as they can elsewhere. But they may not always be clearly differentiated, and the language may not reflect any distinction between them. For instance, the concepts of denying and refusing do not seem to be distinguished in BM (just as English has only one word, 'hot', to correspond with BM 'panas' and 'pedas').

Some of these concepts may correspond with similar concepts in BM (or other mother tongues) but the match will seldom be perfect. So the student must learn to recognize the behaviour in each case, and differentiate it from similar forms of behaviour that are considered distinct in English. He must learn, too, that words for similar concepts do not always have a similar grammar, e.g.

I asked the man.

*I requested the man.

He asked for a book.

*He requested for a book.

The bank requested payment.

*The bank asked payment.

All these difficulties should reinforce the view that a good command of English is a prerequisite for this kind of learning.

The fact that there are many ways of saying more or less the same thing will come as no surprise to students who have read widely. Similarly, the metalanguage will consist of terms that are largely familiar to such students, and the associated concepts will be at least partly understood. Thus the teacher's task can be limited to making this understanding clearer and sharper, to differentiating similar concepts and teaching the few new ones that are needed. But if most of the terms and concepts have never been encountered, the teacher will find it very difficult to help students master them.

5. Developing the Metalanguage: Use of the Mother Tongue

5.1 Even if your students have acquired a good command of English, you may find it difficult to explain (or to get them to explain) some of the distinctions between functions, attitudes, roles etc., because the language needed to discuss such matters can be quite sophisticated. Obviously the most effective way of tackling this is to give a lot of concrete examples to illustrate the terms in question, enabling students to absorb the distinctions inferentially. But you will probably want to crystallize their ideas at some stage. For this purpose, in our view, it is not necessary to exclude the use of BM or another L1 (mother tongue).

It is quite possible for students to have the ability to discriminate between various functions of language, and yet be unable to express the distinction in English. Since at this stage the quality of discussion is important, it is sensible to allow the discussion to be in a language which permits students to express themselves effectively. It goes without saying, however, that English should be used whenever possible.

5.2 Suggested procedure

Here is one possible way of making use of the L1 without, it is hoped, allowing it to dominate the proceedings. We assume that the class is studying one utterance from a short dialogue.

- (a) Discuss what the speaker is doing (i.e. his purpose) – in English if possible, otherwise in the L1.
- (b) Clarify the concept, if necessary by describing further situations where the speaker's purpose is similar and eliciting English or L1 utterances that would be appropriate to them.
- (c) Once the concept is clear, and clearly distinguished from similar ones, give the English term (functional label) for it and if appropriate discuss its relationship with (i) similar terms in English (ii) translation-equivalents in the L1, highlighting any mismatches between the English and L1 systems of terms.
- (d) Then, in English, ask students for examples of other situations in which the same behaviour might be appropriate. Don't reject suggestions in the L1, but help students to express these in English and to note down a few in their exercise books if you like.

6. Talking about Functions

6.1 It is alarmingly easy to talk about functions as if they were objects with some kind of independent existence. You may hear or read expressions of this kind:

- a. *Use these functions.*
- b. *What functions is he performing?*
- c. *What is the function here?*
- d. *Functions tend to occur in certain sequences.*

As I have found when writing this paper, it is difficult to avoid this kind of expression. As long as we remember that these are just convenient forms of shorthand, no harm is done; but it is easy to forget.

Let's remember that 'functions' is short for 'The functions that language performs'; i.e. it refers to what you can do by means of language. A function therefore is not an object but a process or activity. Since (in the sense we are concerned with) it is always human activity, we could also describe a function as a form of behaviour. It is moreover (almost always) purposeful behaviour: *The utterance has this function* is another way of saying *The speaker wants his words to have this effect*.

If we bear this in mind, we can see that the sample expressions a – d above are more abstract and perhaps more mystifying ways of saying something like this:

- a. *Do the following.*
- b. *What is he doing?* or *What does he mean by that?* or even *What does he want (B) to do?*
- c. Much the same as b.
- d. *When one person behaves in a certain way, we can often predict what the other person will do.*

6.2 Here are some suggestions for avoiding the abstract and mystifying word *function* and instead focusing on the activity/behaviour itself. We can ask students to identify functions by questions like:

What does A mean by this?

What purpose has A in mind?

What does A want B to do/think?

What is A doing when he says this?

Prompt: *Is he (asking for information)? –*

No. What, then?

What is A's attitude to?

Prompt: *Is he being (polite)?*

We can draw attention to sequence of functions by asking questions like:

If A (requests something from) B, what is B likely to do?

What usually happens next when you (congratulate) someone?

Does B (agree to) A's (suggestion)?

We can draw attention to role relationships by questions like:

Who do you think the speakers are?

Prompt: *Are they father and son? Why/why not?*

Which is which? Why do you think so?

As you can infer from these suggestions, I think it will be more effective if we base our questions and comments on the data before us, the actual utterances we are analysing. In this way we can ask specific questions (*Is he requesting or ordering?*) instead of abstract ones (*What is the function?*), with I believe a considerable gain in intelligibility.

7. Classroom Options

7.1 However much the students may have read, one of your tasks will be to expose them to even more language, covering a range of functions in a variety of situations.

To begin with, you will want to stress RECEPTIVE skills, i.e. recognizing and interpreting; later you will ask for PRODUCTIVE skills as well, i.e. reproducing and initiating. In many cases, exercises will readily lead from one to another; see e.g. 7.4 below.

7.2 Most of the material you use will be in DIALOGUE form, because there is usually more variety of functions in an interaction than in a monologue. But the dialogues may be both SPOKEN and WRITTEN, both TAPED and LIVE. Many of them will be products from the situations suggested in various areas of the Form IV/V syllabus; others will reflect work covered in earlier years.

7.3 The kind of dialogues used, whether written or spoken, may be:

AUTHENTIC: i.e. recorded from real life, preferably without the knowledge of the speakers.

or, at the opposite extreme:

SCRIPTED: you can compose the conversation or take it from a book etc.

Between these extremes there are other, perhaps more useful, possibilities:—

SEMI-AUTHENTIC: you tell the participants what message their words are to convey, but you do not supply the words themselves.

e.g. **Customer** *Price of a single ticket to Singapore?*
Clerk *Class? Type of train? etc.*

This method can be used with colleagues and friends to produce reasonably authentic but controlled material that you can tape; or with students for productive practice.

FUNCTIONALLY-PROMPTED: this is an extension of the previous method, in which you specify the function and the content for each utterance, again leaving the speaker to supply the precise words

e.g. **Customer** **INFORM** (*1st class, express*)
Clerk **INFORM** (*£35*)
Customer **PROTEST** (*Expensive*) etc.

UNPROMPTED ROLE PLAY: you give students the situation and assign roles ('you are the mother, you are the daughter') and let them work out for themselves what they would do.

e.g. *A is a strict old fashioned mother. B is her daughter aged 15. B wants to go to a friend's party and sleep at the friend's house. B's task is to persuade A to allow this. (Area 13).*

The results of such role play can be taped and then discussed.

7.4 Interactions for discussion and interpretation should be kept short, otherwise the process is likely to be tedious. It will be useful to draw attention to sequences that frequently go together, for instance:

invite — accept — suggest — agree

e.g. **A:** *Will you come for a picnic on Sunday?*

B: *That would be lovely.*

A: *How about going to Templer Park?*

B: *Why not?*

When students have *analysed* a short dialogue in this way, useful extensions would be for students to *synthesize* (i.e. make up!) a further dialogue in which

- (a) The functional sequence is the same, but the situation is different. (You should supply the situation initially.)
- (b) The role relationships are different (but the situation and functional sequence is similar).
- (c) The participants' attitudes are different (e.g. A announces they are to go on a picnic and B is reluctant to do so) and thus the functions will be altered.

7.5 As we saw earlier, the function of an utterance is what the speaker intends by it: his purpose in saying it. If we want to develop students' understanding of how language functions, a necessary ingredient of any practice will be this element of purpose. Students should be able to identify the speaker's purpose when they analyse dialogues, and should be given a clear purpose when they perform productive tasks.

The more **TASK ORIENTED** we can make the work, the easier it will be for students to see the way we use language to get things done. A task implies a clear **GOAL**; when we know what the goal is, it is easier to interpret people's behaviour, including their linguistic behaviour.

8. Making Use of What They've Learnt

Finally, let's remember that the communicational syllabus and the new guidelines for the 122 papers offer us the opportunity to help our students take advantage of the big investment they have already made in learning English. In nine years of exposure to English, our Form IV students will have assimilated quite a lot, even if we may sometimes find that hard to believe. Much of this knowledge is dormant and passive, but in the two years at our disposal, it should be possible to awaken it and help the students to activate knowledge which has up to now been passive.

No one is pretending this is easy, but given support from colleagues (particularly, perhaps, the school librarian) it is not impossible. Reading programmes will help to revive and widen vocabulary and control of structures; classroom activities will help to transfer many language elements from receptive to productive use; and study of communicative functions will sharpen the student's ability to interpret others and to express his own purposes.

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