FITTING THE STRUCTURES OF SURVIVAL ENGLISH INTO A NOTIONAL THRESHOLD LEVEL OF LANGUAGE FUNCTIONS

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Introduction

With the influx of refugees to the United States, the ESL teacher and syllabus constructor are faced with an interesting and challenging problem. That problem is how to fit the teaching of survival English into the normal ESL curriculum. The goal of this curriculum has been communicative competence but mostly at the university level. What survival English is taught to university-bound students is limited and is usually fit into a structural framework. Even when the ESL program is not geared to university-level, most curricula are structurally oriented around situations, i.e., at the post office, the doctor's office, etc.1

As D. A. Wilkins (1976) has said in Notional Syllabuses, the structural framework in whatever form is a synthetic (grammatical) syllabus which is inevitably incomplete. He has said:

One of the major reasons for questioning the adequacy of grammatical syllabuses lies in the fact that even when we have described the grammatical (and lexical) meaning of a sentence we have not accounted for the way in which it is used as an utterance. (1976, 10)

Another approach to syllabus construction is suggested by D. A. Wilkins - the notional/functional syllabus. The notional syllabus takes as a starting point the uses of utterances and orders these by language function and topic for teaching purposes. The threshold level of language functions suggested by J. A. vanEk (1976) is one such attempt. VanEk states that:

The basic characteristic of the model ... is that it tries to specify language ability as skill rather than knowledge. It analyzes what the learner will have to be able to do in the foreign language and determines only in the second place what language-forms (words, structures, etc.) the learners will
have to be able to handle in order to do all that has been specified. (1976, 5)

L. G. Alexander in this same book suggests that one alternative framework of their approach is the situational application of a functional/notional approach (1976, 151). Most of the materials in survival English can be fit into this framework.

This paper identifies the language functions of the threshold level and proposes a check-off matrix that may be used to ensure that the grammatical structures and situations of a survival ESL course incorporate the language functions at a threshold level.

Grammatical Structures and Situations of Survival ESL

The author has selected two survival ESL texts as typical: (a) English as a Second Language: A New Approach for the 21st Century (Modulearn) and (b) English for Adult Living - Books Une, Two (S.R.). A summary of the structures and situations offered in these books may be seen in Appendix, Chart 1.

J. A. vanEk has identified topic areas that adult students at the threshold level must cover. These topic areas are a good summary of structures and situations found in survival English materials.

1. (a) personal identification
   (b) house and home
   (c) life at home
   (d) education and future career
   (e) free time, entertainment
   (f) travel
   (g) relations with other people
   (h) health and welfare
   (i) shopping
   (j) food and drink
   (k) services
   (l) places
   (m) foreign language
   (n) weather

(vanEk, 1976, 25)

These topics can be subcategorized. To take one example, vanEk suggests that for 1(k) services:

2. the learner "should be able to make use of a number of important services and help others to use them:
   (a) post: give and seek information about where the post office is, where a letter box is, inquire about postage for letters and parcels, buy stamps, inquire about poste restante
(b) telephone: give and seek information about where phone-calls can be made; ask someone to ring them up; tell others they will ring them up; ask if they can make a call; ask for a telephone number and give their own number; ask for coins.

(c) telegraph: send a telegram; ask when it will arrive; inquire about the price.

(d) bank: give and ask information about where the nearest bank is, where foreign money can be changed; change money at a bank, (optional: cash a cheque, say whether and, if so, where they have an account).

(e) police: give and seek information about where the nearest police station is; report a loss or a theft; pay a fine

(f) hospital surgery: (see Medical services above)

(g) repairs: give and seek information about where things can be repaired; ask for things to be repaired.

(h) garage: give and seek information about where the nearest garage is; report a breakdown; ask for technical help.

(i) petrol-station: give and seek information about where the nearest petrol-station is; (optional: buy petrol, have oil, water and tyres checked).

(vanEk, 1976, 33)

If we wish, we can identify this topic-related behavior with specific lessons as listed for Modulearn or English for Adult Living. "Services" are covered in English for Adult Living in sections 5, 6, 10, 11, 13, 15, 18 and in Modulearn in sections 7, 11, 12, 13, 14, 21, 23, 24.

As can be seen in the chart in the Appendix, the structures and situations to be found in Survival English materials are fairly comprehensive in covering the situations or topics and a set of limited structures which may be used in those situations. There is some effort to build on "known" structures but there is very little effort to incorporate language functions.

Language Functions at the Threshold Level

The language functions that J. A. vanEk has identified are:

3. (a) imparting and seeking factual information
   (b) expressing and finding out intellectual attitudes
   (c) expressing and finding out emotional attitudes
   (d) expressing and finding out moral attitudes
(e) getting things done (suasion)
(f) socializing

(vanEk, 1976, 25)

There are many more language functions as have been noted by Searle and Wilkins, but for the threshold level students the functions chosen are those of most broad operational use. Thus in 3 (a) one function of imparting and seeking information is that of "identifying". This function recurs in a large number of situations and structures as in 4.

4.

(a) This/These BE

\{my friends the books I spoke of the clutch the job application the prescription the policeman\}

(b) The books which

\{my brother gave me look like yours were on the table\}

have been lost.

(c) The pretty little girl on the left needs talking to.

(d) Q. Who went to the store?
A. My brother.
Those boys over there.

(e) Q. What do you need?
A. a book
change
information
some help

The ESL teacher and syllabus constructor may use the six broad language functions identified by vanEk to ensure that the materials of a survival English course are graded to ensure that a specific language function is taught within a variety of situations and with an increasing demand for the use of the proper and
perhaps more complex grammatical structures that may be used.

What this paper suggests is that the listing made for a survival English course must incorporate not only topics (situations) and structures but also language functions. This will necessitate a restructuring of the survival English materials so that the topic is reintroduced a number of times with an increasing level of difficulty of grammatical structure to demonstrate a specific language function.

Check-off Matrix of Language Functions

Let us take an example of how a syllabus constructor or an ESL teacher could restructure survival English materials to incorporate specific language functions. In the situation or topic of "services" seen in 2 (a) - (i), all of the language functions indicated in 3 would be used. However, for purposes of this limited approach, the author has selected the language function of "suasion" or "getting things done" (3.e.) as the most demonstrable. The language functions involved in "getting things done" include:

5. (a) suggesting a course of action (including a speaker)
   (b) requesting others to do something
   (c) inviting others to do something
   (d) advising others to do something
   (e) warning others to take care or refrain from doing something
   (f) instructing or directing others to do something
   (g) offering assistance
   (h) requesting assistance

   (vanEk, 1976, 38)

   The language function of 5 (a), "suggesting a course of action (including the speaker)" must include language forms of the following kinds:

6. (a) (Please) Fill'er up. (Imperative)
   (b) Let's stop for gas.
   (c) Shall I/we check the tires?
   (d) We could check the oil and water too.
   (e) What about taking the car to a mechanic?
   (f) We might ask the garage attendant to check the lights.
or language forms of the following type for 5 (d), "advising others to do something":

7. (a) Always put the zip code on your letters. (Imperative)
   (b) You should find out the hours of the post office.
   (c) You ought to weigh that letter first.
   (d) Why don't you ask the mailman?
   (e) I think, you should use better string on that package.
   (f) I can recommend UPS for fast delivery.

As can be seen, there are many different structural forms of suasion. The notional syllabus requires that a specific language function be taught regardless of the actual forms and their difficulty. This paper suggests that if the language functions are included as part of the things to be taught in certain situations, the structural forms will come naturally.

The Imperative is introduced in the first lesson of both the Modulearn and the English for Adult Living texts, as a classroom expression for the purpose of running the class. What must also be taught is that the Imperative can be used in suggesting a course of action as in 6 (a) or in advising others to do something as in 7 (a). The Imperative can also be used in "warning others to take care" (5.f.), as in 8 (a); or in "instructing or directing others" (5.g.), as in 8 (b).

8. (a) Don't walk. (negative Imperative)
     Don't smoke around the fuel pumps.
     Mail before 3 p.m.

The ESL teacher or syllabus constructor should include language functions in the matrix of things to be taught. The check-off matrix in 9 on the following page.

As can be seen, this matrix is not complete but what is suggested is that not only should topics and structures be considered in preparing survival materials; but that language functions must also be taken into account. In considering the teaching of the topic "services", sub-category Bank (3.d.), the ESL teacher must identify and demonstrate not only the structures that might go with this topic but also the language function. In adapting the materials of Modulearn and of English for Adult Living, the suggestion is that most of the materials can be used if the teacher makes an effort to demonstrate language function as well.
For example, in teaching "how much/many" both Modulearn and English for Adult Living introduce "how much/many" in section 3 (see chart 1), Situation--American currency. Some effort must be made to show all of the language functions of this grammatical structure, as indicated in 9.

9. Check-off Matrix of Language Functions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TOPIC</th>
<th>STRUCTURE</th>
<th>FACTUAL</th>
<th>INTELLECTUAL</th>
<th>EMOTIONAL</th>
<th>SOCIAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bank Currency</td>
<td>a. How much / many / $</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Open checking account</td>
<td>b. This is my check-ing acc. #</td>
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<td></td>
<td>c. I'll cash a check.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>d. Do you need some money?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>e. How much do you need?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>f. What is your acc. #?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>g. Do you need a passbook?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>h. Let's go to the bank.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>i. I would like to deposit.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>j. Your check has been returned (bounced).</td>
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<td></td>
<td>k. Would you like me to lend you</td>
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<td></td>
<td>l. Will you give me a certified check?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>m. We could cash a check at the grocery store.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>n. A credit union has share drafts.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>o. We can give you 5 1/2% on your savings acc.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

"How much/many" has the factual language function in forms like those of:

10. (a) How much does ______ cost?
   It costs $5.75.

(b) How many ones do you want?
   I would like 10 ones.
The factual language functions are those of (1) identifying; (2) reporting; (3) correcting; and (4) asking.

This structure also has the intellectual language function of expressing agreement or disagreement, as in:

11. Yes, it costs $5.75. That is too much.

The social language function of "how much/many" must also be taught. That is the idea of when a native speaker is allowed to ask this question:

12. (a) to a clerk--How much does ______ cost?  OK
(b) to a friend--How much does the movie cost?  OK
(c) to a realtor--How much does this house cost?  OK
(d) to a host--How much does this house cost?  No

The language forms in 9 (a) - (m) vary in their language functions. But as can be seen all of these forms can be used for more than one language function. Almost all of the structures can be used to express the factual language function, all except 9 (h) and 9 (k). 9 (j) and 9 (k) can be used to show some of the emotional language attitudes, those of (1) expressing pleasure/displeasure; (2) expressing interest/lack of interest; (3) expressing hope/fear/worry; or (4) expressing preference. 9 (d) "Do you need some money" and 9 (k) "Would you like me to lend you some money" and 9 (j) "Your check has bounced" can be used to show the moral language functions of expressing approval, or appreciation or disapproval.

To achieve communicative competence of survival English, the student must be exposed to these various functions and learn to relate the use of one grammatical form to more than one function and topic. This check-off matrix is suggested as a way of helping the ESL teacher and/or syllabus constructor to incorporate the structures and topics of survival English with the appropriate language functions to produce a situational application of the notional/functional syllabus.
FOOTNOTES

1. L. G. Alexander in the "Supplement" to J. A. vanEk's book, The Threshold Level for Modern Language Learning in Schools (1976) points out that the structural framework is a syllabus of "graded sequences of structures" (1976:152) and a situational application of the structural framework "... covers a variety of approaches ... ."

   classroom situational
   center of interest situational
   structurally controlled situational
   story-line situational (1976:153)

2. The situational application of the functional/notional approach as presented by L. G. Alexander (1976:157) "is used to cover not only grammar and lexis, but functions, notions, and their components, settings and topics, social and psychological roles, and style and range of expression."

REFERENCES


## Chart of Structures and Situations in Sample Survival ESL Texts

### Structures
1. **WHAT'S YOUR NAME?**
   - It's time.
2. **WHAT Q - 3rd person**
   - Yes/No Q - BE
3. **DEMONSTRATIVES**
   - How much Q
4. **DETERMINERS**
   - (A/AN, THE)
5. **WHERE Q**
   - Prepositions of Place
6. **WHO Q**
7. **Pres. verb (take, have, etc.)**
   - Short answers DO, BE

### Situations
1. **Use classroom vocabulary**
   - Greetings
2. **Identify professions/occupations**
3. **Use calendar**
   - Use monetary system
4. **Identify fruits & vegetables**
5. **Identify locations**
   - Identify common & personal possessions
6. **Identify family relationships**
   - Recognize numerals (1-100)
7. **Identify common ailments**
   - Use of telephone

### ENGLISH FOR ADULT LIVING - Book 1

### Structures
1. **N + BE**
2. **Neg. + BE**
3. **Pres. Tense - need**
4. **Neg. + DO**
5. **Pres. Progressive**

### Situations
1. **As a person his/her name**
2. **Greetings**
3. **Identify persons/objects, colors/numbers**
4. **Name family members**
5. **Name days of week**
6. **Name foods want**
   - Shopping have Nutritional needs
7. **Identify grocery items**
8. **Identify package vocab.**
9. **Handle Am. currency**
10. **Identify housing need**
11. **Use classified ads**
12. **Identify basic utilities**
13. **Use telephone**
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>8. Pres. verbs {want}</th>
<th>Discuss family members</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>May I help you?</td>
<td>Discuss dwelling places/rent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(fixed expression)</td>
<td>Is there ____ Q</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. SOME/ANY Verb - like</td>
<td>Discuss feelings of hunger &amp; thirst</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tell time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Discuss take-out food vs. other types of food</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Verb - need</td>
<td>Identify clothing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Identify months/seasons</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Use ordinal numbers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Pres. Prog. Q - in pres. prog.</td>
<td>Shop for specific items</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Describing present actions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Discuss driving activities</td>
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<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>Using the post office</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Talking about birthdays</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. WHAT are you doing?</td>
<td>Describe present activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Habitual action</td>
<td>Discuss early morning family activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WHAT DO YOU do everyday?</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>6. WHERE + BE + ing</th>
<th>Use the post office</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7. Imperative</td>
<td>Read city map</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Directions</td>
<td>Read trans. schedules</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time Vocabulary +</td>
<td>Make reservations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency Adv.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Pres. Tense + Inf.</td>
<td>Use school services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past Tense - BE</td>
<td>Enroll child/self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review</td>
<td>Professions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Identifying &amp; buying clothing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Book 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Past - Verbs</td>
<td>Identify budget for family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neg. Demonstratives</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Future Neg. Q</td>
<td>List bank services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Use of checks, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Frequency Adverbs</td>
<td>Identify car parts &amp; use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Complete purchase of car</td>
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<tr>
<td>12. Modal Aux.</td>
<td>Obtain driver's license</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Read traffic signs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Use road map</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
13. Comparisons
Use newspaper/state employment service/telephone to find job

Fill out applications
Practice job interviews

15. Past Participles
List services of
Police Dept., Fire Dept.
Place emergency calls

Identify and list
rights of citizens, aliens
File alien report
Citizenship procedures

17. Past Perf. Indirect Object
Identify medical services
Keep health records

Identify family services
List health insurance needs

19. Imperatives
Talk to the barber/hairdresser
Talk about birthdays

14.
Discuss daily meals & snacks
Use transportation system (airplane)

15. Prepositions
Use transportation system (bus)
Discuss taking a trip

Imperative

16. Past tense - statements, Q Adverbs CAN
Using city map (streets, etc.)
Places of business
Giving directions

Occupations

17. Irregular verbs - Past
Household pets
Types of cars
Exchanging bought items
Places in the U.S.

18. Please excuse
Talking about weather
Explain absence because of illness

19. Imperatives
Talk to the barber/hairdresser
Talk about birthdays
20. Describe what is wrong with something

21. BE GOING TO
   How do you spell __________?

22. Sizes

23. Review all question forms

24. Adverbs of frequency

25. Two place predicates

Using the telephone
Discuss home appliances

Talk about buying furniture, etc.
Talk about credit
Talk about sizes

Getting home services/utilities
Emergency help

Traffic rules/signs
Common car problems

Job interview
Discuss jobs & classified ads