

Learning Centers: Meaningful Contexts for Language Use in the Primary Immersion Classroom

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In the K-3 classroom teachers and students spend a significant amount of time focusing on reading instruction. It is essential that students of this age learn both the phonics and the reading strategies necessary to independently decode, comprehend, and achieve fluency with a benchmark text. For the classroom teacher, there is no question that the practice of meeting with readers in small groups provides an excellent forum for reading instruction critical to an effective literacy program (Ford & Opitz, 2002). This smaller reading group provides a greater opportunity for teachers to use instruction that appropriately scaffolds and effectively engages each learner in a way not possible when addressing students in a large group setting. But what happens to the remaining students who are not taking part in such focused instructional time with the teacher?



Second graders read at the Listening Center.

Because the majority of students will spend a considerable amount of time away from the teacher during small group reading sessions it is imperative that the power of instruction that occurs without the teacher rivals the power of the instruction that takes place with the teacher (Ford & Opitz, 2002). This statement becomes even more critical in the immersion classroom, where a major program goal is communicative competence in the second language (L2) (Stevens, 1983). In order to accomplish both literacy and L2 learning objectives, learning centers can serve to create the kind of environment that is conducive to both successful reading instruction and meaningful peer-peer interaction in the L2.

This article begins by defining and summarizing specific research concerning the benefits of learning centers in a L2 environment. Next, considerations for the integration of learning centers in the immersion classroom are suggested. Finally, the article outlines examples and brief explanations of learning centers that I have found to be successful in scaffolding my second graders' immersion language learning.

The Learning Center

A learning center is a defined space in the classroom where materials are organized and made available so that students can learn without constant teacher direction. Centers can be organized to support the development of specific literacy skills, mathematical concepts, student interests, or integrated themes. The collection of materials is, however, designed purposefully so that the students are able to work with these materials to develop, discover, create, and learn at their own pace. It is important to note that learning centers should never be used as a means to introduce a concept. Rather, learning centers are designed to remediate, enhance, or extend knowledge on a skill, concept, standard, or topic. The teacher is then able to differentiate instruction and challenge each student by presenting opportunities to participate in activities at his/her individual level. Finally, learning centers can be designed for independent use or for pair and small group work of three to five students within a cooperative setting.

Learning Centers in the Immersion Classroom

“Language is acquired most effectively when it is learned for communication in meaningful and significant social situations” (Genesee, 1994, p. 1). Research has shown that immersion students benefit from an environment in which they are given many opportunities to produce and experiment with new forms of the language, where attempts at communication are valued and language skills are continually stretched to promote improvement (Swain, 1996). Finding ways to structure an environment that frequently provides opportunities for students to produce language and improve the language they produce remains one of the major challenges facing the immersion teacher (Fortune, 1997). Designing project-based lessons and promoting cooperative group work in the classroom are recommended strategies for meeting this challenge.

When immersion teachers are asked why they do not implement more cooperative learning and project-based activities into their teaching, they often indicate concern that students will use English (L1) in these activities (Cummins, 2000). As a teacher of second grade students, there are many reasons why it is difficult to imagine teaching without making use of such learning activities. First, young children are active learners who need to touch, feel, experiment, and create to learn, and learning centers are designed to relate to this world of active learning. They also encourage involvement in a given task. This involvement directly enhances the development of choice making, oral language, creativity, social skills, and responsibility taking (Isbell, 1995). Moreover, immersion students in the primary grades are naturally inclined to stay in the target language when well-structured tasks encourage them to use and build upon their developing language skills. Finally, the atmosphere in a small group is less threatening and encourages greater participation, thus increasing the amount and frequency of student production in the target language.

In a learning center, talking about concrete objects, playing a game, or completing a partner activity are interactive language tasks that serve as excellent vehicles to help students communicate purposefully in the L2 (Stevens, 1983). According to Curtain and Dahlberg (2004), there are many types and benefits of such interactive language tasks that can be incorporated into learning centers. In the following table, I have expanded on these ideas and present specific language learning opportunities embedded within the various interactive tasks.

Table 1: Language Learning Benefits of Interactive Tasks

Types of Interactive Language Tasks	Benefits of Interactive Language Tasks
Interviewing/Surveying	Repetition and practice asking and answering questions with multiple peers
Finding differences/Similarities	Increased need for lexical specificity and use of negative constructions (e.g., this is not a..., I don't see a..., etc.)
Following/Giving directions	Use of imperative form and practice with frequently encountered verb-preposition combinations
Arranging objects	Practice with prepositional phrases (e.g., next to, on top of, behind, in front of, etc.)
Finding/Giving information	Summarizing/organizing information with increased use of adverbs (e.g., first, next, then, finally)
Identifying objects/persons	Need for noun-adjective agreement and greater lexical specificity
Solving problems	Use of conditionals with "if-then" clauses, sequencing of steps in a process using adverbs (e.g., first, second, third, etc.)
Cooperative puzzles	Practice asking and answering questions with multiple peers and adverbs of location (e.g., Does this go here?, What piece fits here?, etc.)
Games	Natural two-way practice of the immersion language for giving and understanding directions

Centers designed with information gap activities in which one partner or member of the group has information that the other partner does not also provide an excellent context for meaningful communication (Curtain & Pesola, 1994). For example, Student A describes a mystery word to Student B by indicating the type of word (noun, verb), and/or the number of syllables, vowels, and consonants in the word. Student B asks any questions he/she might have and writes the mystery word. Student A checks for accuracy, and in so doing, encourages both students to discuss the L2. Such communication about the building blocks of language can foster a meta-level awareness of important language features among the learners.

While a second language program, which is entirely based on activities (learning centers), may seem too radical to teachers who need to follow a prescribed curriculum, it is possible to incorporate activity-centered learning into the curriculum on a regular basis. It will be eye-opening to the skeptical teacher to observe the amount of language learning which takes place during these sessions, and to see how many curricular and language learning objectives are actually covered by the children without direct teacher guidance (Stevens, 1983).

Considerations for the Integration of Learning Centers in the Classroom

There are many ways to integrate learning centers in the classroom. For example, the small reading group time with the teacher can be treated as one of multiple learning centers that the children rotate through according to a time schedule. This approach ensures that every child meets with the teacher at least once throughout the day. In this way, the teacher station simply becomes one of the centers visited by all students within the learning center rotation. Another way to organize centers in the classroom is to group children together and let them choose their own centers. The teacher can then select one or two students from each group to meet with him/her for reading instruction. This way, students stay at the learning center until the task is completed and then move to other centers until center time is finished (Ford & Opitz, 2002). Regardless of the organization or the routines adopted for center time, there are several considerations to ensure success for both the teacher and students:

- **Create centers that support important learning goals** (Tomlinson, 1999). During center time, students should be independently or cooperatively engaged in meaningful activities. Only consider activities with learning goals that advance or deepen students' knowledge.
- **Include materials in the center that address a wide range of reading levels, learning profiles, and student interests.** Offer activities that vary from simple to complex, concrete to abstract, and structured to open-ended (Tomlinson, 1999).
- **Directly model the game or activity in the center to the students before center time, and then provide clear directions to students built into the center.** Watch students to see exactly what needs to be taught (e.g., working cooperatively, using a tape recorder, caring for materials) (Ford & Opitz, 2002). Depending upon the grade level, directions can be written, pictorial, or recorded.
- **Offer instructions about what a student should do if he/she needs help during center time** (Tomlinson, 1999). Activities should be user-friendly for students and not have the potential to interrupt the teacher. However, it is necessary to establish a system for the students to use if they need help during center time. Some teachers designate one or more student "experts" with armbands that identify them for the class or employ a pre-determined system that students can reference if they have a question during center time. Other teachers have students write their question on a piece of paper and place it in a designated area of the classroom. The teacher can then attend to these questions when he/she has time.
- **Design centers that operate with minimal transition time and management concerns.** If implementing centers consumes more time, energy, and effort than the instruction and activities that take place, rethink the use of centers or revisit the design and structure of those particular centers (Ford & Opitz, 2002).
- **Include a simple built-in accountability system to motivate students to stay productively engaged in the center** (Ford & Opitz, 2002). An accountability system can be as simple as using a card for students to color in or mark off after they complete center activities. At the end of learning center time students can turn their cards into the teacher or refile them on their own for future teacher review.

Learning Center Examples and Explanations

There is no limit to the number and type of learning centers that can be designed to promote student language production in the immersion classroom. Following is a list of various learning centers that I have found effective in encouraging my second grade students to interact with each other in meaningful ways.

Book Box Center:

In order to establish this center in the classroom, each student must have a box (or bag) that contains four to six “just right” books that the student is capable of reading independently. Change the books every month to expose students to a variety of genres and authors.

How to extend student use of the immersion language: Students may read with a partner. Another idea is to have students record their favorite book on a cassette for others to listen to and enjoy.

Published Work Center:

A published work center presents the students with the opportunity to read the work of their peers. Organize class-made books and/or student journals in a quiet corner of the room where students can explore their peers’ writing.

How to extend student use of the immersion language: Students may read with a partner. They may also spend time reading to themselves to later read a book aloud to an adult as a homework assignment.

Puzzle Center:

This is a center where students may select an activity from a collection of crosswords, word finds, brainteasers or other puzzles.

How to extend student use of the immersion language: Students may work in pairs or small groups to complete a puzzle. They may also be required to check their work with a partner after they have finished the activity independently.

Listening Center:

At a listening center, a small group of students preview a book together to discuss the pictures, predict story events, and hypothesize about unknown vocabulary before listening to the text on a cassette. They then complete a sheet of comprehension questions together. Another idea is to have students listen to a unit-supportive song(s) and follow along with the written text. After listening to the song, they can discuss the meaning of certain words underlined by the teacher and/or words chosen by the students themselves. Have students write and/or draw their understanding of these words at the center.

How to extend student use of the immersion language: This center lends itself to authentic communication amongst the students.



Learners are engrossed as they read a peer's writing at the Published Work Center.

Writing Center:

This center provides an opportunity for students to expand upon a written or pictorial writing prompt in their personal journal, complete a page to add to a class-created book, or engage in other writing activities.

How to extend student use of the immersion language: Students may brainstorm ideas together or take advantage of the opportunity to edit an earlier draft of their work with a peer (using a rubric as a guide) before handing it in to the teacher or placing their project in the published work center for final review.

Word Centers:

Word centers are literacy centers that provide an opportunity for students to play with letters and high frequency words. Reading the word wall, partner spelling review, high frequency word bingo, and information gap activities are some of the popular activities that can be included in this center, and many different “word” centers can be in use at the same time.

How to extend student use of the immersion language: Interactive language, games, and activities in this center can easily be designed for partner and small groups where students are encouraged to communicate with each other to successfully complete the activity.

Role-playing Center:

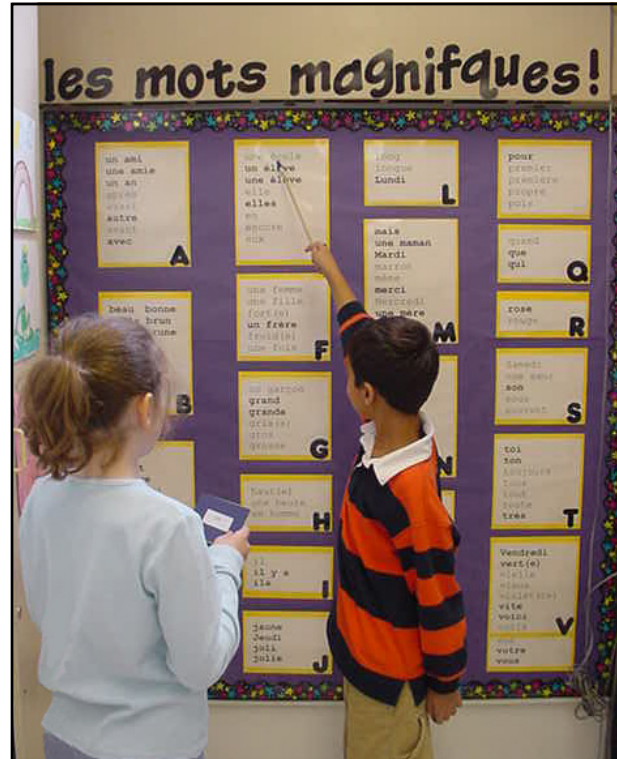
Students may demonstrate characters and sequence of events from a story.

How to extend student use of the immersion language: This center naturally lends itself to student interaction and communication when students act out a story together. They may perform for peers and/or parents as time allows.

Math Center:

Math centers are usually reserved for math games that reinforce a concept already introduced by the teacher.

How to extend student use of the immersion language: This center lends itself to partner and small group work as the students can play board games and card games where communication is necessary in order to play the game or complete the activity.



Students engage in an activity at the Word Center.

Computer Center:

There are many activities that the students can complete on computers. The teacher can bookmark math websites for extra drill practice, students can create a thematic slideshow, or read and complete an activity related to teacher-created Power-Point presentation.

How to extend student use of the immersion language: Students may work on these projects in a small group or with a partner. Students who have shown proficiency with certain programs may also be assigned as tech experts to help each other with projects.

Art Center:

This center should be stocked with colored paper, markers, crayons, scissors, glue, and other materials that the children can use when completing art projects that relate to the current classroom theme, sound of the week or letter of the day.

How to extend student use of the immersion language: Place all art materials at one table to give students the opportunity to interact with each other while completing their project. As this center has a tendency towards a relaxed atmosphere, one or more students can be designated as encouragers who make sure that each student is encouraged to communicate with the group throughout the activity.

Thematic Center:

Any of the listed learning centers can be adapted to focus on the current classroom thematic unit by including vocabulary words, books, songs, or activities in the center that correspond with the unit.

Conclusion

Learning centers are a carefully constructed, cooperation-dependent, and activity-based learning environment that invite and encourage the students to use the immersion language by placing them in a position where they have the need and the motivation to communicate with their peers. Centers are therefore an effective tool to supply students with regular opportunities to hold extended conversations that will, in turn, further develop students' target language while simultaneously freeing the teacher to attend individually or in smaller groups to the distinct needs of each learner.

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