

Teaching functions and situations with mini scenarios

Functions

Functions describe the purposes of language use. Without some grammar, learners could only say words; they would be unable to express the relationships between the words. However, grammar alone does not help learners to know how language is used. Learners need to know which bits of language will help them to achieve a particular communicative function or purpose, to be aware of what they can do with the language items they have learned and to understand what other people are trying to do with the language they use. Common communicative functions are, for example, requesting, acceding to a request, informing, sympathizing, and asking for information.

The function or purpose the speaker has in mind can often be made evident by adding the missing verbs to what the speaker says:

A I'd like a salami pizza, please. (*First Choice A1*, Unit 4, Practice 10)

The speaker *requests* a salami pizza.

B Sure. (*First Choice A1*, Unit 4, Practice 10)

The speaker *accedes to the request* with 'Sure'.

A I'm not very well. (*First Choice A1*, Unit 8, Listening 8)

The speaker *informs* someone that he is not very well.

B Oh dear. What's the matter? (*First Choice A1*, Unit 8, Listening 8)

The speaker *expresses sympathy* with 'Oh dear' and *asks for information* with 'What's the matter?'

Conversely, it will quickly become apparent that speakers do not normally state the communicative function directly. When people accede to a request they say, 'Sure' (as above) or 'Here you are' (*First Choice A1*, Unit 3, Mini Scenario 1) or many other variations, but nobody signals that they are acceding to a request by saying, 'I accede to your request'.

Functions in *First Choice*

Functions in *First Choice A1* and *A1 Fast* are embedded in mini scenarios. Mini scenarios show our learners functional language in a social context. If we teach learners a functional phrase (often called an *exponent* in books for teachers) without reference to any particular situation or context, they are likely to use the wrong exponent when they speak. For example, it will be clear to us as teachers that 'Sure' and 'Here you are' are not interchangeable. We can

use 'Sure' in acceding to many types of request, but we can only use 'Here you are' when acceding to a request that requires us to give something to the requester.

Through scenarios we can help our learners to become familiar with suitable functional exponents for particular situations. We can demonstrate to the learners how encounters in English are likely to develop. This is useful information for them because in many social and functional conversations there are typical sequences of communication.

Using mini scenarios to help learners produce natural language

The mini scenarios in *First Choice* help learners with a number of aspects of natural spoken language including adjacency pairs, listening tokens, natural phrases and discourse markers, as well as helping them with the structure of a communicative sequence (discourse structure).

Communicative mini sequences

Many utterances, spoken in a particular situation, suggest to a competent speaker exactly the kind of response that is required. The functions of the first utterance and the response are dependent on each other, as can be seen from the examples below.

C Your boarding card. (*give*)

B Oh! Thank you. (*thank*) (First Choice A1, Unit 4, Mini Scenario 9)

A Merry Christmas. (*expressing seasonal good wishes*)

B Thanks, and the same to you. (*reacting to seasonal good wishes*)

(First Choice A1, Unit 8, Mini Scenario 9)

It is useful to teach learners these communicative mini sequences, often known as *adjacency pairs*. They set language in a clear, if minimal, context, illustrating frequent language patterns that low-level learners can reproduce. Inevitably, learners at A1 and A2 levels can be presented with only a limited repertoire of formulaic adjacency pairs, while at higher levels, they can learn a wider range of possible responses appropriate for different speaker roles and settings.

Listening tokens

When we talk to someone, we need to show that we are listening as well as making our speaking contributions. All it needs is some very short words or sounds but just as with the communicative mini sequences, learners tend not to use these unless we focus on them in class. In *First Choice A1*, Unit 6, Mini Scenario 4, for example, learners can experience how 'Ah', 'Mm', and 'Right' are used to show interest in what the speaker is saying.

Natural phrases

A scenario can provide learners with natural, idiomatic phrases for certain situations and draw their attention to them. Simply including phrases in a dialogue is often not sufficient for the learners to realize that these are optimal exponents for the situation. So *First Choice* includes and highlights these natural phrases. In *First Choice A1*, Unit 12, Mini Scenario 5, phrases for the function *arranging to meet someone* are included in the dialogue. However, in order to focus the learners' attention on the phrases, they are asked to pick them out of the dialogue and match them up with other, often less idiomatic, phrases with the same function. So learners read the phrase 'Would you like to meet today?', find the more idiomatic equivalent, 'What about today?' in the dialogue and write it into the green box. Or they read the literal 'Is Wednesday possible?' and find 'What about Wednesday?' in the dialogue.

Discourse markers

These little words are used a lot by competent speakers of English but learners often do not notice them or use them, making what they say sound curiously stilted. Also in *First Choice A1*, Unit 12, Mini Scenario 5, the word 'Well' is used as a softener before Tara tells Ben that she is looking for work. Ben twice uses the word 'then' but he uses it as a discourse marker, not as an adverb referring to an event in the past: 'OK, then, Wednesday evening ...'. Here, 'then' just marks the end of making the arrangement.

Discourse structure

Many conversations with a purpose (*transactional discourse*) involve a number of stages, without which the conversation does not really work as a piece of effective communication. In *phoning to make an arrangement* (*First Choice A1*, Unit 12, Mini Scenario 5), the following stages are necessary and appear in the dialogue:

- Greeting
- Giving background information
- Saying why you want to meet the other person
- Negotiating a time and place to meet
- Confirming and finalizing

Look at the dialogue and imagine how odd it would be without a greeting on both sides! Learners will possibly include a greeting when practising a similar conversation, but many of them would not remember to confirm and finalize the arrangement in English (even if they do it in their own language) unless they were given an example.

Other mini scenario features

Scenarios can also introduce learners to the difference between propositional and communicative meaning, that is, the fact that words don't always carry the same meaning. In certain situations, some bits of language mean something completely different from their dictionary meaning.

Serena How are you today?
Ben OK.
Serena OK? What's the problem?

(*First Choice A1*, Unit 3, Mini Scenario 1)

In this case, 'OK' definitely does not mean 'OK'.

One clue to a discrepancy between dictionary meaning and the speaker's intended meaning-in-context (or what linguists call *propositional meaning* and *illocutionary force*) is intonation. Effective intonation is achievable at low levels as long as learners realize how important it is, that it can affect meaning. *First Choice* gets the learners to notice and practise a range of intonation, either within a scenario or following on from one (*First Choice A1*, Unit 3, Mini Scenario 1 and *First Choice A1*, Unit 11, Pronunciation 10 e.g. 'Oh', 'Oh dear', 'Fine', 'That's very kind of you', etc.).

To sum up, the mini scenarios in *First Choice*:

- Give learners the real language they need to communicate effectively.
- Show them how the language is organized.
- Expose them to frequent features of spoken language.
- Prepare them to engage in tasks.