

# Functional Syllabuses and Needs Analysis

Dr. Abdul Haq al-Naimi •

## Abstract

The present paper is an attempt to shed light on the basic principles that should be taken into consideration when designing language syllabuses on the basis of language functions and learners' communicative functions. In fact, prior to any analysis of the EFL learners' communicative needs, a comprehensive description of the learners' social, linguistic and/or psychological background is vital. Such description is significant in order to come up with a language syllabus that meets the needs of the learners. The paper also addresses some obstacles that might hinder the design of functional syllabuses.

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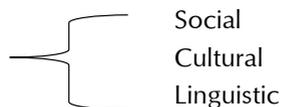
• Ajman University Of Science & Technology Ajman - UAE

## 1. Introduction

A syllabus is “ a specification of the content of a course of instruction and lists what will be taught & tested”( Richards, 2001:2). The nature of a syllabus is closely related to the view of language. Under the impact of Grammar-based views of the nature of language, language syllabuses were expressed in terms of grammar, sentence patterns, and vocabulary. As a result of the more recent movement towards communicative theories of language, syllabuses have tended to be expressed more in communicative terms. Functional syllabuses are” organized around communicative functions, such as identifying, reporting, correcting, describing” ( Richards, 1990:9). Pedagogy shifted its attention from the teaching and practice of grammar and pronunciation rules, and the learning of vocabulary lists, to communicative activities. The functional approach has placed a premium on meaning rather than form and on consideration of factors other than purely linguistic ones. One very significant move has been the attention which is now given to the LEARNER, both to his potential communicative needs, and to his characteristics and background. In this functional syllabus design has taken a step towards the main stream of curriculum development which is concerned with all the learning which actually takes place both inside and outside the school. Since the curriculum exists within a context wider than the school, external factors are seen to be important in the process of curriculum development. These factors include cultural, social and political aspects of context in which curriculum is implemented.

Typically, a needs analysis within the functional approach should take into account three main classes:

1. Potential communicative needs.
2. The learner and his background



3. The educational setting. (including cultural, political, and economic factors).

Clearly, it is the learner’s potential communicative needs which will form the basis of the syllabus itself, providing the content of the programme. The scope and organization of the programme and most especially, the methodology to be employed will be influenced by factors 2 and 3 above. What is significant is that these factors are seen as being a necessary part of language syllabus

design and that in designing a syllabus within the functional approach, the designer will need both to obtain information under headings 2 and 3 to apply this information in the construction of the syllabus.

We shall now approach functional syllabus design by starting with the question of learner's potential communicative needs, following the conventions which have been established by Richterich (1972), Munby (1978) and others. We shall then proceed to a consideration of the two sets of factors grouped under headings 2 and 3 above. Finally, we shall look at the specification of objectives.

## **II. Aim of the Research**

This research offers a brief account of what we suggest as a number of basic principles for the design of functional syllabuses. In the discussion of functional syllabuses which we will undertake, we shall endeavor to justify that designing such syllabuses is laborious to use in practice and presents many difficulties.

## **III. Limits of the Study**

In this study no serious claims have been made about the needs of learners in the secondary schools. This is because school pupils will have potential needs of all sorts and special needs from which a syllabus may be derived do not in this case exist. Therefore, when dealing with masses of learners who have no clear communicational objectives, it is impossible to predict what the learners' needs might ultimately be.

## **IV. The learners' Potential Communicative Needs**

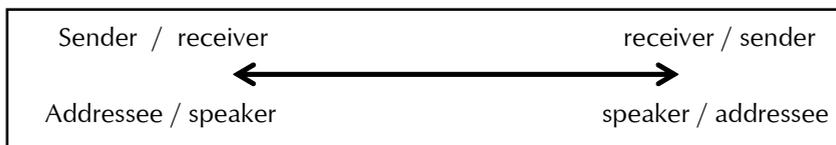
In the simplest terms, a needs analysis is "to identify things learners need to do with the language and stimulate these in the classroom....and then learn the forms which would fulfill those needs" (Cook, 2003:37). The kinds of questions we want to answer in defining learners' needs would include the following:

- a) Where will he be using the language? Setting
- b) Who will be using it with? Participants
- c) What will he need to do with the language? Functions
- d) What topics will he need to discuss? Topics
- e) What medium will he need to use? Medium

a) Setting: this term is used to include both the type of setting, such as an occupational or educational setting, and the specific location, such as an office or lecture hall.

To design a functional syllabus, we need to list the general and specific settings which the learner will encounter.

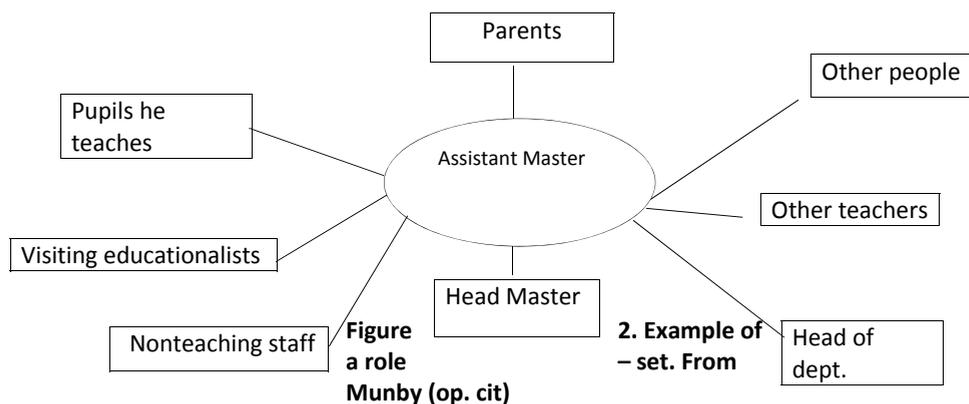
## b) Participants



**Figure 1:Participants in communication**

In communication there are both a sender and a receiver, and in the course of interaction, these roles alternate. So the speaker becomes the addressee and vice versa. The speaker’s behavior will, in part, be influenced by the identity of his addressee, which brings us to an important aspect of language behavior, namely that there is a close relationship between social role and language use.

A social role exists in relation to other roles with which it is associated. Thus, for example, the role of a doctor involves other roles such as patients, nurses, ancillary staff, consultants, and so on. The figure from Munby, cited below, illustrates a role set for an assistant master in a typical secondary school.



Defining such role sets for our students leads us to consider several important features. Firstly, there is the identity of members of the role-set in terms of number, age – group, sex and nationality. Secondly, there is the social relationship with each member of the role – set. Thirdly, we are reminded that all these relationships involve reciprocity – they are a two way street. The concept of role highlights the continuing, reciprocal nature of interaction, reminding us that the social roles we identify for

our learners must be seen in the context of other social roles and not in vacuum. Thus, the role of guest involves the role of host; and the role of instructor involves the role of learner.

The social relationship between members of a role – set may be either symmetrical, that is, there may be an element of superiority or subordination, of equality or distance, cohesiveness or divisiveness. Where one member of the role–set can control the behavior of another there is an asymmetrical element of power in the relationship. Where the relationship is symmetrical, with familiarity and shared interests, there is an element of solidarity (Brown & Gilman, 1960).

As may be obvious by now, the nature of the social relationship is likely to have a considerable influence on stylistic features of language. At the simplest level, this influence will be revealed in the choice of addressee terms, e.g. Sir, Mr. X, Bill. At a more complex level, there will be more subtle choices, as in ways of making suggestions or making illustrations or requesting help. Social relationship and appropriateness, then, are very closely interconnected and in defining learner's needs, it is important to specify the social roles in which the learner will engage as a prelude to specify the stylistic features of the language he need to use.

### **c) Language functions:**

We come now to the category which, above all, distinguishes the design of a semantic or notional syllabus from a structure based one. In order to determine the potential communicative functions which he learner will need, it is necessary to have some kind of list against which to check his needs. The Waystage (1977) provides such a list. Using such a list, we can review the language functions which the learner will need to perform. Waystage is an objective for these learners who would be temporary visitors to a foreign language country or have temporary contacts with foreign language speakers in their own country, and who would use the foreign language particularly orally and for general, non-professional purposes. In other words, Waystage is a basis for achieving general foreign language ability.

There are however, some problems associated with such an exercise. Firstly, there is the problem of sampling potential language use. Ideally, this would be done by observation. The practical difficulties in the way of doing this are obvious. Secondly there is the difficulty of predicting the learners functional needs on the basis of introspection. Although introspection based on experience is a valuable tool, such introspection is bound to be subjective, and so some outside objective check needs to be made in order to verify and augment one's own "best guesses". Thirdly,

there is the possibility of eliciting the learner's own predictions by direct questioning. A difficulty here is in eliciting the required information in terms which are comprehensible to the learner, since functional terminology is somewhat removed from the layperson's everyday use of language. Finally, another source of information, closely related to our first suggestion is to elicit information from people actually engaged in tasks using language in the ways required by our learners.

In all of the above, we need to have a framework within which we attempt to characterize the learner's potential function needs. The checking off of individual functions on a list may be sufficient but checking off in this way may be unsatisfactory because each function is treated in isolation.

Functional syllabuses present language as an inventory of functions, for accumulation and storage. What such syllabuses do not do or have not done to date is to "present language as discourse, and since it does not, it cannot possibly in its present form account for communicative competence"(Widdowson 1978:248).(1)

**(1) Communicative competence is not a compilation of items in memory but a set of strategies for realizing the value of linguistic elements in context of use, an ability to make sense as a participant in discourse by the skillful deployment of rules of language in use.**

A more stylistic and helpful approach may be to take a large unit as the basis of analysis, as exemplified by Bung (1973) in his definition of foreign language needs of waiters and hotel staff. He defines a functional unit in terms of OPERATIONS AND BEHAVIOURS, which a waiter, for instance, has to perform in the course of his duties. He lists such staff functions as waiter, serving food, room service, giving information about entertainment. Each of these staff functions consists of functions such as we find in Munby (op cit). (To make the above discussion feasible, see Appendix 1)

#### **d) Topics:**

We now come to the question "what topic will the learner need to discuss?" Topics can be very general or highly specific. Thus, a general topic like food can be broken down into more and more specific sub topics, and this is what is done by Van Ek (1977:32).

Food and drink: learners should be able to deal with some aspects of eating and drinking:

- Types of food and drink
- Places where you eat and drink

Like the list of functions, a list of topics can be used as a check or reminder when attempting to establish learners' need. The Waystage provides topic lists, and the list below gives the main topic heading in Waystage, which may be used as a general checklist.

- |                               |                      |
|-------------------------------|----------------------|
| 1 . Personal identification.  | 7 . Food and drink.  |
| 2 . House and home.           | 8 . Services.        |
| 3 . Free time, entertainment. | 9 . Places.          |
| 4 . Travel.                   | 10 . Language.       |
| 5 . Health and welfare.       | 11 . Weather.        |
| 6 . Shopping drink.           | 12 . Public notices. |

A list such as this may be combined with a list of topics in which the learner is interested. Clark (1979) and his colleagues drew up such a learner based list derived from a survey of a secondary school pupils. The most popular topics were:

Sports/ TV programs/ School/ Holidays/ Travel, Seaside/  
 Films and drink/ Animals/ Parents/ News (world affairs)/  
 Jobs/ War ( violence ).

Once we have defined the functional needs and wants of the learner and when we have listed the topics areas which are of relevance, we are in a position to consider how these elements will be encoded or expressed. In other words, we can start producing exponents for them. There is, however a danger if our listing of exponents is based on office – based intuition or introspection. Each of us has his/her own idiolect or ways of expression, and it is all too easy to impose one 's own style of expression when producing exponents for a given set of functions and topics. Thus, reference to actual language use through the collection of authentic data is crucial to avoid colouring exponents with one 's own idiolect.

If it is not practicable to collect data from the field,one 's own intuition should be checked against that of other native speakers. It will be sensible to elicit exponents from native speaking colleagues or associates and to modify the list of exponents accordingly. Either way, reliance on only one source of exponents may produce language examples which are unusual or odd.

**e) Medium :** Here we are concerned with what are traditionally called “the four skills” , viz., listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The first two are associated with the spoken medium, while the latter two are associated with the written medium. When defining learner's needs it is important to specify the major categories of

communication in which the learner will engage.

## **V. The Learner and his Background**

In identifying learner's need we have specified what the learners should be able to do in terms of language functions, topics and medium. It is possible to undertake such a needs analysis without, at any stage, coming into contact with the learners themselves. Indeed, needs analysis can be carried out in the comfort of the office without even "getting mud on your boots". The value of needs analysis carried out under such circumstances is open to question, and any needs analysis to be worthwhile should have the benefit of information based on work in the field, such as a job analysis.

All of the information derived from such sources will provide the basis for functional syllabus. But, before the syllabus can be constructed, it is essential to look at the starting point from which the learners will proceed. This means that we have to study the characteristics of the learner. In doing so, we will come into contact with his background and this in turn will lead to a consideration of the psychological, social and cultural factor. The questions we want to ask include:

Nationality

Age- Sex

- Who is the learner ? LI (first language)
- Cultural background

Social class

Occupation

- What is the social and educational background ?

Type of Education

Competence in English

- Why does he want to learn English ?

-What is his motivation for learning English, e.g.

"I like English people." "English has a literature." "I want to travel abroad and English is the most widely used language." "I want to improve my professional knowledge by reading up to date information in English."

- What is the learner 's view of learning a language ?, e.g.

"You have to learn the rules." "Learning idioms is most important."

"Learning to speak the language is the most important."

- What will interest the learner within the repertoire of English?

E.g. literature, the mass media, informal conversation with friends, giving and receiving instruction, expressing one's own viewpoint on current issues, exchanging viewpoints.

-Is he a good language learner? The reference here is to his characteristics as learner along lines suggested by Rubin (1975) and discussed in Naiman et al (1978). A summary of Rubin's list of strategies followed by the good language learner is given in (Appendix 2).

It will be obvious that a complete profile of the learner, taking into account all of the items listed above, will be quite an exercise in itself. Furthermore, there are circumstances where it is difficult or impossible to obtain such information in advance of teaching the students concerned, or where obtaining the information is objective and entirely factual, e.g. age, nationality, sex. Some information may be difficult to classify, for instance, how does one characterize the cultural background of a Lebanese educated in an English-medium university in his own country? Finally, other information concerned with the learner's motivation and attitude will be difficult to obtain because of difficulty in eliciting such information in a way that is meaningful both to the learner and the teacher.

In spite of these hazards, attention to the learner, his requirements and feelings has come to occupy an important place in syllabus design. It would be no exaggeration to say that the learner has too often been the last person to be considered when a syllabus has been designed and decisions on methodology and material have been made. Even though a needs analysis can be conducted without reference to the learner, decisions on the scope and organization of the syllabus and, most crucially on methodology, cannot be made without reference to-and preferably consultation with the learners themselves. Let us now consider the learner's background:

### **Social Background**

The social factor is a complex one, since it involves two different things. Firstly, the society from which the learner comes and in which his past and present learning may take place; and Secondly, the society into which the learner may move. The significance of the social and cultural factors in planning is discussed by Nostrand (1966), Richards (1972) and White (1972). Their discussions include reference to such influences as cultural, linguistic, educational, economic and political factors and it is to the first of these that we will now turn.

## **Cultural Background**

The questions we need to ask here are:

- What type of culture is it ? ( industrial, rural, religious,....).
- What are culturally acceptable ways of behaving ? ( rules of politeness, customs such as shaking hands or not, reactions to differences based on age, sex and socio-economic status).

Using such factors and many others, syllabus course designers should compare and contrast the “home” and “target” culture of the learners. These differences are likely to influence the syllabus design and the teaching procedure.

## **Linguistic Background**

Two separate levels of analysis come under this heading, the first is concerned with contrastive analysis between the learner’s LI and the FL. For a discussion of this field, see James (1980) and Kharma& Hajjaj ( 1997). The second area concerns the place of the target language in the learner’s own society . This will involve fact finding in order to answer questions such as the following :

- 1 . What languages are used in the community ?
- 2 . Is there a standard language ?
- 3 . Is there a national language ? Is it the same as 2 above?
- 4 . Is there a language policy in relation to either 2 or 3 or both?
- 5 . What is the status and role of English ? Is it the national language, a prestige language used by a minority of the population, the medium of education, a language of wider communication with outside world, a foreign language with limited functions ?

Answering questions 1 –5 above will help to characterize a language situation.

## **The Educational Setting**

Here we are concerned with the general standard and allocation of resources to Education . The questions we need to answer are :

- 1 . Is Education centrally controlled ?
- 2 . Who controls the finance ?
- 3 . How involved are teachers in innovation ?
- 4 . What resources are granted to Education ?
- 5 . What is the status and influence of examinations ?
- 6 . What is the standard of teachers in primary and secondary schools ?

7 . How well educated and trained are they ? When designing a functional syllabus we should attempt to answer the above questions and many others with respect to the educational system of the country with which you are familiar .

### Economic Background

Here we are concerned with resources (audio-visual aids, trained teachers, time, money, etc...) and opportunities.

- 1 . What is the basis of the country's economy ?
- 2 . What manpower requirements does the economy have ?
- 3 . What employment opportunities are open to school leavers and university graduates ?
- 4 . What portion of the national budget is allocated to Education ?

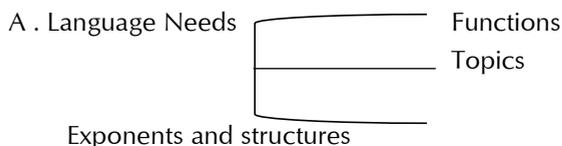
### Political Background

As far as Education is concerned, the influence of political climate of the country will be reflected in the aims of the Educational system and in participating in it by teachers, pupils and the community. The questions we would like to ask here include:

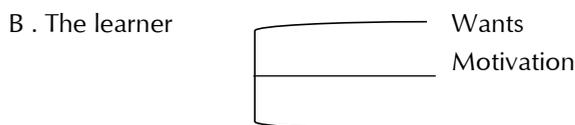
1. How is the Education system controlled ?
2. How is access to Education controlled ?
3. What political factors influence the place and role of English and other languages in the community ?

### VI. Conclusion:

By systematically working through the issues presented in the preceding sections , we should obtain information on:



Exponents and structures



Approach to learning

Social, cultural and educational background



Information from A and B provides the basis for designing the programme and planning procedures, viz. Syllabus design and methodology. Information from C will influence the scope of the syllabus and the methodology that is employed . In other

words, we have a sequence of stages :

First, we discover what is desirable (needs), then we find what the learner's resources are, and finally we see in what ways the aims of the syllabus are capable of realization given available resources .

The learner's needs are defined by reference to the settings in which he will operate . This is a process of prediction and is concerned with factors which are external to the learners themselves. In fact, as we have seen, needs can be defined without reference to the learners. The next step is to discover learner 's wants and to match these against their needs .

Once this is done, it is possible to produce a range of linguistic exponents from which a structural inventory can be derived. All of this information will feed into the design or planning of the syllabus as a programme of what is to be taught, viz. the content and skills.

The actual teaching procedure, i.e. methodology, will be influenced by other pieces information that have been gleaned about the learners, such as their social and cultural background, their expectations and approach to learning, their age and their previous educational experience .

So far our concern has been with the learner, but as we have seen, neither the learner nor the teacher operates in isolation from the social, political, and educational context around them. It is a flaw in the Munby syllabus design model that these crucial areas are ignored; and yet, it is these very issues which will determine the final form and scope of the syllabus for the school and its resources-human and material-will be the product of a given social, educational and political system, and the syllabus will bend pressures from these areas. To ignore such constraints is likely to result in the production of a syllabus which is nothing more than the idealized expression of unrealizable intentions. The sequences of steps we have followed may be summarized as follows:

### **Steps PurposeOutcome**

1. To find learner 's need	Functional and topic inventory
2. To find learner 's wants	As above
3. To produce exponents for 1 & 2	Inventory of exponents
4. To produce structure list for 3	Structural inventory
5. To find characteristics of learners	Description of characteristics
6. To review contextual factors constrains	Inventory of resources, and

7. To review institutional factors      Inventory of resources, and constrains  
Which will help or hinder teaching
8. To produce a teaching syllabus      The teaching (or pedagogical  
using output from 1,2,3,and 4, syllabus)  
and modifying these on the basis  
of output from 5,6 and 7.

Despite the extensive literature on syllabus design in recent years, there is little empirical evidence to warrant commitment to any particular approach to syllabus design. This could be the subject of another research.

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## Appendix 1

### Operations and Functions

- Use the waystage list of language function as & check list ( Van EK 1977 ).
- Make & list of “operations” which have engaged in during a typical day as a visitor to a foreign country, e.g. buying stamps, visiting a museum, eating in a restaurant.
- Where necessary, break down long and complicated operations into a series of smaller steps.
- Make a list of language functions for each operation or stage in the operation.
- You can adapt the list of functions you have been given by using them in one dimension of grid or matrix, thus:

	Booking in at a hotel	Cashing a travelers cheque	Reporting a lost piece of luggage	Dining with new acquaintances	Meeting strangers
Language functions			?		?
Identifying			?		
Describing					
Requesting	?	?			

## Appendix 2

### Rubin’s List of Strategies

- 1 . The good language learner is a willing and accurate gusser.
- 2 . The good language learner has a strong drive to communicate, or to learn from communication. He is willing to do many things to get his message across.

3 . The good language learner is often not inhibited. He is willing to appear foolish if reasonable communication results . He is willing to make mistakes in order to learn and to communicate. He is willing to live with a certain amount of vagueness .

4 . In addition to focusing on communication, the good language learner is prepared to attend to form. The good language learner is constantly looking for patterns in language .

5 . The good language learner practices.

6 . The good language learner monitors his own and speech of others. That is, he is constantly attending to well his speech is being received and whether his performance meets the standards he has learned.

7 . The good language learner attends to meaning .He know that on order to understand the message, it is not sufficient to pay attention to the grammar of the language or to surface form of speech.

# أثر سياسة الدمج على الأداء المالي للشركات الأردنية من وجهة نظر الموظفين الإدارية: دراسة ميدانية

د. عبد الحق النعيمي

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## الملخص

يسلط البحث الضوء على المبادئ الأساسية التي يجب ان تؤخذ بعين الاعتبار عند تصميم مناهج اللغة الإنكليزية و اعدادها والتي تعتمد على الوظائف اللغوية وعلى تحليل الحاجات المستقبلية لمتعلمي اللغة الأجنبية، وهذه الحاجات لا يمكن التنبؤ بها إلا بعد دراسة تحليلية مفصلة للخلفية الاجتماعية واللغوية والنفسية للمتعلمين لكي نستطيع أن نخرج بمنهج يتناسب و حاجات المتعلمين. ويعرض البحث كذلك بعض المصاعب التي تعترض تصميم واعداد مناهج اللغة الإنكليزية بالاعتماد على الوظائف اللغوية.