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# Picture Cards as Language Teaching Tools

Peter Duppenhaller, ECC Foreign Language Institute

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Using picture cards is an excellent way to develop a relaxed, productive classroom atmosphere, and to encourage students to work together in groups to accomplish a task. In addition, picture cards can be used to practice vocabulary items (especially nouns), describe things, practice transactional language, and to develop listening comprehension skills.

Best of all, picture cards can be adapted and extended to fit a variety of EFL/ESL teaching situations. Young children can learn and practice simple vocabulary and sentence structure. Adults, in general English courses, find using picture cards enjoyable because the cards add visual interest and the activities using them can almost always be extended in challenging ways. Students in ESP classes (e.g., Business English) find using picture cards an interesting and relatively painless way to learn the names of such things as office equipment. One further application of picture cards is testing pre-literate students for placement or admission purposes.

## Sources of Picture Cards

Ready-made sets of picture cards are often available in toy stores or from EFL/ESL publishers dealing in children's materials. Alternatively, teachers can make their own cards, or make this a class project by inviting students to contribute drawings or pictures of items which they would like to know the names of. Additional sets can then be copied as

needed. Young learners enjoy coloring their own cards, which gives them a chance to learn the names of the colors and practice some transactional English in the process. Having the students contribute items ensures higher student interest and a continuing source of new cards as newer items replace older ones.

This article describes three picture card activities which I have used and found to be successful. Older learners enjoy all three activities—played one after the other during the same class. These activities are also very adaptable—the only real limitation being the imagination of teachers and students.

## Take the Card

**Level:** Beginning

**Materials:** A set of picture cards, one item to a card. If the class is large, divide it into groups of about ten with each group receiving an identical set of cards.

**Procedure:** Present the vocabulary items on the cards, one by one, to the students. Once the class is familiar with the words, spread the cards picture side up on a table.

With a small class, have everyone sit around a table (or desks pushed together) so they can see all the cards. The teacher (later one of the students) calls out the word that matches one of the picture cards. Students recognizing the picture try to be

the first to take that card. After all the cards have been taken, the student with the most cards is declared the winner and becomes the next caller.

I usually do not penalize students for taking the wrong card. They simply have to return the card to the table and play continues. If you wanted, you could penalize a student by making him/her lose one turn, but with large classes I have found that this is more trouble than it is worth.

With large classes, divide the students into groups of about ten each. Each group gets its own set of cards and gathers around a different table. The teacher acts as caller and then holds up the card so that each group can verify that the correct card has been taken. The student in each group with the most cards is that group's winner and becomes that group's next caller. Continue play for three or four rounds. If you do not have enough cards, you can have one group perform while the other students (non-performers) gather round and act as onlookers.

### Descriptions

**Level:** Elementary and intermediate

**Materials:** Same as in "Take the Card"

**Procedure:** The procedure is the same as in "Take the Card," except that the caller gives a description of the pictured item or talks about it without saying the name of the actual item itself. For example, if the card were a picture of the moon, the caller could say, "I can see this at night. It's very bright." If the card were a picture of a red apple, the caller could say, "It is red and delicious."

As a listening activity this game is ideal for enabling students to realize that they do not have to understand every word in order to be able to "guess" what is being described. They are in fact able to guess the correct item even when they do not understand every word the caller says. In countries where traditional grammar-translation methods are emphasized in the school system, this activity gives students a rare chance to practice "guessing" strategies.

### Making a Story

**Level:** Intermediate and above

**Materials:** Same as in "Take the Card"

**Procedure:** Each group of students gets one set of cards equal to the number in the group plus one (i.e., five students would receive six cards). They must use all but one card to make a story together.

Intermediate level students should only be required to use the "word" that the picture illustrates. Advanced level students can be asked to use not only the word but any other information that they can glean from the picture (e.g., A picture of a blue bag with a shoulder strap would require only the word "bag" from intermediate level students but "bag", "blue", and "shoulder strap" from advanced level students).

Each member of the group must give one sentence of the group's story, each sentence containing one of the words on the cards. The stories are presented to the class and points awarded for "creativity." Continue play for three or four rounds. The group with the most points is the winner.

**About the Author**

*Peter Duppenthaler received his M. Ed. (TESOL) from Temple University. He has taught English in Japan since 1974, and is currently chief of both the*

*Educational Research Division and the Educational Training Section at ECC Foreign Language Institute, Osaka, Japan. Current interests include: teacher training, curriculum design and development, and the relationship between age and learning.*