

Colored Word Cubes

The goal of the Colored Word Cubes¹ is to give students guided practice forming sentences. The content and grammar of these sentences are largely up to students to determine. This is not a “conversation” exercise—it is not intended to lead to free talk or extended exchanges. Rather, the goals are student-centered communication and accuracy practice.



We use the Colored Word Cubes with advanced rank students, through junior and senior high and up to adults. They work like this:

1. Teacher puts the cubes out onto the table.
 - See below on choosing which cubes to put out.
2. Students who are ready raise their hands. When called upon, one takes any cube from the table and places it in front of them.
3. On the cube there is a word, phrase, or grammatical instruction (e.g., “mother” “almost always” “if (future)” etc.). The student is to make a true, interesting² sentence using that word, etc. Examples:
 - “mother”: My mother plays tennis once a week.
 - “(almost) always”: My family almost always eats dinner together.
 - “if (future)”: If I don’t study, I won’t pass my next math test.
4. Once a student has made a sentence, the teacher will respond to its content before any error correction. Make a comment, express surprise, agree or disagree with it, etc.
5. When a student makes a sentence, one of three things might happen:
 - The student might make an error — the teacher corrects it and the student should retry on her next turn.
 - The student doesn’t make any errors... but the sentence is too easy for that student.
 - The student makes an interesting and challenging sentence.
6. If we judge that the sentence the student made was too easy, we elicit

¹ The “Colored” in the name is to distinguish these from a separate set of word cubes that do not have colored sides and are used for a different sentence-building game.

² By “interesting,” we mean including the sort of detail a listener is likely to want to know, without being asked. Also, the sentence should challenge the speaker. “My mother is tall” or “My mother’s name is Mayu” would not be acceptable for students beyond a very basic level.

more. One suggested practice (to be followed or not at the teacher's discretion) is to simply prod the student for more, saying "And...?" or "Okay, tell me more..." and having them continue until they make some sort of error. Our reasoning is that, if they only say things they are already confident saying, they won't learn anything new. By encouraging them to go and go until we find something to fix, we've tested the limits of their learning and found an area we can help them work on. We might also sometimes give some guidance as to what else they might add to the sentence ("And what breed is your dog? How long have you had it?" etc.). It helps if we challenge students at the outset: "It's up to you to make this game interesting, so add lots of detail!"

7. A student whose error has been corrected, or who has been instructed to try a more challenging sentence, will try again only after some other students have tried their own sentences. We don't want them simply parroting the teacher's correction.
8. Also, there are no abandoned efforts. Once a student has begun with a particular sentence, they will keep trying again and again until they get it right (with adjustments in strictness made by the teacher to deal with individual student psychology).
9. Once a student has completed a sentence successfully, they return the block to the center of the table and earn points (see below).
10. When the block is put back in the center, it is turned over to a face of a different color. The order is pink - yellow - blue - green - brown - purple. (These sometimes progress in difficulty level.) The same student, or a different one, can choose to try the same cube again on a subsequent turn.
11. Points are earned as follows:

Cube face	Chip color	Point value
pink	red	1
yellow	yellow	1
blue	blue	1.5
green	green	1.5
brown	white	2
purple	white	2

The advantage of this method of chip-awarding is that you can see, at a glance, how many of which cube face a student has attempted.

12. The game ends when the teacher decides that time is up. Students with the most points are the winners—praise them to the skies—and then praise *all* for their meritorious efforts. We may note which cubes were used and to what levels students proceeded, and start from that point again next week. The Word Cubes exercise (and virtually any other “game”) should normally be repeated three weeks in succession. Thereafter, play it as often as seems fruitful.
- Cube difficulty level: Some of the cubes have a colored divot in one corner of the pink face. Cubes that are all pink (no color in the corner) are easiest. Harder cubes are color-coded (in the corner) according to increasing difficulty level, from yellow to blue to green—with green being hardest.

Follow-Through exercise:

After students have succeeded with two to five cube-faces each, the teacher calls time and acknowledges points gained. Students will then be asked to recall their successful efforts, but only in Japanese translation, and write the Japanese in their notebooks, leaving every other line blank. (The first week, they’ll do this with just one of the sentences they made in the game, building up over the weeks to recalling all of them.)

Before each student writes, a teacher with adequate Japanese comprehension will carefully monitor to be sure those translations match the English. (Teachers whose Japanese skills fall short of this can enlist school staff help, or have students cross-check each other’s work.) Typically, some part will have been momentarily forgotten, or a verb tense or something may not quite square with the previous English. After one each is sorted out and neatly written in kanji and kana, the teacher will make repeated sweeps (or respond to hand-raising) until all have been correctly recalled and written in translation.

Homework will be to re-create, in writing, one’s English sentences. (The first time you do this, each student should, if the clock allows, write their first English reverse translation in class—very neatly, of course. The teacher must okay the accuracy and beauty of each before assigning the rest as homework.)

Obviously, the homework will be checked the following week. One method for doing so is for each student to read his or her English sentences aloud, one per turn. (Any sloppy writing featuring misshapen letters will have to be erased and rewritten on the spot before being deemed acceptable as a completed assignment.)