

Notional-Functional Approach to English Language Teaching

(Semester 3, ENG, SEC-3, under CCF)

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Historical Background



Origins of the Approach

Wilkins' Pioneering Work

- D.A. Wilkins developed the notional-functional approach in the 1970s.
- His 1976 book ***Notional Syllabuses*** published in 1976 (Oxford University Press) categorized language by notions and functions, influencing course books by the late 1970s.



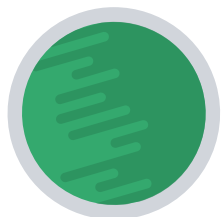
Adoption by Council of Europe

- The Council of Europe integrated Wilkins' ideas into communicative language syllabuses, shifting focus from grammar to practical communication needs.
- By the end of 1970s, the course books started adopting functional syllabuses.



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Key Concepts



- ❖ This approach is based on the analysis of the learners' social and vocational communicative needs.
- ❖ What meanings people want to convey i.e., the notion (such as the emotion, the manner, the time, the location, the motion, quantity)
- ❖ What people want to do with the language i.e., the function (such as, persuading, informing, requesting, expressing)
- ❖ Learning of the vocabularies and language structures specific to the identified notions & functions



Defining Notions and Functions



What Are Functions?

Functions include persuading, informing, requesting, and expressing, enabling learners to perform real-world language tasks.



What Are Notions?

Notions cover meanings like emotion, time, location, motion, and quantity, based on learners' social and vocational needs.



According to Wilkins (1973, 1976), eight types of communicative functions are recognized, that is, eight kinds of things learners can do with language, such as:

- ❖ *Modality* (to express degrees of certainty, necessity, conviction, obligation, and tolerance)
- ❖ *Moral discipline and evaluation* (judgment, approval, disapproval)
- ❖ *Suasion* (persuasion, recommendation, predictions)
- ❖ *Argument* (information asserted or sought, agreement, denial, concession)
- ❖ *Rational inquiry and exposition* (author's note: similar in sub-categories to argument and evaluation)
- ❖ *Personal emotions* (positive and negative)
- ❖ *Emotional relations* (greeting, flattery, hostility)
- ❖ *Interpersonal relations* (politeness and status: degree of formality and informality)



UNDERSTANDING THE FUNCTION OF LANGUAGE THROUGH EXPONENT

Function	Exponent
Inviting informally	• Please come to the party! • I would love it if you come! • Join us if you can!
Inviting formally	• I wonder if you could possibly come to the party • I cordially invite you to lunch at my house • It would be my pleasure if you would join us at the party



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Assumptions and Principles

Core Assumptions



Focus on Communication

Language learning prioritizes communicative functions and notions over strict grammar, using real-life contexts.

Real-World Relevance

Emphasizes authentic situations; grammar emerges naturally through meaningful use.

Guiding Principles



Purpose-Driven Teaching



Targets specific communicative functions and notions for effective real-world competence.



Skill Integration

Builds listening, speaking, reading, writing via contextual practice.



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Syllabus Design

Activity-Based Structure



Aligning with Needs

- Selecting tasks matching identified notions and functions for authentic skill development.
- Teachers design lessons to practice and develop language skills within authentic contexts.

Lesson Progression

Includes scaffolding learners' understanding, and, use of languages by incorporating all the four basic skills (LSRW) activities with role-plays, simulations, problem-solving, and information-gap activities.



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Teaching Techniques and Roles

Learners' Active Engagement

Interactive Learning



Active involvement fosters practical language use in target scenarios.

Participation Strategies



Promotes pair/group work, collaboration; learners gain autonomy in expressing ideas.



Teacher's Facilitative Role



Guidance and Feedback

Facilitates discussions, provides feedback, encourages reflection on communication strategies.



Error Correction

Corrects for accuracy and appropriateness in context-specific situations.





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Teaching Materials

Authentic Resources

Real-World Examples

Uses newspapers, documentaries, pamphlets, ads, event promotions, news debates.

Practical Items

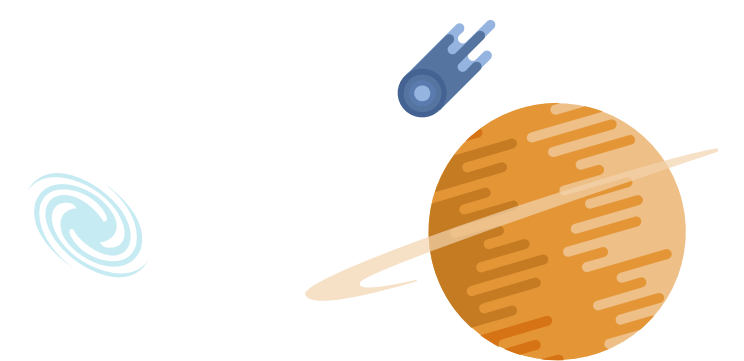
Incorporates invitation letters, posters, billboards for contextual relevance.





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Criticisms and Limitations



Key Challenges



Grammar Neglect Risk

Prioritizes meaning over accuracy, potentially weakening grammatical foundations.

Assessment Difficulties

Hard to design valid tests measuring functional language use reliably.

Syllabus Limitations

Item Lists vs. Methods

Provides lists of items to learn, not detailed learning processes.





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Conclusion/Key Takeaways



Key Takeaways

01

Learner-Centered Focus

Classifies skills by communicative purposes and meanings learners need.



02

Benefits for Teachers

Helps identify and analyze needs for optimal target language achievement.

Recommended Readings



- *A History of English Language Teaching* by A. P. R. Howatt & H. G. Widdowson, 2nd Revised edition [2004]
- *Fundamental Concepts of Language Teaching: Historical and Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Applied Linguistic Research* by H. H. Stern [1983]
- *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching* by Jack C. Richards & Theodore S. Rodgers [2001]
- *Building Strategies* by Brian Abbs & Ingrid Freebairn [1979]
- *Functions of English* by Leo Jones [1979]
- *Notions in English* by Leo Jones [1982]