

Feature Article

How to Organize the English Closet: A Conversation Flowchart for Students

By Kathi Emori

Introduction

Students in Japan have been exposed to the English language since elementary school, and sometimes earlier. The formal learning really begins in junior high school and continues through high school. One problem that many university teachers have faced when walking into the first communication class of the semester is something along the lines of:

“Ok, get to know the person next to you. Ask them 5 questions. Go.”

And the students sit staring blankly at the teacher then at the student next to them.

Tough beginning, and even tougher to get over this hurdle.

In this paper, I want to introduce a systematic flowchart that I have been using for three years in varied levels of English communication classes at several universities. After walking into an initial class and barely getting two minutes out of the students in English, this flowchart brought them up to an ability to converse for a full continuous 90 minutes. I was just as surprised as they were and I like to think, based on my teacher evaluation feedback forms, most students walked away as satisfied as I was feeling at the end of the courses. I'll present the steps I took in reviewing the problem which led me to organize the chart as I did. I hope that other teachers can follow my thinking to see how this worked for my style of teaching and they can take away some ideas to adapt to their own classrooms and situations. I do not see this as a sure-fire way for all teachers to get their students to speak for 90 minutes straight in class, but more as a guide to one way how it could be done. Each teacher has their own style and techniques that work for them. This works for me, I hope it helps others in some way.

My Response to the Problem

Brainstorming Possible Causes

After facing this dilemma in my first week as a university teacher, I started thinking about how to get the students rolling along the communication highway. I made a list of a few things:

- a. They have had this language before: simple easy questions from their junior high school textbooks. They have the basics, but they don't know how to use it; maybe they haven't actually had the chance to use it in conversation.
- b. They had pretty difficult grammar drilled in the heads throughout high school to get ready for the university exams. They have done a lot of translating and vocabulary exercises. But they don't know how to use it; probably they haven't actually had the chance to use it.
- c. They do not seem to know how to organize the language they have been exposed to or acquired in a way that they can pull it from a particular pocket in their minds to their mouth smoothly; they definitely haven't actually had the chance to use it.
- d. It seems their brains are closets*, and right now it's a chaotic mess of words, grammar points and translation techniques all piled up with no hangers or drawers to neatly put them away for easy access. They can't find the white shirt or clean socks when they need it quickly; because when you wear certain clothes often enough, you put them in the front of the closet or in easier places to reach. With language, the more we use it and learn how it's used; we learn to put it in the right drawers for quick and easy access.
- e. How can I help them organize the language that has been thrown haphazardly inside their closets? How can I get them to just learn to use the language that they actually already have shelved haphazardly around in their heads?

- f. Perhaps I need to look at how native speakers “use” the language they have and somehow make it accessible to the students. What’s different in the conversations native English speakers have that our university students have not actually been exposed to and they obviously need?

Recordings & Transcripts

That is when I started carrying around a voice recorder when I met friends of mine outside of school. I wanted to see what was happening in our conversations that seemed to be missing from the students’ pragmatic knowledge base. (Important note - I only did these recordings with my closest friends and explained afterwards why I did not tell them beforehand of the recording. I gave the option of erasing it if they felt uncomfortable with me using it. No one minded and most were helpful in talking with me again afterwards about the transcripts I typed up).

Below there is a transcript of an interaction that I particularly liked in its short conciseness as well as moving through different topics at the pace that it did. Other transcripts were really too long or quite complicated as well. They did offer good back-up to what is seen happening in this transcript though, which helped me organize a flowchart to introduce to the students in class.

The Flowchart’s Progression

I studied the transcripts over and over again. I looked for what is missing from the junior high school and high school classes. (See Appendix A for full transcript)

My first impression was the movement between topics was strongly visible and struck me a key to the puzzle, so I cut up the conversation based on topic switching and marker placement. The conversation took place in three main parts:

1. Some form of greeting
2. Questions / topics
3. Some form of goodbye

Highlighting with different colors, the cues stood out further. It did not take long to see what the students were missing:

- They may not have practical knowledge of how to use discourse markers.
- They may not know how to move from part 1 to part 3 smoothly.
- They may not know how to change topics and to move comfortably within a conversation.
- They may not know how to sustain the conversation for longer periods by changing topics or expanding or referring to other things that had been said previously.

I picked out the markers: “by the way”; “so”; “well”; “anyways”; “That reminds me...”; “As I was saying...”; “Like I said before...”; “I have to go...”; etc.

After looking up in some textbooks from junior high school and high school, as well as through many of the textbooks that are common amongst native English university communication class teachers, I searched for dialogues that focused on using discourse markers in practical ways. I did not come across many that focused just on the marker itself, but some markers (such as “by the way”) did appear in some mini-dialogues without real explanation or specific practice.

Getting them to understand the practical importance underlying these two concepts, (a.) the three main parts and (b.) the discourse markers, would probably be my biggest obstacle and the lessons could get quite messy. Introducing these should start simple and spiral out as they grasp and have plenty of practice time with each stage into an organized system that they could visually imagine as they were talking with a partner.

I also made it a goal for the students to be speaking on the “Inner Independent” plane of dialogue as much as possible, which Willis (1987 & 1992) states is quite rare and hard to achieve. This style might actually draw that out somehow. My input would only be to support the language they needed as they moved along in the conversation. I would need to teach them how to say things like:

“Oh, sorry, I have to go because Kathi just signaled that we should sit back down. Let’s talk more later.”

And

“Um, we’ve finished. So, let’s change the topic until Kathi signals to stop, what are you going to do this weekend?”

On top of keeping the situation as real as possible, I also needed to make sure that their emergency language was up to speed. Ask each other while talking for clarification of each other’s speech rather than solely relying was key; and my role as a resource more than a teacher was also going to be important. Having them discover as they spoke what language they lacked or needed (not me trying to pre-guess these) and to ask me for it was another way I hoped they would gain independence in conversing on their own. I wanted to focus more on output rather than input because I saw this as helping confidence and increasing speaking time for them.

Teaching Pace & Steps

Setting the Pace

As you will read below, the students were “moved” through the flowchart one step at a time. Based on the three years that I have used this, I can recommend some of the patterns that I have picked out in terms of “teaching pace”:

1 st year university classes:	One step per class, with repeated practice By the last class, they are speaking in English for the entire 90 minutes, rotating partners as they do.
2 nd to 3 rd classes:	Two or three steps per class, with a lot of practice By the middle of the semester, they can speak for 90 minutes.
4 th year classes:	I give them the transcript and a hollow flowchart and have them try and figure it out themselves. (This sometimes works, and sometimes doesn’t.)

Each class will be different and it also depends on the amount of exposure the students have had to just having free-talk time in their previous English lessons. Introducing the chart as a whole from the start and too quickly, I have found, can overwhelm them and actually do more damage than good.

Teaching the Flowchart

I’ve written below how I move through introducing the chart to the students. Visually, I introduce the chart one step at a time as well. I never show them the completed chart at the beginning, and I usually use the chalkboard or white board and draw one circle or box at a time. For the purposes of this paper, I have computerized it; however, the students see hand drawn circles on the board, again, one circle or box added each lesson. I found that this helped them learn the steps and be able to stay in that circle or box for the amount of time needed to really understand what was happening there.

Pre-Step

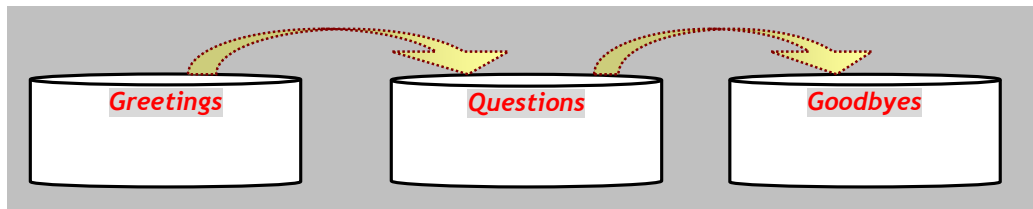
The lesson before this Conversation Flowchart is introduced should focus on making follow-up questions and trying to remember other people’s names. This usually works well with a 1st class of the semester ‘interview questionnaire’ that they must complete (See Appendix C).

Step #1

Students are given a transcript of a conversation that has been recorded between native speakers. It has been divided into parts by the teacher; the students put the conversation in chronological order before listening to it (See Appendix B).

Step #2

The students try and label the function of each part; *for example, greeting, introduction or invitation, etc...*; and they make notes of the language used that signaled each function. *For example, they knew it was an invitation because they saw “Shall we...” in the part.*



Step #3

Students brainstorm different 'greetings', 'topics for questions' and 'goodbyes'. The key is that the greetings & goodbyes are true. For example, they should not practice "see you tomorrow" if they aren't really going to see each other tomorrow, but to say when they will meet again.

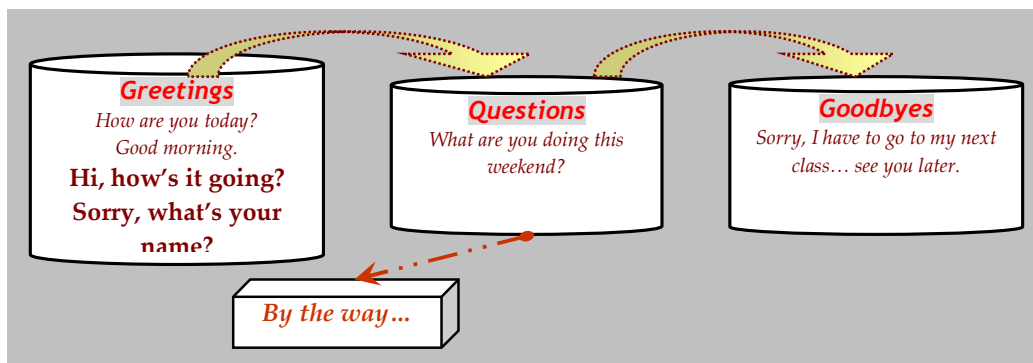


Step #4

Students then get up and greet a student, ask for their name if they don't know it and say goodbye. They repeat this with 2 more students. When they are seated back down, they ask the student next to them "Who did you talk to, and what did they say?" Both retell about the 3 students they spoke with.

Step #5

Students are shown the 1st discourse marker "by the way" and how it can be used to change a topic. They are shown how it can be misused and/or over-used. They practice a few times with the student next to them and check with the teacher if they are using it correctly.



Step #6

Students now find someone they haven't spoken to in the class yet, greet them, move into a topic of their choice, try using "by the way", keep making follow-ups and move into a good-bye when they think it's been enough. Sit down again and ask the student next to them "Who did you talk to and what did they say?" and "How did you use 'by the way'?"

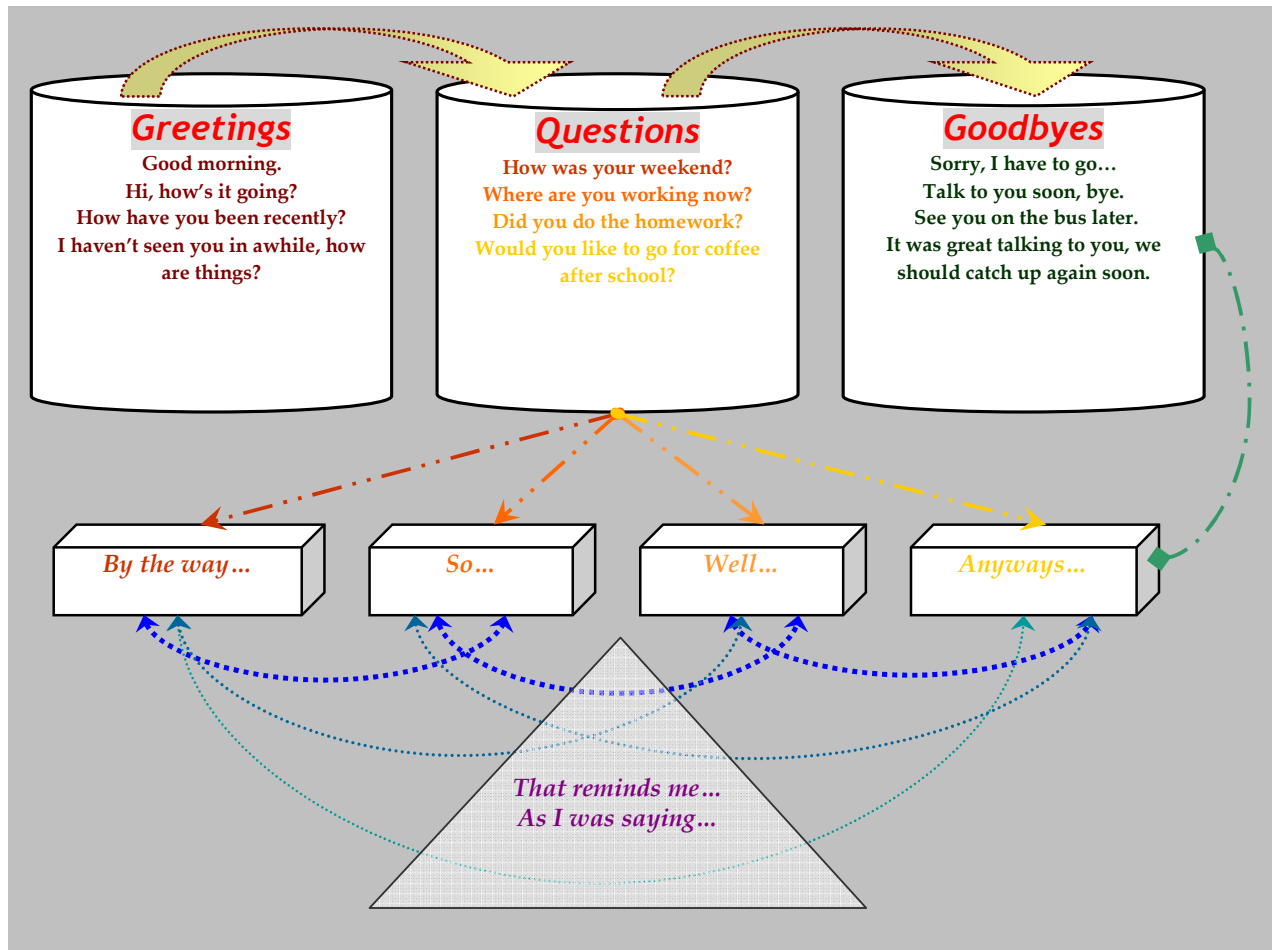
Step #7

As the students progress, the teachers introduces new markers, such as "so...", "well...", "anyways..." as ways to change the topics or move into closing a conversation. Other useful

markers are "As I was saying (last class)...", "That reminds me...", "Remember when I told you about ..., well now...".

Step #8

The chart is now complete. An important point is that this model works only as a framework. Students are free to explore and manipulate it as they become more comfortable using it. This model can act as entire lesson plans over the course of the semester, as supplementary to work being done in a course, or just as a series of warm-ups.



Troubleshooting Problems & Common Questions

As I wrote above, each class and teacher will be unique in its own style and approach or success in language learning. A few problems based on my own experience and other teachers' feedback includes:

- a. *What do I do about very shy students?*
 - I think encouragement helps; when they have a system to work within, they start to feel comfortable and confident.
- b. *How can I get them to understand "anyways"? I never actually say that.*
 - This is something I often use to lead from what I am talking about into getting ready to say goodbye. Many British colleagues have questioned this point. This is not set in stone; make it sound how you personally speak because I think you can only teach them that, not how others speak.

- c. *How can I get them to move beyond this chart? It seems to have trapped them and they don't move beyond it.*
 - Make sure they know that this is not definite - that it is as stepping stone to expansion and discussion in English. Talk to the students about linguistics and how language works, it's not a big secret to keep from them. I am a firm believer in talking to them about cognitive processes and how the brain stores information. They can understand the concepts in simple terms and even being taught it in English. The closet example above is a great analogy for them.
- d. *This is a bit formulaic and not necessarily accurate.*
 - Exactly. It is formulaic, and that is what makes it accessible to the students. They hopefully now have the drawers and hangers to use to organize their closet. Its then up to them to re-organize into a closet that works for them. And I hope they will know how to buy extra cabinets or wardrobes if they need it. That is part of their one autonomous learning process that I hope this chart helps them get into.
- e. *They say 'by the way' way too much and not appropriately.*
 - Yes, this is a tough one. I actually tell them that they can only use it once with one speaking partner. And I give them a ton of examples. When they first use this step, I have them just use it with one partner over and over again and I walk around and tell them "yes - you got it" or "no - that's a little strange, try again". Eventually over the course of the semester they can usually use it decently.

Conclusions

Again, based on my experiences, I have found this flowchart to increase their confidence in speaking. Also, the students do seem to slip into what is as close to authentic discourse as we can hope for in the classroom. I have seen the students get extremely involved in the conversation and forget they are in the classroom, and I have heard them actually make plans and write in their diary the plans they have made with the classmate - while still speaking in English. For me, seeing them accomplish a real communicative moment - make a real plan without my prodding - and have them come back the next week and they tell another partner about what they did, is a major step in the right direction.

This confidence and comfort ability to move in and out of topics and rely on each other more than the teacher helped as they could then move into more difficult topics and discussions classes. It can get a bit redundant if the teacher doesn't recognize that he students are ready to move beyond it. This is up to the teacher to gage and adjust the pace as they teach it. Please contact me if there are any adjustments or ideas that you have on how to improve it. This is a work in progress, and even though I have been using it for three years - each semester something new creeps up and I tweak it a little. I still refer to this as in the "piloting stage". I look forward to your thoughts and opinions.

References

Willis, J. 1987 *Inner & Outer: Spoken Discourse in the Language Classroom*. In Coulthard, M 1987 pp. 1-19
 Willis, J. 1992 *Inner & Outer: Spoken Discourse in the Language Classroom*. In Coulthard, M 1992 pp. 162-182

Acknowledgements

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Appendix A

Transcript, color differences indicate topic changes

K: Hi, sorry I'm late. Have you been... um.. waiting long?
N: No.. not a.. maybe 5 minutes?
K: [.. sorry]
N: [No worries..]
K: [how was school?]
N: Yeah, it was good. I had three great classes in the morning, but uh.. the afternoon dragged by. Yours?
K: Not bad, just busy. Lots of papers to correct for the final exam. Hey, what are you drinking?
N: I got a frappucino, I felt like being bad. (he he)
K: I'm going to go order, it looks busy – might take a minute.
N: [ok]
K: Hey, by the way, did I tell you I ordered a new cappuccino machine?
N: [no!]
K: Yeah. I'm so excited, it's being shipped from the States, and so cheap!
N: How much did you get it for? I know you checked tons around here.
K: I know, about ... um... I think with shipping it'll be.. just about 200 dollars, or ni-man yen or so... yay?
N: [cheap, wow]
K: And it has a timer – I've been looking for that for ages, but it got it.
N: Cool. So... when am I coming over for a cappuccino and cake? Hmmm....?
K: Yeah, ok. You are the first on the list to taste test. You said before, but I forgot, you're moving up to Tokyo when...?
N: March 28th I think.
K: [oh, ok]
N: Plenty of time to try it out. I went up and got an apartment last weekend
K: [where?]
N: already with Hiro. Fuchu. Far from the city but cheap and pretty big.
K: Nice. Now you can relax about it. I know you were worried, show me pictures if you have any when you come over. Which brings me back to, what are you doing next Thursday night-- I don't have school on Friday, want to come for dinner?
N: Yeah, but I can't get there til 7, is that ok?
K: No problem – gives me more time to get ready. Any requests?
N: No – whatever.
K: My phone, sorry... (hello? Honto? Hai... hai... wakata, sugu kaeru. Un.. jaa ne.)
K: Sorry, Nik, I have to go – Sami needs to go to the vet.
N: [oh no, she ok?]
K: Something's wrong with her stomach.
N: [again?]
K: She got sick 4 times during the night – gross. And I had to clean it up.
N: [was it food?]
K: I don't think so, she ate a plastic thingy, that might be it. Anyways, I'll see you Thursday? Mail me!
N: Yeah, hope she's better. Wait, can I bring anything?
K: [thanks... nope!]
N: See you on Thursday.
K: Sorry... again – as always with me, right? Bye!

Appendix B

Separated by Discourse Marker & Jumbled Transcript Paper

Name: _____ Class: _____ No# _____

I. Decide with your partner or group the order of this conversation.

Put 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th in the small boxes.

II. Practice reading the conversation in your group.

III. Circle the words that signal a change in topic.

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K: Which brings me back to, what are you doing next Thursday night-- I don't have school on Friday, want to come for dinner?
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N: No – whatever.

Appendix C

Step #1 First Class Introduction Questionnaire and Interview Paper

Name: _____ Class: _____ No# _____

IV. Fill in as many words as you can by yourself. Compare with a friend. Listen for the correct answers.

V. Change papers with a friend and ask these questions. Write a short answer.

1. Where _____ you live? _____
2. When _____ your birthday? _____
3. _____ your favorite color? _____
4. Who is _____ favorite musician? _____
5. What _____ movie? _____
6. What is _____ you dislike? _____
7. _____ your hero? _____
8. How _____ to school? _____
9. Which kind of fruit _____? _____
10. What _____ in your free time? _____
11. Where do _____ want _____ travel? _____
12. _____ is _____ goal _____ year? _____
13. What is your goal for _____ far _____? _____
14. What _____ think _____ English? _____

VI. Choose 3 questions above and write a follow up question. Ask your friend and write a short answer.

For example: #8. by train = How long does it take? 90 minutes

- () 15. _____
- () 16. _____
- () 17. _____