



THE IMPORTANCE OF FUNCTIONAL ENGLISH IN ESL TEACHING

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research study was to investigate whether the achievement levels in ESL, for Functional Skills, can be raised. Following observation of Functional Skills English practice, during the last year, students appeared to readily struggle with the requirements of the curriculum following the introduction of the new qualification. Overall attainment rates are poor. This led me to consider whether the poor success rate was as a result of lack of exposure in functional skills. From this the thought to explore the nuances of functional English and present it in the form of a research article began. This article resonates the findings of the study conducted on the importance of Functional English for ESL learners.

Introduction

Functional English is usage of the English language required to perform a specific function like academic study or career progression. Functional English provide the essential knowledge, skills and understanding that will enable the user to operate confidently, effectively and independently in life and at work. Individuals who possess these skills will be able to participate and progress in education, training and employment as well as develop and secure the broader range of aptitude, attitude and behaviour that will enable them to make a positive contribution to the communities in which they live and work.

For some time employers and universities have been calling for young people to leave education with the skills needed to operate confidently, effectively and independently. It is more important than ever that young people of all academic abilities can manage the demands of the workplace, and of further and higher education.

Functional skills are the essential elements of English that help people to develop higher levels of practical skill, which they can apply to real life contexts. Rather than being taught as separate curriculum subjects, functional skills are applied to the teaching and learning in embedded way.

Colleges teaching functional skills have found it is a more engaging way to teach and learn. Teachers have provided opportunities for pupils to apply their knowledge and skills to real life situations. Pupils have been enthusiastic about learning academic subjects in the context of real life, which gives more relevance to what they are studying.

The main components of functional English are listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The recent Confederation of British Industry (CBI) report (Working on the three Rs, August 2006) states that employers are looking for people who can: articulate clearly, take and pass on messages, deal with customers effectively, read, understand and follow a wide range of documents, write fluently and accurately, using accepted business conventions of format, spelling, grammar and punctuation. In a nut shell it is nothing but the acquisition of language skills to interact in the given situation.

Helping learners to become functional with English means helping them to:

- choose appropriate communication methods
- ensure their communication methods are fit for purpose
- communicate in ways that meet the needs of the audience and situation
- apply English skills in a range of meaningful contexts
- become increasingly independent in their learning.

It is essential to think of learners becoming functional with their English, rather than thinking there is a vital body of knowledge known as functional English. This is likely to require a different approach to teaching and learning which focuses on applied learning, using wherever possible a subject or vocational focus. This has important implications both within English lessons and across the curriculum.

Within their specialist English lessons, learners need opportunities to apply their skills to a range of real and realistic topics, relevant to life and work. The topics should be plainly relevant to learners, appealing to them by being motivating, interesting and realistic. English teaching should reveal how English is used in life, enabling learners to gain experience of the breadth of applications of the subject.

This resource sets out some of the ways in which making adjustments to help learners become more functional with English is supported by existing practices including:

- Learning through application
- Learner-centered approaches
- Active learning
- Partnership learning
- Assessment for learning.



Many real-life, relevant situations have been devised for discussion; these will develop learners' ability until mastery is achieved in their speaking and listening skills. The development of writing, speaking and listening skills will become of equal importance to reading in the Literacy course. The teaching and learning of speaking and listening skills will become explicit, with numerous opportunities to take part in real and relevant situations to develop and practice these.

People with good oral communication skills

- have more productive relationships with other people
- will be able to obtain the information they need from organizations and individuals they have to work with
- can explain things clearly and make a case for themselves
- can relate well to peers and colleagues
- are more successful in their careers
- have reduced risk of experiencing conflict and aggression from others.

Oral communication is one of the most highly valued skills by employers. The National Employers Skills Survey from LSC showed that several key areas in which employees were seen as lacking all require good communication skills: • customer handling (38%) • oral communication (35%) • team working (34%) • problem solving (34%). Source: National Employers Skills Survey 2005: Key findings (LSC, 2006)

Teaching of speaking and listening has been described as the 'Cinderella' of English. Although it is one of the three attainment targets for the National Curriculum, Ofsted reports that: 'Too little attention has been given to teaching the full National Curriculum Programme of study for speaking and listening and the range of contexts provided for speaking and listening remains too limited.'

How to teach these skills?

Listening: Listening activity doesn't mean just to listen and respond.

A large part of communication is listening, but it's the part that most people forget to do. In order to listen effectively, a person must put aside her own opinions while the other person is talking. This is the only way to truly hear what he's saying, even if you don't end up agreeing with him completely. The best way to know if you've understood the other person correctly is to repeat back to her what she said and what you think she meant.

The listener must identify the tone of voice of the speaker. Research has shown that the tone of voice carries more meaning than the individual words themselves. Tone of voice plays an even bigger part when we are on the phone and cannot see the other person. Call centre staff

are often taught to smile when talking to customers on a telephone as their tone of voice becomes more positive.

Practical activities include asking for information in shops or asking for directions with an emphasis on speaking clearly and composing questions that will result in the needed information. Introduce them to the most common question words – ‘what’, ‘who’, ‘where’, ‘when’, ‘how’, ‘why’ and ask the students to compose a question on a given topic using each word, question tags, echo questions (**A:** John has got married. **B:** Has he? **A:** Yes, it was last week. **B:** Was it? **A:** Yeah. **B:** This is great news). They will need to respond to simple questions, such as giving information about themselves to a doctor, teacher or careers officer.

Teaching material: Maps (for giving directions), sentences with minimal pairs, listen for global comprehension, listen for specific information, flow charts, question cards using a range of contexts and scenarios as a basis for paired activity. Learners should have opportunities to ask questions in real situations, outside the classroom.

Speaking: Learn to speak by speaking.

The two main sub-skills of speaking are linguistic skills and communicative skills. Linguistic skills are the language skills which include phonology, grammar, syntax and vocabulary on the other hand communication skills are the social skills.

Practical activities include pair work, group work, role play, information gap activities, narrating stories, guess who am I, games etc.

Writing: Writing on any topic should be coherent.

- ✓ **Unified:** All of the sentences in a single paragraph should be related to a single controlling idea (often expressed in the topic sentence of the paragraph).
- ✓ **Relevant:** Each sentence should be clearly related to the topic. All the sentences should refer to the central idea.
- ✓ **Coherent:** The sentences should be arranged in a logical manner and should follow a definite plan for development (Rosen and Behrens 119).
- ✓ **Well-developed:** Every idea discussed in the paragraph should be adequately explained and supported through evidence and details that work together to explain the paragraph’s controlling idea (Rosen and Behrens 119).

Reading comprehension encompasses several skills. Basically, comprehension is achieved when the reader understands what he's read.

Strategies that can help students read more quickly and effectively include



- ✓ Previewing: reviewing titles, section headings, and photo captions to get a sense of the structure and content of a reading selection
- ✓ Predicting: using knowledge of the subject matter to make predictions about content and vocabulary and check comprehension; using knowledge of the text type and purpose to make predictions about discourse structure; using knowledge about the author to make predictions about writing style, vocabulary, and content
- ✓ Skimming and scanning: using a quick survey of the text to get the main idea, identify text structure, confirm or question predictions
- ✓ Guessing from context: using prior knowledge of the subject and the ideas in the text as clues to the meanings of unknown words, instead of stopping to look them up
- ✓ Paraphrasing: stopping at the end of a section to check comprehension by restating the information and ideas in the text

Teaching all these skills involves the integrated approach of different techniques, approaches and methods.

Teaching Methodology: Let us take a very simple passage

The statement *teenagers are good for nothing* is untrue. *For one reason*, all teenagers cannot act in the same way because they all have different personalities and have been raised differently. *For another reason*, most teenagers are hard-working and sincere young adults. Most study hard, respect adults, and grow into useful and responsible adults. *Admittedly*, there are those who do get involved in crime, take drugs, and disrupt schools. *But* this is only a very small percentage. To consider all teenagers good for nothing because of these kids is wrong.

The statement teenagers are good for nothing is untrue. (why, state your reasons)

For one reason, all teenagers cannot act in the same way because they all have different personalities and have been raised differently. (how and why do they act differently)

For another reason, most teenagers are hard-working and sincere young adults. (how do you say that they are not good for nothing type) Most study hard, respect adults, and grow into useful and responsible adults. (when an you consider that they are useful and responsible, give an example of your experience) *Admittedly*, (use another word) there are those who do get involved in crime, take drugs, and disrupt schools. *But* this is only a very small percentage. To consider all teenagers good for nothing because of these kids is wrong.

Let one student read this paragraph and let others listen.(listening task)

Let one student ask some questions based on the paragraph and others answer.(speaking)

Let them debate on *the present day youth are turning out to be good for nothing*.

Discuss on- involved in crime, take drugs, and disrupt schools with some real life examples, current scenario (why do you think young people involve in these activities)

Pre writing: Analyze for topic sentence, supporting sentences, transition words/ link words and conclusion.

Rewrite the same using different vocabulary. Write a similar paragraph.

Reading: Global comprehension- What is the writer's point of view? What is his tone?

What does the writer mean by *raised differently*?

Using visual aids: It is often good practice to use visual aids as part of a presentation. You can help learners by discussing the range of visual aids available such as handouts, flipcharts, slides, objects and computer-based presentations and explaining what makes an effective visual aid, such as the number of words on a slide and clear labels on diagrams. Confidence comes with practice, and it is important to try out a presentation to check how it flows, whether it fits the time available, and whether the delivery is fluent.

Evaluating feedback: Constructive feedback can be very useful here. You will need to discuss with learners appropriate ways of giving feedback to each other that is not damaging.

It is noticed that a good method must be comprehensive and eclectic. **Eclectic** means choosing; not following any one particular system or set of ideas, but using parts of many different methods and approaches. It must be based on thorough knowledge of science of languages.

Activity 1 Asking for some information

Your best friend calls you on the phone and exclaims: Guess what happened to me on the way home from school? Just as you were ready to ask, your phone went dead. What would you naturally want to know? You would be most curious and anxious to find out what had happened. You would have to figure out a way to find the answer guess, go to his house, or wait until you saw him again. Until you see your friend, no communication has taken place.

Place several groups of words on the board for student examination. Be sure to place both incomplete thoughts as well as complete sentences on board.

Ask individuals to read word groups out loud to determine *sentence* or fragment.

Incomplete thoughts should be completed. Ask for several responses for each to illustrate the different ways each group can be completed.

Activity 2 Developing insight

Using posters or the following statements, ask students to consider these situations:

A baker wants to bake a fancy cake.

A builder wants to build a house.

A driver wants to drive from New Haven to Los Angeles.

Teacher to Students: Assume that all of these people have everything they need to complete the task (materials, equipment, manpower, etc.). However, one important thing is needed by all. What do you think it is?

Teacher Note: Depending on the class, grammatical theory about subjects and predicates can be discussed here. However, the emphasis here is on the sound of sentences, not the theory behind them.

The baker needs a recipe.
The builder needs a blueprint.
The driver needs a map.

Activity 3 Communication distortion

Here are some hilarious examples

"Since I have to go to my village to sell my land along with my wife, please sanction me one-week leave. "

"I am suffering from fever, please declare one day holiday."

"As my headache is paining, please grant me leave for the day."

Activity 4: Technical writing using reference skills.

If I could visit any place in the world . . .

Rather than use opinions and unconvincing reasons, students were directed to encyclopedias, atlases, travel brochures, and similar materials to find out about the places of interest, cultures, and traditions, to include in the composition. Pertinent facts were picked from these materials to defend their writing. As a follow up activity, a letter-writing unit was taught in the traditional way, in which students would write to embassies, the United Nations, and state capitals to request pictures and additional information about the place they wrote.

Good teachers teach, better teachers demonstrate, best teachers inspire.

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