

## Karuta: Too Competitive for ESL/EFL?

Almost any foreigner who's been in Japan for more than a few days is familiar with the card slapping game called *karuta*. It's easy and has the advantage of being known to the students since there are several Japanese variations of it. One only needs to spread a few cards on the floor, desk or table and you're ready. As this game needs very little equipment and can be adapted to work with almost any kind of cards; picture, word or otherwise, it is a very attractive game. On the negative side it seems to reward the knowledgeable and/or aggressive students, and can become very competitive.

**John Grant** of Kagoshima shares his journey of fine-tuning the game of *karuta* to gear it for his classes:

One of the earliest variations I saw was played at a language school over 20 years ago. The cards were seemingly chosen at random—verbs, nouns and adjectives were all mixed together. The teacher called out a card and the students slapped at them until, often by chance, someone hit the correct one and was praised by the teacher. Scoring was done by counting the number of cards each student had, and the winner (of course) was the one with the most cards.

This led to my first refinement, the “one hit” rule. The students are only allowed to hit one card and, if that guess is incorrect, they cannot continue to participate in that turn. This rule turned out to have two major disadvantages. The first was that only the students who knew the card would even try, and the second was that those students tended to slap the cards a little emphatically. Some would literally punch the cards. Or the hand which had beaten them to it. This led to tears and occasional bloodshed.

Thus the “soft hit” rule was made. Over-enthusiastic students aren't allowed to keep the cards they garner through violence. In cases of extreme over-enthusiasm (envision a violent piling on of hands) the guilty party (or parties) has to return a previously won card or stay out of the next round.

The problem of knowledge is balanced by the “slow hit” rule, which is enforced only when there is an uneven mix of grades or experience in the group. The students who are older, more aggressive or more knowledgeable are told, by name, that they can't slap the card immediately. They have to extend their hand slowly allowing others a chance.

In beginner groups the lack of vocabulary led to prolonged inactivi-

ty. This led to the “count” rule. In this situation I count down and the card is revealed if no one guesses it within that time. Then I have the choice of either removing the card or replacing it. In beginner groups, returning the card seems to work better.

The “no eye contact” rule was invented for students who watch my eyes focusing on a certain card or area. The “hands down” (usually on the knees) rule is for those endgame situations when few cards remain (otherwise some students' hands would be hovering over those last cards). At the very end of the game, when only one to three cards remain, the “nonsense” rule kicks in. Here I call out a word that is obviously not there, like “pig” when there are only fruit cards.

Variations: 1) Call similar sounding words—“pen” instead of “pan” or “kick” instead of “cake”. 2) Stretch the first sound of the word a bit and change the end. Instead of saying “rain” say “rrr...un”. 3) Use fly swatters and rubber squeaky hammers, found at 100 yen shops everywhere—put the students in teams or pairs and let them hold the tools together. The resulting tug o' war can be a lot of fun and usually softens the game as well. 4) Weight the scoring by placing different values on cards so that commonly known words, like “banana”, are rated at one point while more difficult words, like “kiwi”, are two points and certain unknown words, like “pear”, are three.

In an effort to make the activity more student-oriented I have added a few elements to this game: 1) Let the successful student be the one who calls the next card. This serves to curb the more knowledgeable, faster students. While they are calling out cards they are not collecting them; 2) Use the round-robin approach in which students take turns calling out the cards. Slower or beginner students may have trouble once the known cards have been called, but it is a good reinforcement activity.



Antonym 'karuta'.

A few ideas can help reduce, if not eliminate, the overt competitiveness of *karuta*. With young and beginner students I often place the cards on a flat surface and let the students collect what they know and usually everybody has about the same number (but we're not going to count them anyway, are we?). Also, I call out or have the cards called out turn by turn. Each student has the chance to collect a card without the others' interference. I also weight the game by calling out easy cards for some students and difficult ones for others. I place the cards in such a way as to give an advantage. Sometimes, after removing an unknown card, I announce it and then put it back in play.

A simple game can become complex with a few extra rules (or many rules, as in this case). The game doesn't necessarily become better, however. For that to happen you and your students must make it work and it must work for you.

At left is a picture of one of John's classes. The version of *karuta* that they are playing goes like this: He spreads antonym cards on the table and divides the six students into three teams. When he calls a team's name, it's that team's turn and then he calls two cards ("Hot/cold", for example). The rules are that only one team at a time can go for the cards and they must find them within a count of five. Each student has to get one of each pair—one student cannot get both cards. Any mistaken pair is a forfeited turn.

**Fumie Noguchi** says:

I usually use *karuta* after I have introduced new letters, sounds, expressions, or words. Some examples are: I ask students to find the lower case letter which matches the capital letter I show (very early stage); to find alphabet or word cards which correspond to a certain sound; to find the corresponding expression card to the expression I say ("Thank you"—"You are welcome" etc.); to guess the correct card with three hints; to find the correct cards while listening to music or a story, etc.

**Anne Takata** of Maple Eikaiwa

writes that her students love this version:

For my children's classes I often spread the flash cards on the table and take away all the chairs. I divide the children into two teams and they write their team name on the board. The children then walk (or skip, or run) around the table to some upbeat music. When the music stops I call out a sound or word, or write a letter on the board (whatever the target skill is) and the kids grab for the appropriate card. The student who successfully grabs the card, places it under his or her team name on the whiteboard ledge and then calls the next card. (Sometimes I pull kids out of the circle to make sure everyone gets a chance to call the cards.)

When only a few cards are left, we turn off the music and everyone stands around the table with their

hands on their heads. I purposely call cards that are not on the table so they have to listen carefully. If they touch a card that wasn't called, they return one of their cards to the table. The team with the most cards at the end of the game wins.

Most teachers who wrote in about *karuta* said that because of its competitive nature, many adjustments need to be made, such as helping weaker students build their confidence, controlling the way in which the students choose the cards, and giving each student a chance to participate individually. Chris Hunt invites you to visit his website for an alternate game he calls "Touch" (photos below) at <http://www.wisehat.com/resources/games/touch.htm>.



*Fingers up! Fingers down! in Chris Hunt's class.*