

Discourse Flowcharts

*A working paper by
Robert Bruce Scott*

www.fhsu.edu/~rbscott

The role of comprehensible input in the second language acquisition process

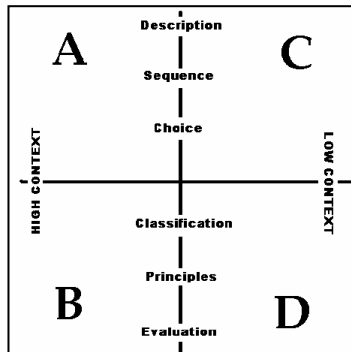
Krashen and Terrell ([The Natural Approach: Language Acquisition in the Classroom](#), Prentice Hall, 1983) hypothesized the existence of an “affective filter,” or emotional wall which can prevent a person from attending to messages a teacher is trying to communicate; and the role of “comprehensible input,” or a meaningful message encoded in spoken or written language just beyond a student’s level of mastery of grammatical/phonological forms.

According to Bill VanPatten ([From Input to Output: A Teacher’s Guide to Second Language Acquisition](#), McGraw-Hill, 2003), input is “language that a learner hears (or reads) that has some kind of communicative intent.” There is a close relationship between input and second language acquisition, says VanPatten. “Input is related to comprehension in that whenever a learner of a language is engaged in actively trying to comprehend something in the L2, that learner is getting input and that input serves as the basis for acquisition.”

While the learner is focused on meaning, he or she unconsciously associates that meaning with the ways (phonology, syntax, discourse) in which it is encoded. “Without an attempt at comprehension [focus on meaning], there can be no connection between meaning and how it is encoded,” says VanPatten (2003). “Acquisition happens as a by-product of comprehension.”

The art of creating comprehensible input to promote English language acquisition is at the center of any learning activity consciously designed to engage and include culturally and linguistically diverse students. Christian Faltis ([Joinfostering: Teaching and Learning in Multilingual](#)

[Classrooms](#), Prentice Hall, 2000) suggests an overlay of cognitive task descriptors derived from Bloom’s Taxonomy ([Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: The Classification of Educational Goals](#), Longman, 1956) onto Jim Cummins’ grid ([Negotiating Identities](#), California Association of Bilingual Educators, 1996) to help teachers design their instructional language to accommodate English language learners without sacrificing standards or content quality in an inclusive classroom.



The Cummins grid also helps teachers to visualize the two different domains of communicative competence in which English language learners are expected to achieve mastery if they are to be successful in the school community. To handle tasks in quadrants A and C, the upper half of the grid, students need to develop “Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills” (BICS) in English.

Below the mid-line in the Cummins grid, however, is the other, more cognitively challenging domain, “Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency” (CALP) skills, quadrants B and D. There are a number of strategies teachers can employ to help English language learners progress towards proficiency and success in academic settings. Most of these come from a field of ESL curriculum and instruction research called “Sheltered English” (Short, Deborah J. and Echevarria, Jana, [The Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol: A Tool for Teacher-Researcher Collaboration and Professional Development](#), Center for Research on Education, Diversity and Excellence, 1999).

Sheltered English is a way of shaping subject-matter and grade-level curriculum content for English language learners so that it conveys language forms via comprehensible input comprised of the same standards-based objectives that the other students are learning. SIOP provides guidelines for managing, supporting, presenting and teaching the content that is the center of every lesson.

CREDE Standards #3, #4, #5: relevant challenges and the instructional dialogue

The Center for Research on Education, Diversity and Excellence (CREDE) has published five teaching standards based on research on what works with at-risk students (K-16). According to CREDE, “the standards were distilled from findings by educational researchers working with students at risk of educational failure due to cultural, language, racial, geographic, or economic factors.” Teachers who align their lessons with the five CREDE standards are not only helping students at risk due to economic, cultural, linguistic or other factors, but also at the same time enhancing the learning environment for ALL students in an inclusive classroom setting.

The third CREDE standard—contextualization—suggests that “schools need to assist at-risk students by providing experiences that show abstract concepts are drawn from and applied to the everyday world.” Included among the indicators listed for this CREDE standard: “The teacher designs instructional activities that are meaningful to students in terms of local community norms and knowledge.”

The fourth CREDE standard calls for challenging activities. Sometimes when guiding a student whose first language is not English teachers can fall into a routine of always oversimplifying their lessons, goodheartedly seeking to make things as easy as possible. “While such policies may often be the result of benign motives,” says CREDE, “the effect is

to deny many diverse students the basic requirements of progress—high academic standards and meaningful assessment that allows feedback and responsive assistance.” Indicators for this fourth CREDE standard: “The teacher presents challenging standards for student performance,” and “the teacher designs instructional tasks that advance student understanding to more complex levels.”

The fifth CREDE standard sets as a goal for teachers to engage students in an ongoing instructional dialogue. “Thinking, and the abilities to form, express, and exchange ideas are best taught through dialogue, through questioning and sharing ideas and knowledge,” according to CREDE. Indicators for this fifth CREDE standard: “The teacher arranges the classroom to accommodate conversation between the teacher and a small group of students on a regular and frequent basis,” and “the teacher guides conversation to include students’ views, judgments, and rationales using text evidence and other substantive support.”

Calls for discourse-oriented instructional approaches to conversation in ESL/EFL

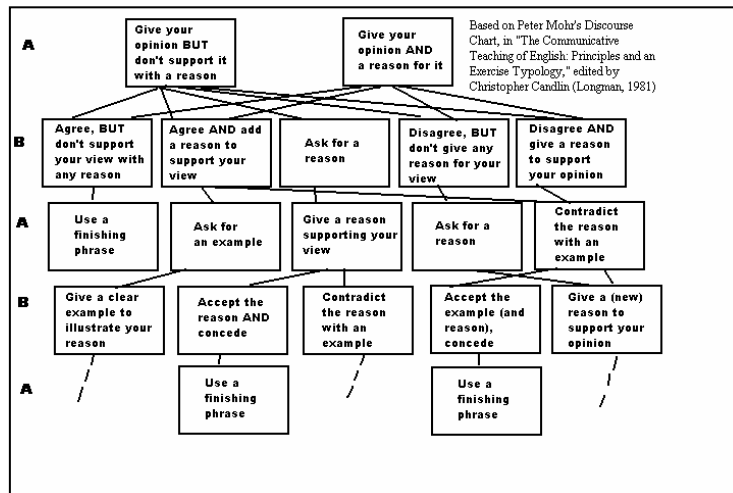
In their 1997 *TESOL Quarterly* forum piece, “Direct Approaches in L2 Instruction: A Turning Point in Communicative Language Teaching,” Marianne Celce-Murcia et al issued a call for applications of discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, pragmatics and other research relevant to communicative competence, towards the goal of describing communicative language teaching more systematically.

Celce-Murcia and her colleagues want to raise the level of discussions about communicative teaching, in order to build up a system for what they call “a principled communicative approach” that recognizes “a *shift toward direct teaching*” of conversational or discourse-level grammar (Celce-Murcia et al, 1997).

According to Celce-Murcia, this shift toward direct teaching has three main tendencies: “first, adding specific formulaic language input to communicative tasks; second, raising learners’ awareness of the organizational principles of language use within and beyond the sentence

level; and third, sequencing communicative tasks more systematically in accordance with a theory of discourse grammar.” (1997)

Step-by-step through the Logical Conversation Approach



Step One: Introducing the chart

The first step is to familiarize students with the chart. Before showing students the entire chart, the teacher should review each of the category or function labels which appear on it. When individual terms have been gone over and students seem to understand them, the teacher can introduce the chart as a whole, on an overhead, a computer screen, handouts or all three. The teacher should follow several sample dialogues through the chart.

Step Two: Tracking sample dialogues

The teacher now can provide students with sample written dialogues which they must plot along a route on the chart. Students can work on this charting exercise in pairs, checking each other's answers before asking the teacher for help. Some students will enjoy saying the dialogues out loud to practice pronunciation.

Step Three: Building dialogues on cue

In this step, it is necessary for students to work in pairs. One student is speaker A and the other is speaker B. A handout is given to them which contains a few topics, questions or problems for discussion. For each topic, a sequence from the chart is given, which they have to follow in creating a conversation together. The conversations are written down so that

the teacher can check to be sure they fit the targeted categories.

Topical territory is pretty wide open, since the opinions stated in these exercises are in response to directions, not necessarily indicative of

one's true belief. This is a non-threatening way to get students arguing in the classroom.

Step Four: Flashcard exercises

The fourth step serves as a bridge between silent, written work which refers directly to the chart, and actual conversations which no longer refer either directly or indirectly to the chart. This bridge step involves at least three people at one time. One student holds up cards as cues for the other two to follow in having a conversation about a given topic. Cards are sequenced to follow a particular path along the discourse chart. These flashcard debates can be done in groups or teams, and smaller sizes of cards can be used to create "conversation adventure booklets," for use in pairs.

Step Five: Freestyle debates

The final step allows students to converse without any reference to the chart or its labels. This step begins with a short explanation of H.P. Grice's rules of logical conversation (Grice, H.P., "Logic and Conversation," in *Syntax and Semantics*, Vol. IV, edited by John P. Kimball, Academic Press, 1975). Then students engage in discussions on given topics they have reviewed, and their talks are scored using Grice's rule categories: quality, quantity, relevance, manner (Grice, 1975).

More info: ERIC Document 247 744