

## NOTIONAL CURRICULUM IN AN INTENSIVE COURSE

by Bob Ruud

Director, Language Institute of Japan

January 1989

### Introduction

The Language Institute of Japan's Residential Business Communication Program is a four-week intensive, residential, total-immersion, English-only course for business people. It has existed in slightly changing form for nearly twenty years. Its curriculum pre-dated D. A. Wilkins' Notional Syllabuses by several years; nevertheless, it is said to be "notional". In this paper I will trace a brief history of the curriculum and describe it as it exists today.

### History

The original designers of the residential program at LIOJ say that they knew very little about language teaching; that they just wanted to "put people from different countries together and see what would happen." The participants and the teachers in the course were brought together in a situation where interaction was not only encouraged, it was all but unavoidable. Behind the scenes of "putting people from different countries together", of course, teachers were busy organizing activities and planning lessons. However, "putting people together" clearly established interaction as an end as well as a means. Subsequently, emphasis naturally fell on language use and meaning before language form and description, despite the difficulty of predicting the outcome of such emphasis in specific or behavioral terms. There would probably be acquisition of morphemes and sub-phonemic particles going on, but this was left somewhat to chance, and there was an unscientific assumption that interaction between well-intended people from different cultures and language backgrounds could have a general positive effect. This interaction would not eliminate differences among very different people, but would concentrate on making them practical communicators.

This basic principle of interaction, then, was the foundation of the curriculum for LIOJ's intensive program. It consisted of a core idea and a few corollaries, and accommodated a variety of approaches to classroom teaching. The program evolved with Japan, gradually moving toward where the need for communication was most obvious: the business world. With the stronger attachment to business came an increasing need for stricter accountability, both by an increasingly sophisticated clientele, and by teachers trained in the new science of language teaching methodology. It was a thriving curriculum, waiting (though not anxiously) for science to give it a name. Then Notional Syllabuses was published. Like the already existing LIOJ curriculum, it advocated a meaning-based teaching plan relatively independent of methodology. The term "notional" attached itself naturally, quickly, and securely to the LIOJ curriculum. Other theories of methodology and language acquisition have had their impact and gradually been absorbed or discarded, but "putting people from different countries together to see what would happen" is still really what is done at LIOJ, and "notional" is what is said about it.

## The LIOJ Curriculum Today

In general, the curriculum provides a framework which makes coordinated interaction among teachers and students a matter of course. Teachers' daily records of how they actually implement the curriculum become the syllabus. Veteran teachers are encouraged to create these records as well as follow them.

I would now like to describe briefly a number of the important features of this curriculum: Perspectives, Notions, Short-term Goals, Sequencing, and Evaluation.

### Perspectives

In an intensive program in which the students are in class for nearly nine hours a day, change in perspective is good simply for change's sake. In addition, the changes in perspective in the daily schedule in LIOJ's curriculum appeal to some common inclinations and address some common weaknesses students have when they enter the program.

**Micro:** The Micro slot is designed to improve students' ability to understand and speak in sentences, emphasizing questions and answers. Micro focuses on the expression and comprehension of ideas in controlled practice, and on language use in one-to-one situations. The main skills being developed are: controlling conversations with questions; initiating, maintaining, and closing conversations; and communicating on the telephone. This perspective combines communication with the exactness our students are used to in studying English.

### OHP 1: BBP

**Macro:** The Macro slot is designed to teach students to comprehend and express main ideas. In listening, the focus is on extended (relative to level), uninterrupted speech (NOTE: level). In speaking, the focus is on the organization of ideas. The situational focus is on speaking to a group, and listening as part of a group, where the control language emphasized in Micro may not be appropriate. The main skills being developed are gist understanding, summarizing, organizing explanations, descriptions, etc., and making generalizations and supporting them with examples. A weakness this perspective is designed to address is students' tendency to want to understand every detail or nothing at all, and to want to speak perfectly or not at all. In other words, it is designed to help students overcome their linguistic limitations through recognition of the organization of English speech, in both speaking and listening.

### SAMPLE: A Simple Solution

**Business English Skills:** The Business English Skills slot is designed to teach students the language of business. The focus is on the use of English in the students' own business situations. The main skills being developed are presenting, participating in meetings, exchanging business-related information, etc. Students' need for such skills is obvious.

### OHP 2: Fluency Square for Business

### OHP 3: Program Calendar

**NOTE:** Show amount of daily time, slot breakdowns.

## Notions

The term "notional" means, for us, "meaning-based", and includes both concepts and functions. While meaning is obviously most important in a program which claims communication as a goal, however, it is not enough to simply say "meaning must come before form." The word "meaning" must have direct application to the designing of materials and planning of lessons.

Concept: Basic units of meaning in the categories of:

Space (e.g. spatial relations, location, direction, naming, attribution, etc.)

Time (e.g. past, present, tense and aspect in general, etc.)

Logic (e.g. induction, deduction, speculation)

A common way of introducing concepts is with Fluency Squares (see references), but the concepts in focus for the week are supposed to underlie most of the lessons that week.

NOTE: Recycling and introduction to next week's focus.

Function: Communicative intent (e.g. greeting, introducing, parting, etc.)

The most common way to teach functions is through first comprehending and then practicing taped dialogues. Some of the taped dialogues which have been published by LIOJ teachers include Yoshi Goes to New York by John Battaglia and Marilyn Fisher, Start with Hello by John Battaglia and Vickie Christie, and Functioning in Business by Lance Knowles and Francis Bailey.

NOTE: Function Tally with taped dialogue (demo)

## Short-term Goals

Each week in the four-week term has a focus, stated in both concepts and functions. At the end of the week students make presentations and participate in simulations which exercise the language in focus. These activities are both end products of the week's work, and indicators of students' abilities.

## Sequencing

The order of these weekly focuses is based on a rough hierarchy of complexity for concepts, and application to the daily life of the program for functions.

In the first week, teachers diagnose and promote proficiency in the primary concepts of space (naming, location), and time (past, present, and future), and simply answering the question "what". Naming things is seen as the simplest thing you can do in a language, and the next simplest thing is to attribute simple characteristics, such as physical appearance or position in time, to those things. In business this means simply to identify and describe things, and the presentation the first week is "Job and Company Description".

NOTE: Difference in future here.

The functions in focus are those that are most easily exercised in the first week of the program, namely introductions, greetings, invitations, etc.

The next step in the conceptual hierarchy is comparison, which is essentially a dual description. The first week focus consists of describing something (company, job, etc.) and establishing a basic time framework (past, present, and future). When students apply what they have learned to more than one product or service in their businesses, they can hardly do so without indicating differences and similarities. The use of these differences and similarities for persuasive effect naturally follows. Thus we have comparison/contrast as a kind of dual description, and the added "function" (meaning "intent") of persuasion.

The functions in focus are defining, comparing, persuading, offering and soliciting opinions, etc.

If we emphasize the passage of time in description in business English, we have the concept of process, addressing the questions "How?" and "What for?" The emphasis is shifted from basic space concepts to time concepts, on purposeful change over time. This is much more complex than simply establishing things in time or space, which is the basic framework for both description and comparison. Process language also entails simple description, and often includes comparison as well. It also usually entails a historical or time perspective, establishing points in time within the larger dynamic time framework, and tracing them through a time sequence. The links in this chain of events are causes and effects, and the question "how" and the language of explanation are main features of the speech.

The function in focus is explaining.

The final conceptual focus is problem analysis and speculation. Causes and effects of known problems, anticipated problems, and proven and possible solutions are the main subjects of discussion. What makes problem analysis complex is that it is abstract and relies completely on logic. It entails all of the previous areas of focus, stemming from description and basic factual time to the complex cause/effect relationships of process. But what it adds is of a more abstract nature: talking about things that do not exist in reality or are contrary to fact. Tracing the possible causes of a problem and the effects of possible responses to it entails describing things, comparing alternatives, and tracing processes, but emphasizes the abstract, and relies on logic.

NOTE: We don't teach formal logic. Rather, we teach how to express logical relationships.

The functions in focus are those that are most easily exercised in the fourth week of the program, such as closing, parting, etc.

OHP 4: Curriculum Calendar

## Evaluation

The evaluation system consists of assessments of linguistic, skill, and communicative abilities. Assessment in a notional curriculum is essentially assessing "putting people together and seeing what happens." Familiarity is just as important as reliability. In other words, as well as getting some good objective information through standard testing procedures, we have to be able to say that we know the student well. Regardless of the grounding of our tests in science, they cannot really tell us very much about how well students will get along with foreigners in the international work place, or how well they will perform tasks which require making the right impression as well as using the correct verb form. Familiarity cannot simply be factored into the testing apparatus: it must be gained through interaction over a long enough period of time.

After that period of time, students are evaluated by means of the following:

OHP 5: Assessment Draft form:

OHP 6: Linguistic Assessments:

OHP 7: Skill Assessments:

OHP 8: Application of Skills to Communication: The Written Evaluation:

NOTE: Show Company Report?

## Teaching

Teachers need to understand the basic principle of the program, and use it as a guidepost in their teaching. What other people have done in the past serves as a model, but teachers are encouraged (eventually) to decide for themselves how closely to follow what has been done. Their restriction is to stay within the relatively broad conceptual bounds, and direct students toward the long and short term goals of the program.

## Being a Student

Students are sometimes shocked by the English-only policy. Sometimes they are frustrated by the seeming lack of attention to grammar rules. The program is residential, and there can be problems with that aspect of the program as well. But in general, the program does what it sets out to do. That is, it produces students who are practical communicators. Students who complete the program are generally more proficient linguistically. But they are also more able to overcome their linguistic limitations by persisting appropriately both in getting their meaning across and in understanding what others are saying to them.

## Conclusion

The term "notional" in reference to the LIOJ program refers to a set of ideas and a system of teaching, in a program which emphasizes interaction. It allows teachers to make an art of teaching; art that is guided and disciplined, but at the same time expressive and experimental. The curriculum, truly "notional" to whatever degree, is the guide toward both the broad communicative goal, and the narrower, more incidental, linguistic and skill goals. It works pretty well.