

Do you feel that your language lessons are overly focused on grammar and vocabulary? Do you find that students sometimes struggle to communicate effectively in some social situations? The answer may be to teach your students more functional language. This lesson outlines some common functions, their characteristics and ways of teaching them.

Task 1 – What’s the real meaning?



Look at the two-line dialogue below and the following exchange between the student and teacher.

John: I can hear the phone.

Sue: I’m having my lunch.

Student: Why does Sue say “I’m having my lunch”?

Teacher: Because she’s is doing it now – at the moment of speaking.

Student: But John is there – he can see she is having her lunch.

Teacher: Exactly. It’s happening now.

Student: But why?

What is the teacher not making clear?

Jot down your answers on a note pad, then check the answer key below. 🗝️



Task 1 Feedback

The teacher is not focusing on the functional meaning of Sue’s utterance. In this context, Sue is making an excuse – “I’m not going to answer the phone because I’m having my lunch”. Focusing only on the grammatical meaning of the structure Sue uses does not make this clear.

Key Skill

Understanding the underlying social meaning of certain utterances is at the heart of functional language. We often use language because we want to perform some kind of communicative act like make a request or offer advice. The expressions that we use to achieve this are known as functional exponents.

Task 2 – Some typical functions



Numbers 1 to 10 list some common functions. Letters a to j provide examples of functional exponents (ways of expressing each function). Match the functions to the exponents.

Functions	
1. making suggestion	2. inviting
3. giving advice	4. requesting
5. making apologies	6. refusing
7. agreeing	8. regretting
9. offering	10. complaining

Exponents

- a. I can't make it tonight – sorry.
- b. I'm afraid I was disappointed by the service.
- c. I should have left earlier.
- d. We could order in a pizza.
- e. It'd pay to talk to the boss.
- f. I'd go along with that.
- g. I'm really sorry about the vase.
- h. Why don't you come over tonight?
- i. Any chance of a coffee?
- j. I'll pay.

Check your ideas in the answer key. 

Key Skill

The examples in task 2 are not in any way comprehensive. There are many other functions in English, and there is a wide variety of exponents that can be used to express each one.



Numbers 1 to 5 below outline some key principles associated with functional language. Letters a to e describe the consequences of these principles in terms of classroom practice. Match the principles with the consequences

Principles

1. One structure can have more than one functional meaning ...
2. The kind of functional exponent that you use changes depending on how well you know the person that you are speaking to ...
3. Pronunciation, in particular sentence stress and intonation, has a key role to play in functional language ...
4. Functional exponents can often vary greatly in terms of their structure ...
5. Some functions can be indirect and subtle ...

Consequences

- a. ... so you sometimes need to highlight the grammatical form.
- b. ... so you need to check their meaning very thoroughly.
- c. ... so in the classroom it is important to establish the relationship between the speakers in examples and practice activities.
- d. ... so it is important that the teacher makes the context clear to students.
- e. ... so it is important to provide students with plenty of controlled oral practice.

Check your ideas in the answer key. 

Key Skill

Many language structures have more than one meaning. The meaning of an utterance is often difficult to understand out of context. For students to understand the functional meaning of an utterance it is essential that both the context and the relationship between the speakers are made explicit to them.

Task 4 – Activities and aims



Numbers 1 to 8 describe different activities that can be used to teach aspects of functional language. Letters a to h are aims associated with these activities. Match the aims to the activities. 

Activities	Aims
1. The teacher plays a dialogue and asks students to think about where they think it is taking place.	
2. The teacher asks students to read a dialogue and decide on the relationship between the two speakers.	
3. The teacher asks students to read a series of short excerpts from dialogues and decide on possible meanings of certain utterances.	
4. The teacher underlines key words in examples on the white board.	
5. The teacher drills from prompts focusing on stress and intonation.	
6. The teacher uses prompts to elicit a four-line dialogue that exemplifies a functional exponent and gets students to practise it in pairs.	
7. The teacher asks students to rewrite a scrambled dialogue containing functional language so that it is in the correct order.	
8. The teacher asks students to perform a role play that offers an opportunity to use functional exponents.	

Aims

- a. To provide pronunciation practice.
- b. To highlight the form.
- c. To provide controlled written practice.
- d. To check language appropriateness.
- e. To provide freer oral practice.
- f. To check understanding of the context.
- g. To check functional meaning.
- h. To provide controlled oral practice.

Thinking about your teaching ...

Over a period of two or three weeks, listen to friends and colleagues and try and tune in to the way they use language. Listen for examples of functional language and think about how clear the meaning would be to a non-native speaker.

Note your observations in your *Teaching log*.

Taking it to the classroom ...

When focusing on dialogues that contain functional language, there are three useful questions that will help students to think about and analyse the target language:

- Where is the conversation taking place?
- What is the relationship between the speakers?
- What does speaker A / B want to do / say?

Want to find out more ... ?

On pages 221 to 225 of *Learning Teaching (2nd Edition)* by Jim Scrivener (Macmillan 2005) there is further reading on teaching functional language.

On pages 231 and 232 of *The Practice of English Language Teaching (4th Edition)* by Jeremy Harmer (Pearson 2007) there is a description of a functions lesson focusing on the function of 'inviting'.

Answer Key



Task 2 – Feedback

1. d
2. h
3. e
4. i
5. g
6. a
7. f
8. c
9. j
10. b

Task 3 – Feedback

1. d
2. c
3. e
4. a
5. b

Task 4 – Feedback

1. f
2. d
3. g
4. b
5. a
6. h
7. c
8. e



This work is published under the *Creative Commons 3.0 New Zealand Attribution Non-commercial Share Alike Licence (BY-NC-SA)*. Under this licence you are free to copy, distribute, display and perform the work as well as to remix, tweak, and build upon this work noncommercially, as long as you credit the author/s and license your new creations under the identical terms.