Notional syllabuses : theory into practice

Notional Syllabuses: Theory into practice

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1.0 Introduction: the theory

The aim of this paper is not to convince people of the virtues of notional syllabuses, but to discuss some of the problems of putting them into effect. It might, however, be as well to begin by outlining the principal characteristics of notional syllabuses without examining closely the reasoning that lies behind them[1].

The term *syllabus* is used here to refer to the linguistic content of language teaching and the principles that underlie the selection of that content. A syllabus as such usually takes the form of a set of inventories – inventories of the grammatical (structural) and lexical forms to be taught. Where, as is often the case, no separate syllabus exists, we can abstract the linguistic content from the course materials being used. Since this content will have been selected according to some criteria or other, we can regard it as being in effect the syllabus on which the course is based. Syllabus construction in this sense is not concerned with methodology, although inevitably it will be expected that the approach to classroom teaching will be consistent with the view of language embodied in the syllabus.

The salient characteristic of a notional syllabus is that it aims to organise language teaching in terms of the purpose of communication rather than the form. To put it another way, the fact that language is a tool of communication is taken as the starting-point. We analyse the likely uses to which the learners will put the language. We cannot know exactly what ideas they will want to express, but we can predict the kind of ideas which are common in real communication. To make this predictive analysis of the content or purpose of communication, a system of semantic or notional categories is used; hence the term *notional* syllabuses. Only when the communicative purposes of language learning have been established is the question asked of what the appropriate forms of language are for the expression of those purposes. The resulting syllabus is, therefore, first an inventory of notional categories and only secondly a list of linguistic forms. The overall structure is provided by the notional and not by the grammatical or lexical content.

1 The arguments in favour of a notional syllabus are given in D. A. Wilkins: *Grammatical, situational and notional syllabuses,* In *Proceedings of the Third International Congress of Applied Linguistics,* Volume 2, Heidelberg, J. Groos Verlag, 1974.

The first essential step in putting a notional syllabus into effect has been to develop a set of categories that are suitable for the purpose. To this end a taxonomy of communicative categories has been proposed which in itself incorporates a pragmatically oriented model of communication. In brief, the content of communication is seen from three angles. There are in the first place *conceptual categories.* These are intended to handle semantic choices that we almost inevitably face in constructing sentences in a language, such concepts as *time* (past time, duration, frequency etc.), *quantity* (articles, number systems, quantifiers etc.), *space* (location, direction) and *actor-action* etc., relations. Secondly there are *modal categories.* In using language we continually express the reliability of our degree of commitment to the statements we are making. We do not always so much assert that something *is* so as that it *may* or *should* be so, (possibility, obligation etc.), or that it is our *intention* or *wish* that it should be so (volition etc.). Finally there are categories of *communicative function,* which are concerned with the social purposes that we have in producing a particular utterance. We use language for much more than the simple conveying of information (i.e. of conceptual meaning). We use it to express *suasion* (orders, requests, suggestions etc.), *evaluation* (accusation, judgement, agreement etc.), *emotions* (pleasure, surprise, disappointment etc.), *emotional relations* (sympathy, gratitude, greetings etc.) and so on. From the full and detailed taxonomy of such categories a particular notional syllabus can be derived. The objectives of language learning are interpreted in terms of being able to make requests, express sympathy, narrate past events, give directions, express shades of possibility etc., and *not* to master the present tense, comparative adjectives, the passive or demonstrative adjectives etc.[2].

How then does the notional syllabus relate to the concept of communicative competence? Fundamental to the idea of communicative competence is the notion that there is more to an effective knowledge of a language than a knowledge of its grammar and lexicon. To have even a practical mastery of the grammar is not necessarily to know how that grammar is used in actual acts of communication. There are conventions of use just as there are conventions of construction. Successful communication depends upon efficient deployment of the resources of language and the capacity to construct correct grammatical sentences does not ensure that those sentences

2 The categories for a notional syllabus were first presented in full in D. A. Wilkins: *The linguistic and situational content of the common core in a unit – credit system,* Strasbourg, Council of Europe, 1972 (Subsequently in *Systems Development in Adult Language Learning,* Strasbourg, Council of Europe, 1974).
A revised version of this taxonomy will appear in D. A. Wilkins: *Notional Syllabuses,* London, Oxford University Press, Forthcoming 1976.

can be deployed effectively or appropriately. Since the notional syllabus starts from an analysis of what the language is used for, it has the potential to develop a communicative competence in learners.

We can perhaps borrow and extend an analogy to illustrate the point[3]. When the language learner is practising intensively through structural drills, he is like the pianist who is doing his scales and arpeggios. The activity is not an objective in itself but it produces a dexterity which is essential for a 'live' performance. Playing a Beethoven sonata requires a re-combination of the skills acquired through practice. Real language performance similarly depends upon the integration of linguistic skills separately acquired. Playing a particular composition, however, means following as faithfully as possible a pattern determined by the composer. This pattern itself can be intensively rehearsed. In language learning too it is possible to rehearse in a controlled fashion naturalistic samples of language use which exemplify the integration of widely differing linguistic structures. At this point, however, the learner of languages differs from the pianist – from the classical pianist, at least. The language learner cannot be content with this type of performance. Language use is characteristically a process of *improvisation* based upon a sure command of underlying linguistic skills. Allied with an appropriate methodology the notional syllabus aims to create a capacity for linguistic improvisation that meets an individual's social and personal needs.

2.0 Notional syllabuses: the practice

From the above discussion we can obtain a somewhat simplistic view of the process of notional syllabus design. Given a defined group of learners, we begin by making a non-technical statement of the desired objectives. This statement will no doubt be concerned with the language activities involved (i.e. reading, writing, speaking, listening), the likely situations of use, the domains in which the communication will take place, broadly the purposes to which the learners might be expected to put the language. The statement may occupy no more than a few sentences, but it is then analysed in detail in terms of the notional categories that have been proposed. That is to say from the total set of notional categories we select those which are relevant to this particular group of learners. Since each category may often be realised in a number of different linguistic forms, the next task is to decide which form or forms the learners are to be expected to learn. The items in the resulting

3 F. Debyser: *Simulation et réalité dans l'enseignement des langues vivantes. Français dans le Monde,* 104, 1974. This article was drawn to my attention by Keith Johnson.

inventory will then be arranged in a pedagogic sequence. This will be partly a matter of determining the linear order of items, but partly also a question of the level at which a given item might most appropriately be introduced. The decisions to be taken thereafter, involving as they do matters of materials and methods, are not strictly speaking questions of syllabus design.

2.1 First problem: isolation or integration?

Unfortunately the above description is indeed simplistic. It fails to reveal some of the very real practical problems that have to be faced in actually producing a syllabus. It represents the content of language learning as a succession of items to be acquired individually. This differs from a grammatical syllabus only in so far as the items carry notional labels rather than grammatical (structural) labels. The process of learning still appears to be one of progressive accumulation of "pieces" of the language. This is misleading for at least two reasons. The first is that the items cannot in practice be isolated from one another. There is no way in which a learning unit can be constructed to teach a certain concept of time, for example, which does not simultaneously involve several of the other conceptual categories. Nor is this all. Sentences are practised not just as illustrations of the grammar but as potential utterances with a clear social function. The sentences to which a learner is exposed in any one learning unit, therefore, inevitably express several different kinds of conceptual, modal and functional meaning. It seems more appropriate that this state of affairs should be recognized in the syllabus than that it should be left to the materials producer to resolve the difficulty of how to relate conceptual, modal and functional content.

There is a second and related reason for questioning the desirability of adopting an itemized approach. Intrinsic to the notional syllabus and, indeed, to the target of communicative competence, is the belief that language learning should replicate language using. People cannot have a mastery of linguistic activities in which they have never previously engaged. In teaching, therefore, we aim to provide the opportunity for the learner to experience those activities with which he is most likely to be concerned in the future. Real language behaviour, however, is extremely complex. Rather than single utterances with a clearly defined purpose, it consists of chains of action or interaction, occasionally of a highly predictable character, more often leaving the speaker free to choose from a large range of options. In real life we do not just issue an invitation and then take no further interest in what happens. The response may be positive, negative or hesitant. It may lead to suggestions

about other people who can be asked or to reminiscences about similar occasions in the past. The possibilities are multitudinous. Language learning which focusses on one item at a time, however "communicative" the definition of that item, will just not measure up to the needs of future language use. Isolation of linguistic items may be necessary as part of the learning process, but a syllabus which is based on that principle cannot be adequate.

The inevitable conclusion seems to be that, while recognizing the importance of the individual semantic categories that we have established, some higher organising principle – a kind of hierarchy – is needed that groups such categories together in useful ways. The notional taxonomy itself provides groupings of the notional categories. But the groupings are in terms of broad semantic relatedness and do not necessarily bring together items that are likely to co-occur in real language use. The category of *time,* for example, covers time in relation to the present (i.e. past, present and future), time in relation to a past or future axis (before past, after past etc.), durative and punctual time, notions of inception, simultaneity and termination, the expression of points of time, of frequency and so on. The category of *suasion* includes orders, requests, instructions, directions, advice and suggestions. If we attempted to construct a language situation to illustrate or contextualise fully the different components of either of these major categories, it is clear that the result would be highly contrived and would bear little resemblance to real language behaviour. If a solution is sought in the first detailed attempt to incorporate notional principles into a specification of language learning content[4], we shall be disappointed. Here too there are carefully elaborated inventories, but no clear indication of the basis on which the different parts can be related to one another.

The problem is probably most easily overcome where a language course is being provided for people with very clearly defined objectives. That is to say, where there is a very clear indication of the actual language events in which people are going to participate, it is the set of those language events that provides the overall structure within which the different notional categories can be presented. Thus, the language training programme of IBM Paris identifies a number of different types of language performance which are integral to the job functions of the trainees[5]. They include such activities as information-gathering, information-giving, presenting (as at a meeting or conference), reporting, information-transfer-writing, socialising and planning-deciding. An activity like information-gathering is interesting for the

4 J. van Ek: *The Threshold Level,* Strasbourg, Council of Europe, 1975.
5 See *Level Performance Charts,* Paris, IBM, 1974.

way it cuts across the dimensions we normally impose upon language teaching. In the first place it is an activity in which productive and receptive language skills may often combine. Information may be elicited by questions (a functional category) which in turn require a listening skill. Listening in this instance is not to be taught as an isolated skill but as an activity which is closely related to speaking. On the other hand much information may be collected by means of reading, and, at the same time, be recorded in written form as in the taking of notes. The information sought may be a set of technical instructions, information relevant to a management task, information necessary for day-to-day living in the foreign language environment, the nature of customer's needs and so on. In such a language teaching situation one does not need to look beyond the work tasks that involve use of the foreign language to find an organising principle for a notional syllabus.

It is more difficult to offer a general principle which can be applied even where subsequent language use is ill-defined. Actual language use has to meet so many, varied needs that there is little point in trying to predict at all precisely what future communicative needs are going to be. The hope must be to be able to identify types of language activity that are reasonably generalisable and that are at the same time readily adaptable to the exigencies of unforeseen needs. The broad behavioural category of *socialising* which figures in the IBM programme perhaps fits the requirement. *Socialising* as such does not occur in the notional taxonomy, but the individual language functions that are characteristic of socialising are in fact to be found in the total set of notional categories. It is not difficult to see that such categories as the following can readily be grouped together under such a heading: invitations, accepting, declining, asking, identifying (self-identification), greetings, introductions, complimenting, gratitude, pleasure and phatic communion (i.e. utterances that have no purpose other than simply to establish contact with someone).

Another category might be *making arrangements* which could involve proposing, suggesting, agreeing, disagreeing, certainty, uncertainty, doubt, preferences, alternatives, intentions, directions, aspects of (future) time, location and quantity (cost). We could not predict the exact circumstances in which any general group of learners might need to make future arrangements but we need not doubt that in general it is what anybody who uses a foreign language may frequently find himself doing. We can therefore aim to create on the one hand a knowledge of the way in which the linguistic code is used to express these different notions and on the other hand a dexterity in applying this knowledge to differing circumstances so that the learner will readily be able to adapt himself to the demands of real communication when they arise in the future. In passing we may note that an interesting feature of

making arrangements is that it provides opportunities for systematic presentation of certain conceptual (e.g. time), modal (e.g. doubt) and functional (e.g. suggestions) categories. In this respect it is in contrast with *socialising* where the suggested categories are all drawn from the functional part of the notional framework.

Unfortunately although *socialising* and *making arrangements* are two "higher" categories within which individual items can be grouped and integrated, providing a notional syllabus requires us to discover a whole series of such categories which between them will cover all the desired notions and which will themselves replicate significant instances of real language behaviour. It is not certain that the search for such categories will be successful. An interim solution will be proposed when some further problems have been discussed.

2.2 Second problem: continuity and coherence

If we do not succeed in finding these higher categories and are thrown back upon a type fo syllabus which simply itemizes the notions in sequence, we will find that we run up against other problems, problems of *continuity* and *coherence.* The problem of continuity is not an entirely unfamiliar one. Language teaching materials which set out to expose the learner systematically to the grammatical system of the language (that is, materials based on a grammatical syllabus), have always had to face the difficulty of overcoming the fragmentary nature of units, where each unit is based on a different aspect of the grammatical system of the language. There is no necessary connection between successive units with the result that part of the task that faces the materials producer is to contrive some such connection. It is commonly done in two ways. The first is to sequence the grammatical content in such a way that any new language item can be presented by means of the forms that have previously been learned. The best modern courses do this well. The second way is to introduce some thematic continuity, perhaps in the form of some kind of story line. This, unfortunately is all too often done in a prosaic and unimaginative way. Language learning units which are devoted successively to requests, permission, suggestions, advice and so on are as vulnerable in this respect as units devoted to the past tense, articles, the passive and demonstrative pronouns. Where we are concerned with short term courses, usually intensive in character, the lack of continuity may not be important. Motivation is maintained more through the sense of progress being made than through the creation of some kind of extrinsic interest. Similarly, forgetting may not be as great a

problem as it is in longer-term and less intensive courses. With long-term courses, however, recourse may have to be had to a story line and some means will have to be found of maintaining the learner's contact with the forms previously learned.

The problem of coherence arises from the fact that although the notional approach is claimed to be the most adequate way of analysing communication needs, in the sense that it incorporates much that cannot be accounted for if a different basis is adopted, it is not the only dimension of language use that we would wish to exploit in attempting to predict and provide for future language use. In particular, there are occasions on which the *situational* dimension will be important. We are interested in situations in so far as it is true that there are certain settings (i.e. physically describable environments) in which there are characteristic patterns of language use and in which the language learner may well find himself. We cannot derive a whole structure for language learning from such situations because much language use is not situation-related in this way and therefore would not be predicted from a simple analysis of them. The claimed superiority of the notional syllabus is that it caters for everything that a situational syllabus would contain and more besides.

The relationship between situations and the notional categories is roughly this: that, in a given situation, certain notions (particularly certain functions) habitually recur. The same functions may well also be found in a number of other situations. It is also the case that there are notions which are much needed in language use but which are not characteristic of any particular situation. If language forms are taught as being necessary for one situation only, useful generalisations about their use in other situations are being missed. Through a notional as opposed to a situational approach we hope to be able to capture such generalisations.

From this it follows that materials which seek notional coherence will lack situational coherence. A given function may be presented to learners in the context of one situation and then shown to be operative also in other situations. These same situations may occur also in other notionally defined learning units. The same situation, therefore, occurs in a relatively random fashion at different points in the learning material. A simple example will illustrate the point. A notionally defined unit might be devoted to "giving personal information". Such a unit would include a number of examples of situations in which a person might need to provide personal data. Such situations might be: on passing through immigration control at the airport, on checking into a hotel, on registering with the police, on opening a bank account, on registering with a doctor or otherwise using the National Health Service, on enrolling in an educational establishment and on introducing

oneself to a stranger. Such a learning unit will obviously have coherence from a purely notional point of view, but it follows that the language needed in the process of using medical services or using a bank is going to be scattered throughout the course. If we were tempted to say that this means that we should base our syllabus on situations rather than on notional categories so that they are labelled "In the bank" or "Visiting the doctor", we have to face the fact that in six or seven different units the same function is going to recur. Evidently, this is not an efficient way to proceed.

Ideally we would like to adopt a syllabus which ensures both the maximum generalisation of individual functions and the coherent presentation of different language functions as they occur within one situation. Such a syllabus will obviously have a more complex structure than the one we have so far envisaged for the notional syllabus. We can leave aside for the moment the question of how this might be achieved but we can recall that earlier we were seeking "higher" categories of language behaviour within which clusters of notional categories would be grouped. A situation in a sense provides just this, although it has the disadvantage of doing so in a way that sometimes specifies the appropriate linguistic forms so narrowly as to make generalisation away from the situation rather difficult.

2.3 Third problem: grammar and conceptual categories

It may have been noticed that in this discussion so far there has been considerably more reference to functional than to conceptual categories. Although this is not deliberate, it is almost inevitable. When we attempt to analyse objectives from the outside we tend to refer to those aspects of language use which involve visible interaction with others. We focus upon observable language behaviour. By definition the functional categories relate much more directly to outer forms of social behaviour than do the conceptual or modal categories. If we had looked more closely at what was involved in, say, information-giving, we would have found that the conceptual and modal categories were indispensable in the precise analysis of the linguistic repertoire needed by the learners.

The question does arise, therefore, of what is the best way to introduce the conceptual categories in a notional syllabus. It is not a question that is at all easy to answer in practice. The language content which derives from the conceptual part of the notional taxonomy is very much that which is normally covered in the process of teaching the grammatical structure of a language. At present we usually structure our language teaching in a way that reflects systematically the grammatical facts of the language. This grammar-

based teaching concentrates initially on the formal aspects and extends later and with varying degrees of adequacy to cover the variety and subtlety of meanings that these forms express. The notional approach proposes to reverse the process in that the structure of learning is determined by the meanings to be acquired and only subsequently are the forms sought which express those meanings.

Unfortunately language is such that the relationship between grammatical forms and grammatical meanings is very complex and very messy. If we are to take meanings as the starting-point, we will analyse them in terms of some kind of "logical" system, as for example when we say that time-concepts are divided into past, present and future time or that (some) events can be characterized in terms of an actor-action relationship. The reality of any language is such that its grammatical system rarely has an exact parallel for these "logical" categories in, for example, a system of past, present and future tenses or a subject-verb relationship which *always* indicates actor and action (the uses of tense systems are usually far more complex than this and the subject-verb relation often covers many more semantic relations than just that of actor-action). If, in preparing a notional syllabus, we say that we are going to introduce a unit devoted to *the expression of past time* or the *actor-action relation,* therefore, we are going to find ourselves faced with the most profound formal complexities. Form and meaning are far from being in a one-to-one relationship and as a result we will have considerable difficulty in achieving any systematicity in the way in which the grammar of the language is presented. It will not be easy for the learners to form useful generalisations about the grammar and use them as a basis for the construction of other sentences.

It is not necessary to conclude from this that the conceptual part of the notional taxonomy is inapplicable. There are language teaching situations in which I believe it is well worth exploiting the conceptual categories in spite of the difficulties. What is more, even where the grammatical basis is retained for the early stages of learning, a different view of the priorities may well be taken if conceptual needs are taken into account. The fact that there are such difficulties in handling the conceptual categories probably explains why it is that where new syllabuses and materials have been developed, the initial effort has been directed at intermediate learners, that is to say, those who have already gained some grammatical competence in the language probably through having been taught from a grammatical syllabus. Since such materials have been able largely to ignore the conceptual categories, it would be more correct to designate the results as *functional* syllabuses and not truly *notional* syllabuses. It follows that such syllabuses do not demonstrate how conceptual, modal and functional categories can be integrated in one syllabus.

Consequently we cannot yet be sure that if we abandon the grammatical motivation which is behind most current course-design, we shall still be able to ensure that the grammatical system of the language is adequately learned (as it must be if a learner is to become communicatively competent in the language). The question of how the learning of the grammar of a language can be effectively promoted within a notional syllabus remains to be answered therefore.

2.4 An experimental course[6]

Having identified some factors which make the task of putting a notional syllabus into effect more complicated, we can now look at how the problems were faced in one particular instance. At the Centre for Applied Language Studies we were concerned to provide a two-month intensive language course (28 hours per week) for 200 foreign students coming to study for research degrees in Britain. All the students had some existing competence in English. It is one of the conditions of being accepted at a British university that the student should already have a knowledge of the language. In practice, however, the students, coming as they do from a wide variety of backgrounds, were extremely varied in their standard of English. It should be borne in mind that none of these students had ever been resident in an English-speaking country before and indeed that most of them had never visited Britain or any other European country previously. Although part of the course was inevitably concerned with the specialised language skills that they would need, it was decided that one component should be devoted to what might be called *social language skills,* that is to say the principally oral skills necessary for every-day social intercourse. The total amount of time available for this part of the course was 70 hours, which constituted one third of the total course time.

Since all the students possessed some grammatical competence, it was decided that the social skills component should be based on a functional (and modal) syllabus. While attention might be drawn to grammatical points in an informal way, where it seemed appropriate, there would be no attempt to exploit systematically the conceptual categories. (Special provision was made for the weakest students, whose grammatical competence was inadequate as a basis for a functionally oriented course. For these students remedial sessions

6 The materials for the course referred to here were written by Keith Morrow and Keith Johnson from whose ideas on the problems of putting notional syllabuses into practice this paper has benefited.

based on a grammatical syllabus were provided outside the social skills component. It is hoped eventually to associate materials based on the conceptual categories with the functional units as optional extensions to be used where the teacher finds it appropriate with a given group of students.)

The design of the social language skills component ran immediately into the problem of the conflict between situational and functional needs. Given that the students were in some cases in an advanced commercial and industrialised society for the first time and in other cases in a society that was culturally very distinct from their own, a great deal that they would inevitably encounter in every-day living was totally unfamiliar to them. There was a large amount of information about the situations they would meet which is specific to a British environment. As a matter of some urgency they needed to be made aware of this information and to be given proficiency in the linguistic skills that the situations demanded. All of this would be useful to them immediately and throughout their stay in Britain. In the circumstances it would have been perverse not to recognize that it would be far easier for the students if the information and language relevant to these predictable situations were presented in situationally coherent units. Whatever the theory of notional or functional syllabuses might say, to adopt a purely functional organisation of the material would be detrimental to the situational needs of the students.

The resulting syllabus is a compromise between functional and situational structure. The course begins with a set of Preliminary Functional Units, continues with Situational Units and then proceeds to the Main Functional Units. The seven Preliminary Functional Units (P.F.U.'s) present those language functions which recur in a number of different situations. When the same functions occur again later in the Situational Units no further teaching of them will be required. The functions dealt with include *introducing yourself, giving personal information, greetings, farewells and introductions, requesting services* and *requesting information.* There then follow eight Situational Units devoted to *banking, travelling, shopping, post office and telephone, food and drink, doctors and dentists, leisure activities,* and *hotels and accommodation.* It is interesting to note that the Situational Units, meeting as they do the students' immediate needs, are very useful in the short term. However, by the end of the first month their value is already considerably diminished as the students have by then in any case met the situations that the units deal with and learned how to handle them. This is a further indication that a situational syllabus is not a suitable basis for a long-term course.

The second month of the course is devoted to the twelve Main Functional Units (M.F.U.'s). Whereas in the P.F.U.'s the tendency is for the functions to

be itemized individually, in the M.F.U.'s an attempt is made to group the functions where possible. Thus there are units entitled *making plans, feelings, narrating events, talking about yourself and reporting speech.* The titles are not very tidy but make it clear that the functions are not presented in disjointed fashion. On the other hand, given the difficulty mentioned above of trying to find "higher" categories, it is not surprising that units aimed at individual functions remain: *describing people and places, invitations, agreeing and disagreeing.* In the actual materials there is little by way of connection between the successive units. In a very intensive short-term course this lack of continuity does not seem too important, especially as the social language skills component constitutes only one third of the course and, as a result, other kinds of language learning are proceeding at the same time. It seems desirable, however, that greater coherence should be given to the individual units. As things stand they appear to be a somewhat haphazard selection from among the much larger possibilities offered by the overall taxonomy. In fact everything that is taught is useful, but it would perhaps be more convincing if the principles of selection were more visible.

We have been concerned in the latter part of the discussion with how far in a given teaching situation it was possible to put notional principles into practice. It would no doubt be of interest to look at the nature of the materials themselves and to see to what extent the new perspective requires new techniques. However, this paper has been concerned with syllabus design rather than with methodology and the lessons to be learned from the materials themselves must be left to another paper. The work described is experimental in the sense that it is a deliberate attempt to probe new territory. It is not a carefully controlled piece of research and therefore only subjective and impressionistic conclusions can be drawn about the success of the teaching. We could not possibly say that these materials produced a communicative competence in the learners. That would, in any case, have been far too much to expect in the time available and under the actual conditions. However it is interesting to note that the teachers who were responsible for using these materials and who were not necessarily committed to them in advance, found that there was much about the conventions of use of the language that was not known by the students, including those whose grammatical competence would normally have been judged to be quite adequate. What we often assume to be "simple" facts of language use are by no means self-evident to someone whose learning has never been oriented towards use of the language. Informally, therefore, we would conclude that the language content provided by this partly functional, partly situational syllabus was unfamiliar to the majority of the learners. The reaction of the learners themselves tended to confirm that it was also useful and that after all is what we seek to achieve in language teaching.