

Flashcards in the classroom have a long history. I am not particularly old and decrepit, but it seems a long time ago now when I vividly remember their use both for word recognition and as a picture stimulus in my primary school. With new technological developments in the ever-changing world of ELT, the use of this tool may seem a little dated,

Fun with flashcards

John Wade brings new life to an old technique.

but flashcards can still provide the basis for simple, quick to prepare and stimulating language learning activities.

An image can provide an extremely powerful means of communication. We only have to look closely at how advertising uses images to persuade us to buy products we do not need, or which may even be dangerous for our health, in order to understand how effectively a picture transmits a message and causes it to stick in the mind. This can be exploited in the classroom by choosing interesting or unusual pictures, which remain in the minds of students and are strongly associated with the linguistic or lexical content of the lesson.

First let's examine how it is possible to produce and catalogue different kinds of flashcards in order to make them appealing to your learners and to render them readily accessible in the event of last minute lesson emergencies. Then I will provide some examples of real classroom activities which I have used myself.

A flashcard archive

Pictures of all kinds can be found in any number of magazines, and it is possibly this bewildering choice which poses the first problem in setting up an easy-to-use flashcard archive. There are two distinct types of images which the teacher can exploit in different ways. The first is a somewhat generic typology, which consists of interesting or unusual images. These may offer more applications with higher-level

classes in conversation and discussion work, as will be illustrated below. The second type, on the other hand, comes closer to what is considered to be the classic flashcard, suitable for lower-level classes and largely based on lexical categories.

Type 1: Loaded images

The term *loaded* is intended to express the concept of an image which may arouse a particular emotional reaction. This first type comprises images of a general, but thought-provoking nature, which I have classified as follows.

Portraits

These are simply pictures of individual people. The portrait may show the full body or just the face. Black and white photographs are particularly effective in revealing the inner personality of the subject. It is probably preferable to avoid getting them from fashion magazines as models often have a distinctly neutral appearance. The colour supplements of newspapers are often a good source of interesting faces. In addition, a separate section could be added to this category which deals with emotions: with images of people laughing, crying, being angry or whatever. Students can formulate ideas about who the people are, their background, life story or, for more imaginative classes, secrets from their glorious (or sordid!) past.

People

This category is concerned with images of two or three people together. If there are any more, it becomes difficult to focus attention clearly on the people themselves. Such images give students the opportunity to look at people in a real context, giving an insight into who they really are, how they are reacting to their surroundings or the particular situation in which they find themselves. It is possible to ask students to hypothesise about what the people are doing together, what is going to happen next or what has just happened.

Discussion

Images for this category include scenes, setting and situations which are typical of newspaper-type photographs. Such

pictures can serve as the basis for discussion or an exchange of opinions regarding content or interpretation. With a large collection of such photographs, it is very easy to find subject matter to tie in with ongoing coursework. Suitable photographs can again be found in the colour supplements of most quality newspapers and also in weekly news magazines.

Paintings

These provide a rich source of images for discussion and interpretation, and it is useful to have in your archive a variety of styles, ranging from classical to abstract. The classics, Rembrandt for example, often tell whole stories and are full of fascinating detail; the Impressionists are always popular with students because they are generally so well known, from the delicate works of Monet to the bold strokes and colours of van Gogh; more abstract or unusual works generally form a good basis for discussion: Picasso, Dalí, Kandinsky and many others provide ample sources. It is possible to find 'files' of these kinds of images in many bookshops.

Type 2: Neutral images

This second type traditionally contains specific categories such as famous people, jobs, clothes, house and home, town, landscapes, animals, transport, food and drink, and activities

(sports/free time). This list is by no means exhaustive, but I have found that it is sufficient for my needs, and these areas could also be further sub-categorised. Nevertheless, I feel that too many categories can become confusing and time-consuming, since the archive filing system needs to be accessible and user-friendly. A further important point to consider is the careful choice of images according to your specific teaching context. To take a very simple example, a 'typical' British postman or postwoman may be unrecognisable as such in different cultural contexts.

Making flashcards

It is relatively simple to produce flashcards, but it is important to ensure that they are durable and visually appealing. I personally feel that a few dog-eared photographs torn from a magazine and crudely stuck on cardboard from an old cereal packet reflect badly on the organisational capacities of the teacher and may cause more amusement among students than unbridled enthusiasm for what might have been perfectly valid teaching materials.

I tend to make all my flashcards a standard A4 size to make filing easier and I also mount them on coloured card, each category having its own colour, to make them easily distinguishable in the resources room during a hectic working week.

Many conventional adhesives cause poorer quality paper to crinkle up when it is attached to a card backing, and if you have a ventilated space available, professional spray-on adhesives are a good way of avoiding this problem.

It is expensive to cover hundreds of flashcards with heat-sealed plastic, so as a compromise I put all mine in transparent neoprene sleeves, which are available in multiple packs at comparatively little cost.

Each card should then be numbered and each category filed away in a separate open box file. Finally, a catalogue can be prepared with a list of the images you have available in your archive. This may be time-consuming, but it is easier to keep track of the material you have prepared, and at the end of the school year, damaged or missing items can be replaced.



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Integrated activities

Flashcards are often associated with activities for beginners, but I would like to encourage their wider exploitation in the classroom.

For this reason, the activities I suggest would be also be suitable for intermediate or upper-intermediate level classes. The use of the flashcards themselves is integrated with further materials or objectives in order to place them in a specific lesson context and show how they can be used constructively.

1 Sound and vision

Language: describing objects and scenes; giving opinions

Vocabulary: adjectives for emotions and feelings; types of music

Materials: wordsearch worksheet; cassette tape with short extracts of a variety of types of music, which can easily be prepared by the teacher; flashcards of paintings representing a variety of styles

- Attach a series of five or six paintings to the board in front of the class. Divide students into small groups and ask them to discuss what they see in each painting, what they think of it and what kinds of emotions or memories each one arouses.

MUSIC!

There are many kinds of music. Try to find twenty of them.

W H G E U I S R C T O W O C N Y R O C K
P O P T I E F E H Y O P Y L H Y E F V M
M Y S W Q P N L A P D S R A I F D B C X
C F Y I G T V Z M Y F B P S S W Y T K F
O B I R E Y F G B S X A Q S U G C E S P
U G Z Q P J O P E R A G Y I G S B C U M
N X R Y P K L E R R Y A Q C Z P L H F Y
T T Q P U N K T O L E Y R A P K K N R S
R T B R H E A V Y M E T A L Y S X O Q W
Y H H K J M N R Y S E T Y G R U N G E P
A R N E W A G E T Y Q O Z O P B V X R D
N R P H B B L U E S T M V C U M K S J Z
O T K U H V C M U S I C A L R Q S C A L
W M Y G C Z W A Q R M I P T H Z R X Z M
E T L K V T I D W Q O I F T D F S L Z P
S O U N D T R A C K H F N B V T I A R U
T G Y V C K P E S U P P K J L N B R T S
E A S Y L I S T E N I N G Q R E G G A E
R O C K A N D R O L L R J H O V R D K F
N B I L K M H S Q E W O P B J Y S X W E



Fun with flashcards



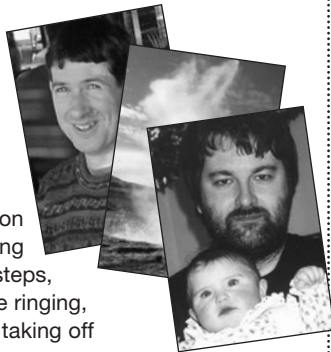
- Then ask students to find a partner from a different group, to exchange opinions and make a list of adjectives to describe one painting. Write a selection of these adjectives on the board in a general feedback session.
- Ask the class what kind of music they would associate with both the paintings and the adjectives listed on the board. Make a brief list on the board of music types suggested. After this, hand out the worksheet; pairs try to find as many types of music as possible. You could impose a time limit to keep things moving. Have another brief feedback session and add more music types to the list on the board.
- Ask students to listen to the cassette and identify the kinds of music they hear. Check answers with the class.
- Finally, ask students to return to their original groups and try to decide what musical extracts can be matched with which paintings, giving reasons for their choices. Ask the groups to present their conclusions to the class in a general feedback session.

2 Effective stories

Language: narrative tenses

Materials: a random selection of portraits, people and discussion flashcards; cassette with a selection of sound effects, such as a creaking door, a car driving off, heavy footsteps, a scream, eggs frying, a telephone ringing, rain falling, wind blowing, a plane taking off

- Divide students into small groups and ask them to listen to the cassette and discuss possible interpretations.
- Attach a random series of images of people, places, situations and objects to the board and ask each group to invent a story including the images and the sounds. You could allow students to make notes, but the object of the exercise at this point is to exchange ideas and create the story orally through group cooperation. After a set time, ask the groups to present their stories to the class.
- As a follow-up, the stories could be written for homework.



3 Life stories

Language: talking about past experience; use of present perfect vs past simple

Materials: a selection of portrait flashcards; profile worksheets (these can be adapted according to level, but could take the form of a blank CV with sections for personal details, education, professional experience, hobbies/sports, further details, etc)



- Divide students into groups.
- Attach several portraits to the board and number them.
- Hand out the worksheets and ask each group to choose one portrait and to fill in the details of their character using their imaginations.
- Ask a representative of one group to assume the identity of the person in the chosen portrait. This person is interviewed by the rest of the class in an attempt to discover which photograph he or she represents. A limit to the number of questions which can be asked adds to the competitive nature of the activity. Repeat the process with the next group.

4 TV debate

Language: giving opinions; agreeing and disagreeing; discussing advantages and disadvantages

Vocabulary: specific to the topic area chosen for debate

Materials: a selection of discussion flashcards with a common theme (eg famine, beauty contests, the environment, holidays, etc); four portrait flashcards; role cards for main personalities in the debate with information about who they are (name, age, some past history, personality and attitude to the subject under discussion)

- Attach the flashcards to the board. Divide students into small groups and ask them to discuss how the images could be connected and why.
- Have a general feedback session and try to reach a class decision about what the common theme is.
- Give the groups a time limit to think of as many words as possible which they associate with the topic, and then have another feedback session in which the class discuss their choices; write a selection of words on the board. This focuses attention on the subject matter of the debate which is to follow and provides useful vocabulary.
- Introduce the idea of a TV debate – well-known people debate a current issue in front of a TV audience and answer questions from the audience. Explain that four famous people have been invited to the classroom to answer students' questions about the topic. Display four suitable portrait flashcards on the board and explain who the people are. Ask for four volunteers or pick four extrovert members of the class. They each take a role card, leave the classroom and prepare a defence of their position compatible with their new identity.
- Once they have left, ask the rest of the class to form new small groups and prepare a number of questions for each guest.
- Finally, nominate a chairperson from the class, invite the guests back in and start the debate.
- As a follow-up, students could write an essay based on the topic. 