**3. The Functional-Notional Syllabus**

**3.1 Introduction**

The view that philosophers of language and sociolinguists had on language during the 1970’s started to be broadly reflected in syllabuses and course books and gave birth to what became known as functional-notional syllabus design.

Many teachers, however, while first encountering such terms (function and notion) get confused to what each of them means. As Nunan (1988) explains: **functions** can be described as ‘the **communicative purposes** for which we use the language’ whereas **notions** are ‘the **conceptual meanings** […] expressed through language’. Good examples of language functions that might a syllabus embody are *greeting, identifying, apologizing, inviting, declining invitations, offering, advising, suggesting* and many others. However, for notions that a textbook may present for study are *time, direction, equality, cause, frequency, existence, duration and size*.

**3.2 Assumptions behind Functional Notional Syllabuses**

The notional-functional syllabus came into existence as a reaction to the structural syllabus in the seventies. During that time where structuralism was prevailing in language classrooms, linguists started questioning the beliefs that used to govern the approach. The studies done up to then on how a child learns the grammatical and the phonological systems showed many inadequacies, since learning could not be considered simply as the result of habit formation, the fact being that children were able to create utterances they had not been exposed to before. In addition to that, there was a need to find out how children learn to communicate, too. And in that line of thought, it became evident that communication required more than simply being able to master the language structure.

Among the reasons that generated the development of the notional functional syllabus, one is related to the assumption that ‘language was much more appropriately classified in terms of what people wanted to do with the language (function) or in terms of what meanings people wanted to convey (notions) than in terms of the grammatical items as in traditional language teaching models’ (Finocchiaro and Brumfit,…………).

So to speak, language is considered as ‘a vehicle for the expression of functional meaning. […]This theory emphasizes the semantic and communicative dimension rather than merely the grammatical characteristics of language’ (Richards and Rodgers …………….).Language is seen as communication. And the American linguist Douglass Brown(………..)states that ‘communication may be regarded as a combination of acts, a series of elements with purpose and intent. Communication is not merely an event, something that happens; it is functional, purposive, and designed to bring about some effect-some change, however subtle or unobservable-on the environment of hearers and speakers’.

Finnocchiaro and Brumfit (…………..) suggest that the functional-notional approach has a big merit in putting the learners and their communicative purposes at the centre of the curriculum. Some of the benefits they mention about adopting a functional-notional approach are:

* It presents realistic learning tasks.
* Real-world language is provided for everyday teaching.
* It focuses on introducing receptive skill activities (listening/Reading) before embarking learners onto the productive skill (speaking and writing).
* It asserts that the speaker must have a real purpose for speaking, and something to talk about.
* Communication fosters the learner’s intrinsic motivation because it expresses basic communicative functions.

**3.3 Critiques to Functional-Notional Syllabuses**

The difficulty in shifting from structurally-based syllabus design to functional-notional criteria, is the complexity in the selection and grading of items. Decisions about item inclusion in the syllabus can no longer be done on linguistic ground alone, and designers need to supply items which they believe will help learners to carry out the communicative purposes required to accomplish their objective behind learning the language. So as to determine what these purposes are, it is almost often primordial to carry out a needs analysis. This is mainly the case when developing syllabuses for the sake of teaching English for specific purposes.

In developing notional-functional syllabuses, designers are faced with the difficulty of looking beyond the notion of linguistic elements in terms of simplicity and complexity while it comes to grading them. The grading of functional items appears to be of greater difficulty and complexity because there are few apparent objective tools for judging that one functional form, for instance, ‘apologizing’ is either simpler or more difficult than another one such as ‘requesting’.

The functional-notional syllabuses have also noticed some similar criticism to those addressed to grammatical syllabuses. Widdowson (1979) points out that inventories of functions and notions do not necessarily reflect the way languages are learned any more than do inventories of grammatical points and lexical items. He also claims that dividing language into discrete units of whatever type misrepresents the nature of language as communication.

Widdowson, too, came out with a critique about structural and notional syllabuses when he states that ‘both types of syllabuses recognize that the learner’s goal should be the ability to communicate. They differ in the assumption of what needs to be actually taught for this ability to be acquired. In both cases there is a gap between what is taught and what is learnt, both leave something for the learner to find out for himself. They differ again in their awareness of this fact. In other words, in spite of the fact that both types of syllabuses have the same objective, which is to teach learners how to communicate, none of them reaches it. Indeed they end up doing more or less the same thing. The difference seems to lie on the fact that an inventory of linguistic items was replaced by an inventory of functions and notions. In spite of this criticism, Widdowson states that ‘what the work of notional syllabuses has done,[…]is to sharpen our perception of what is required of a syllabus if it is to develop communicative competence in learners’(……………..). And he carries on explaining that the notional syllabuses ‘are the first serious consideration on what is involved in incorporating communicative properties in a syllabus’. Furthermore, he comments that it would have been more beneficial if the notional syllabus had been considered as ‘a means of developing the structural syllabus rather than replacing it’. In this way, instead of being two rival approaches, both syllabuses could be seen as complementing one another. This is what Ben MOUSSAT (…………..) concludes within his analysis to the question, ‘…Language teaching should be viewed as a double-fold objective process: (1)to develop in the learner grammatical competence in the Chomskyan sense[…] and (2) to inculcate in him what is socially appropriate and accepted, i.e. what Hymes (1962) has labeled “the speaking rules” ’ .