

A sample syllabus for “Oral Communication A”

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A Sample Syllabus for "Oral Communication A"

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The following syllabus is intended for the senior high school students who will take "oral communication A", one of the three new "oral communication" subjects, which will enter the school curriculum in 1994. According to the revised edition of the Course of Study published by the Education Ministry in 1989, the aim of this subject is "to develop the students' ability to listen to and understand what their interlocutors intend to communicate and to express their ideas in English in various situations of their daily lives," and "to form the students' attitude to communicate actively." The Course of Study states that this course should treat both listening and speaking equally, that it should teach expressions to show one's emotions or thoughts, and that it is necessary for teachers to devise activities which treat different situations in schools, homes, or other places, dealing with various topics.

The aims and objectives of "oral communication A" suggest the strong possibility of adopting the notional-functional syllabus. Finocchiaro states five functional categories in "The Functional-Notional Approach From Theory to Practice" (Finocchiaro, M. and Brumfit, C, p.65-66, 1987). They are "personal" (clarifying or arranging one's ideas; expressing one's thoughts or feelings), "interpersonal" (enabling us to establish and maintain desirable social and working relationships), "directive" (attempting to influence the actions of others; accepting or refusing direction), "referential" (talking or reporting about things, actions, events, or people in the environment in the past or in the future; talking about language. This is often termed the metalinguistic function), and "imaginative". I used some of the functions stated in this book in writing the syllabus. However, as I realized that some functions assume too broad categories, I divided them into smaller, and more specific functions.

1. An outline of the syllabus

The general aim of the syllabus is to develop the students' basic ability of listening and speaking, teaching them basic communicative functions and expressions used in their daily lives in schools, homes, or other places.

The following syllabus includes the functions, the settings, and the expressions.

Unit 1: Functions: Greetings and self-introduction. Setting: At school(at the first English lesson). Expressions: Nice to meet you, my name is Yoshio Arai. How do you do?

Unit 2: Functions: Asking and giving information about time. Setting: At home. Expressions: What time does your school start? It starts at eight-thirty.

Unit 3: Functions: Describing and asking one's hobbies and interests. Setting: At school(among friends). Expressions: What are your hobbies? My hobbies are collecting stamps and reading.

Unit 4: Describing and asking one's future plans. Setting: In the classroom after school(among friends). Expressions: What are you going to do this weekend? I'm going fishing.

Unit 5: Functions: Apologizing. Setting: At school(during a lesson). Expressions: I'm sorry, but I forgot the homework. Sorry for being late again.

Unit 6: Functions: Talking about prices. Setting: At a bookstore. Expressions: How much is this magazine? It is six hundred yen.

Unit 7: Functions: Asking and giving directions. Setting: At a street corner. Expressions: Excuse me, but could you tell me the way to Shibuya Station? Where is the station, please?

Unit 8: Functions: Offering invitation on the telephone(Accepting or refusing it)(1). Setting: At home. Expressions: Hello, this is Kazuo Watanabe speaking. How about going to see a movie this Sunday?

Unit 9: Functions: Offering invitation on the telephone(Accepting or refusing it)(2) Setting: At home. Expressions: Would you like to come to my house for dinner this Saturday? I'd love to. I'm sorry, but I'm busy this week.

Unit 10: Functions: Offering food or drinking(Accepting or refusing it). Setting: At home. Expressions: What would you like to drink? I would like to drink tea.

Unit 11: Functions: Making suggestions and giving advice. Setting: At a hospital. Expressions: I suggest that you should take light exercise every day. You should go on a diet.

Unit 12: Functions: Agreeing and disagreeing. Setting: At a school(discussing what exhibition the class should display at a cultural festival). Expressions: That's a good point. I'm not sure I quite agree with your plan.

2. One complete section of the syllabus

Unit 7: Asking and giving directions -- Excuse me, but could you tell me the way to Shibuya Station?

7.1 Dialogue

Suppose you are spoken to by a foreigner and asked the way, what would you respond? Work in pairs and role-play the following dialogue.

(At a street corner)

A: Excuse me, but could you tell me the way to Shibuya Station?

B: Yes, certainly. Go straight on this street and turn right at the second corner. The station is just in front of you.

A: I see. Thanks a lot.

B: You are welcome.

7.2 Useful Expressions

There are some ways of asking and giving directions in English. Study the following expressions.

a. Excuse me, but could you tell me the way to the post office?

b. Excuse me, but how do I get to Mitsubishi Bank?

c. Where is the station, please?

d. Go straight on this road for two blocks.

e. Turn left at the first corner.

- f. It's over there on your right.
- g. It's next to the hospital.
- h. I'm sorry, but I don't know the place.

7.3 Listening activity

Look at the map. You will hear four sets of directions. Mark the place if you follow the directions..

The direction might be like this: Leave the museum and turn right at the first corner. Go straight on for three blocks, and you will find it on your left. Now write the name of the place.

7.4 Communication activity (1)

Use the map of your school to make new dialogues. Role-play them with your partner. Before making dialogues, you should learn the following expressions.

- a. Go upstairs(downstairs).
- b. It's on the second floor.
- c. It's at the end of the way.

A dialogue might be like the following.

A: Excuse me, but how do I get to the faculty room?

B: Go straight on and go upstairs if you come to the end of the passage. It's next to the Principal's room.

A: Thank you very much.

B: Not at all.

7.5 Communication activity (2)

Work in pairs. The teacher will give you a map and your partner another map. Both maps are almost the same. However, your map has the names of the places missing in your partner's map and your partner's map vice versa. You and your partner exchange questions asking the missing places in each map. You explain the directions from the place of the "start" on your map. You should not show your map to your partner in doing this activity. For example, you will exchange the following dialogue with your partner.

You: Excuse me, but how do I get to the department store?
Your partner: Yes. Go straight on the road one block and turn left.
You will see the department store on the right.
You: Thank you.

After filling in the missing names, you and your partner exchange the maps and check the results.

3. Rationale for the syllabus

As the learners's needs to communicate in English have greatly increased recently in Japan, it has become necessary to change the focus of the teaching from the grammatical to the communicative features of the language. As is mentioned earlier in this article, the aim of "oral communication A" is to develop the students' ability of listening and speaking. This subject should deal with different situations related to the students' daily lives, treating various topics. Considering these characteristics of the subject, it might be natural to think of the notional-functional syllabus as one of the most appropriate approaches.

The first reason that I advocate this approach is that it focuses on the functions of the language without neglecting the grammatical features. Wilkins(1979) states the advantages of notional syllabus. "The advantage of the notional syllabus is that it takes the communicative facts of language into account from the beginning without losing sight of grammatical and situational factors. It is potentially superior to the grammatical syllabus because it will produce a communicative competence and because its evident concern with the use of language will sustain the motivation of the learners." (p.19) The Japanese senior high school students have already studied English for three years in junior high schools and have acquired some knowledge of grammatical structures. Therefore it is efficient for them to learn the communicative use of the language with some reference to the grammatical structures.

The notional-functional syllabus is similar to the situational syllabus in that it deals with situations. However, it is superior to the situational syllabus in that it can include all the necessary functions for the course, not only those which appear in some situations, which enables the learners to apply the functions used in certain situations to other situations. For example, expressions used for asking and giving directions at a street corner can be used at schools, companies, department stores and other places with some practice of the new vocabulary and expressions.

While Finocchiaro and Brumfit(1987) includes "study of the grammatical structures and student discovery of underlying rules"(p.84), which is accuracy work, in general basic segments of a unit, they emphasize the importance of fluency work and insist that improvisation and adaptation are most important activities in this aspect.

But it will be when students are engaged in fluency activities, that is when they are negotiating with language and adjusting and improvising with the limited language that they know, that they will both internalize and extend their understanding of the linguistic system. Language is created by learners, not given to them...Any kind of talking activity, in which students work in pairs or groups with all the groups talking at once, will have some elements of fluency discussion. Many improvisational role-play and simulation activities and many language games will involve elements of oral fluency.(p.97)

The activities in Unit 7 are made based on this principle --improvisation and adaptation. The students role-play and work in pairs in 7.1, 7.4, and 7.5.

In discussing what a communicative method should be, Morrow(1981) points out that "The mere adoption of a notional(or, more specifically, functional) syllabus does not guarantee that we are going to teach our students to communicate."(p.60)

Among the five principles of communicative methodology which he lists, the third principle is the following: "The processes are as important as the forms." He insists that a communicative method should aim to "replicate as far as possible the process of communication, so that practice of the forms of the target language can take place within a communicative framework." (p.62) He gives three processes which support a communicative method. The first process is "information gap". The second process is that the students have choice, "both in terms of what they say and, more particularly, how they will say it." The third process is that the students do "feedback" in an interaction which they are engaged in according to the aims of the conversation they have.

As the notional-functional syllabus fixes the language functions and grammatical structures in each unit, it is impossible to accept totally Morrow's these processes. However, it is possible to do communicative activities, which replicate the process of communication, to some extent within the framework of the notional-functional syllabus. For example, role-playing is an example of such activities. 7.3, 7.4, and 7.5 are all task-based activities, with 7.5 being an information-gap activity. As these kinds of activities are rarely found in "The Functional-Notional Approach" (1987), it is necessary to develop task-based or information-gap activities in teaching with this approach.

When we adopt the notional-functional syllabus for "oral communication A", the problem remains as to how we should decide which functions are necessary for the senior high school students in Japan, which needs further investigation and discussion.

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