

A Model for an Independent-Learning/Workstation-Based Fifth-Day Class

Dee Anne Bess

Asia University

Introduction

Picture this taking place in your fifth-day class:

Students walk into their fifth-day classroom. First they suitably arrange the room — tape player and chairs at the back table for the listening station, chairs around a block of desks for the conversation station, individual desks and chairs loosely grouped for students who will work on reading, writing, or grammar, and instruction signs placed at each station.

After any necessary announcements by the teacher, students either sign up for the workstations that have limited numbers of participants (conversation, listening, and writing) or immediately begin working on another project (reading books, reading cards, or grammar). What follows is 40 minutes of intense, self-paced, self-directed, independent learning. It is a class that meets several goals: it is structured differently from the usual Freshman English class; it gives students the opportunity to work independently, thus meeting specific goals and objectives of the Freshman English curriculum (namely that students will develop their critical thinking and language-learning skills; evaluate their own language, experience, and ideas; and develop study skills for autonomous, life-long learning); it offers students a chance to work on weaknesses or focus on strengths, as they choose; and it provides a forum for student-teacher communication in a small group setting.

The idea for this type of fifth-day class stemmed from my undergraduate studies in elementary education, which, at the time, were emphasizing the workstation method. The workstation method also proved to be very successful with my Business level 5 and International Relations level 7 Freshman English university students during the first semester of the 1999/2000 school year, judging from the progress of each class and from the amount and

quality of work the students were able to finish. The topic of this paper is how I planned and implemented the workstation approach in my fifth-day class.

The Focus: Topics or Skills?

The first consideration was whether to focus on specific language skills, on a particular topic or topics, or on some combination. I settled on a combination. My fifth-day class encompassed several general skills: extensive reading, reading comprehension, writing, conversation, grammar, and listening. The listening projects, however, were topic-based, paralleling the topics in *High Impact*, the textbook used during the other four days of class. Those topics included "likes and dislikes," "health," "feelings," "phone messages," "weather," "giving directions," "plans and invitations," and "describing and introducing people." Additionally, the grammar worksheets contained extensions of grammar points from that same textbook (for example, simple present verbs, present continuous verbs, imperatives, models, possessive pronouns, and sentences with conjunctions).

The Materials

The materials necessary for each of the workstations in my multi-skills fifth-day class are summarized in the table below.

Type of Station	Materials
Listening	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- tape player- cassette tapes- listening worksheets- answer keys- earphone adapters and earphones
Extensive Reading	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- graded Longman, Heineman, and Cambridge readers, with headwords of 1200-1600- book report forms- envelope for check-out card and deposit
Reading Comprehension	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- SRA reading cards, lime and aqua level- SRA keys
Writing	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- poster of a model letter
Grammar	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- grammar worksheets- answer keys
Conversation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- "The Ungame" conversation game board- dice and markers

Of these, the listening and grammar materials had to be custom-made by gleaming various exercises from several different textbooks, in order to fit the topics and grammar points of the textbook used during the other four days of class. The textbooks used as resources included *“Person to Person”* (books 1 and 2), *“Listen for it,” “Great Ideas,” “Basic English Grammar,”* and *“Fundamentals of English Grammar.”* The writing poster was simply a hand-written page, in correct letter format, consisting of the following words: *“(Date), Dear Dee Anne, Hi! I’d like to tell you about myself. In Freshman English class, I feel/think/am....Sincerely, (Name).”* I told students that they could write about any topic as long as they used correct letter format.

In addition to the learning materials listed in the table, there were two other items necessary for the smooth operation of the workstation-based class.

The first item was a Steps Page. The goal was for students to proceed independently and at their own pace, yet, at the same time, it was necessary that the students know my expectations for each project. For example, for the extensive reading project, in addition to completing the book report form, I also wanted students to answer the comprehension questions at the back of the book. In the case of the listening projects, I wanted students to only listen to each exercise first and then go back to listen and respond. However, since each project required a different set of instructions and each student needed the instructions at varying times, I created the Steps Page, listing the steps for each type of project, to guide students through to the completion of each project. Each student had a copy of the Steps Page, and a Steps Page was available at each workstation.

The other necessity was the Class Record Sheet. On this sheet, which specified the requirements (further explained in the next section) and listed the date of each class session, students recorded which project they worked on each day, the date on which they finished each project, and their score for each. The Class Record Sheet was invaluable for overseeing each student’s progress and for determining grades at the end of the semester.

The Logistics

In this workstation fifth-day class, each student was pursuing an individual course throughout the semester and, on any given day, six different activities were going on simultaneously. Therefore, several logistical guidelines proved very useful in managing the class.

At the beginning of each class, I first made necessary announcements, students then consulted their Class Record Sheets to determine whether they should continue a project from the class before or sign up for a new project, and finally students moved to the appropriate stations and began to work.

In addition, at the beginning of the semester, even though the students had the Steps Page to provide directions, I made myself available for consultation by not including the conversation group during the first few class sessions.

Also, although the focus and purpose of this class was independent learning, I was concerned that students would confine themselves to activities with which they were already familiar, thus limiting the possibilities of new ways of learning. Accordingly, I required that each student try each project at least once and listed these requirements on the Class Record Sheet.

Some constraints on group sizes were likewise beneficial. Because I answered individually each letter the students wrote to me, I limited the writing group to five or six members during each class in order to keep my load of written work manageable. For effective communication and plentiful opportunities for interaction, no more than four students participated with me in the conversation group each time. Finally, due to the limited number of earphones available, the size of the listening group was also restricted.

The Pitfalls

As with any class activity done for the first time, certain problems pointed to refinements that I will certainly implement when I do an independent-learning/workstation-based class again. These are the improvements I will make:

1. On the first day, devote the entire class period to introducing the system and working through an example of the Class Record Sheet.
2. Set up a rotating system for readers and limit the number of weeks they can be checked out.
3. Avoid preparing too much material. For my students, five minutes of listening, one page of grammar, and one page of writing were sufficient.
4. More clearly separate each project's physical work-area.
5. Provide an avenue through which students can share with each other what they have been learning.

Other Possibilities

Although my class focused on various language skills (reading, writing, grammar, listening, and conversation) with a touch of topic-based study in the listening projects, other potentials exist for the independent-learning/workstation-based class.

A skills-focused class could as well concentrate on a single skill. A class focused on reading, for example, could include stations where students work with readers, newspaper articles, magazine articles, reading cards such as SRA, supplementary passages related to class topics as well as stations where students discuss readings and write in response to readings. A listening-focused class could include stations where students may re-listen to cassettes already used in class, watch video clips, work with music lyrics, or work through a supplementary listening textbook.

It would also be possible to structure a class so that it focused on a specific topic such as intercultural communication, either through one skill such as various genres of listening or through a variety of skills.

Results & Conclusion

To calculate the students' grades at the end of the semester, I averaged their scores on each project. These scores were based on my grading of the students' book reports, written letters, and participation in the conversation group and on their self-grading of all their objective work: the listening, grammar, and reading comprehension projects. I figured in an additional grade based on how many projects they had completed.

Evaluated on a day-by-day basis, this independent-learning/workstation-based class achieved its goals. The relaxed but busy atmosphere of the classroom on fifth days showed that the students enjoyed the break from the teacher-set pace of regular classes. In addition, the fact that students consulted me infrequently as a resource rather than constantly depending on me as the source of knowledge indicated that the students were self-directed in improving their language skills, progressing at their own rate, and learning independently from the teacher. With very rare exceptions, they were also consistently on-task, an indication of their developing study habits. Furthermore, an unforeseen result, cooperative learning, also occurred as students regularly helped each other in many phases of the projects.

From an overall, semester-long perspective this class was also a success. Although it required much effort and work in terms of materials preparation and logistics, the students' satisfaction with the completion of each project, evident in their attitudes displayed each time they wrote a date in a box on the Class Record Sheet, was rewarding to both the teacher and students. The students studied hard to complete their projects, with several finishing more projects than required – including one who even completed two readers. The students' self-

confidence in English also seemed to increase as a result of accomplishing tasks they had never before done on their own.

References

- Azar, B. S. (1984). *Basic English Grammar*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall Regents.
- Azar, B. S. (1985). *Fundamentals of English Grammar*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall Regents.
- Ellis, R., Helgesen, M., Browne, C., Gorsuch, G., and Schwab, J. (1996). *High Impact*. Hong Kong: Longman Asia ELT.
- Jones, L., and Kimbrough, V. (1987). *Great Ideas*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Richards, J. C., and Bycina, D. (1987). *Person to Person*. (Books 1 & 2). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Richards, J. C., Gordon, D., and Harper, A. (1995). *Listen For It*. New edition. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Zakich, R. (1997). *The Ungame*. Las Vegas: Talicor.

Appendix A

Class Record Sheet

Name:

	Required	---- Your Choice ----						
Reading cards	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Reading books	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Writing	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Listening	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Grammar sets	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Discussion	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

In the box, please write the date when you finish each project.

Day	4/21	4/28	5/12	5/19	5/26	6/2	6/9	6/16
Project								
Score/NF								

Appendix B

Steps for Grammar Sets

1. Read and understand the grammar boxes. It's OK to ask another student if you need to. Speak English quietly.
2. Do the exercises by yourself.
3. When you finish, if another student is finished, too, compare your answers.
4. Get the answer page from my table. Then check your answers.
5. Write your score on your "Class Record Sheet."
6. If you don't finish, give your paper to me. You can finish next week.

Steps for Listening Group

1. Clean the earphones first!!
2. Make sure all the group members have their earphones ready before you begin!
3. Set the tape player counter to "000" before you start!
4. Play the first exercise. Don't stop the tape, and don't write answers. Just listen and look at your page.
5. Rewind the tape. Play the first exercise again and write the answers.
6. Check the counter number. Play the next exercise. Don't stop the tape, and don't write answers. Just listen and look at your page.
7. Rewind the tape to the correct counter number. Play the exercise again and write the answers.
8. Do Steps 5 and 6 again until you finish all the exercises.
9. If there is time, compare your answers with a partner's and listen to the tape again.
10. Get the answer page from my table and check your answers.
11. Write your score on your "Class Record Sheet."
12. If there is time, listen to the tape again. Try to hear the information for the questions that you got wrong.
13. After you finish listening, wrap up your earphone cord and tie it with the twist-tie.
14. If you don't finish, give your paper to me. You can finish next week.

Steps for Reading Cards

1. Choose an SRA card that looks interesting.
2. Read the story. Do NOT use a dictionary yet!
3. Read the story again. If you need a dictionary, you may use it, but only 6 times!
4. On a separate paper, write the title of the story.
5. On the inside of the card, there are questions. Write the answers to the questions on your separate paper. Do NOT write on the card. Next to each answer, write the line number(s) where you found the answer. Don't do the questions from the back of the card.
6. Get the answer card from my desk and check your answers.
7. Write your score on your "Class Record Sheet."
8. Put the cards back in the correct order.
9. If you don't finish, give your paper to me. You can finish next week.

Steps for Reading Books

1. Choose a book that looks interesting.
2. Write your name on the book's card.
3. Clip 1000 Yen to the card and put it on my table.
4. Check the "Book Report" form to see what you will need to do.
5. Begin to read the book. Take your book home to finish reading it.
6. After each chapter, write the answers to the questions in the back of the book.
7. When you finish the book, finish the "Book Report" form.
8. Return the book to me in good condition and get your money back.
9. Give the "Book Report" and the answers to your questions to me. I will tell you your score next week.

Steps for Writing

1. Get a piece of A4 paper.
2. Make a line on each side, 2 cm. from the edge. Write your letter between the lines; don't write in the margins!
3. On the top line, on the right side, write the date.

4. On the second line, on the left side, write "Dear Dee Anne,"
5. Skip a line, indent, and begin to write your letter.
6. Don't write on every line; you must double space by skipping lines.
7. Remember to indent the first line of each new topic.
8. Finish the letter with a closing such as "Your student, name " or "Sincerely, name "
or "Take care, name ".
9. Give your letter to me. I will tell you your score next week.