

Using Learning Centers in an ESL Classroom

A mini-grant project by:

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Summer 2014

Table of Contents

Frequently Asked Questions Answered	3
General tips	5
Tips for lower level classes	7
Tips for higher level classes	8
Tips for multi-level classes	9
Photocopiables and Templates	10
Pair Dictation Samples	11
Pair Dictation Templates	15
Board Game Template	17
Board Game Instructions and Teacher Notes	18
Board Game Sample	19
Cards Template	27
Student Survey	28
Student Checklist	29
Learning Centers in My Classroom	30

Frequently Asked Questions Answered

What are learning centers?

Learning centers are student centered, engaging activities which are also self-checking and self-selecting. The activities are used to focus on a set of skills and deepen the students' knowledge and abilities in that area. Students can work alone, in pairs, or in small groups. Different centers are set up around the classroom and students move from one center to another on their own time and by their own choosing in the allotted class time.

Why should I use learning centers in an ESL classroom?

Learning centers are student focused. Since all ESL classrooms are multi-level in some way, using learning centers allows slower students to spend more time practicing lessons from class while more advanced students deepen their understanding and ability to use the target skills or language. Students are not rushed nor bored. Learning centers put the control into the student's hands. Adults appreciate being able to focus their learning on what is most important in their lives. Because students are involved in different games and activities at the same time, there is no down time. Students are constantly practicing and learning, which also alleviates chatter and use of native languages. Learning centers are extremely useful in classes that have rolling admission. New students entering the class can use the learning center time to catch up with what the class had finished before they began attending.

If I use them, do I have to call them learning centers?

Of course not! Sometimes the term "learning centers" can be confusing for ESL students, especially low level students, who may not completely grasp the meaning of the words. Try using words your students will understand and be excited about. Some possible expressions are: learning groups, practice groups, practice activities, learning games, practice time, group time, learning stations, activity stations, etc.

When should I use learning centers in my ESL classroom?

This depends on the logistical factors of your classroom/center. There are three logical time slots – beginning, middle, or end of class. There are advantages and disadvantages to each. Using learning centers at the beginning of class allows students to begin learning as soon as they arrive and allows stragglers to enter and join in. However, more traditional learners may feel that class is not actually starting due to the informal nature of the centers. Using learning centers in the middle of class makes for a nice break from regular class material, but it can be hard to keep a regular schedule because, as we all know, lessons never take exactly the amount of time we think they will. Finally, using learning centers at the end of class makes for a nice way to wrap up and let students practice what they have been doing. Nevertheless, students

who are not as serious may goof off or end up leaving early. Think about how long your class is, if there is a break time, when students tend to enter/leave, and class energy levels. These factors will help you decide what the right time slot is for your class. You may even decide to mix it up. For example, on Tuesdays, learning centers are used at the beginning of class and on Thursdays, learning centers are used at the end of class.

How much time (per class or per week) should I devote to learning centers?

Again, this will depend on the logistical factors of your classroom/center. In order for learning centers to be effective, students need practice with them. I recommend using them more frequently, but perhaps for less time. It is important that students have the opportunity to use them every class, even if it is for a shorter period of time. For example, in a class that meets for two hours twice a week, I would use centers for 20-30 minutes each class. In a class that meets for three hours three times a week, I would use centers for approximately 45 minutes each class. Finding the right balance between learning centers and classroom instruction may take a period of trial and error.

How can I introduce learning centers to my class?

Slowly. In any level class, throwing several new activities at students and asking them to change the class structure (i.e. no teacher in front of the class teaching) is a recipe for disaster. Try incorporating activities that students are already familiar with into the learning centers. Sometimes it is best to start out with groups doing the same activity at the same time. Have students practice each activity in this manner before offering multiple choices with learning centers. Once students understand the concept of an activity, the content can be changed without having to re-explain the activity. Even when students understand all activities and instructions thoroughly, they may still get a little lost once learning centers are out in full force and there are different groups doing different things all over the room. It can be overwhelming for some at first, so be prepared to walk around and help keep students going. With time, it will become normal and highly enjoyable for them.

What do I do if something is not working with learning centers?

Ask your students for their opinions and feedback. Create an environment where they feel safe and comfortable sharing their ideas with you. This will not only keep students interested in the class, it will improve your experience as the teacher. If something is not working, change it. Try new things. Each class is different, so finding what works best with your specific group of students is key.

If I have questions about incorporating learning centers, who can I contact?

Feel free to email me anytime. You can reach me at losowski@adultlearningcenter.org.

General Tips

Here are some general tips and things to remember when incorporating learning centers into your ESL classroom:

- Do not worry if not all your materials look “perfect”. Activities should be simple to use and understand and useful for students. Whether or not everything perfectly matches and looks like store bought quality is not important.
- Print or photocopy cards on cardstock and cut them up rather than using index cards. This is less time consuming than writing on notecards. Also, if you have access to a laminator, it will help protect your materials.
- Re-use materials from old games. Scrabble tiles, letter magnets, game pieces, dice, and so on make great additions to learning centers. Check your closets for pieces from games you no longer use or try second hand stores and even transfer stations.
- If you need to buy materials for learning centers, see if your program director will pay for the materials so long as the centers are available to share amongst all teachers.
- When creating activities, keep directions clear and simple. Remember, the focus is on the content rather than the activity itself.
- Not all students may be familiar with common American games, such as dominoes, board games, or Bingo. While these activities can become favorite learning centers, be sure there are always directions on hand at a center in case students do not understand. When introducing a new activity, it is best to play as a class the first time.
- Do your research and find out more about your students. With lower level students, this may include using a higher student to translate. What are their jobs, hobbies, interests, etc.? Use those pieces of information when creating the learning centers for your classroom. If there are a couple students who work as landscapers, a matching game with garden tools (pictures and words) would be very useful. When writing sentences for a pair dictation, you can use true statements about the class (i.e. “Juditha was a farmer.”) Making things personal makes the centers more interesting.
- There is no need to re-invent the wheel. While many learning centers will need to be created, use what you have available whenever possible. Photocopies from supplementary materials can be great learning centers (just make sure it has some interest and value and is not just busy work). If some students are preparing for their citizenship exams, use government materials as a learning center. Store bought games can sometimes be good to use, but be sure that all information contained in the game is appropriate in level and content.
- While emphasis should be given to group work and student interaction, do not force students to work in groups.

- While students are working on their learning centers, float around the room to offer help as needed. If no one is directly requesting your help, spend a little time interacting with each group.
- Always have one learning center free. If one group finishes working with an activity or center, there should always be something new for them to grab. They should not have to wait until another group finishes to trade activities. There should always be one back-up learning center that any group can take when they finish.
- The use of learning centers is not meant to be the only approach used in a class. It should not take up more than one third of the total class time. It works best when mixed with individual and group activities as well as teacher instruction.
- Encourage students to move on to another center when they finish with the first one. However, don't designate a specific amount of time after which students have to move. Allow students to set their own pace. They can spend as much time as they need to at one center or move on quickly if the center is easy for them or has little interest.
- Decide when you want to use learning centers. You may want to change when you use them (i.e. in the beginning of class one day and at the end of class another day). The schedule may even be dictated by other events at your center. For a long session, you may want to consider using centers multiple times per class. For example, you may have learning centers out and available for students as they enter the room and use them for the first 15-20 minutes of class then have them available at break time and after break as well.
- Set ground rules and involve the students in setting ground rules for what is appropriate, respectful, and responsible behavior during learning centers. Post the rules so all students are clear about the expectations.
- Before creating learning centers, think about the space you have to work with at your center. Think about storage space and the classroom area. Do not create big, bulky learning centers if you only have one drawer in a desk to store your things in. Try to create "flat centers" that can fold and pack up more easily. Also, think about how easily it is to move around your classroom and what type of table space you have. Create centers that will logistically function in your space.
- Share, share, share! If other teachers at your center will also be using learning centers, you can share materials. This way you only have to create half of the centers!
- Have students help with setting up and cleaning up learning centers.
- Invite other classes in to use centers and work together.
- Use real life items whenever possible. For example, do not create a restaurant menu. Go to local restaurants and ask for copies.
- Have a wide variety of centers/activities available so there is something for everyone.

Tips for lower levels

Here are some specific tips and things to remember when incorporating learning centers into your lower level ESL classroom:

- It may take longer for students to catch on to learning centers. This will be a new concept for some of them, so keep the experience positive and show them that they are learning and they will begin to love it.
- Before passing out learning centers, be sure all students are familiar with the tasks they will be completing. Take time to do the activities as a class if necessary.
- Always incorporate some basic level learning centers. It can take some students a long time to master the fundamentals, such as the alphabet. By always having extremely basic activities available, students who need the extra practice can get it without feeling self-conscious.
- Ask students for their opinions. While lower students will not be able to complete a survey about their feelings on learning centers, simply walking around the room and asking students if the activity they are working on is good is a great way to gauge their interest.
- Do not worry if not all of your learning centers are self-correcting. Lower level students have a harder time understanding that it is OK to check their own work. Also, complicated self-checking sheets can be too difficult for lower level students. For a matching activity, you can write numbers or letters on the matching cards (A matches with A). For a sentence creation activity with cards, giving students a list of sentences that can possibly be created from the words can be overwhelming. In that case, just have students leave the sentences on the table or in the hanging pocket file and check them from time to time.
- Try to involve as many senses as possible. Things that students can touch and manipulate will be far more conducive to learning than lots of white paper.
- Bring in real items for learning centers. For a clothing unit, bring in a bag of real clothes (clean ones!) for students to touch and match with the word and to describe. Real life items are always the best policy when dealing with lower level students.

Tips for Higher Levels

Here are some specific tips and things to remember when incorporating learning centers into your higher level ESL classroom:

- Because some students may be critical of this different approach to learning and instruction, start with a discussion about educational traditions in different countries. Show students that there are a variety of ways to learn so they will more easily see the value in learning centers as they get going.
- Include some learning centers with material that was learned in the previous level. In case students did not attend that level at your center or did not master the material before moving on, a learning center gives them the opportunity to revisit the content in a less stressful setting.
- Beyond finding out about students' jobs and interests, find out what goals high level students have. What do they hope to do once they leave your program? Are their goals more academic or work related? Use those goals in your learning centers. For students who are more academically inclined, a college level vocabulary matching game with definitions would be extremely useful.
- Find a way for students to frequently give their feedback. For example, a weekly journal assignment could be to discuss what students like and do not like about learning centers or students could interview or survey each other.
- Have a mixture of individual and group activities. Some higher students are extremely focused and may prefer to work alone sometimes. Encourage them to mix their work and sometimes work with a partner or in a small group, but allow them to choose what works best for them.
- Try having students keep a log of the activities they did, how long it took, what they learned, and what they liked/did not like.
- For academically minded students, consider using an extra copy of a favorite supplementary textbook as a learning center. This is a great way to incorporate grammar that some students are specifically looking for.
- Give students control over the content and focus of learning centers. Because higher level students can communicate their needs and wishes to you, use the information to create centers or have students create centers for their classmates.

Tips for Multi-Level Classes

Here are some specific tips and things to remember when incorporating learning centers into your true multi-level ESL classroom:

- Make different activities at different levels. Have some centers with material that is at an extremely low level (for example, alphabet or personal information matching) and other centers with material that is at a higher level (for example, rearranged stories or pronunciation activities).
- Make the same activity multi-level so different level students can use it together. Sometimes students of very different levels can work well together. Give them an activity they can do that is naturally conducive to their different levels. For example, in a spelling activity, the lower level student can look at the work and find the letter tiles to spell the word. Alternatively, the higher level student can be told the word and they have to locate the letter tiles and spell it without copying from the card with the word on it. A timed component could even be used to add to the competition. For students who are in the middle, one student can use the card to spell the word while the other student finds the correct letter tiles.
- Use colors or symbols to mark the levels of different centers. Each student should know which colors or symbols are appropriate for them. Alternatively, for the same activity, such as a pair dictation, you can mark it with the levels A,B,C.
- Learning centers are ideal for multi-level classes because it allows students to focus on their own needs and move at their own pace without being rushed or held back by classmates at different levels. For a true multi-level class with a wide gap between the lowest and highest student, you may want to devote more than the recommended one third of class time to learning centers.
- Use learning centers as a way for all students to study the same topic or subject but focus on different aspects, depending on their level. For example, for the topic of health, lower students can label a diagram of body parts while mid-level students practice a conversation about health problems and higher students practice calling a doctor's office and dictating phone messages.
- Involve higher level students in the planning and creation of learning centers. They can use what they have learned to create centers for the lower students in the class.

Photocopiables and Templates

The following pages can be photocopied and used in class. As a reminder, for learning center materials, I recommend photocopying onto cardstock or colored paper and laminating or using sheet protectors. If you prefer to have your students create the materials, you can give them one photocopy and have them transfer the information onto index cards or other paper.

Some of these pages could also be used as templates. Information can be added or changed to create multiple lessons or activities. For example, there are pair dictation samples and templates. You can use the samples exactly as they are, photocopying and using in a center. Alternatively, you could photocopy the template and add different sentences for different activities (or have students add the sentences of their own or copied from the book).

I have also included a survey and checklist for students to keep track of their work.

Jobs Pair Dictation – Student 1

Read the sentences to your partner. They will write the sentences.

1. They are gardeners.
2. Esmeraldo works at Dunkin Donuts.
3. You are students.
4. Camelia is a teacher.
5. Harry is a construction worker.

Now, listen to your partner. Write the sentences they read to you.

6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____

When you finish, check all the sentences.

Jobs Pair Dictation – Student 2

Listen to your partner. Write the sentences they read to you.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Now, read the sentences to your partner. They will write the sentences.

6. Maria is a housekeeper.
7. Juditha and Adelina are homemakers.
8. They are sales assistants.
9. Lauren works at the Adult Learning Center.
10. You are an accountant.

When you finish, check all the sentences.

Family Pair Dictation – Student 1

Read the sentences to your partner. They will write the sentences.

1. Jennifer is Lauren's sister.
2. Esmeraldo looks like his father.
3. Their family is from Mexico.
4. Thomas is Susan's husband.
5. Yolanda has long hair.

Now, listen to your partner. Write the sentences they read to you.

6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____

When you finish, check all the sentences.

Family Pair Dictation – Student 2

Listen to your partner. Write the sentences they read to you.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Now, read the sentences to your partner. They will write the sentences.

6. Carol is David's mother-in-law.
7. Her family is from Africa.
8. Tommy is Emma's brother.
9. Abdul has short hair.
10. Maria looks like her mother.

When you finish, check all the sentences.

Pair Dictation – Student 1

Listen to your partner. Write the sentences they read to you.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Now, read the sentences to your partner. They will write the sentences.

6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____

When you finish, check all the sentences.

Pair Dictation – Student 2

Listen to your partner. Write the sentences they read to you.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Now, read the sentences to your partner. They will write the sentences.

6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____

When you finish, check all the sentences.

Board Game Template

Start / Finish	Pick a yellow card	Move forward one space	Pick a blue card	Pick an orange card	Pick a green card	Move back two spaces	Pick a yellow card
Pick a green card	<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around; align-items: center; height: 400px;"> <div style="background-color: yellow; padding: 10px; border: 1px solid black; width: 15%;">Put yellow cards here</div> <div style="background-color: green; padding: 10px; border: 1px solid black; width: 15%;">Put green cards here</div> <div style="background-color: lightblue; padding: 10px; border: 1px solid black; width: 15%;">Put blue cards here</div> <div style="background-color: orange; padding: 10px; border: 1px solid black; width: 15%;">Put orange cards here</div> </div>						Pick a blue card
Pick an orange card							Pick an orange card
Skip one turn							Pick a green card
Pick a blue card							Skip one turn
Pick a yellow card							Pick a yellow card
Pick a green card							Pick a blue card
Pick an orange card							Pick any color card
Move back two spaces	Pick a blue card	Pick a yellow card	Pick a green card	Move forward one space	Pick an orange card		

Board Game Instructions and Teacher Notes

Teacher Notes:

- Game boards may be purchased from www.barebooks.com or made using poster board.
- Any combination of colors can be used. Different color cards represent different challenges. In this example, yellow is a picture of a vocab word, orange is a mixed up sentence, blue is a question to answer, and green is fill in the blank.
- With each unit or topic, the cards change, but the colors and activities do not. This makes students feel comfortable with the game itself while remaining challenged by the content included in the game.
- To make the game self-correcting, cards can be placed face up on the game board. A student rolls and lands on a space. They read the card and answer. The correct answer is already written/printed on the back side of the card for students to check.
- To play the game, one student rolls the dice and moves around the board that number of spaces. They perform the action of the space they land on. For example, if the student lands on a blue space, he/she picks a blue card, reads and answers the question. He/she can check the answer on the back of the card and get feedback from his/her classmates. Once his/her turn is finished, the next player rolls and moves around the board.
- Decide how much “helping” is allowed between students. I typically allow students to help as much as they want, so long as no one student is taking over.
- Decide whether or not students will be allowed to continue moving forward if they get a wrong answer. Lower level students may not understand that they can only move if they get the right answer, but higher level students should be able to grasp more advanced game playing concepts.

NOTE: The following eight pages have a sample board game about family from my collection. You can copy the pages onto cardstock and use it with a board game or copy the template and change the information. If copying onto cardstock, the first two pages are yellow (for vocabulary), followed by two orange pages (for mixed up sentences), followed by two blue pages (for questions), and finally two green pages (for fill in the blank).





**is / Bi-Yun /
grandmother. /
Karen's**

**Tommy / are /
Emma / and /
Susan's /
children.**

**Thomas /
Carol's / is /
husband.**

**Tai-ling's / is /
wife. / Bi-Yun**

**Tommy's / is /
David / father.**

**father-in-law. /
David's / is /
Thomas**

**Karen / sister. /
is / Michael's**

**are / parents. /
Emma's / Susan
/ David / and**

**Juditha's / is /
son / tall.**

**My / like /
looks /
daughter /
husband. / my**

**Bertha / names
/ Their / and /
Shamshidah. /
are**

**family / from /
My / Republic. /
Dominican / is**

**daughter / like
/ looks / her. /
Adelina's**

**live / the /
States. / We /
in / United**

**has / sister /
long / My /
hair.**

**daughter / is /
Rosa's / short.**

**thin. / parents /
Marco's / are**

**Do you look like
your mother?**

**When is your
birthday?**

**Do you look like
your father?**

**Are you tall or
short?**

**How many
children do you
have?**

**Are you
married?**

**Do you have
long hair or
short hair?**

**Who are your
parents?**

**Who are your
grandparents?**

**How many
aunts do you
have?**

**Does your
family live in
the USA?**

**Do you look like
any famous
person?**

**How many
uncles do you
have?**

**Do you have a
beard or
mustache?**

**How old are
you?**

**How many
cousins do you
have?**

**How old
_____ you?**

**Michael

Susan's son.**

**Who _____
your mother?**

**Thomas and
Carol _____
Susan's
parents.**

**How old
_____ she?**

**Rosa _____
short hair.**

**Susan and
Karen _____
sisters.**

**Do you _____
any children?**

**My father
_____ a
beard.**

**Judith's family
_____ from
Ecuador.**

**Her sister
_____ tall.**

**Maria and
Bertha _____
from Mexico.**

**My birthday
_____ June
24th.**

**Your family
_____ very
nice.**

**Peter _____
divorced.**

**That _____ a
great photo!**

Cards Template

Fill in the boxes and cut out to make matching sets or cards for a board game.

Learning Centers (Student Survey)

When it is time for learning centers, I feel...

The best thing about learning centers is...

The thing I would change about learning centers is...

My favorite learning center is...

I wish there was a learning center about...

Learning Centers (Student Checklist)

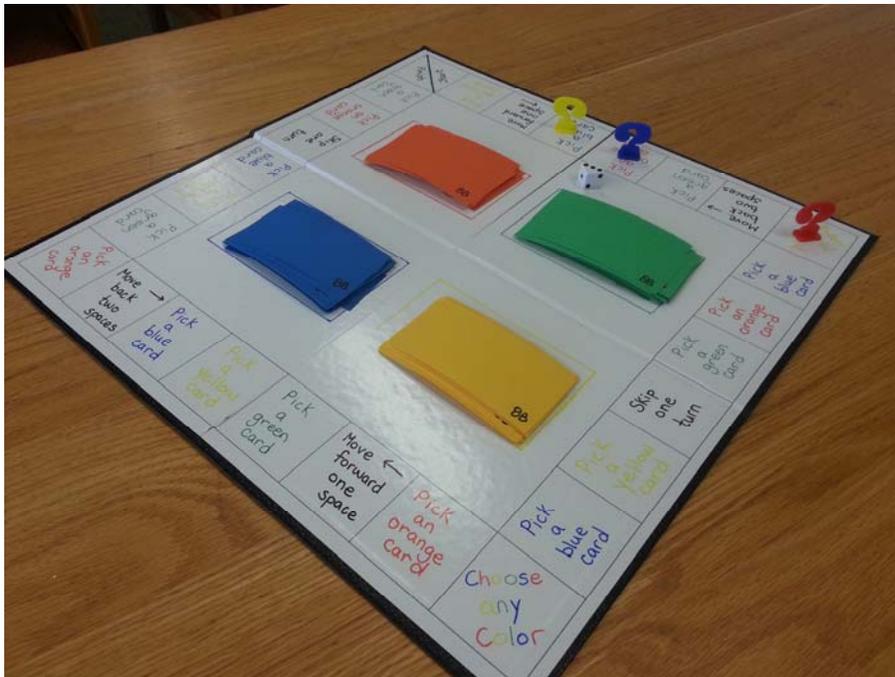
Date	Activity	Time spent	Comments

Learning Centers in My Classroom

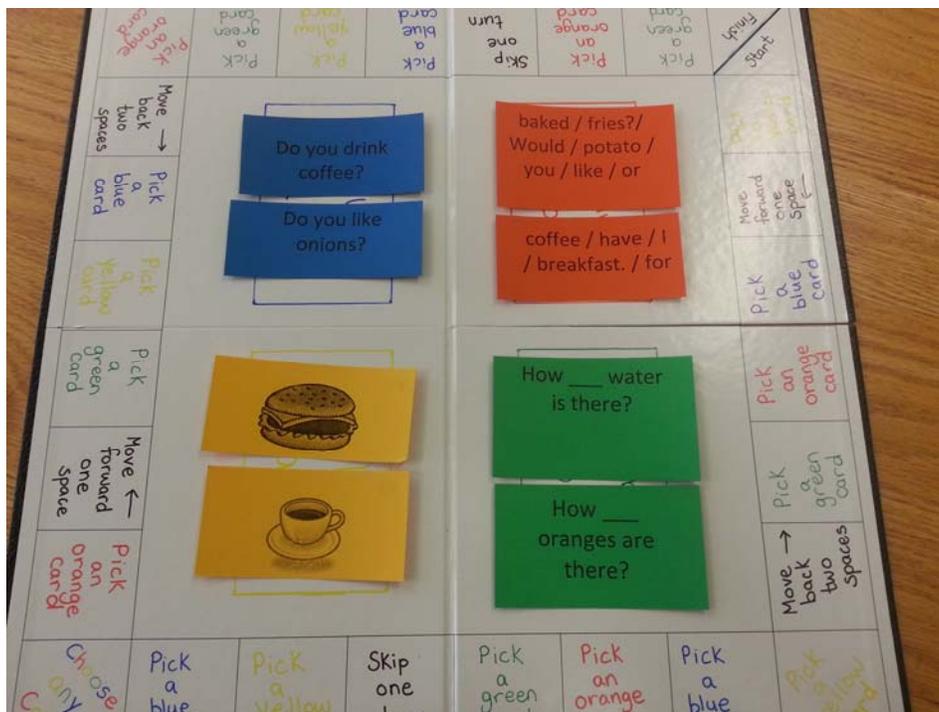
As a visual learner, I appreciate that pictures are worth a thousand words. Here are some pictures of learning centers in my classroom with descriptions. There are no students in the pictures because of privacy issues, but you can see each center set up.



Every day, when my students come into class, they put their things down at their seat and come to this shelf in the back of the classroom (we are lucky to have plenty of storage space available). There are six tables in my classroom, so I have six designated learning center boxes (although we call them “practice activities”). Students can choose the box of the activity they would like to practice and take the box to their table. The boxes always contain the same type of activity, as indicated on the outside of the box, but the content changes based on the unit we are working on. The box on the top left says “Board Game and Rotate”. In my classroom, the board game is the most popular activity, so I have two copies. However, if there is a pressing need for a different type of center, it will be put into rotation in this box. The other boxes say “Board Game”, “Matching”, “Pair Dictation”, “Making Sentences”, and “Spelling”.



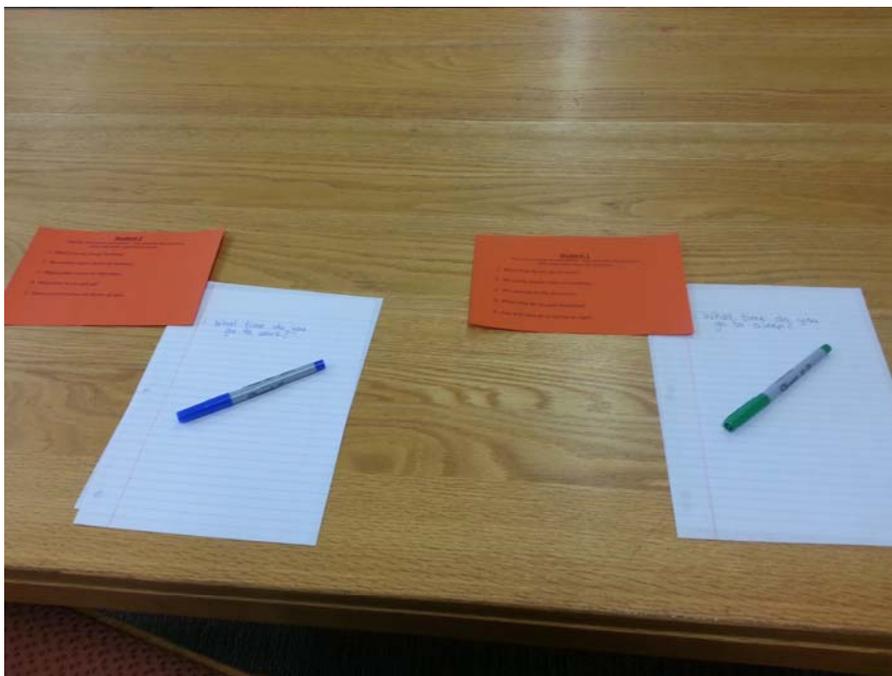
The “Board Game” is set up with the colored cards in the middle. Each student has their own game piece. You can use regular dice. For the “Board Game” template, see page XX.



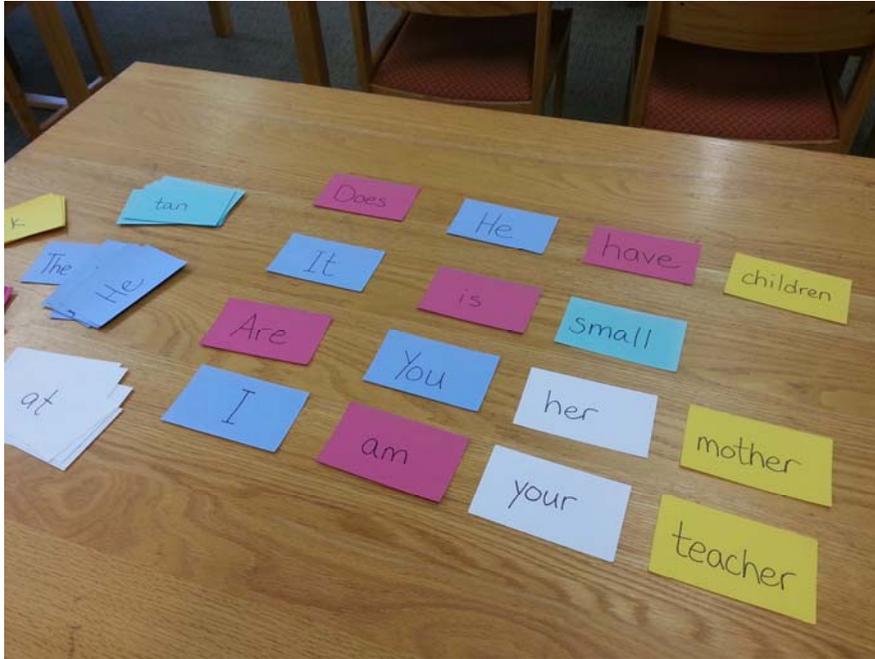
While the content of the cards changes, the structure is the same. Yellow cards are always pictures of vocabulary. Blue cards are always questions. Orange cards are always mixed up sentences. Green cards are always fill in the blanks (usually with the correct verb).



The “Matching” center has pictures of vocabulary and the words that match. Students need to match the appropriate pictures and words. To minimize confusion, the pictures are the same as the “Board Game”. Each pair has a letter on the back so students can check if they are correct.



The “Pair Dictation” center has a card and paper for each student. The sentences on each card are different, and the students take turns reading their sentences to each other and writing down what their partner says. I use loose paper so the students can keep it when they finish.



The “Making Sentences” center uses words on different color cards. The students rearrange the cards to make sentences. The cards are color coded by part of speech: blue cards are subjects, red cards are verbs, green cards are adjectives, and yellow cards are objects or nouns.



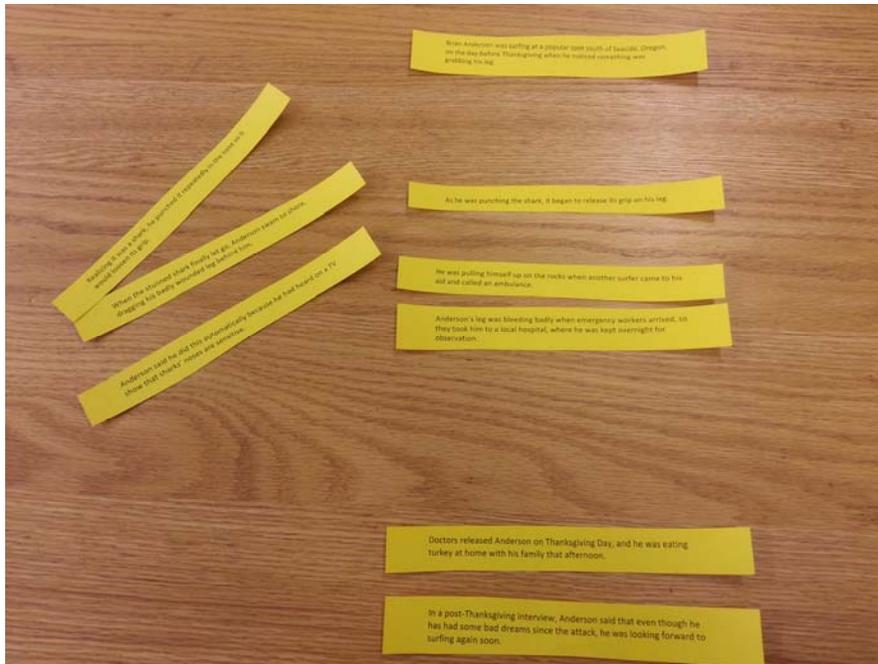
Alternatively, the “Make Sentences” center can be done using a hanging wall pocket chart.



The “Spelling” center can be done on the table or on the whiteboard if the letters are magnetic. Students are given cards with vocabulary words and letters to spell the word. Low level students can copy the spelling directly from the card. Higher level students can work with a partner to quiz each other on the spelling. One student can read the word while the other spells it from memory. If you do not have enough letters, students can spell one or two words at a time using a smaller set of letters.



An additional learning center I sometimes use is a map with state shaped pieces. This is a good for students studying geography or for citizenship. A completed map is available for correcting.



An additional learning center I sometimes use is a mixed up story. Sentences from the story are cut up. Students need to rearrange the story into the correct order. Each piece is numbered on the back so students can see the correct order.



Bingo makes a great learning center. I sometimes use this store bought "Sight Word Bingo"