

Using Learning Centres in the English Language Classroom 212

Rita Collins & Naďa Vojtková provide a way of structuring learning for large groups

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What are learning centres?

Learning centres are a method for structuring the classroom to allow students to work in groups. Students move through the centres, which are based on a set of skills or activities established by the teacher. Centre rotation can be done in a specific time or based on individual student needs. By using learning centres, a teacher is able to structure both learner groups and skill-based activities to maximize student autonomy and time-on-task.

Learning centres have been used in the US for many years and research studies have looked at the positive aspects of providing instruction in this manner. Centres are used across grades and in subjects as diverse as art, science, and history. Learning centres are well-suited for English language classes as the approach gives learners and teachers the opportunity to focus intensely on speaking, listening and grammar skills in small groups. They are also ideal for language and content integration (CLIL) as they enable a natural blending.

Research studies confirm what many teachers have come to know through experience; learning is enhanced when students are actively involved in the learning process. Students who actively participate in a class are more likely to successfully demonstrate learning gains (Tinto 599). Yazedjian and Kolkhorst (1985) cited studies that indicate “the degree of retention and retrieval of knowledge are facilitated by active-learning exercises, such as discussion, practice and/or application.”

In a comparison of classes that used learning centres and others that were organized in a more traditional manner, Bottini and Grossman concluded that learning centers enabled young children to be more involved in the learning process. They found that “learning centers not only provide children with opportunities to explore, experiment, and construct their own knowledge, they also provide opportunities for movement, socialization, choice making, responsibility, and problem solving” (2008:278). This is true for most learners irrespective of age.

Types of learning centres

There are two general categories of learning centre. The first category is composed of centres that are either facilitated or non-facilitated. Facilitated centres have a person responsible at each centre. This can be a teacher, a student who has been prepared or an adult volunteer. The facilitator is responsible for helping students cover the skills or materials at that particular centre.

Non-facilitated learning centres do not have a person in charge. Often there are written instructions that learners read and follow. Sometimes non-facilitated centres for very young

learners are self-explanatory or the teacher explains the tasks at each centre in the lesson so that the children understand what is required.

The second general category is composed of centres that are either timed or untimed. Timed learning centres have a set time for the task to be completed. For example, students will spend twenty-minutes in a centre and thus, complete three centres in one hour. Often in timed learning centres, groups of learners rotate. Group A at the first centre will move to the second centre after twenty-minutes, while Group B who was working at the second centre then moves to the third one. In this example, three groups of learners can rotate through three centres in one hour.

Untimed centres give individual learners the time they personally need to complete the centre's task. If there is an untimed writing centre, one student may stay for five minutes while another student may want to be at that centre for fifteen minutes. The amount of time at the centre is left up to the learner within general perimeters set by the teacher.

This chart shows seven types of centres discussed in this article.

	Facilitated	Non-facilitated
Untimed	A. Expert centre	E. Enhancement centre
		F. Non-group centre
Timed	B. Random group centre	G. Skill circuit centre
	C. Ability centre	
	D. Interest centre	

A. Expert Centre

This centre can be used for writing. Perhaps the goal of a lesson plan is to have each student write and self-publish a story. The first centre begins with the whole class. The teacher helps students brainstorm ideas and write a first draft. Students then move individually to the second centre that is facilitated by someone who assists students with editing their stories. At the final centre, each student gets help to bind their story into a book.

B. Random Group Centre

This centre is one of the most typical. The class is divided into groups. Each group goes to a centre for a set amount of time. For example, in an English classroom there can be four centres: reading, listening, speaking and grammar. The students are divided into four groups and each group begins at a different centre. After fifteen minutes, the groups rotate to the next centre. Within one hour, all students will have spent fifteen-minutes in each of the centres. Facilitators have a set of materials that they cover with all the groups rotating through. An example is to have a listening centre with a listening activity and comprehension questions. At the grammar centre, students go over homework or have an opportunity to practice a new grammatical structure.

C. Ability Centre

Similar to the Random Group Centre, but students are divided by skill levels rather than randomly. This centre uses concepts from differentiated instruction where the teacher is

addressing the range of learners' needs. For example, the teacher can have centres divided into English skills such as reading, writing and speaking. Students rotate through the centers in their assigned groups. The difference between an Ability Centre and the Random Group Centre is that the facilitator would have different levels of materials for each group that rotates through.

D. Interest Centre

Here students divide into groups by interests. For example, students divide into groups by which animal they want to study. At various centres, students read materials about their animal, watch a video, write a first draft of their report and then a final report to present to the entire class. Each centre has a facilitator to help learners do the task. This arrangement requires the facilitator to have materials for each group. Although this sounds difficult, with technology and references such as encyclopedias, it can easily be done.

E. Enhancement Centre

The Enhancement Centre is a table or a file box in the classroom that learners access when they finish required work. For example, when the class is working on an assignment to read a text and answer questions, some students will complete this assignment more quickly than others. These students then have the option to go to the Enhancement Centre to select an activity to do while they wait for the next whole class activity. Activities at the Enhancement Centre have written instructions or, for very young learners, photographs or drawings that explain what to do.

F. Non-group Centre

The Non-group Centre is similar to the Expert Centre except there is no facilitator. Students circulate through these centres, which are untimed, and instructions at each centre explain what needs to be done. Students stay at a centre as long as necessary to complete the task. Sometimes this type of centre is used for large classes where the teacher wants students to have exposure to many different activities.

G. Skill Circuit Centre

Skill Circuits are similar to Non-group Centres except they are timed. There are manageable tasks at each centre that students need to complete in a given time. For example, there are five different grammar centres arranged around the classroom. Students spend five minutes at each one and must move to another centre when the time is announced or a buzzer goes off. This gives students a sense of excitement while doing the activities and encourages them to stay focused on the task.

Conclusion

This brief overview of learning centres provides ideas for implementing them in the English language classroom. Their value to enhance student involvement and to build student autonomy has been studied and applied in various contexts. Learning centres are an effective way to maximize the time students spend on tasks and in small groups so they are more likely to show improvement in their English language skills.

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