

Snakes & Ladders

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INSIDE:

**Small Worlds:
Getting inside the
child's world**

See page 5.

**Grammar
Shortcuts for Kids**

See page 8.

**Kindy Hell?
How not to teach a
kindy class**

See page 11.

Plus...

*Games, Business Matters,
Very Young Learners,
and Events and Festivals*

Kazillions of Flashcard Games



by David Harrington

Flashcards are probably the most accessible language teaching tool available to teachers. There are commercially made packs of flashcards. There are flashcards of various shapes and sizes made to go along with every children's English course series. There are downloadable flashcards on the Internet. Flashcards can be made using clipart or even hand-drawn by those with artistic talent. There are noun flashcards, verb flashcards, adjective flashcards, animal flashcards, color flashcards,

shape flashcards...

All teachers have flashcards, but what to do with them? The word "flashcard" suggests the teacher quickly holding up a card and the students saying the name of the item on the card or some similar drill. Well, that is one possibility but there is so so so much more that can be done with flashcards.

There are kazillions of games that can be played with flashcards. There are matching games, seeking games, recognition games, memory games,

racing games and more. I have tried here to categorize some of the standard flashcard game styles and to give an interesting example of a game to play for each.

Matching games

Matching games are the concentration style games that have the players try to match two or more of the same item. The items being matched can be objects (nouns) or actions (verbs) or descriptions (adjectives or adverbs) or places (prepositions) or even combinations of these (The red ball is rolling slowly under the table.).

The good thing about matching games is that almost everyone knows how to play them. The usual problem with matching games is that often language is not really necessary to play the game. One student turns over a card, grunts “ugh”, then another student turns over a card and grunts “umf” since it doesn't match. They turn the cards back over and play continues. The trick is to add language learning value to the game.

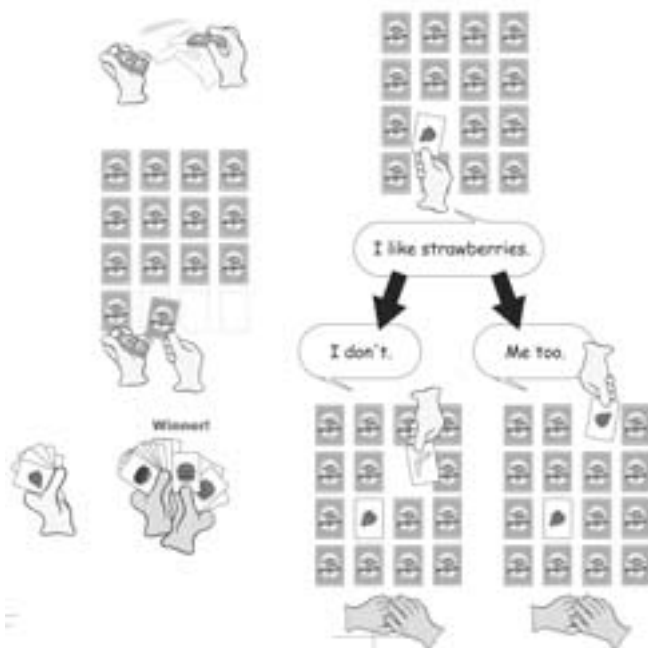
Matching games are great for practicing Statement-Response interactions. An example of Statement-Response would be:

- A: I like ice cream
- B: Me too/I don't

Someone once said that almost all conversations consist of one statement followed by a long series of “me too”s. Statement-Response tends to get short shrift in the classroom where Question-Answer seems to dominate (What's your name? Where are you from? Where were you on the night of the crime? Sometimes it begins to feel like a police interrogation.).

“Me too' concentration”

As in other concentration games, pairs of cards are



shuffled and randomly placed face down. The first student turns over a card and says, “I like ____.”.The second student turns over a card and if the card matches the first student's card says, “Me too” or “I don't” if the cards do not match. Of course, any other Statement-Response patterns work for this as well, for example: “I have a/an ____”; “I've found a/an ____”; “I see a/an ____”; “I once had a friend who said his favorite (toy, food, animal etc.) was a/an ____” or whatever language target you wish to practice.

Seeking games

“Go Fish” is an example of a seeking game. The object of a seeking game is to collect a complete set. It can be similar to a matching game in that the students look for the same item as they hold, for example, I have a banana card in my hand and I ask, “Do you have any bananas?” or it can be looking for complimentary items – I hold a picture of a fork and ask, “Do you have a spoon?” or opposites – I have the picture of the tall boy so must ask, “Do you have the picture of the short boy?”

Classic “Go Fish”

Students try to find cards that match the cards in their hands by walking around the room asking other students if they have a card. If the student has the card requested he or she hands the card to the person asking the question.

The dialogue for a seeking game can be just a short question and answer:

- A: Do you have a pencil?
- B: Yes, I do.

and B gives the picture of a pencil to A.

But the real language learning value in seeking games is when they are used to build longer dialogues:

- A: Excuse me.
- B: Yes?
- A: Do you have a pencil?
- B: Yes, I do.
- A: Could I borrow it for a minute?
- B: Sure. Here you are.
- A: Thank you. I'll give it right back.

and B gives the picture of a pencil to A.

You can see how this sort of a dialogue can be built up piece by piece until it becomes a whole conversation with several elements.

Adding the absurd

Sometimes adding an absurd element makes the pattern really stick in the students' memories. Laughter drives the point home. This also allows for the students to practice clarifying questions.

A: Excuse me. Could I borrow your cow?

B: Did you say my cow?

A: Yes, your cow.

B: Well, I suppose you can borrow my cow. Here you are.

A: Thank you. I'll bring it back when I'm done.

Here is an idea for "Go Fish" that adds a little twist to the game:

"Go Fishing with Liars"

As with the classic version of "Go Fish", the object of this game is to collect the most pairs of cards. Pairs of flashcards are shuffled and dealt out to the students. Play begins just as in classic "Go Fish". Students move around the room asking other students if they have a card that goes with one of the cards in their hand.

A: Do you have a pencil?

Now two things can happen. If Student B has the pencil card then he or she can answer "Yes, I do" and pass the card to Student A, who then has a set. But Student B has an option. Whether Student B has the pencil card or not, he or she can say, "No, I'm sorry I don't have a pencil."

Student A now has the option of challenging Student B, politely of course.

A: Really, are you sure you don't have a pencil?

Once challenged, Student B must tell the truth. If Student B has the requested card, he or she has been caught and must pass that card and any two other cards to Student A. If Student B does not have the requested card and is challenged, Student A must give two cards to Student B for not believing him or her.

Recognition games

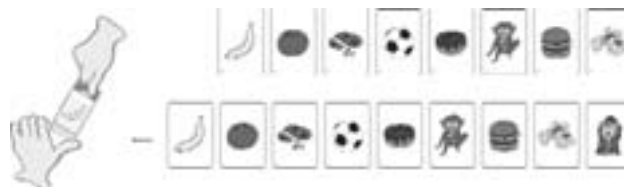
"Bingo" and "Slap"/"Slam" ("Karuta Tori" in Japanese) are recognition games. The object of a recognition game is for the student to recognize the picture or written word that the teacher says. That is also the problem. Often recognition games are far too teacher-centered. The teacher does a lot of talking to silent students. That has a very low language learning value.

There are ways to add language learning value to recognition games. For example, in "Bingo" many teachers have the students take turns being the caller. The less the teacher talks and the more the students talk the better.

Here is a game that, once the teacher starts the reaction, leaves all of the speaking to the students:

"Chain reaction slap"

This game takes a little preparation. First you need to acquire some transparent card protector sleeves. This is easy if you use playing-card-size flashcards as protective



sleeves for these are sold in toy stores all over. They were made originally to protect baseball cards and Pocket Monster cards. They sell for about 200 yen for 100 sleeves. To set up the game, line up two identical sets of cards as shown above. Move the bottom line of cards one card to the left and place the wizard card in the empty space on the bottom row. The extra card on the bottom row becomes the starting card and the teacher keeps that card. The top row of cards will become the face up cards and the bottom row of cards will become the face down cards. Now put each set of face up and face down cards into a transparent protector sleeve. Put a small mark with a waterproof pen on the face up side of each sleeve so that you will know which side is to be placed face up when you play the game. Now you are ready to play.

First pre-teach the items on the cards and give the students some context for the words. I often play this game with noun cards and the phrase "I want a/an ____."

Spread the cards on the floor or on a table with the face up mark visible. The teacher starts the chain reaction with the item on the starting card from the preparation. As in "Slap", the students try to recognize the item and slap the card first. The fastest student then picks up the card and calls for the item on the back. This chain reaction continues until the last card, the wizard card. It always ends at the wizard because it is magic.



Memory games

In a memory game, students are shown pictures for a few seconds then the pictures are taken away and the students try to recall what they have seen. The theory is that keeping the words in short-term memory for a while helps them move to long-term memory. Memory games are great for learning nouns and verbs with a lot of repetition. They are also a form of torture if overdone.

“What’s missing?”

This is the simplest form of memory game and is a good game for beginners that have only learned a very few nouns.

Put together a set of 3 or more cards. Show all of the cards to the students. Turn the cards over and remove one. Turn them back face up and ask, “What’s missing?”

“Never-ending story” and “what’s in my suitcase?”

These are the real memory torture games. “Never-ending story” is for practicing verbs in all their forms. One verb card is placed face up on the table. Let us say for this example that the card shows the action “ride a bicycle”. The students get to look at the card for a few seconds and then it is turned face down. If we are going to practice the past tense then perhaps the first student may start by saying, “Yesterday, I rode my bicycle.” The first card is turned face up again and a second card is placed face up next to it, for example, “watch television”. Again the students get to look at the cards for a few seconds, then both cards are turned face down. The second student must now say, “Yesterday, I rode my bicycle and I watched television.” This continues adding cards and moving around the circle with each student making longer and longer statements until there is just too much to remember and the cards can no longer be recalled.

“What’s in my suitcase?” is the same game except played with nouns. It is a good opportunity to practice numbers, partitives (words like “a pair” “a loaf” etc.), and the singular and plural forms with “There is” and “There are” phrases: “In my suitcase there is an Aloha shirt. There

is a pair of socks. There are two tiny aliens from outer space” (Don’t forget the absurd elements!).

Racing games

In all racing games the object is to be the first to complete a task. That task may be to pass the cards in a relay, to sort the cards into categories or to assemble cards in a set. Passing games are one type of racing game. A passing game is a good way to get a lot of repetition without the feeling that there was a lot of repetition.

A simple passing game

Have the students form two straight lines. Start a noun flashcard from the end of each line. In the following dialogue, A is the student at the front of the line and B is the next child in line:

A: Would you like a _____?

B: Yes, please.

A: Here you are (*as the card is passed*).

B: Thank you.

A: You’re welcome.

The dialogue continues up the line as each card is passed. The first line to pass all of the cards is the winner. Ten cards passed means ten repetitions of the target phrase, “Would you like a _____?”

There are these and so many more games that can be played with flashcards. You may have noticed that all of the flashcard games mentioned above were based on common, standard non-language learning games. It is simply a matter of finding card games in books or at toy stores or even recalling games that you enjoyed as a child and modifying them to add language learning value. Professor John Fanselow of Columbia University says in his book *Breaking Rules: Generating and Exploring Alternatives in Language Teaching* (1987) to look at what you are doing and just do it differently. There are many interesting ways to add something new to the usual games you are already playing and many interesting ways to add language learning value to the games you already know.

Of all of the teaching tools at our disposal, flashcards offer the greatest potential and flexibility. A few cards, a few simple ideas, a little imagination, and the language just pours forth.

References

Fanselow, J. F. (1987). *Breaking Rules: Generating and Exploring Alternatives in Language Teaching*. New York: Longman.

David Harrington has been teaching in Japan for over 20 years. He is the co-author of several ELT textbooks including “What’s in the Cards” published by ABAX ELT and most recently “Listen Kids” published by Language Solutions.

Choosing Flashcards

Be careful when you select flashcards. Not all flashcards are good. Make sure that the cards actually show what you want them to show. I used to have a set of flashcards purportedly showing shapes, for example, a triangle. Now a card with a simple triangle is not very exciting so the company that makes the cards in all their wisdom had a cute little grey bunny rabbit standing next to a tree holding a large purple triangle. After practicing the names of the shapes with the students we tried a little flashcard drill. Teacher holds up the cute little grey bunny rabbit standing next to a tree holding a large purple triangle flashcard and the students enthusiastically shout out... you guessed it...

“Rabbit”

“Bunny”

“Tree”

“Purple”

“Grey”

“Cute”

“Cute grey rabbit”

Everything except “triangle”.