

LANGUAGE SYSTEMS | FUNCTIONAL LANGUAGE

INTRODUCTION

Functional language can be described as a **unit of language** (or language **chunk**) which we use to achieve a specific **communicative purpose**, usually involving the **interaction** of at least two people. For example, the purpose of the unit of language '*Could you pass me the salt, please?*' is making a polite request. It can be generalized that the unit "*Could you..., please?*" performs the function of making a polite request in most contexts (e.g. *Could you close the door, please?* / *Could you help me with my assignment, please?* / *Etc.*).

These units of language like '*Could you..., please?*' (performing a particular function) are called **functional exponents**.

Different exponents can perform **different** functions.

- Would you like some coffee? Making offers
- Let's go to the cinema! Making suggestions

Different exponents can perform the **same** function.

- Is it ok if I sit here? Asking for permission
- Do you mind if I sit here? Asking for permission

The **same** exponent can perform **different** functions.

- Can I have some coffee? Making a request
- Can I smoke? Asking for permission

Some exponents have a more **flexible** structure and can be followed by different units of language.

- How about going for a walk? Making suggestions
- How about the red one? Making suggestions

Some exponents are **fixed** and finite.

- Thank you. Expressing gratitude
- Not at all! Accepting an apology

Categorizing functional language and compiling a comprehensive list of functional exponents is an extremely difficult task. There are no 'functional language' dictionaries to **help teachers** identify and select language functions. However, some categorizations and lists of exponents exist. These are mentioned in the **Useful Resources** section of this handout.

TEACHING FUNCTIONAL LANGUAGE

Functional language is generally taught like other vocabulary or lexical items and teachers usually raise awareness of aspects of **meaning and use** first. The exponents are analyzed as units of language and the emphasis is placed on the function they perform (rather than the grammar). As functional language is naturally used as part of an interaction between two or more people, **dialogues** are often used to help learners work out the meaning of the exponents. Learners may be presented with an exchange between people and asked to identify the target exponents and their corresponding function.

E.g. Read this short dialogue and decide which of the underlined expressions are used to 'make an invitation', 'accept an invitation', and reject an 'invitation'.

A: Hey guys, my parents are away this weekend. Would you like to come round for dinner?

B: Sounds great!

C: I'm not sure.

It is important for learners to become aware that functional language usually generates a **reaction or response**, and to learn both parts of the exchange (e.g. learn how to ask but also how to answer questions).

It is also important for learners to become aware of the **social context** in which an exchange takes place and identify which exponents are **appropriate** in different situations. This is usually related to the level of **formality** required by the situation, and how well you know the **audience** and the **sociocultural conventions** of the situation.

Consider these requests. Which one would you use if you were talking to a stranger?

- Would you mind closing the window?

- Will you close the window?

Pronunciation can play an extremely important role and can define the meaning of an utterance. Learners need to know that a change in **stress** and **intonation** can make the expression '*Would you mind closing the window?*' sound like a genuine polite request or a sarcastic request closer to an order.

The grammatical **form** or **structure** of functional exponents is usually clarified by presenting the exponents in their entirety and by raising awareness of what precedes or follows them (whatever is applicable).

MAKING SUGGESTIONS	RESPONDING TO SUGGESTIONS
INFORMAL <u>Let's</u> + bare infinitive > <u>Let's go</u> to the beach. <u>How about</u> + gerund > <u>How about going</u> to the beach?	INFORMAL Accept <u>Sure!</u> Reject <u>I'm not sure.</u>
FORMAL <u>I suggest</u> + gerund > <u>I suggest going</u> to the beach. <u>We could</u> + bare infinitive > <u>We could go</u> to the beach.	FORMAL Accept <u>I'd be delighted to.</u> Reject <u>I'd rather</u> + bare infinitive > I'd rather <u>stay</u> home.

Activities to expose learners to functional language generally involve input activities designed to **raise awareness** of units of language and the function they perform, and **practice** activities designed to create the need to use them for a particular communicative purpose in a particular context.

Pair- and group-work, role-plays and simulations are popular activities to promote **communicative practice**. Ideas to help teachers select these activities can be found in the **Useful Resources** section of this handout.

PLANNING A FUNCTIONAL LANGUAGE LESSON

A functional language lesson can often be sequenced using popular lesson **frameworks** like Presentation-Practice-Production (PPP), Test-Teach-Test (T-T-T) or Task-based Learning (TBL).

For more information on Presentation-Practice-Production (PPP) and how to plan a lesson using this framework, please refer to the following handouts:

- Methodology | Presentation-Practice-Production (PPP)
- Lesson Frameworks | PPP

For more information on Test-Teach-Test (T-T-T) and how to plan a lesson using this framework, please refer to the following handouts:

- Methodology | Test-Teach-Test (T-T-T)
- Lesson Frameworks | T-T-T

For more information on Task-based Learning (TBL) and how to plan a lesson using this framework, please refer to the following handouts:

- Methodology | Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT)
- Lesson Frameworks | TBL

USEFUL RESOURCES

For more information on some key functions, please refer to the following handout:

- Key language functions

Other lists of functions (and corresponding exponents) can be found in publications accessible on the European Association for Language Testing and Assessment website:

- A2 level > http://www.ealta.eu.org/documents/resources/Waystage_CUP.pdf
- B1 level > http://www.ealta.eu.org/documents/resources/Threshold-Level_CUP.pdf
- B2 level > http://www.ealta.eu.org/documents/resources/Vantage_CUP.pdf

General English **coursebooks** usually include functional language as part of their syllabus and the exponents are sometimes highlighted in visible 'language boxes'. The following coursebooks are an example:

- Cutting Edge 3rd Edition (Pearson) *Useful Language box*
- New Total English (Pearson Longman) *How To... box*

Other language teaching books focused on **conversational skills** target functional language more explicitly.

- Communication Games *series* (Longman)
- Conversation Gambits (Language Teaching Publications)
- Role Plays for Today (Delta Publishing)

TEACHING TIPS

- Remember to introduce the target language using a clear and unambiguous context.
- Avoid presenting language items in isolation as if you were presenting verb tenses: the clarification of form should show language in chunks and place the emphasis on functional exponents (constants), and 'what follows' (variables).
- Don't forget to introduce answers to questions as they generally go together. If you are teaching 'requests', for example, introduce ways of saying 'yes' and 'no' to a request.
- Make sure you include aspects of cultural/social 'appropriacy' in the clarification: particular attention should be given to the context and the degree of formality / distance between interlocutors.
- Create opportunities for practicing both sides of a function (e.g. question and answer). This can be done by promoting group activities such as role-plays, problem-solving tasks, discussions, etc.
- Functional language it's not only spoken, but also written. Provide opportunities for consolidation by asking learners to do some writing and consider the differences between spoken and written language.

FURTHER READING

- Finocchiaro, M. and Brumfit C. (1983). *The Functional-Notional Approach - From Theory to Practice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hadfield, J. & Hadfield, C. (2009). *Introduction to teaching English*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Chapter 2.3.
- Harmer, J. (2007). *The Practice of English Language Teaching. Fourth Edition*. Harlow, UK: Pearson Longman. Chapter 14.
- Hedge, T. (2000). *Teaching and Learning in the Language Classroom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Chapter 2.2.2.
- Scrivener, J. (2011). *Learning Teaching. The Essential Guide to English Language Teaching. Third Edition*. London: Macmillan Education. Chapter 5.6
- Van Ek, J.A. & Trim J.L.M. (1991). *Threshold 1990*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
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- Wilkins, D.A. (1976). *Notional Syllabuses*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Chapter 2(4).