

Shared Identities: Our Interweaving Threads

Learning centers in large, multi-level university EFL classes

Jean-Pierre Chretien
Takushoku University
 Ellen Scattergood
Nihon University

Reference data:

Chretien, J. P., & Scattergood, E. (2009). Learning centers in large, multi-level university EFL classes. In A. M. Stoke (Ed.), *JALT2008 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.

Two experienced teachers describe how they use learning centers to ensure a productive classroom experience in large, multi-level classes. Though each learning center has a single focus, students are actually engaged in using all language skills. Teachers need to prepare materials and a simple system of evaluating and monitoring student involvement and progress. For large, less self-motivated classes, learning centers can provide students with better focus and teachers more opportunity to observe and guide students.

様々なレベルの生徒が混在するクラス内で、ラーニングセンター（以下、LC）を活用していくことにより、生産的な授業を確かなものにしていく方法を、二人の経験豊富な先生が示します。四つのスキル（話・聴・読・書）のLCはそれぞれ個々の目的がありますが、生徒たちは全てのスキルを使うことが保証されます。先生は、準備する物と生徒たちの参加と（成長）過程について評価する単純なシステムを用意する必要があります。人数が多くモチベーションが低い授業のために、LCは、より良い目的を生徒にもたらし、また先生には生徒たちをサポートする機会をもたらすことができます。

This article describes a strategy two experienced teachers used to help reluctant students engage in English learning activities in large, multi-level university EFL classes. Learning centers were set up in the second semester to remedy the frustration felt by both teachers and students during the first semester, where the teachers had struggled to find some common ground on which to work with the variety of levels. The students, meanwhile, seemed unable to find significance in studying English. When students are frustrated there is an aloofness, a lack of cooperation, and non-engagement in activities, all negative behaviors that thwart efforts to create a successful communicative language class. For teachers the frustration is unrewarding and not conducive to effective teaching.



In our separate but similar classroom settings, the syllabus for communication courses is meant to provide students with opportunities to use English. However, it became apparent in the first semester that it would be self-defeating to expect explicit growth in English language skill. Instead, these immature, non-English majors needed to learn how to be self-directed first, then be encouraged to find motivation to achieve, not necessarily to learn English, but to accomplish a series of tasks.

To reduce the frustration and provide students with more opportunities to use and practice English, we collaborated in the planning of learning centers designed to replace whole-class activities, which had not yielded good results in the first semester.

Learning centers can be viewed as a cross between cooperative learning, community learning, and task-based learning: They are designed to provide specific, meaningful tasks which require students to work collaboratively to achieve common goals.

In line with Curran's (1976) view of community language learning, learners become members of a community—their fellow learners and the teachers—learn through interacting with the community. Learning is not viewed as an individual accomplishment but as something that is achieved collaboratively. Community language learning addresses the personal commitment that learners need to make before language acquisition processes can operate, rather than putting emphasis on psycholinguistic and cognitive processes.

Our objective, then, in creating learning centers in our two separate classrooms was to help students focus and become

more engaged in language learning activities. Rather than become stricter with our classes, or resort to textbook driven instruction, we understood that in empowering our students with the responsibility to make decisions that would directly affect their achievement, a better classroom environment would grow.

This article describes, in general terms, the situation, content, and operation of our learning centers. It highlights the limited kind of progress individual students might make while they mature and become aware of their growing confidence. The plan to use learning centers meant that we needed to prepare different kinds of materials, and invent simple systems for assessment, evaluation, and monitoring student involvement, which are outlined in the article. Finally, in making suggestions to teachers who might want to try learning centers, we show how learning centers can provide focal points for students and free teachers to observe and guide students more effectively.

What are learning centers?

Learning centers became popular in the 1970s in elementary education. Moffett (1976) described a learning center as “a station learners go to that has directions posted and materials stocked for carrying out alone or as a small group some learning activity without teacher guidance...freeing the teacher to coach, counsel, and consult” (p. 46).

Learning centers conform to La Forge's (1983) view of learning as a social process in that “interactions between learners are unpredictable in content but typically said to involve exchanges of affect. Learner exchanges deepen in

intimacy as the class becomes a community of learners. The desire to be part of this growing intimacy pushes learners to keep pace with the learning of their peers” (p. 9).

Learning centers, an example of a “humanistic technique” (Moskowitz, 1978) blend “what the student feels, thinks and knows with what he is learning in the target language.” According to Moskowitz, humanistic techniques of language learning “help build rapport, cohesiveness and caring... [This] helps students be themselves...and helps foster a climate of caring and sharing...” (p. 2).

Learning centers also help teachers and students address key elements for successful cooperative learning, defined by Olsen and Kagan (1992) as: positive interdependence, group formation, individual accountability, social skills, structuring, and structures.

Learning centers are by their very nature task-based. Task-based language learning fosters negotiation and experimentation. Tasks require learners to use authentic language, have well-defined dimensions and closure, have variety of format and operation, include physical activity, involve partnership and collaboration, call on learners’ past experience, and tolerate and encourage a variety of communication styles (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

Students

The two groups of students were similar in crucial ways: they were numerous (45 and 36 students), they were inexperienced in English, most had never had a native speaker as teacher, they were not English majors, they lacked organizational and study skills, they displayed varied levels

of ability, they showed immature behavior, they could be characterized as reluctant and reticent learners. But perhaps the most striking commonality was their lack of any real motivation to study English, a fact which compelled us to provide them with opportunities to actually use English to perform real learning tasks.

Materials

There was no budget for materials, so we relied on materials with which we were familiar, which were easily accessible, and would have the greatest impact. Some materials required coordination, i.e. iPod, DVD and CD players. Other materials could be made (vocabulary, game pieces, etc.), purchased (graded readers, notebooks, markers, etc.), or provided by students (e.g poster paper, using recycled calendars). Additional equipment we found useful included extension cords, timers, stopwatches and magnets. By using these materials we were modeling for students how it is possible to study English simply and enjoyably with things around them.

Procedure

There were four learning centers: reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Simple instruction sheets provided a guideline for what to do in each center. Students took roles in each center. For example, the leader coordinated the proceedings, the time-keeper helped the leader keep members on task, the dictionary person was designated to find the meaning of unknown words in the dictionary, and the messenger relayed information and questions to the teacher.

We used learning centers for 10 weeks of the 12-week semester. The first class was for training. Each week students freely joined one of the learning centers. They were required to complete two tasks in each skill category, plus two free choices, for a total of 10. The final class was used for students to finish uncompleted tasks and to review achievement points with the teacher.

To plan these learning centers the two teachers met several times to discuss the possibilities, and create goals and assessment ideas. It took several hours to assemble materials and create instructional documents. Additional time was necessary each week to monitor points or review notebooks, and to make topic talk posters and listening tasks. Before each class approximately 15 minutes was necessary to arrange the spaces and materials.

Clear and simple instructions, small sub-groupings within the centers (3 to 4 students make an ideal sub-group) and designated roles (leader, timekeeper, messenger) helped make the learning centers work smoothly and effectively, helping students realize their potential to use English in real situations. Naturally, a large classroom space is desirable, but there is no particular physical set-up for the learning centers except to clearly define their location.

Using learning centers

Writing centers

In the writing learning centers, students chose topics from prompts (see Appendix 1), were asked to brainstorm their topic in pairs first, to create an outline or mind-map, and then finish a first draft for their in-class task. After getting

comments from peers and the teacher, the follow-up task was to produce a word-processed final draft of their writing.

Listening centers

Both sites focused on a series of pre-listening tasks (activating background knowledge, prediction, and identifying key vocabulary), listening tasks (e.g., dictation, fill-in-the-blank, and note-taking) and post-listening tasks (retelling, writing opinions about the topic). See Appendix 2 for examples of tasks.

Speaking centers

The speaking centers operated differently at each site. In one class, a topic poster (collage of pictures, captions, short news clippings and ten key words) was provided by the teacher. Students identified the key words and matched them to the pictures and captions. Students then formulated questions based on the topics and the leader wrote them on poster paper for all to discuss. The follow-up task was to summarize the discussion and to find out more about the topic on the Internet.

In the other class, students chose from a list of speech or role-play prompts. The in-class task was to work with a partner to write a script for the speech or role-play. The students checked the script with the teacher, and then they revised and practiced. They did not have to memorize the speech or role-play, but were encouraged to practice and use note-cards with key words. The follow-up task was to perform the speech or role-play with their learning center group.

Reading centers

In both reading learning centers graded (extensive) readers were used. One teacher used her small library of graded readers from which students borrowed. The other teacher had students use a single extensive reading text, which had been ordered in the first semester.

In one class, students chose a graded reader. The in-class task was to read the story—or one chapter in longer stories—and take notes, looking up words they didn't know and writing a definition in English for each word. After reading, they used their notes to write a brief summary. The follow-up task was to either write their opinion about the story, or to do an extension activity (“What do you think will happen next?” for example).

In the other class, students chose one of the stories in the text. Using vocabulary cards provided by the teacher, the students identified the words and scanned the story to find the vocabulary in context. After reading and discussing the story together, they reviewed the vocabulary using a game provided by the teacher. The follow-up task was to write a reflection and do an extension activity.

Assessment

We chose different styles of assessing students for grading purposes. Our assessments were a means to gather points toward a grade and we recognized, and accepted, that the grades did not measure language acquisition. The grades did, however, reflect the level of commitment, effort, and engagement invested by the students. One teacher used a stamp sheet to record achievement of tasks: For each in-class

and follow-up task completed, the student received a stamp. The other teacher had students use notebooks in which the process of experiencing a learning center was recorded in the form of class notes, home assignments, and follow-up and extension activities. Students received one point for class notes, one for home assignments, and one for any extensions, for a total of three points each week. After twelve weeks they could earn 36 points.

These forms of assessment clearly showed the commitment, effort, and engagement of students and made final assessment simple.

Observations

Both teachers agreed that the atmosphere in the second semester was happier and more positive. Students were asking real questions about procedures, vocabulary, grammar points, their role in the group and topics. They were attempting to figure out things for themselves, to solve problems and were picking up a body of shared vocabulary, integrating all four language skills, and earning more points than in the first semester. Decisions we saw them making included which tasks to do in which order and to what degree they would complete each task, depending on how many points they felt they needed to earn. Attitudes toward the class and each other also improved.

In the writing centers, we noticed few students wrote extensively, and the grammar was not perfect. However, they did produce authentic, comprehensible, and untranslated writing. Planning together in pairs was active, effective, and enjoyable for the students, but time-consuming.

The listening centers confirmed for us the necessity of having small class sizes when the students are inexperienced and uncommitted learners. In the small, teacher-led listening centers, shy students could speak up more freely, uncooperative students participated, and teachers were able to get to know the students better.

The topic choices in the speaking centers (current events in one class and student-chosen prompts in the other) piqued the students' interest. They had more opportunities to exercise their English; for example, writing questions for the topic talk poster prompted them to discuss grammar and question-making. One-to-one time with the teacher, checking their speech scripts, led to valuable insights about natural, conversational English.

Having a choice of what to read was stimulating—and a new experience for many students. Reading a story together and talking about it was also a new and beneficial experience. One teacher noticed them giving advice to each other about which books were worth reading and which weren't. That kind of interest in collaborative, cooperative activity was an example of the kind of engagement we were looking for.

In terms of achievement, whereas some students in each class failed the first semester, none failed the second. In both classes, 22 students' grades increased in the second semester. In Class 1, 10 students' grades decreased and 2 stayed the same. In Class 2, 14 decreased and 8 stayed the same.

Table 1: Comparison of 1st and 2nd semester grades

| Grades | Class 1 (35 students) | | Class 2 (45 students) | |
|--------------|-----------------------|------------|-----------------------|------------|
| | Semester 1 | Semester 2 | Semester 1 | Semester 2 |
| 90s | 2 | 8 | 0 | 15 |
| 80s | 6 | 7 | 6 | 8 |
| 70s | 11 | 8 | 31 | 10 |
| 60s | 6 | 4 | 7 | 12 |
| 59 and below | 10 | 8 | 1 | 0 |

The teachers felt less frustrated and spent much more time facilitating the operation of the learning centers instead of policing students' behavior. We could offer guidance more easily, more closely, and more often.

Both teachers observed students who were surly and uncooperative in the first semester come around in the learning centers. The smaller, more controlled setting allowed them to show what they knew, much to the delight of their peers, whose positive attention encouraged further positive performance.

Both teachers observed less confident and less experienced students come out in the smaller groups, where they heard more, watched more and asked more questions in English about the tasks and even about other topics.

Both teachers appreciated the chance to eventually work with each and every student in a small group and show students how they can easily support the growth of their listening, reading, speaking, and writing skills in home assignments and follow-up tasks.

Conclusion

Learning centers require an initial investment of time used for assembling materials, creating documents, and working out a simple system of assessment. To experience more success, students should receive more extensive training on how to use the centers; for example, our experience has told us that it would have been better to begin learning centers early in the first semester with a 4 to 6 week series of training sessions to help students learn what is expected of them in each learning center, how to get organized, and how to do follow-up tasks and home assignments. Then, after a trial period, we could have reviewed the performance and made changes. Ideally, in time, these learning centers have the potential to become more autonomous self-access centers.

These students came to our classes unable to participate in cooperative learning activities, which we believe are the best way to improve confidence, which increases motivation, which can in turn lead to improved language skills. Learning centers provide students time to mature as students, and give them the opportunity to become more active participants. Engaging in focused learning activities helped them to build confidence. Over time, learning centers can help students to develop skills necessary for autonomous self-study and cooperative learning activities.

Jean-Pierre Chretien and **Ellen Scattergood** are both long-term residents of Japan, teaching university classes in the Tokyo area. They worked like dogs for, and finally received, their Masters degrees in TESOL from Columbia University Teachers College in the not too distant past. They can be contacted at jpkame@yahoo.com and ellenscattergood@gmail.com.

References

- Curran, C. A. (1976) *Counseling-learning in second language*. Apple River, IL: Apple River Press.
- La Forge, P. G. (1983). *Counseling and culture in second language acquisition*. Oxford: Pergamon.
- Loughran, J., Mitchell, I., & Mitchell, J., (Eds.). (2002). *Learning from teacher research*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Moffett, J., & Wagner, B. J. (1976). *Student-centered language arts and reading, K-13, a handbook for teachers* (2nd ed.) Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co.
- Moskowitz, G. (1978). *Caring and sharing in the foreign language class*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
- Olsen, R., & Kagan, S. (1992). About cooperative learning. In C. Kessler (Ed.), *Cooperative language learning: A teachers' resource book* (pp. 1-30). New York: Prentice-Hall.
- Richards, J. C., & Rodgers, T. (2001). *Approaches and methods in language teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Appendix 1

Examples of writing prompts

Thematically-based prompts

- Future plans (What is your dream for your life after graduation from university? How can you best prepare for this dream?)
- English learning history (How did you learn to use English? What helped when you were learning English?)
- Favorite personal belonging (Everyone has a favorite belonging. What's yours? What does it look like? Where did you get it?)
- Family history (Genealogy" is your family tree. Tell a story about your family's history.)
- Friendship (Friendship takes many forms. Who is your favorite friend? What is he or she like? Why do you feel friendship with him or her?)
- Sports (Why do you think sports is so popular? What sport do you like the least? Why? Who is a sports person you admire?)
- The arts (Art can take many forms: music, painting, writing, movie making, architecture. What artistic performer do you admire?)

Multi-genre writing prompts

- "Life Stories cards" (small business-card-size cards taken from a board game. They have a variety of prompts such as "Describe an ideal vacation" and "Tell about an incident with a car.")
- Picture postcards (use to tell a story)
- Diary style
- TOEFL cards (3x5 cards with TOEFL writing prompts, such as "Nowadays, food has become easier to prepare. Has this change improved the way people live? Use specific reasons and examples to support your answer.")
- Letter style (asking for information, apology, congratulations, condolence, complaint, fan letter)

Appendix 2

Examples of listening tasks

Example 1

This is an example of a listening task that did not work very well. The podcast used was one meant for language learners (BBC 6 Minute English), but the students were not interested in the content (pronunciation and language learning) and they tuned out as soon as they heard the "teacher talk" used in the podcast.

Listening task with BBC 6-minute English podcast**Before you listen: Task 1**

Write a definition for the vocabulary. Use your dictionary or ask the teacher for help.

pronunciation
 mispronunciation
 troublesome
 a phenomenon
 tongue-tied
 tongue twister

Before you listen: Task 2

Talk about these questions with your partner. Write your partner's answers.

1. What English words are difficult for you to pronounce?
2. Are there any words in Japanese that are difficult for you to pronounce?
3. Choose a word from your dictionary or any English book you have. Ask your partner to pronounce it. If you don't know how to pronounce it, ask the teacher.
4. How many sounds do you think we need to be able to pronounce in order to speak English clearly? (44? 104? 400?)
5. How many sounds do you think we need to be able to pronounce in order to speak Japanese clearly? _____

6. Do you know any tongue twisters in English? If you do, say them to your partner.

While you listen

Listen to the podcast and answer the questions.

1. What words are difficult for people to pronounce in English?
2. How many sounds do experts say we need to be able to pronounce in order to speak English clearly?

After you listen

Check your answers with your partner and then with the teacher.

Follow-up tasks (one task = one follow-up stamp)

1. Go online and find some English tongue twisters. Find 5 short ones or 2 longer ones and write them down. Practice saying one of them and say it for the teacher in the next class.
2. Make a list of 5 words that you think are difficult to pronounce in English. Write what they mean in English and make example sentences. (Students were given an example). Check your pronunciation with the teacher in the next class.

Example 2

This is an example of a listening task that did work very well. The video used was not meant for language learners. It was a cartoon meant for native speakers of English. However, the content was interesting to them, as was the medium. The task was not aimed at complete lexical comprehension, but of gist. These two examples show that it is not necessarily better to use language input that is more comprehensible to the students. Interesting and motivating content, and scaffolded tasks, are much more important.

Watching and listening task with an English cartoon**Before you watch: Task 1**

Talk about these questions with your partner, then write some keywords.

What are your images of Halloween?

What are the differences between Halloween and Obon?

Before you watch: Task 2

Write a definition for the vocabulary. Use your dictionary or ask the teacher for help.

rise up from the dead

spleen (an organ in your body)

zombie

celebration

ancient tradition

visit from the spirit world

return to the spirit world

hungry → full

empty → full

carved wooden mask

scary

challenge (someone) to a match

While you watch

You'll watch a 10-minute cartoon about Day of the Dead, a festival celebrated on November 1-2 in Mexico. While you watch, take notes about what happens in the story.

After you watch

Talk about the story with your partner. Use the key vocabulary and your notes. Then, write a summary of what happened. Try to write at least 100 words.

Follow-up tasks (one task = one stamp; please write at least 200 words for each)

1. What do you usually do for Halloween?
2. Do you think it's good to celebrate Halloween or other non-traditional holidays (Christmas, Valentine's Day...) in Japan?
3. What do you usually do to celebrate Obon?
4. Do you think Day of the Dead is more like Halloween or is it more like Obon?

Example 3

Newstapes 2: An Honest Taxi Driver

At the other site, listening tasks centered on the text and tape of a book entitled *Newstapes 1* by W. B. White (1993). Although this center was led by the teacher, students could run a similar center on their own. The news-like stories in the text are authentic enough to be taken as real, both in content and in speed of delivery. The listening activities were successful in that they were interactive, using props and maps to deepen comprehension. Tasks provided students many chances to discuss and share information and easily ask questions for confirmation. Rather than straining to hear, students could negotiate meaning with each other and with the teacher, in order to comprehend the message and improve distinguishing words. Some of the tasks reinforced grammar points.

Before you listen: Task 1

Name cities in California (Los Angeles, San Francisco, etc.)

What is the capital city of France?

Locate the places on maps.

What is another name for a taxi? (cab)

What do businesspeople often carry? (briefcase, portfolio, attaché case)

Before you listen: Task 2

Listen to and write 5 key words: honest, receive, briefcase, cab, passenger.

Students check spelling with each other then ask questions about spelling and meaning.

Listen to and write 5 more key words: driver, downtown, jewelry, reward, watch (wristwatch).

While you listen: Task 3

First listening: listen for locations and numbers.

Second listening: listen for key words.

After you listen: Task 4 (*there are options to choose from*)

Work in pairs.

Each pair receives half the text of the news story.

Imagine the other half of the story (beginning or end).

Negotiate with an opposing pair to reconstruct the story's details.

Compare imagined story with the text.

After you listen: Task 5

Work in pairs.

Fill in the missing words in the text (This task focuses on grammar points such as articles, prepositions, verbs, collocations, etc.)

Compare with other pairs.

Listen to check.

After you listen: Task 6

Shadowing

After you listen: Task 7

Pronunciation/intonation practice

Follow up

Write about an example of honesty