

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)². 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 One, 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 | (h) health and welfare |
| (b) house and home | (i) shopping |
| (c) life at home | (j) food and drink |
| (d) education and future career | (k) services |
| (e) free time, entertainment | (l) places |
| (f) travel | (m) foreign language |
| (g) relations with other people | (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

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.
- (b) Turn the screw clockwise.
 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

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

"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

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3. Iwataki, Sadae, and project staff of the Adult Education Program of the Division of Career and Continuing Education of the Los Angeles Unified School District, 1979. *English as a Second Language: A New Approach for the 21st Century*. San Juan Capistrano, CA: Modulearn, Inc.
4. Searle, J. R., 1970. *Speech Acts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
5. VanEk, J. A., 1976. *The Threshold Level for Modern Language Learning in Schools*. Council of Europe, Strasbourg: Longman Group, Ltd.
6. Wilkins, D. A., 1976. *Notional Syllabuses*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

1. Chart of Structures and Situations in Sample Survival ESL Texts

MODULEARN	
<u>Structures</u>	<u>Situations</u>
1. WHAT'S YOUR {NAME ADDRESS}? It's {a TIME.}	Use classroom vocabulary Greetings
2. WHAT Q - 3rd person Yes/No Q - BE	Identify professions/occupations
3. DEMONSTRATIVES How much Q	Use calendar Use monetary system
4. DETERMINERS (A/AN, THE)	Identify fruits & vegetables
5. WHERE Q Prepositions of Place	Identify locations Identify common & personal possessions
6. WHO Q	Identify family relationships Recognize numerals (1-100)
7. Pres. verb (take, have, etc.) Short answers DO, BE	Identify common ailments Use of telephone

ENGLISH FOR ADULT LIVING - Book 1	
<u>Structures</u>	<u>Situations</u>
1. {N Pro.} + BE {N Adj} {Neg. Yes/No Q} -BE Plurals	As a person his/her name Greetings Identify persons/objects, colors/numbers Name family members Name days of week
2. Pres. Tense - need want have Yes/No Q - DO	Name foods Shopping Nutritional needs
3. Neg. + DO How much + BE Package Vocabulary	Identify grocery items Identify package vocab. Handle Am. currency
4. Prep. Phrases WHERE + BE Expletives	Identify housing need Use classified ads
5. Pres. Progressive Neg. Yes/No Q	Use telephone Identify basic utilities

- | | | | |
|---------------------------------------|---|-----------------------|-------------------------------|
| 8. Pres. verbs {
want
have} | Discuss family members | 6. WHERE + BE + ing | Use the post office |
| May I help you?
(fixed expression) | Discuss dwelling places/rent | 7. Imperative | Read city map |
| Is there _____ Q | | Directions | Read trans. schedules |
| 9. SOME/ANY | Discuss feelings of hunger & thirst | Time Vocabulary + | Make reservations |
| Verb - like | Tell time | Frequency Adv. | |
| | Discuss take-out food vs. other types of food | 8. Pres. Tense + Inf. | Use school services |
| 10. Verb - need | Identify clothing | Past Tense - BE | Enroll child/self |
| | Identify months/seasons | Review | Professions |
| | Use ordinal numbers | | Identifying & buying clothing |
| 11. Pres. Prog. | Shop for specific items | | |
| Q - in pres. prog. | Describing present actions | 9. Past - Verbs | Identify budget for family |
| | Discuss driving activities | Neg. | |
| 12. | Using the post office | Demonstratives | |
| | Talking about birthdays | 10. Future | List bank services |
| 13. WHAT are you doing? | Describe present activity | Neg. | Use of checks, etc. |
| Habitual action | Discuss early morning family activities | Q | |
| WHAT DO YOU do everyday? | | 11. Frequency Adverbs | Identify car parts & use |
| | | | Complete purchase of car |
| | | 12. Modal Aux. | Obtain driver's license |
| | | | Read traffic signs |
| | | | Use road map |

Book 2

	Discuss daily meals & snacks Use transportation system (airplane)	13. Comparisons	Use newspaper/state employment service/telephone to find job
14.	Use transportation system (bus) Discuss taking a trip	14. Embedded Sent.	Fill out applications Practice job interviews
15. Prepositions Imperative	Using city map (streets, etc.) Places of business Giving directions	15. { Pres. } Participles { Past } as Adj. { Passive }	List services of Police Dept., Fire Dept. Place emergency calls
16. Past tense - statements, Q Adverbs CAN	Occupations	16. Pres. Perf.	Identify and list rights of citizens, aliens File alien report Citizenship procedures
17. Irregular verbs- Past	Household pets Types of cars Exchanging bought items Places in the U.S.	17. Past Perf. Indirect Object	Identify medical services Keep health records
18. Please excuse	Talking about weather Explain absence because of illness	18. Pres. Perf. Prog. Past Perf. Prog. Conditional - IF	Identify family services List health insurance needs
19. Imperatives	Talk to the barber/hairdresser Talk about birthdays		

20. { WHEN
WHAT TIME } Q Describe what is
wrong with something
21. BE GOING TO Using the telephone
How do you spell Discuss home appli-
_____? ances
22. Sizes Talk about buying
furniture, etc.
Talk about credit
Talk about sizes
23. Review all Getting home ser-
question forms vices/utilities
Emergency help
24. Adverbs of fre- Traffic rules/signs
quency Common car problems
25. Two place predi- Job interview
cates Discuss jobs &
classified ads