A Training Portfolio for Teachers of Functional English

By

Farzana Ursani*

In the Allama Iqbal Open University's education system, the student remains the most important person. Everything and everybody strives to make their learning process easier, comfortable and rewarding. The entire AIOU machinery, both administrative and academic, is in constant attendance to facilitate students. Yet, their grievances are endless...they lament of neglect, injustices and rough deals.

Another major concern is the tutor. A tutor is a major link between the student, scattered far and wide the country and the course co-ordinator who is based at the AIOU's main campus at Islamabad. The AIOU has a vast country wide tutor network supervised by respective regional offices and the directorate of regional services (DRS), based in Islamabad. An AIOU tutor is expected to perform multiple roles as compared to its counterpart in the traditional system. Although, being academically and professionally qualified and experienced, tutors are inadequately briefed or trained about the concept of distance teaching and learning more specifically about their role as AIOU tutors. Despite efforts of organising numerous tutor training workshops, one waits to see improved tutor performance and better and interactive tutorials. Most of these tutor briefings, workshops or trainings are hastily arranged, lacking in proper content and context and are not very cost effective. At a recent tutor training workshop in Quetta in April 1997, I had an opportunity to have a very realistic encounter with the tutors, gathered from all over Balochistan. The first two days were devoted to clarifying the concept of distance teaching and learning system, how different it is from the formal system, yet how challenging, and the distance teaching jargon so extensively used at AIOU.

A questionnaire was distributed in the beginning with a purpose to make participants familiar with each other and feel at ease. The questionnaire basically meant to break ice as well as help assess their knowledge about the AIOU and the special terminology associated with the distance education system. This was followed by an intensive drilling about how to use and handle the various compo-

* The writer is working as Assistant Professor in the Department of English Language & Applied Linguistics, AIOU, Islamabad.

nents ranging from learning materials, assignments which in true terms are students' continuous and open-book assessment, the importance of media component in their learning process, supplementary or enrichment materials in form of suggested readings, books, readers, vision books, flip charts and of course audio, video, radio and television programmes. The tutors were reminded about the importance of feedback in AIOU's system stressing upon positive reinforcement on assignments and during tutorials, compilation of results, maintaining their own and students' records and most importantly remaining connected with the regional offices and the DRS. The next step was to define their role as tutors, their responsibility to make the fortnightly tutorial sessions as interactive, rewarding and useful for the students and finally, discuss and put forward in a practical fashion some ideas on how to teach the *Matric Functional English Course.*[1]

The aim of this article is to share my experiences during the Quetta workshop which infact proved to be my re-orientation. It helped me redefine my teaching performance and commitment, rethink my teaching and writing objectives and revise the strategies and approaches adopt while writing courses and assignments. Honestly, the experience jolted me out from the comfortable and exclusive hideout at AIOU, changing my self concept and my understanding of the factors that contribute to successful language teaching and learning in particular. My purpose, therefore, is to illustrate the workshop plan, a kind of progression beginning with an interactive exercise of getting to know each other to the role of tutor, the description of an interactive classroom, the concept of Functional English and finally illustrating some practical suggestions for teaching the Matric Functional English units adapting unit one of the course.

Getting to know Each Other

Mix around the class, talk to your workshop colleagues and ask each other these questions. You can ask all questions or any selected few:

[1]Matric Functional English is a full credit (12 units) compulsory component of the Women Secondary Education Programme of AIOU. It is basically targeted at the Rural Women who have an education qualification till grade 8. The course follows a multi-media approach which includes the textbooks, study guides, audiocassette, vision book, assignments, tutorial sessions and written exam. There are two semesters in a students' year and mandatory weekly tutorials. Tutors and students meet for two hours at specific place and time to work on the unit studied during the week. Tutor training is a regular and the most significant aspect of all AIOU courses, especially for the Functional English tutors, where tutors are given a significant exposure to the WSEP's multi media courses. The present article focuses on the training workshop for a group of tutors of Balochistan region.

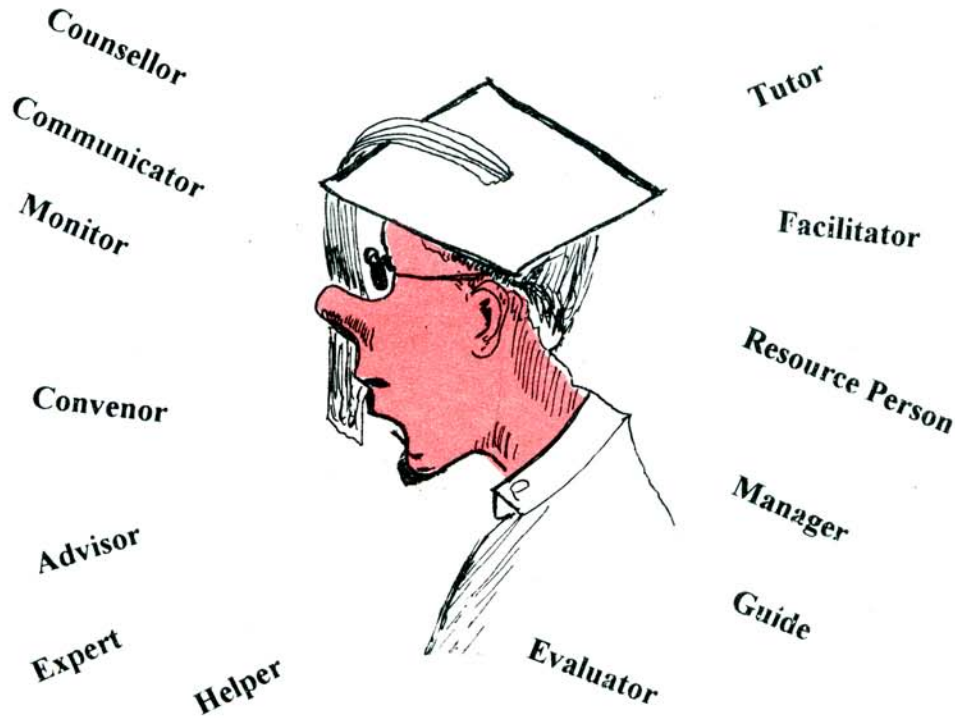
1. Which part of Balochistan have you come from?
2 Is this your first experience of attending an AIOU workshop?
3. How would you define a "workshop"?
4. Do you know what distance learning is all about?
5 Have you heard of these terms before?

Self assessment question
Study kit
Open Learning
Media component
Tutorials
Format
Feedback
Correspondence
Tutorial/assignment schedule
Regional Office

6.You are going to teach the Matric Functional English courses. Are you familiar with these terms more specific to English Language teaching?

- Functional English
- Four Language Skills
- Dialogue
- Context
- Practice
- Communication
- Every day English
- Activity
- Vision Book
- Skim, Scan, Infer

Answers to the questions were later discussed in the class with the help of pre-planned handouts and transparencies and audio visual demonstrations depicting various components of the AIOU and the principles of Functional syllabus/English. Participants did a brain storming exercise to add related terms, in other words synonyms of the word tutor. This is what we achieved.



What are the pre-requisites to qualify as a tutor? The question was basically about the academic, professional and personal qualities of a successful tutor or the profile of a good tutor? This question was once again open for discussion and which generated the following useful and relevant answers:

Teacher
Tutor Facilitator

- Level of Education
- Subject Competence
- Professional Competence
- Teacher Student Relationship
- Interpersonal Skills
- Friendliness and Fairness
- Discipline and Control
- Adaptability
- Innovation
- Attitude Towards Error
- Positive Feedback
- Evaluating Yourself

Role of a Tutor/Facilitator

The word facilitator comes from the Latin word *facilis* which means:

- To make Easy
- To free from difficulties and obstacles
- To help forward and promote learning
- To lessen the burden

A tutor/facilitator must:

- Take the responsibility of the tutorial group - what the group does and how it does
- Bear in mind the overall purpose of the tutorial group
- Provide opportunities to the group to grow in an appropriate direction
- Help the group to take control and responsibility of their own learning and achievements
- Beware of what is constantly happening in the group and if notices any diversions, redirects them to the main point
- Encourage and support them in the learning process
- Be a part of the group, not always the leader
- Not force ones own needs or insight or decisions on the group, but allow freedom and interaction
- Stay quiet and yet be attentive

A tutor/facilitator has to learn to acquire the style, attitude and ability to lead.

AIOU tutorials need to be different from regular and formal classroom teaching periods of forty minutes. The tutorials are conducted fortnightly where students are expected to come prepared. Being recruits of a self study and personalized system of learning, the AIOU students come to attend the tutorials with preliminary preparation and seek the tutor's help and guidance in areas of diffi-

culty. Therefore, these tutorials ideally ought to be ninety minutes of problem solving, discussions, group and pair work and interactive learning, leaving students with a sense of achievement and satisfaction. How many of the tutors do these things with their tutorial groups? The answers as expected were not very encouraging. Yet banking on the opportunity, I spelled out some of the basic ingredients essential to make any tutorial or a regular classroom session interactive, lively, rewarding and worthwhile in terms of learning.

In a classroom, interaction occurs in these forms:

T ⟶ S — The teacher talks or lectures most of the time and students are just passive listeners. This particular class is teacher centered.

T ⟶ S
⟵ — The teacher gives opportunity to the students to participate in the class, yet keeps control. This is less teacher centered but still the teacher is the dominant figure.

S ⟶ S
⟵ — The teacher provides the impetus and allows students to take initiatives. Here the teacher's role is more of a facilitator and the class is student centered.

An interactive classroom is basically student centered where students are allowed to explore, interpret and evaluate whatever is being presented to them. Students are given freedom to express their opinions in writing and in speech, they are free to reach to their own conclusions and the teacher's inconspicuous presence is to subtly monitor the learning process and keep a sense of direction more appropriately so when students are learning English as a foreign language.

Tutors can make the tutorial sessions interactive by:

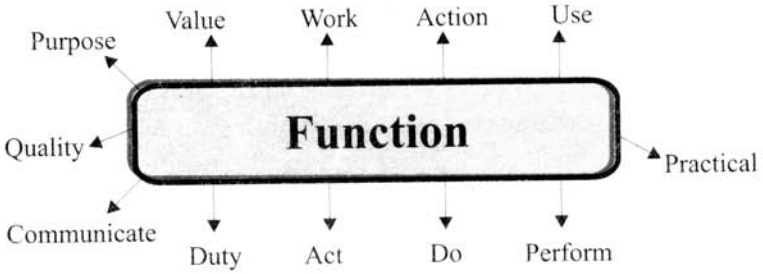
a) ***Creating a conducive social climate in the classroom:*** The tutor should show solidarity with students, give help, acceptance, clarification, reward understanding, a sense of fulfilment, direction and satisfaction. The list can be endless, the bottom line is, that a tutor and the class atmosphere should be relaxed, positive and constructive which would result in releasing the typical tensions and fears of students. All these are crucial for creating a good interpersonal relationship between the two.

b) ***Providing for participation and independence to students:*** Once again the tutor's role is of a facilitator, a resource person allowing students to take responsibility of the rate and route of their learning in other words take control of their own classroom performance. Such initiatives will make the entire teaching and learning period very interesting, rewarding and healthy, both for students who are on a voyage to explore their capabilities and for the teacher who acts as a guide and mentor in their learning process.

c) ***Creating variety in learning activities:*** Incorporate innovative teaching techniques using all kinds of audio visual aids. The tutor can experiment with endless ideas, be adventurous and bold, practice drama techniques, games and other such communicative activities .. it is up to the tutor to induce life and vigour in the sessions and among the students.

d) ***Giving positive and constructive feedback:*** A timely and apt feedback or response is of tremendous importance in students learning process. Sometimes, peer correction and self correction can also contribute in the educational growth of students.

Ensuring that the tutors now have adequate orientation about the AIOU and the challenges of being AIOU tutors, they were then guided into more specific and professionalized field of teaching Functional English. Assuming that the concept of Functional English will be new for them and that almost all of them will be unfamiliar with the contemporary, more appropriately fashionable jargon, extensively used in the discipline of the teaching of English as a foreign language, and the current emphasis to the Functional approach, I started of by doing a mind map exercise, eliciting synonyms for the word functional, followed by giving them a simple checklist defining the term Functional English, how different it is from traditional English courses, and its usefulness for learners of the English language and finally by suggesting practical guidelines for teaching the Functional English course.



Functional Syllabus is the kind of a syllabus where the functions are selected and sequenced according to their usefulness to the learner, the extent to which they meet the learner's communicative needs" (Cunningsworth 1984). The term *function* refers to the process of conveying the meaning. The functional syllabus lists various functions and gives examples of how those functions can be expressed in English. Widdowson (1979:248) states that "a functional syllabus is only an inventory of units, which are more functional than structural". The following are some basic characteristics of the functional syllabus. The functional syllabus:

- ⇨ is designed for the non-English speaking people (foreign learners) is Interactive, student-centered, communicative, needs based deals with every day, real life contents;
- ⇨ incorporates appropriate language according to relevant socio-cultural situations;
- ⇨ uses language in its proper context, situation or setting;
- ⇨ integrates grammar and vocabulary with other language skills by using them in meaningful and communicative tasks and activities;
- ⇨ stresses on purposeful learning, that is, all language learning activities have a definite purpose or objective;
- ⇨ equally emphasizes all the four language skills;
- ⇨ plays around with different language variations that are possible within each function;

- ⇨ focuses less on structure and more on communication (oral performance);

- ⇨ grades functions, vocabulary, grammar, listening, speaking, reading and writing tasks according to their level of difficulty or complexity;

- ⇨ expresses the titles of units in functional terms to focus students attention on learning objective/s of the unit;

- ⇨ spells out the learning objectives before each unit to set up expectations of students;

- ⇨ presents one particular language function in different situations;

- ⇨ recycles one particular function in successive units to highlight various possibilities of use;
- ⇨ can use learners' native language whenever foreign concepts or references need clarification, and
- ⇨ encourages flexibility, that is, teachers can break away with the routine heirachy of units according to students' needs and ease.

In a functional approach inductive learning is encouraged where the learner is presented with a number of examples which embody the rule and by identifying similarities between the example and the rule, the learner hypothesises and seek confirmation of the hypothesis (Cunningsworth 1984:22). In other words, the learner induces the rule and then uses it. The emphasis, therefore, is on the use (appropriateness or the matching of language to its social context and function) rather than the usage (grammatically correct sentences without too much concern for how these sentences can be used). However, as Allan Cunningsworth (1984) puts it "no one can produce a functional course without teaching language forms, we should teach both, although the relationship between the form and function is complex, success depends on how successfully we teach the form of the sentence and its effective use in a context of social interaction." Keith Jhonson and Morrow (1981:72) presents the stages or the process of teaching a language function. One would clearly notice that the focus "changes from the accurate production of isolated utterances to the fluent selection of appropriate utterances in communication. The learner is now concerned with using language, not English usages. In order to do this, learners take on roles and interacts with other learners. The teacher will actually assume different roles to model the language for the learners". I have taken the liberty of adapting Jhonson's and Morrow's

model by joining practice and transfer stages together and adding on the production stage.

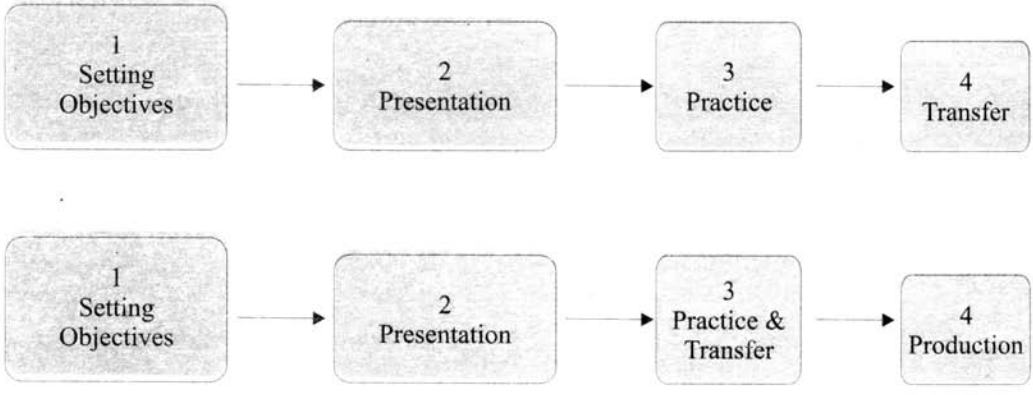


Fig. given above is an Adapted Model of (Johnson and Morrow (1981:72)

Stating objectives is simply telling the students what the unit is about and what they are expected to learn. To examplify, learning objectives of the Matric functional English course units were demonstrated and tutors were asked to pretend as students and predict and anticipate about the contents of each unit. Presentation stage is the initial stage of learning a new item. "The teacher provides the new information, the new piece of knowledge, and the learner concentrates on understanding and remembering it" (Cunningsworth 1984:34).

The learner is infact trying to internalise the new rule and the new language item. We can, therefore, say that the presentation stage is actually about contexualisation of the function or the language item. To contexualize or situationalize communicatively, the function is placed in terms of who is speaking, to whom, where and why. The practice and transfer stage is when "the learner starts to use the language item. As first it is carefully controlled, giving a great deal of help and prevent the learner from making too many mistakes. The degree of control is lessened as the learner becomes more confident" (Cunningsworth 1984:34). At this stage the teacher can go on practicing in form of drilling or repetition of the language presented, individual responses, questions and answers, pair and group work, substitution drills, role play, improvisation, information transfer exercises. At this stage a teacher can experiment with a whole range of exercises with the main aim of giving maximum exposure to the learners and then allowing

a certain degree of independence. Many language experts have also termed this as the guided practice stage.

The production stage is the final stage where "the learner is helped to use the language in uncontrolled environment and which is closer to their own personal and real life circumstances. The student is now being prepared for using English in the world outside the classroom" (Cunningsworth 1984:34). Students play around with language with a great deal of freedom and independence and enjoy unrestrained creativity.

Planning a Functional Lesson

Let us examine the possible steps that one may follow in planning and then teaching a Functional English unit.

1. ***Presentation of the dialogue***: Discussion of the function, situation, people, roles, setting, unfamiliar vocabulary or concepts, the formality and informality of the language, relating the theme of the dialogue with the personal experiences of students, incorporating audio visual aids to set the scene, etc.

2. ***Practice of the dialogue***: It can be repetition or drilling, questions and answers on the dialogue, substitution drills, reinforcement of the form or grammatical practice and function, group and pair work involving work based on the unit.

3. ***Productive work***: In form of role plays, dramatisation, role plays, problem solving and other communicative activities involving free expression and independent learning, using supplementary reading, writing materials which could add more to their knowledge.

Lesson Plan: Matric Functional English 207 Unit 1

1. ***Presentation***

   Discuss the situations, people, roles, occupation, behaviour, the language they use.

   Talk about traffic rules, problems, the traffic policeman, the driving licence, challan etc. to illicit relevant vocabulary items and setting up the scene.

   What do you think about Kamal Baig?

What kind of a person Kamal Baig is?

What kind of a family background do you think he has?

Where are these people? or the place or the scene where these people are speaking?

What kind of language are these people using? Is it formal, informal, rude, impolite, pleasant, the tone etc.

Are there any such signals which tell us about the behaviour or the style of the speakers.

One can use visual aids to enrich the function and for further clarity, such as some traffic signs, a drawing of a car accident etc.

2. ***Practice and Transfer***

Help students finish off the given exercises. They can either work individually or in pairs.

Provide a list of questions or ask students to add more questions similar to the ones given in the dialogue, students can practice speaking by asking and answering each other those questions.

Change the context or situation, for example, a student caught cheating in the exams and the exchange between the principal and the student. Or any such situation which can help students practice speaking.

Give relevant grammar practice, such as explanation about WH questions and personal pronouns.

Give them a variety of situations and ask them to construct questions with:

What, Why, When, Where, Who, How

Since the unit deals with filling forms with personal information, ask students to give their own personal information and also talk to others in the class and fill in their particulars. Also, bring authentic application forms for a driving licence or an identity card etc. and give them enough practice in filling forms.

3. ***Productive Work***

Role play or dramatize the dialogue, ask students to use all kind of questions they have learnt in the practice stage.

Find out more information about traffic rules, traffic police force, any similar news item reporting a car accident or theft etc.

The reading writing section deals with sequence writing, hence ask them to write cooking recipes or operating instructions. Here, the tutor can use a lot of supplementary materials such as manuals etc.

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