Functional-notional Approach


This method of language teaching is categorized 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.

Notions are meaning elements that may be expressed through nouns, pronouns, verbs, prepositions, conjunctions, adjectives or adverbs. The use of particular notions depends on three major factors: a. the functions, b. the elements in the situation, and c. the topic being discussed.

A situation may affect variations of language such as the use of dialects, the formality or informality of the language and the mode of expression. Situation includes the following elements:

- A. The persons taking part in the speech act
- B. The place where the conversation occurs
- C. The time the speech act is taking place
- D. The topic or activity that is being discussed

Exponents are the language utterances or statements that stem from the function, the situation and the topic.

Code is the shared language of a community of speakers.

Code-switching is a change or switch in code during the speech act, which many theorists believe is purposeful behavior to convey bonding, language prestige or other elements of interpersonal relations between the speakers.

Functional Categories of Language

Mary Finocchiaro (1983, p. 65-66) has placed the functional categories under five headings as noted below: personal, interpersonal, directive, referential, and imaginative.

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

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

- 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

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

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:

• 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

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