

Differentiated Instruction Strategies and Learning Centers in the EFL Classroom.

Colin Priest

(Abstract)

By using the techniques outlined in this document I will demonstrate how to create a multi leveled, student focused, conflict free literacy period that can be run consistantly in any elementary school classroom. The key to the success of this program is in the use of very detailed planing and the careful monitoring of student progress, in combination with thorough and solid teaching methodologies. This is not an easy program to implement as it requires a lot of pre-planning and parental involvement but it provides solid and consistant results.

(Key Words)

Methodology, Phonics, Differentiated Instruction, Learning Centers.

Introduction

Learning centers and differentiated Instruction strategies are a series of methodological approaches for effectively managing the individual differences in development and learning styles that exist in every classroom. They stem from the early theories of Piaget¹ and Erikson² and the more recent studies conducted by Frost³ and Pelligrini⁴. The fundamental principal that underpins this methodology is that focused play, peer interaction and personal motivation help students become more fully engaged in the learning process leading to better educational outcomes and a smoother, conflict free, classroom environment.

1. What are learning centers?

Learning centers are spaces that are created in a classroom to mark out, or differentiate certain activities and styles of instruction, they provide small self regulating groups of students with a stimulating visual, auditory or tactile representation of the teacher's target focus area. According to Dr. Rebecca Isbell⁵ learning centers have certain key features. In her book *The Complete Book of Learning Centers* she provides a helpful, but not exhaustive, list;

- *There is a special feature that draws the children to the library: tree, bathtub, bunk bed, tent, canopy, couch, etc.

- *A collection of books are included that are the appropriate developmental level of the children in the classroom.

- *Books are displayed, so children can see covers and make selections easily.

- *A variety of printed materials are available: children's magazines, big books, class-made books, "mini" page for newspaper, etc.
- *There are private and cozy spaces that are accessible to read independently or with another child.
- *Soft, cuddly animals are available for snuggling during reading.
- *Pillows, beanbags, lawn chair pillows, or small baby mattresses are provided for comfortable, movable seating during "reading."
- *Books, read in circle-time, are added to the Library Center each day.
- *The Center is well lit, and a variety of lighting is used: floor lamp or clamp-on light.
- *Boundaries are established that separate the library from other activities in the classroom.
- *Taped books and a cassette player are available for children to use in the Center.
- *Flannel board, story boxes, and tape recorders are included in the Center for children to use in retelling. (Comprehension Check)
- *Books are changed monthly with old favorites left and new literature added.

In short learning centers are differentiated spaces that provide open-ended materials, flexible opportunities, cooperative learning experiences, problem solving and peer and tutor learning

2. Setting up and managing Learning Centers

Implementing learning centers in the classroom can be a very time consuming and difficult task for any teacher and there is no guarantee that the centers will be received well by the students or provide the necessary outcomes. There is also the very real concern that students will lose focus and become disruptive with an overly complicated or poorly explained task within a learning center. Finding the right activities and spaces can be difficult at the beginning and a lot of it needs to be decided by a process of trial and error, however once your centers are created they should be largely self-functioning, they will only need to be maintained and tweaked from time to time with poorly functioning activities phased out as needed. I will go into more detail about the types of activities that I use in my own learning centers later, however there are a number of great resources available online and in the reference section of this article. As a side note I recommend that you start with just one learning center activity at a time perhaps asking for a school volunteer or assistant to help while you get it off the ground.

When implementing learning centers it is important to note that the methodology (the way you implement your learning center task) is every bit as important as the learning task itself. Part of the challenge of implementing learning centers in the EFL classroom is explaining the processes involved in great detail. Students must be aware of exactly what is expected of them and this involves a lot of careful planning on the teacher's part. This includes creating check sheets, library cards, clean up rosters, reward sheets, and work for fast finishers, it also includes a detailed understanding of how each student will move through

gh the physical space of the learning center and what they will do when they finish a task. I can not e mphasize enough how important it is for the teacher to have every aspect of the student's journey thro ugh the learning center planned and every minute of their time accounted for and checked. In short, att ention to detail and use of correct methodology is the difference between success and failure when imple menting learning centers.

To check the effectiveness of your learning center activities it is important to constantly be on the look out for Red Flags. If you notice any of the behaviors listed below it may be time to rethink either the tasks within each learning center or the explanation and implementation of the tasks. Please be aware t hat if students are unclear about what is expected of them within a given task they may also exhibit si milar behaviors. It is important to first understand the root causes of the disruption before taking action, the solution may be as simple as a re-explanation of the processes involved. Here are some Red Flags that you may want to look out for;

- *Students are disruptive and insensitive to the other participants within the group.

- *Students are speeding through activities and cutting corners.

- *Students seem bored or confused, wondering around the space with nothing to do.

- *There is a general lack of enthusiasm (or audible dissatisfaction) about having to do an activity.

3. The teacher's role during the Learning Center period

If you have planned and explained your learning center tasks correctly and if every student is clear abo ut what is expected of them and has engaging tasks (that they have chosen) to perform then you should be free to move around the room as a floating teacher checking and monitoring each activity. In my o wn EFL classes I choose to station myself at one activity while an assistant floats between activities mo nitoring for disruption and engagement as well as sorting out any confusion about the order of tasks and use of checklists etc. This is up to each teacher but as I am often the only native speaker in the clas s I feel that it is important for me to do the pronunciation, word work and storytelling activities myself rather than give them to an assistant. As a side note it is crucial to explain every detail of the process es and movement within each learning center to any classroom assistant, as a confused assistant can ad d difficulty to a task rather than simplifying it.

4. What are differentiated instruction strategies?

As mentioned above in Dr Isbell's list of key features of a learning center⁵ your learning centers should already be set up with a series of different learning strategies in mind, visual, auditory, tactile to cater f or the different learning styles of each student. However how do we cater for each student's differing ab

ility and level within each task? Well in my own literacy center I have borrowed from the work of Gail Boushey and Joan Moser⁶ in their award winning Daily Five program. All of my activity center activities are graded into different level boxes and each box contains a mix of texts or activities that must all be completed before the student can move on to the next level. Students all have checklists and library cards and they must complete all of the allotted tasks and have them checked by the teacher before they are allowed to move on to the next activity. Students will obviously choose activities that favor their learning styles and this will help teachers identify weak points and then be able to provide different strategies for guiding students towards those activities that they are less comfortable with. This is obviously very time consuming in a large class and I recommend the use of an assistant. In the smaller classes in my school (6-10) students I set and enforce a very strict time limit for this as it can easily go over time.

In order to get these activities done in a reasonable time frame teachers need to make sure that the tasks are concise and achievable. The best way that I have found to do this is to attempt a task first myself and time it (obviously you will be faster than the students who are often seeing this task for the first time but it is just a rough guide). When I first started using learning centers in my classroom I used to predict how long an activity would take based on previous similar activities and this would often lead to activities going over time or even worse falling short.

The other way to get everything done in an achievable time frame is by the use of peer assessment and self monitored check sheets. This is a core component of the Daily Five program⁶ and these types of assessment approaches can also be used to check students have achieved the outcomes you have set. Of course specialist assessment such as pronunciation must be checked by the teacher but many other tasks can be peer assessed, self assessed or checked by a floating teacher.

In my early years ESL classes almost every student operates on a different level, or different place within the appropriate level. Some students will be given extension tasks or extra homework while others will be moving at a much slower pace. Those students who have moved on to the next level or who are quickly finishing a task are nearly always happy to act as peer tutors explaining difficult words or procedures and can almost always be counted on to provide accurate feedback in a sensitive way.

5. The activities I include in my learning centers

Through trial and error I have narrowed down my own learning center activities to those that suit the unique environment of the Japanese EFL classroom. This is taking into account factors such as the number

er of students, limits of space and time and parental expectations.

1. A teacher focus activity where students sit (one on one) with the teacher and look at, and sound out, the phonetic symbols checking for pronunciation and correct articulation (mouth, lips, tongue). Incorrect pronunciation is checked using a visual chart and demonstration from a native speaker.
2. A listening activity (using headphones and CDs) where the phonetic sounds are re-enforced using short focused sentences. The students are encouraged to relax and find a comfortable position for them (comfortable reading chairs and semi private spaces are provided).
3. A writing task where the phonemic sounds are broken up and written in words, e.g. c+an = can v+a n = van. This work requires writing spaces as well as group spaces and private and semi disclosed spaces. These are provided to cater for all learning styles and preferences (see image below).



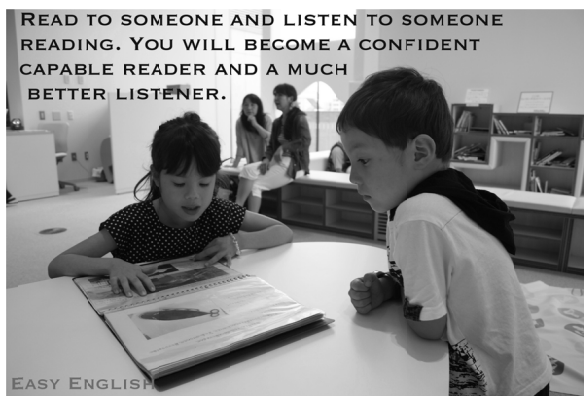
4. A variety of Word Work⁶ activities (phonics and conversation games etc.) that are designed to be self-regulating or use a parent volunteer to monitor. These activities do not need to be taught (after the students have grasped the rules) and the volunteer only needs to make sure that the students are playing fairly and taking turns (see image below).



There are also a series of graded reading activity boxes in each learning center. This follows on the work of Boushey and Moser⁶. Basically all of the readers in my school are divided into levels 1 through 5. The boxes contain many different types of texts ranging from comic styled picture books to short stories and reading cards, students will need to read all of the different texts in one box before they can move on to the next level. All students have a library card and their progress through the levels is carefully monitored.

While using the level boxes students will follow the five maxims of the *Daily Five program*⁶, these are;

1. Read to Self,
2. Work on Writing,
3. Read to Someone,
4. Listen to Reading and
5. Word Work,



*Daily Five program*⁶

This process is explained in great detail and students know exactly how to find a reading partner, when and where to do word work and how to use the listening equipment well in advance of the activity. The texts and text types will always change but it is important to note that the procedures will stay the same throughout all five levels of the program leaving little room for confusion and creating a harmonious and pleasant learning environment. I have found that once the basic foundations, expectations and rules of the learning center are set students become, not only self monitoring but also committed team players willingly providing advice to confused, or new, students.

6. Reflecting on the Process

After each round of learning center activities (they usually last for 60 to 90 minutes depending on the n

umber of students) it is important to bring the students back to a common space for reflection time. In my classroom I have a large common area with a rug and a low chair for the teacher to sit on. During reflection time the teacher asks and answers feedback about the activities and clarifies any concerns or problems and discusses homework as well as makes sure all check sheets and reward sheets are correctly filled out and returned to their correct place. This is also a good time to do any whole group activities such as story time and to undertake any housekeeping activities. As a side note I also start my learning center sessions with a group briefing in the common area in order to inform the students of any changes, concerns or new activities. I try to keep this time as short as possible usually less than 5 minutes.

7. Results

Since implementing these strategies in my own school I have seen a huge level of improvement and a noticeable decrease in disruption and confused or unfocused students. There has also been a noticeable change in the pace with which students are moving through their literacy levels. Explaining my goals clearly to students and their parents, and involving them fully in the process of implementing and monitoring these tasks, through home study extension and parent volunteers, has also greatly improved the communication between students, parents and the school. I am also able to easily explain the process involved in each activity to another teacher or volunteer and have them take over with little or no preparation on their part leaving me free to focus on fine details or individual student tuition.

8. Conclusion

Learning centers and differentiated learning strategies are certainly a challenge for any teacher but if they are implemented, assessed and monitored correctly and if each activity within the center is well thought out and engaging they can be a joy to teach. These strategies are obviously time consuming and challenging but the rewards are there if you are willing to put the time in. I certainly recommend learning centers and differentiated learning strategies to anyone who is willing to challenge themselves early on in their teaching career in order to get greater rewards in the long run.

References

1. Piaget, J. (1945). *Play, dreams and imitation in childhood*: Heinemann.
2. Erik H. Erikson, Joan M. Erikson. (1998). *The Life Cycle Completed: Extended Version*, W. W. Norton.
3. Frost, J.L. (2009). *Play and Child Development*, 4th Edition: Pearson.
4. Pellegrini, A. D. (2009). *The Role of Play in Human Development*: Oxford University Press.
5. Isbell, R. (2008). *The Complete Book of Learning Centers, Revised*: Gryphon House.

6. Boushey, G. & Moser, J. (2014). The Daily Five, Second Edition: Pembroke Publishers.