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EFFECTIVENESS OF THE FUNCTIONAL APPROACH IN TEACHING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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Abstract
This article examines the effectiveness of the functional approach in teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL), emphasizing its role in developing learners' communicative competence. It explores the theoretical foundations, methodological principles, and practical applications of functional language teaching. Particular attention is given to teaching language functions, improving speaking and listening skills, and connecting grammatical structures with real-life communication. The article also discusses the advantages and challenges of this approach and provides recommendations for its effective implementation in EFL classrooms.

Keywords: Functional approach, English as a Foreign Language (EFL), language teaching, communicative competence, language functions, communicative approach, functional-notional syllabus, speaking skills, learner interaction, language acquisition, teaching methodology.

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Introduction

English has become one of the most widely used languages in international communication, education, business, science, technology, and cultural exchange. As a result, the ability to communicate effectively in English is an important educational objective for learners in countries where English is taught as a foreign language. However, knowing grammatical rules and memorizing vocabulary do not automatically mean that learners can communicate successfully in real-life situations.

Many English learners can complete grammar exercises, identify verb tenses, and translate sentences but experience difficulties when they need to participate in an ordinary conversation. They may know the grammatical structure of a question but hesitate when asking for information politely. Similarly, learners may understand vocabulary related to agreement and disagreement but find it difficult to express their opinions naturally during discussions.

These difficulties demonstrate the importance of connecting linguistic knowledge with communicative purposes. This is the central concern of the functional approach to language teaching.

The functional approach emphasizes what people do with language. Instead of presenting language only as a collection of grammatical structures, it considers the communicative functions that linguistic expressions perform in particular situations. For example, learners study how to request information, express preferences, apologize, invite someone, make suggestions, and explain their opinions.

Wilkins (1976), in his influential work Notional Syllabuses, contributed significantly to the development of functional-notional approaches to language teaching. He argued for organizing

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language-learning content around communicative meanings and purposes rather than relying exclusively on grammatical categories. This perspective influenced the development of communicative language teaching and modern approaches to syllabus design.

The functional approach is particularly relevant to EFL education because learners often have limited opportunities to use English outside the classroom. Therefore, classroom activities should provide meaningful opportunities to use the language for realistic purposes.

The effectiveness of this approach does not mean that grammar should be ignored. Rather, grammar should be taught in connection with meaning, context, and communicative intention. Learners need to understand both how a language structure is formed and why it is used in a particular situation.

The purpose of this article is to examine the effectiveness of the functional approach in teaching English as a Foreign Language, identify its principal educational benefits, explain its practical application, and discuss the conditions necessary for successful implementation.

The article addresses the following objectives:

1. To explain the theoretical foundations of the functional approach.
2. To examine the relationship between language functions and communicative competence.
3. To identify the contribution of functional instruction to speaking, listening, reading, and writing.
4. To analyse practical classroom techniques based on language functions.
5. To discuss the advantages and limitations of the approach.
6. To suggest recommendations for EFL teachers.

The functional perspective considers language primarily as a resource for creating meaning and achieving communicative purposes. It focuses on the relationship between linguistic forms and the functions they perform in social interaction.

Halliday (1978), in Language as Social Semiotic, explains language in relation to its social context and the meanings people create through communication. His systemic functional perspective demonstrates that language cannot be fully understood without considering the purposes and situations in which it is used.

For example, the sentence:

"Could you open the window?"

has the grammatical form of an interrogative sentence. However, its communicative function is usually a polite request rather than a question about someone's physical ability.

Compare the following expressions:

- Open the window.
- Could you open the window?
- Would you mind opening the window?
- I wonder if you could open the window.

All four expressions can perform the same general communicative function: requesting someone to open a window. Nevertheless, they differ in grammatical form, politeness, and degree of directness.

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This example illustrates an essential principle of functional language teaching: different grammatical structures can express similar functions, while the same grammatical structure can perform different functions depending on context.

The functional approach therefore encourages learners to understand the relationship between language form, meaning, and communicative purpose.

An important contribution to functional language teaching was made by D. A. Wilkins (1976). His work Notional Syllabuses proposed a way of organizing language-learning content according to the meanings and communicative purposes learners need to express.

A functional-notional syllabus generally considers two important categories:

Language functions refer to what speakers do through language.

Examples include:

- Requesting information.
- Giving advice.
- Expressing agreement.
- Expressing disagreement.
- Making suggestions.
- Apologizing.
- Inviting someone.
- Offering assistance.
- Expressing opinions.
- Giving instructions.

Notions refer to conceptual meanings that learners need to communicate.

Examples include:

- Time.
- Place.
- Distance.
- Quantity.
- Frequency.
- Duration.
- Comparison.
- Possibility.
- Certainty.

For instance, a lesson about travelling may combine the function of asking for information with notions of time, distance, price, and location.

A learner may practise the following expressions:

"How long does the journey take?"

"How much is the ticket?"

"Where is the nearest station?"

"What time does the train leave?"

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These sentences combine grammatical knowledge, vocabulary, and communicative functions within a meaningful situation.

Wilkins's contribution is important because it demonstrates that language-learning content can be organized around what learners need to communicate, rather than exclusively around the order of grammatical structures. His work does not imply that grammar is unnecessary; it offers an alternative perspective for selecting and organizing language content.

The development of communicative competence is one of the central objectives associated with functional language teaching.

Hymes (1972) introduced the concept of communicative competence to emphasize that knowing a language involves more than knowing its grammatical rules. Speakers must also understand how to use language appropriately within particular social and cultural contexts.

Canale and Swain (1980) subsequently developed an influential framework for communicative competence, identifying grammatical, sociolinguistic, and strategic dimensions. Canale (1983) later discussed discourse competence as an additional component.

These dimensions can be explained as follows:

1. **Grammatical competence:** knowledge of vocabulary, pronunciation, spelling, and grammatical structures.
2. **Sociolinguistic competence:** the ability to use language appropriately according to the social situation and relationship between speakers.
3. **Discourse competence:** the ability to connect sentences and organize communication coherently.
4. **Strategic competence:** the ability to use communication strategies when difficulties arise.

The functional approach contributes to these dimensions by teaching learners how linguistic expressions are used in different communicative situations.

For example, learners may know the grammatical structure of the present simple tense but also need to understand how to use it to describe routines, ask about habits, and exchange personal information.

Consequently, functional instruction connects grammatical knowledge with practical communication.

The functional approach is based on several methodological principles that influence the selection of teaching materials, classroom activities, and assessment procedures.

The first principle is that language should be taught in relation to the purposes for which it is used.

Traditional grammar-focused instruction may introduce the structure of modal verbs through rules and isolated examples. Functional instruction connects modal verbs with communicative purposes.

For example:

- Can I borrow your pen? — Requesting permission.
- You should study regularly. — Giving advice.
- May I come in? — Asking permission politely.
- You must wear a seat belt. — Expressing obligation.

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This approach helps learners recognize that grammatical structures are not simply rules to memorize; they are resources for expressing particular meanings.

Language functions become easier to understand when they are presented within realistic situations.

The functional approach is closely connected with Communicative Language Teaching and Task-Based Language Teaching, but these concepts should not be treated as identical.

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is a broad approach that emphasizes the development of communicative competence. It encourages learners to use language meaningfully and appropriately.

The functional approach focuses more specifically on the communicative purposes that language performs and on the relationship between linguistic forms and functions.

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) organizes instruction around tasks that require learners to use language to achieve meaningful outcomes.

For example, a lesson on requesting information may be organized functionally around polite requests. A CLT lesson may include pair work and interaction to practise those requests. A TBLT lesson may require learners to obtain information from several sources and select the best travel option.

These approaches can complement one another.

Richards and Rodgers (2014) explain the theoretical and methodological development of language teaching approaches, including communicative language teaching.

The Council of Europe (2020) also promotes an action-oriented perspective in which learners are considered social agents who use language to complete meaningful tasks. The CEFR Companion Volume provides descriptors that can support the development and assessment of communicative abilities.

Accordingly, functional instruction can be incorporated into communicative and task-based lessons without requiring teachers to choose only one methodology.

The effectiveness of the functional approach should be discussed through evidence rather than unsupported generalizations.

Several publications provide relevant theoretical and empirical support.

First, Ahmed (2013) investigated the functional approach to second-language instruction in relation to grammatical accuracy among university students studying English at the University of Nyala in Sudan. The study used qualitative and quantitative methods and reported that the functional approach was more effective than the structural approach for grammatical accuracy in the investigated context.

This finding is important because it challenges the assumption that functional language teaching necessarily weakens grammar learning. It suggests that meaningful and interaction-oriented instruction can also support grammatical development.

Second, Nguyen and Dao (2021) examined the integration of task-based learning and the functional approach among 100 university students. Their findings indicated improvements in speaking competence, particularly fluency and discourse management, together with positive learner perceptions.

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Third, Wilkins (1976) provides the theoretical foundation for organizing language content around notions and communicative functions. Although his work is not an experimental evaluation of classroom effectiveness, it offers a significant contribution to curriculum and syllabus design.

Finally, the Council of Europe (2020) provides a framework for describing language proficiency and developing communicative objectives. Its action-oriented perspective supports the use of meaningful activities in which learners apply language to achieve communicative outcomes.

Taken together, these sources suggest that functional language teaching has theoretical support and promising empirical applications. Nevertheless, the available findings should not be interpreted as proof that the functional approach is universally superior to every alternative teaching method.

Effectiveness depends on educational context, learner proficiency, teaching quality, curriculum objectives, and assessment methods.

The functional approach represents an important perspective in modern English language teaching because it connects linguistic knowledge with the practical purposes of communication. Its main contribution is the emphasis on what learners need to achieve through language rather than treating language exclusively as a system of grammatical rules.

The theoretical foundations developed by Halliday (1978), Wilkins (1976), Hymes (1972), and Canale and Swain (1980) demonstrate the importance of examining language in relation to meaning, social context, and communicative competence.

The analysis presented in this article indicates that functional instruction can support the development of speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills. It can also help learners understand politeness, register, communicative intention, and the relationship between grammatical forms and their functions.

Research by Ahmed (2013) and Nguyen and Dao (2021) provides relevant evidence concerning grammatical accuracy and speaking development in particular educational contexts. Nevertheless, the findings should be interpreted carefully because the effectiveness of any teaching approach depends on its implementation and the characteristics of the learners.

The functional approach should not replace grammatical instruction or systematic vocabulary development. Instead, it should be integrated with them to create a balanced learning environment in which students understand both the structure of English and its practical use.

In conclusion, the functional approach can be an effective component of EFL teaching when lessons are carefully planned, communicative objectives are clearly established, and learners receive sufficient opportunities to use English meaningfully. Its value lies in helping students move beyond knowledge about the language towards the ability to use the language appropriately and confidently in real communicative situations.

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