

Learning Centers/Stations for Adult ESOL Classrooms
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Learning stations or centers are widely used in K-12 in many different ways. They are easily translatable to the adult ESOL classroom and provide all of the same benefits to these learners as they do to younger learners. They have many of the same advantages of the Individual Learning Folder approach.

Advantages to the learner:

- Learning centers address many of the principles of adult learning;
 - Learners have input into what they will learn, how and how fast they will learn it.
 - A variety of activities guarantees multisensory involvement with learning.
 - Learners can monitor their own progress.
- They allow ESOL learners to work on personal English learning goals.
- Learners can practice skills or review content material in many ways until mastery is achieved.
- Learners can do one or more activities to practice content or skills.
- Learners can repeat or review as they need.
- Learners are able to work on challenging material if they wish, or can review as they desire.
- The approach is flexible so learners can
 - Have more or less challenging material as needed.
 - Work alone or with a partner or in small groups.
 - Use commercial or teacher-made or learner provided materials.
- Testing is largely unnecessary, as activities can be designed for learners to demonstrate competence.
- The learners learn the important skill for further US education settings: independent learning.
- Learners get an important break from having to pay attention to

Advantages to the teacher:

- Centers preclude much individual planning because centers assure that learners will be choosing to do work that is useful to them.
- As for individual folders, centers free up much time for teachers. Teachers can circulate and observe or give feedback as learners want, and/or teachers can focus on individual students who need more help or on newcomers.
- Centers provide opportunities for individualized review and practice that cannot happen in teacher-centered classrooms.
- Built-in flexibility of content and activities makes it easier to keep learners at many levels interested and challenged.

Some cautions:

Though when well carried out, the above advantages to Learning Centers/Stations are clearly there, bear the following in mind:

- Culturally, this approach will be initially uncomfortable for many learners because they will think the teacher is shirking his or her responsibility and because many learners have no experience with activities that are “fun” as a way of learning. (See below for more in “Keys to Success”)
- Separate centers may need to be set up for the non/preliterate since many of the activities (though not all) for these learners may be way too simple for other learners. (See more in “Tips for working with Non-literate learners”)
- Learners should not be permitted to think that learning centers allow undue socialization. Centers are intended for serious learning. ON the other hand, learner interaction is a GOOD thing at centers, so more talking may happen than in other activities.
- Centers are not intended to be the sole approach for a class. They are best combined with group and individual work intervals. They should occupy about 1/3 of total class time.
- Centers are NOT intended to be busy work—work that has little value to the learner and which the learner did not choose to do. If this is the case, the approach will fail miserably.
- Do not oblige learners to rotate to each center during center time. This obviates the aspect of self-chosen work. However, if some learners stick too closely to one or two centers and others never get a chance, then alter how learners go to them. Allow one third of the class at a time, for example, to use centers while others use folders. Or with the class decide on how many times one person can go to the same center. Having lots of activities at one center will allow more learners to use it at the same time.

Keys to Success:

For learning centers to be successful several things need to happen:

- Take time to introduce the process carefully so that learners understand what is expected.
- Content can be new, but the way it is dealt with must be familiar.
- Work at centers is highly relevant to learners’ individual preferences and goals: It is learner-chosen—or chosen in conjunction with a learner. It is NOT busy work YOU have chosen; it is NOT work you chose “because the learner needs it.”
- Activities are useful and challenging to learners, so a range of levels of challenge assures that learners can choose.
- This means knowing your learners very well and meeting with them often. As the process becomes familiar, learners will be able to select or suggest activities to help them learn content or practice skills on their own. (See examples in the PowerPoint on learners asking for specific help on goals.)
- You will also need to change content or add activities or content and rotate centers (Using each one twice in a row and then waiting a couple of weeks to use

them again.) in order to keep them challenging and relevant. As in all things educational, familiarity reduces learning.

- Take time also to assure that learners know how to do each activity at the centers. If they have to struggle with the process, the content is lost to them. This can be done in whole or small groups or individually if needed. Do NOT set up learners for failure by asking them to do something they have never done before.
- Cultural differences about teacher roles and learning habits will make it hard for some to take this approach seriously. Be patient. Explain repeatedly what it is for. Keep expectations high. Give positive feedback and guidance where needed.
- Take the center approach seriously yourself: Designate at least two periods during class time when centers are to be used:
 - Have learners use them as they arrive in class and for about 15 minutes after class has officially begun. This way those who are early always have something meaningful to do. Alternate with folder days, if you like.
 - Designate another 20-30 minutes during the class for center work—preferably NOT right before dismissal (Since the activity is self-directed, many will want to leave early or talk...).
 - If a learner is distracted or bored, find out if the learner
 - Understands the different levels of challenge at the center,
 - Understands what centers are for and how to use them best. (If the learner feels this is a waste of time, find a way to demonstrate the effectiveness of learning in this way. If that doesn't work, direct the learner to a different center or to a folder.)

Do not permit a learner to abandon centers.
- Teach learners HOW to do all activities that are included at the center and how to check the work.
- Be sure practice activities have controlled vocabulary and grammar rather than having the learner generate that as well as practice some skill.
- Progress is largely self-monitored. Learners should learn to use self-check devices and processes such as checklists and to work with other learners to check work before asking you.
- Do not use center time merely to catch up on your own work. Be sure to circulate to see how effectively learners are using centers.
 - Help with things that the learner seems to be confused on.
 - **Ask** if you should indicate what needs fixing—use dots, underlines or question marks to indicate that a learner should take a closer look.
 - Use a generous system of acknowledgement of good work and progress: stickers, A's, “Great work!” etc. All learners love praise.
- Encourage learners to be proactive about checking work, asking for help, helping others.
- As for folder time, center time is serious independent learning: Teach your learners that the American education system/culture expects that they will be independent learners. Tell them, too, that the best students in American schools use a wide variety of ways to learn things.
 - Explain that you are helping them learn to do this.

- Provide LOTS of support for those who do not seem to take off with their independence.
- Ask another learner who DOES get how to use centers and who speaks the language of the less engaged to help them understand the *purpose* of the activity as well as the process for individual activities.
- Do not permit socialization, phone calls, or too much “helping” at centers.—especially from others from the same culture or from spouses, siblings parents, children. Find ways for learners to self-monitor, again as a learning experience for other education settings. However, in some classes, centers will be great places of interaction—learners talking and laughing with each other—this is a GOOD thing!!
- Assure that centers have adequate work for learners to be occupied and that work is varied and challenging.
- Have learners keep track of work they did at centers in a portfolio. Ideally, their work will further their individual goals. (See goal sheets at the end of the folder guide.) Visit the portfolio with the learner from time to time to admire progress.

Getting started:

- If you are totally new to this process, start with one kind of center and then expand it a few times before adding more centers.
- Teach the skill for the first center or centers (e.g. you work with the whole group on putting cards into the correct word order so they know the process).
- Be sure to have a wide range of difficulty in the activities.
- Let learners go two or three at a time to the center the first time to try it out.
- Have them go through the process of self-correcting and recording progress in their folders.
- Once all have done that successfully, add more activities and/or another type of center.
- As for folders, designate specific times for center time and stick to it. If you are starting with just one center, you will need to give all learners a chance to work at it in shifts.

Organizing folders:

There are two general ways to think about organizing centers so that they include many levels of challenge. Each way is easy to expand endlessly.

Approach One: One type of activity with many levels of challenge:

In this approach, there is only one thing to do at a center, but there are endless levels of challenge possible.

For example, the activity is putting cards with words into correct sentence order. The cards can be placed in a wall pocket or on a table (though they don’t get messed up as easily in a wall pocket.) The level of difficulty can be increased both by length of sentence as well as by type of sentence. Sentences should be relevant to grammar the learner is working on or you as a class are working on. If the class is doing present

continuous, then sentences can be created to practice that. Be sure to have many sentence packs so learners do not memorize them easily.

In this type of activity a self-checking process is included—usually with a sheet having the sentences written down and including information that indicates level of difficulty. The cards in the packs have the same information. E.G. Low-level sentences have triangles on each card and on the cheat sheet. Generally it is a good idea to avoid having self-checking information on the cards themselves because it is too tempting to look at each one.

Some other centers of this type could be:

- A map center where learners look at maps of different kinds and answer questions on worksheets.
- A vocabulary practice center where words on cards are matched to pictures. Learners can either choose a pack to work on, or can play concentration with one or two other learners. (Limit the size of groups at centers so activities do not go too slowly)
- A container center for low level learners where they sort real, empty containers onto cards that say “a box of...” “A carton of...” “a package of...”
- A listening center, where learners do a variety of listening activities. They can respond in writing or in some other way, or just repeat what they hear. Be sure to have headphones and a mic for this center.

Approach Two: One focus, many activities:

In these centers there are many ways to work on the skill or content of the center. Different ways can be easier or harder to do. For example: A center can have a focus of syllable counting. Activities could include,

(Easy to hard)

- Cards with pictures glued on them and with squares under the picture for each syllable in the word (e.g. a picture of a bicycle has three squares under it.). Learners say the name of the picture and place markers of some kind in the squares as they say the syllables.
- Cards with pictures and no squares under the picture. Learners place markers on cards according to the number of syllables (for self checking, squares can be on the back or there can be a matching card with picture and squares)
- Numbers on cards with squares under the number (to give a visual clue to the number) and learners sort pictures onto the cards according to syllable numbers. A cheat sheet has pictures photocopied next to numbers. (Miniature figures can be used in activities two or three.)
- A page of words the learner is working on mastering. The learner copies the words into lists according to syllable number. A structured paper with numbers already on it assures success.
- Learners sort words from a reading activity or from materials related to work onto cards so they can be sorted into syllable-number piles.

Have learners do a specific number of tasks each time—that is, 10 picture cards, or 20 pictures onto numbers, etc.

Approach three: Learner-designed

Instead of limiting centers to these two approaches, you may want to design a center in response to specific learner needs. For example, as in the PowerPoint, a learner may request to learn words or phrases by listening, and then you would record the phrases or words the learner has chosen.

Learners have vocabulary to learn for work—you help them create word packs and conversations to listen to or say to each other to practice the words.

Materials for centers:

Use any kind of materials for centers. Learners will not mind homemade materials—and will feel more comfortable about making activities of their own. On the other hand, finding pieces of old materials or used games that can be adapted to learning uses in your classroom is a good way to save time and introduce variety.

If you have to disassemble your centers after every class because you are a traveling teacher, think flat. Big white envelopes will hold a paper wall pocket and a LOT of card packs. Signs and big cards will serve many purposes and can be posted with tape or tacks.

Keep your eyes open for materials that lend themselves to portable centers. A small erasable white board provides a place to write words from pictures at the spelling center.

Also, have learners help set up and take down centers. The investment in the classroom increases their commitment to the class. If they know you are counting on them to set up centers, they will be sure to be there and be on time.