

The pedagogical philosophy behind Fortune, Series 1

The objective of Chasing Time English is to provide high-quality and engaging video narratives for language teaching and learning, and to have these supported by pedagogically-sound learning tasks. While the Fortune series was written with learners in mind, it was also designed to stand on its own as entertainment, and thereby engage learners on the strength of its narrative alone. Our objective in doing so was to take advantage of the potential of video to motivate learning. The script was modified – and certain scenes shot twice – for two different audiences: the lower Blue level (approximating CEFR A2) and the higher Gold level (approximating CEFR B2).

The classroom materials for this series come in four sections: a vocabulary preview, grammar focus, functional/interactional focus, and self-study. The two weightiest sections are the grammatical and functional/interactional sections, each of which should provide a minimum of 1 ½ to 2 hours per level, per episode. In total, there is approximately 60 hours of teaching and learning material across the two levels.

In the videos we have opted for a fairly neutral US accent, and this is represented too in the phonemic script provided in the vocabulary section. After toying with the idea of presenting both standard US and British pronunciation, we elected to provide a single representation that we trust will be widely comprehensible.

Each lesson has between six to eight vocabulary items, which represent key words and phrases from the videos. These include some multi-word items, such as ‘window shopping’ and phrases such as ‘in the mood’ (a prepositional phrase). These selections were made to help learners to understand and to articulate aspects of the narrative; in adopting this approach, we have made some concessions from our starting point of opting for high-frequency items. Each word or phrase is categorised by word class or phrase type, a common pronunciation is given in phonemic script, and an example sentence is provided. The teacher’s view also includes a definition, although the complexity required to define many words means that it will often be of more use to encourage students to use a good bilingual dictionary. In all cases, the meaning and word class chosen is the one most relevant to that episode of Fortune.

The focus for each grammar section is based on items drawn from the appropriate CEFR level description, which were then purposefully written into the Fortune episodes. Their occurrences in the episodes are not, however, overdone: they occur only where they seem most appropriate. Consequently, it may be that in the episode there are only two or three uses of the form that is in focus, but further uses are presented in the teaching materials. The general approach to grammar is to present a structure, its meaning or use most relevant to the student level, then to focus on accuracy in form (including noticing and correcting errors), and then to provide controlled and freer practice. Care has also been taken in the teacher notes to support less experienced teachers by providing accounts of why certain answers are acceptable or not acceptable.

It is also worth mentioning that, where appropriate, we have consciously chosen to avoid creating the impression that there is necessarily a single right answer. This has been a rather unfortunate outcome of many pedagogical approaches, giving many students the false impression that simple binaries exist, such as either past simple or present perfect being correct but not both. Where relevant, the teachers’ notes specify some of these options but others may be possible. We hope too that this may prevent some unnecessary agonizing by teachers!

The functional/interactional sections draw heavily on ideas from research in both Conversation

Analysis and Pragmatics. In particular, these lessons draw attention to how to achieve some of those social actions (such as apologizing, offering, taking leave) that are crucial for building and maintaining relationships and generally functioning in society. Unlike much of what is presented in large textbook series, the Fortune materials focus particularly on sequences of talk rather than individual sentences or turns. Fundamental to our approach is the recognition (see Ryan & Granville, forthcoming) that, as a matter of convention, film and television typically present speech acts that are highly attenuated and thus are not sufficient as models for language learning. Of course Fortune, too, is bound by such conventions. Our approach, therefore, is to use key scenes from the series as a starting point for student reflection and discussion, and to provide supplementary videos demonstrating how such actions are carried out in daily life. Although necessarily still scripted, we have drawn on the research literature to craft scenarios that illustrate authentic aspects of everyday interaction.

Of course, one of the challenges when dealing with socio-pragmatic phenomena (such as speech acts) is that their form is highly context sensitive and responsive to variations in speaker style that may be attributable to variations in gender, class, ethnicity, power and regional speech patterns. Thus what may feel appropriate to a native speaker from New York may feel rather inappropriate or unnatural to a native speaker from rural Ireland. What we have attempted to do, therefore, is to provide models that we expect will provide reasonably wide coverage across contexts, while erring on the side of more polite forms. Consequently, while the lessons on requests (for example) will be overly wordy for use in a busy New York street, they are designed to be suitable across a wide range of other international contexts.

We are also very aware that a great deal of interaction occurs through the use of English as a lingua-franca, where the interactional norms that hold between native speakers may not apply in the same ways. While this is important to acknowledge, we have focused in this initial series on models that do prepare learners for interactions with native speakers; we do in acknowledgement that many native English speakers may be relatively unskilled at cross-cultural communication, and may be harsh judges when their expectations are breached.

Finally, in parts of the script, we have tried to stay reasonably true to spoken language, and this results in some features that may be unfamiliar to those accustomed to the norms of formal written English, such as sentences beginning with 'and' or 'but', and in some cases minor sentences (those without a finite verb). Our justification, of course, is that this series of Fortune (though not necessarily all our future series) is focused primarily on oral language.

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