13 Language functions

A Warm-up

1 Here are some well-known quotations or catchphrases. Can you match them to their function – i.e. their communicative purpose?

1 Round up the usual suspects.	a warning
2 I'll have what she's having.	b inviting
3 My name is Bond, James Bond.	c commanding
4 Houston, we have a problem.	d introducing
5 It'll be all right on the night.	e checking
6 Doctor Livingstone, I presume?	f requesting
7 Come up and see me sometime.	g reassuring

2 Identify any grammar structures that you are already familiar with in any of the quotes. For example, in (4) the present form of the verb *have* is used. Is there an obvious connection between the grammar and the function?

3 Each quote represents what was said in a specific location by one specific person to one or more others. How good is your general knowledge? In each case:

a what was the context of the utterance? i.e. where were the speakers and what were they talking about?
b what was the relationship between the speaker and the person(s) addressed?

If you do not know the sources of these quotes, can you suggest a context in which they might have been said. Who would say it to whom, for example?

> For learners, probably the most striking way in which the knowledge of language developed through a grammatical syllabus fails to measure up to their communicational needs is in its lack of situational relevance. They may […] have considerable practical command of grammatical structures, but the language that they rehearse in the classroom will be inadequately related to what is needed in the situations in which they may actually want to use the language.
>
> David Wilkins, 1976

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B Context and function

1 How many different ways could this sign be expressed in words? Work in pairs.



2 What factors would determine the choice of the different expressions in B1? What might determine the order you would teach them in?

3 Look at the situations below where the same sentence is spoken in four different contexts. Decide on the function of the sentence in each case.

It's ten past nine.









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4 Think of at least two different possible contexts and two corresponding functions for each of the following utterances:

a I'll call the police.
b It's cold in here.
c That's your phone.
d Can you drive?

C Function, style and language

1 The choice between one of several different ways of performing a language function depends on a number of context factors. These factors will include such things as whether the message is spoken or written. Another key factor is the relationship between the people involved, such as how well they know each other, or the social distance between them. The effect of these different adjustments to context factors is known as *register*, which can be formal or informal, for example. Decide on suitable utterances for the context described in the table:

Function	Context and utterance
1 *inviting*	a Send a text message inviting your new neighbours for a welcome drink at your apartment. b You want to have a drink with your friend after work. You say: '…'
2 *asking a favour*	c You want to borrow your flatmate's phone charger. You say: '…' d You are expecting a package to be delivered the next day but you won't be at home. You phone a neighbour whom you don't know very well and leave a voicemail message, asking them if they could take delivery of it. You say: '…'
3 *making a suggestion*	e Your local gym has no wi-fi connection. Write a short note on the subject for the gym's 'suggestion box'. f A work colleague is suffering from back pain, which you think is caused by the way their computer monitor is positioned. You say: '…'

There are particular ways of expressing many functions that have become conventionalized. For example, *Would you like [an X]?* typically functions as an offer. These *formulaic expressions* are often included in syllabuses, alongside grammar items.

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2 Put the formulaic expressions in their correct place in this extract from an elementary syllabus.

Functions	Formulaic expressions
1 asking permission	
2 polite requests	
3 apologizing, and making excuses	
4 asking and giving opinions	

a *What was X like?*
b *Could you … , please?*
c *I had to …*
d *Can I … , please?*
e *I thought it was really …*
f *I'm sorry I didn't …*

3 Work in pairs. Study the coursebook you are using with your teaching practice class. Find the syllabus for the course, which is usually located at the front of the book. Does it include ways of expressing different functions?

D Materials for teaching functional language

Here is an extract from a coursebook, focusing on the language of suggestions.

1 What use could you make of the picture?
2 How would you stage part B?
3 Why is some of the conversation in bold?
4 How would you focus on these items in class?
5 How could you provide practice using these items?

1 FUNCTIONAL LANGUAGE

A **Jonathan is in Mexico City for a meeting with his coworker, Antonio. They're making plans to go out in the evening. What do you think they are saying?**

B 2.34 **Read and listen. Where are Antonio and Jonathan going to have dinner? Where are they going to meet? What time are they going to meet?**



2.34 Audio script

Antonio So, Jonathan, **why don't we go out tonight?**
Jonathan **OK, sounds good**.
Antonio Do you like Mexican food?
Jonathan I love it! Are there any good Mexican restaurants in town?
Antonio Um, in Mexico City? Yeah, I know one or two places!
Jonathan I'm sure you do!
Antonio There's a very good restaurant near your hotel. Why don't we go there?
Jonathan **Good idea**.
Antonio So **let's meet at the hotel**.
Jonathan OK. What time? Eight o'clock?
Antonio Um … **I'm sorry, but I can't**. How about eight-thirty?
Jonathan **Yes, sure**.



Evolve 1

Your trainer will show you how the material is developed in the coursebook. Did you have the same or similar ideas?

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E Teaching functions

1 Work in groups. Your trainer will assign each group a language function (such as *apologizing*) and a level (such as *beginners*). With your group, create a short lesson as follows:

- Think of *two* situations in which the function might typically occur, one more formal than the other.
- Choose an appropriate way of expressing this function for each of the two situations.
- Write two short dialogues (6–8 lines) which contextualize the functional expressions you have chosen.
- Work out how you would use these dialogues to present and contrast the functional expressions to a class at the relevant level.

Be prepared to demonstrate your lesson to the rest of the class.

KEY WORDS FOR TEACHERS

Check you know the meanings of these terms.

- *(communicative) function*
- *context, register*
- *appropriacy*
- *formulaic expression*

REFLECTION

A *functional approach* to language teaching emerged as a reaction to a purely *formal approach* – that is, the teaching of grammar forms or structures, irrespective of the way they are used.

a What sort of problems might a learner encounter who had been taught only language forms, and not their associated functions?

b On the other hand, what might the drawbacks be of organizing a course solely around language functions?

c Can you think of specific instances in your own experience, either as a second language user or as a teacher, where communication was impaired because of *inappropriate* (rather than *inaccurate*) language use?

Reference

Wilkins, D. (1976). *Notional Syllabuses*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p.12.

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