



ESL MiniConference

Helping Speakers Access Discourse Cues More Quickly

Suggestion from a Student Prompts Methodology Change

I have utilized, written about, and presented my "Logical Conversation Method" ([ED247744/FL014406, Old ERIC Clearinghouse Database](#)) for nearly 25 years, since developing it as a masters research paper for my M.A. in TESL at the University of Kansas, in 1984.

That was back when there were only three other articles on flowcharts in the entire field of ESL/EFL, discourse was just starting to build momentum as a popular research area, and computer-assisted language learning was in its infancy.

Most recently, I presented on conversation flowcharting at NYSTESOL in **2000**, the Kansas TESOL 2005 conference, and as an invited session at TESOL's first **Peace Forum**, in 2003. At the 2005 conference of Kansas CEC (Council for Exceptional Children), I presented a paper suggesting applications of my logical conversation method for helping high functioning individuals with Autism to be able to navigate verbal exchanges more successfully.

The basic premise of my approach is that conversation practice guided by discourse flowcharts enables the learner to develop an awareness of different discussion pathways and thereby manage his or her interactions more effectively.

But, even though the flowchart has a strong visual aspect, all the steps of my original method are heavily text-based. The early practice activities entail following instructions which briefly describe different functions, such as "disagree, giving a reason" or "contradict the reason with a counter-example," following a system which was first used by Peter Mohr in 1981.

One key step in my approach, the use of cue cards which represent moves on the flowchart, seems to allow learners to transition from direct reference to the chart to another level, at which the chart and function-labels are no longer needed. That idea of using cue cards came from my linguistics classmate at K.U., Zi Li He, of China. At TESOL 1992 in

Fall 2007

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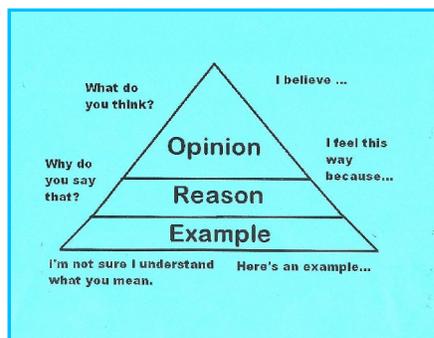
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Vancouver, I presented on possible computer applications of the logical conversation flowchart approach, based on some preliminary work I had done using Apple's HyperCard software.

I have also used Cuisinaire rods in a conversation game in which the different colors represent different functions and players pick up and discard the rods one by one, until some of the more difficult functions are the only ones left and must be practiced. In addition, I have developed "conversation adventure booklets," which are cue-card sequences from the flowchart, but very small and stapled together, so that two students pick a topic, pick up a booklet, and turn the pages, letting the cues guide their conversation.

I was recently using this method in an advanced oral communication class, and was asking students to practice using the conversation adventure booklets. After this class session, a masters student in design suggested to me that there was too much text involved and that he would prefer to work from an image like the one I had briefly drawn on the board, a pyramid with opinions at the apex, reasons in the middle layer, and examples at its base. I took his suggestion as my personal homework assignment for the next class, and came up with two items which seemed to spark more spontaneous conversations and generate some noticeable enthusiasm as well.



[Eventually, I will name the student whose bright suggestion has greatly enhanced my logical conversation teaching approach, but right now it would represent an invasion of his privacy to do so. When I have gained his permission as well as an O.K. from the university to publish the student's name, or after he has finished his university degree program, I will come back to this story and insert the information. I am very grateful for the help and inspiration this individual has provided by reacting to the logical conversation activities.]

I was highly motivated by the request of my student for a visual which would give him and his classmates faster access to their memories of how to perform the various functions in a logical conversation without

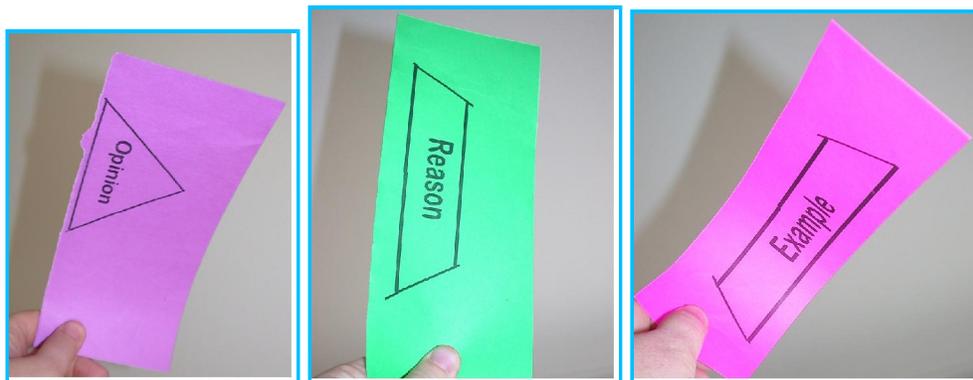
having to process abundant text. In response, I created the pyramid figure, with starting language for questions along the left edge and language for statements along the right edge of the pyramid. The idea is that students can quickly determine whether they want to work at the opinion, reason, or example level, and then easily find the a starting phrase which represents a typical way in which people handle these functions.

During our last few class sessions of the semester, we are beginning each class with very short speeches by designated class members, on topics they have chosen, and then breaking into discussion groups, which use the pyramid handout along with our evolving list of starter questions.

The questions for discussion come from recycled and refined lists which students cull through continually, eliminating those they are uninterested in or tired of and conserving those they still want to talk about, and adding their own suggested topics. On the day I first used the pyramid, one student had decided to talk about how to respect the gay lifestyle even if one believes it is immoral, and so our new topic list included his five questions: Can parents make a child gay?; Is homosexuality immoral?; Is homosexuality unhealthy?; What is heterosexuality/homosexuality?; and What makes a person gay?

Other questions on the list included: Does individual freedom interfere with the rights of others?; What do you want most in your life?; Which is more important for life--knowledge or imagination?; Which is more important for success--knowledge or experience?; Which is more important--love or money?; Which provides more energy for society's progress--the human mind or technology?, and a number of others.

In their small groups, students selected questions from the list and conversed, trying to stay focused on the opinion-reason-example dynamic we are practicing. After every five minutes or so, I brought a group to the front of the class for a "debate" on their favorite topic. Here is where I introduced another innovation which I had been inspired to develop while working on the pyramid graphic: color-coded "ballots" with which audience members could indicate which portion of the pyramid speakers were currently focusing on.



This idea of color-coded ballots came from similar devices described by Jo Gusman in a two-day workshop on sheltered English in the summer of 2003 (read the [report](#)). She has taught large groups of multilingual kindergartners, and found that new English learners can be included in classroom communication as equal participants if all students are using "Yes-No" (green/red) fans and multi-colored fans for multiple choice responses. Jo Gusman is a very dynamic presenter who understands on a profound level the interplay between comprehensible input and affective filter, two concepts which she explains much better than Terrell or Krashen ever did. Her Web site, "[New Horizons in Education, Inc.](#)," is well worth a visit.

Anyway, in our classroom "debates," everyone in the audience had a set of three different "ballots," one for opinion, one for reason, and one for example. I also had ballots, and I started whipping them back and forth to make a sound like a flag waving in the wind. Soon the room was so full of this sound that we could barely hear the speakers, but the enthusiasm and our focus on the elements of logical conversation was undeniable.

The new visually accessible additions to these activities serve very well to underscore the important way in which this approach allows a teacher to focus on content (for acquisition purposes) and form (for analytical clarity) at the same time. It is impossible to focus on discourse form without simultaneously focusing on content: that is my strong belief.

I'm looking forward to the next few class sessions, as our question list keeps evolving and our awareness of conversational logic hopefully develops as well. Twenty-five years after I started becoming interested in conversational logic and the use of flowcharts in second language instruction, I am still (and newly) excited about my Logical Conversation Method activities.

Click [here](#) for a pdf version of these new handouts.

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