

Opening Many Locks with a Master Key: Six EFL Games Played with a Set of Cards

Being a lucky child, I played lots of games, as my parents were primary-school teachers, and playing games is a natural part of growing up and learning. More recently, I took the opportunity to create new games while teaching a course called “Teaching English to Young Learners” to preservice teachers of English. Among these games, there are more than 20 that can be played using only one set of cards, including those described online at TenTen 4 Kids (2018a); teachers and students can make these cards by using the example template in the Appendix. In this article, I describe six of these games that I have either adapted or created.

Many games for children are played to teach or review one specific notion or function; for example, the “Directions Game” offers practice in giving instructions (Lewis and Bedson 1999, 91), and “Body Writing” helps learners review shapes, letters, and numbers (Phillips 1993, 97). The card games in this article can be used with vocabulary related to a variety of topics. What makes the games significant is that they are all played using only one set of cards that can be reproduced to create four pictures for each vocabulary item. After you have prepared the worksheet (see the Appendix) for your game cards, and by using Creative Commons–licensed images from websites such as Flickr or Google Images, you can play these games with that set of cards.

There is no “best” in English language teaching, but often there is “better.” Here, I have included six of the most successful card games for teaching English. Three of the

games are *rousters*, which are movement games; the other three are *settlers*, in which students listen to their friends carefully and play the games in groups at their seats (Lewis and Bedson 1999, 7).

CARD GAMES FOR YOUNG LEARNERS

Games are essential tools for having fun, and “children have an enormous capacity for finding and making fun” (Halliwell 1992, 6). Learning a language is not “the key motivational factor” for them (Lewis and Bedson 1999, 5). Young children typically do not come to the classroom to learn a language; rather, they want to play a game or have fun. The card games described here not only encourage children to learn a language, but also add variation to lessons.

Why to Play

Teachers can use the card games to help students practice recently learned vocabulary

(Lorenzutti 2016) or to introduce new words. The games provided here may seem to have little focus on the language, as at most students either say one word at a time (of an object, usually) or hear one word spoken by the teacher. However, the games can be made more linguistically complex if teachers ask students to form sentences, ask questions, or write dialogues for further practice using the vocabulary. Additionally, students learn from the situations described by the teacher while he or she is explaining the rules of the games or while they are playing. That is to say, students may “need and want to communicate in a meaningful and intense way in that they need to use language to have a turn at playing, to point out the rules, to challenge another player” (Korkmaz 2012, 307).

When to Play

Teachers can integrate the games into their syllabus. If they have a flexible program, they can either supplement the core material or replace activities they dislike (Lewis and Bedson 1999). Teachers can fit the games into a 45-minute period to take a break from more-serious studies or use them to give students a reward for completing a particularly difficult task. They can also be used as warm-up activities or as follow-ups to a lesson.

With Whom to Play

The card games described here can be played with young learners. Language levels of the students playing these games can range from pre-A1 to A2 levels of English. However, the games can also work with other sets of words at more difficult levels (TenTen 4 Kids 2018b). Like Lewis and Bedson (1999), I decided that classifying the games according to language level would not be realistic:

Language level does not reflect the real challenge of the games, which you will find in the nature of the activity itself rather than in the language component. In addition, since most games have numerous variations with different language input aimed at varying age groups, giving a language level could lead

readers to overlook activities which might be just what they need. (Lewis and Bedson 1999, 11)

Instead of including language levels, I have provided classification of suggested age groups for each game in Table 1.

We cannot expect that all language classes take place with ten to 16 students. Many classrooms are crowded. We need to have realistic expectations of ourselves and the learners; however, this does not mean that we should reject the idea of playing games in our classes. On the contrary, “being realistic should mean taking realities into account in such a way that good things can still happen” (Halliwell 1992, 19). For teachers with classes of more than 25 students, I have the following tips:

- “Divide a class up into smaller, more manageable groups which can play games more effectively” by splitting “players into teams” or setting up “game stations” in the classroom (Lewis and Bedson 1999, 12).
- Organize tournaments between groups. If you play the game with a limited number of students, the rest of the students do not even follow along. However, in tournaments, while two groups are playing, the others follow with interest because the result affects all groups, especially the groups that will play the following game against either the winner or the loser. In this way, everyone in the class is involved in the process.
- Rotate roles in games where one group can act as facilitator before rotating to become players, with another group then becoming facilitator. However, this might not work in games where the teacher is needed to decide whether an answer is correct, pronunciation is clear, and so on.
- Involve a large class in making and cutting game cards, such as those in the Appendix. For example, a game with 20 cards for four players in a class of 40 students would require 200 cards—and that would be for

just one set of vocabulary items. Of course, you can save the cards and laminate them for future use, but many teachers in this situation would have trouble producing this many cards. However, students can create cards either by themselves or with the help of their parents. This has an additional benefit because “if you can get parents involved from the start they will be supportive of your and the children’s efforts” (Phillips, Burwood, and Dunford 1999, 13). If each student prepares the game cards of the single worksheet, there will be four cards for each item when the class plays the games in groups of four.

SIX CARD GAMES FOR YOUNG LEARNERS

Table 1 summarizes six games that can be played with sets of cards. It is only a rough guide, and you should “use your own knowledge of your children to judge whether the activity is suitable for your class” (Phillips 1993, 13). You can adapt the games and use variations to develop different skills with different numbers of students in different age groups.

At the end of each game description is a link to a short video that shows how the game is played. We made the videos with prospective teachers of English rather than with young learners; this was due to the difficulties of obtaining permission of all parents to have their children appear in the videos.

1. PUT INTO ORDER

I created this game after watching the popular TV program *Survivor*. The competitors run from the back to the front of the room and memorize ordered vocabulary items; they then run to the back of the room and arrange the items in the order they have memorized. They earn points if the items are ordered correctly. I realized it could be fun to play such a game with young learners.

In this game, you need four identical sets of eight cards. Each card depicts a different vocabulary item (you may increase or decrease the number of cards at your discretion). Tell the

class, “I need two lines,” and students form two lines at the back of the classroom. Put one set of eight cards face down on a desk next to one line of students, and another set of eight cards face down on a desk next to the second line of students. Mix up both sets of cards. At the front of the room, arrange a row of eight cards face down on a desk in front of one line of students, and another row of eight cards face down on a desk in front of the second line of students. You may also arrange the cards face down on a whiteboard or blackboard tray. This means 32 cards are needed to play the game.

The class can play the game at different levels of difficulty. They start by memorizing three cards and finish by memorizing all of the cards. For this game to be played effectively, you can give the following instructions:

I need one student from each group. The first student in each line will come to the board, turn over the first three cards in the row, and memorize the pictures. Then, you will put the cards face down again. After that, return to your seat at the back of the class, find the correct three cards from the set of cards on your group’s desk, and put them into order. The student who finishes ordering the cards first and says, “Ready” will be asked to say the words in order. If the order is correct, that person’s team will get a point. The first student will go to the end of the line, and I will mix up the rows of cards at the front of the room. The game will continue with the next student in each line, who will have to memorize the first four pictures. Then the next student in each line will have to memorize the first five pictures, and so on.

For each student, check to see whether the cards are ordered correctly; if you want, you can also check for correct pronunciation. If the order is correct, that team gets a point. If not, the point goes to the other team. The group with more points at the end is the winner.

A variation of this game is having students make up a story with the words that are memorized correctly. This gives students the opportunity to practice using the target

language, no matter how funny and silly the stories they make up are.

My students loved this game because they were familiar with it due to a popular TV program. Creative teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL) can watch games on TV and consider how they can adapt

and play them in their own classes. A video demonstration of this game can be found at <https://youtu.be/PMU7WgJ5IFk>.

2. PASSTHE RIVER

After playing the game “What’s That Card?” (Lewis and Bedson 1999, 105) with my

Name of Game	Description	Skill/Language Areas	Number of Players	Age Group
1. Put into Order	A game adapted from the TV program <i>Survivor</i> . Students try to memorize the pictures on the board and return to their seat at the back of the class, find the correct cards, and put them into order. If everything is correct, the team gets a point!	Cooperation; writing or speaking (building up stories); vocabulary; pronunciation	10–16*	8–10 10–12
2. Pass the River	Students try to guess what the card is on the stones of an imaginary river. The group that guesses all the cards and reaches the treasure first is the winner.	Concentration; memorization; social skills; vocabulary; pronunciation	10–16*	8–10 10–12
3. Stick It	You say a word, and the students find the card showing the picture of that word and stick it on the board. Whoever is first gets a point.	Listening; reading; writing; pronunciation	10–16*	6–8 8–10
4. Happy Families	Students aim to collect families (four of the same card). The winner is the player with the most sets.	Creative thinking; grammar; pronunciation; vocabulary	Best played in groups of 4	8–10 10–12
5. Repetition	Students have to repeat the words as many times as they can. The game goes on until one of them makes a mistake in calling out the names of the vocabulary items in order. The one who makes a mistake drops out of the game. The last player remaining is the winner.	Concentration; memorization; social skills; vocabulary; pronunciation	Best played in groups of 4	8–10 10–12
6. Bomb	The game is also known as “Old Maid” or “Odd One Out.” Each player removes all the pairs from his or her hand and pronounces the words. The game goes on in this way until all cards have been paired except one—the Bomb, which cannot be paired—and the player who has that card loses the game.	Vocabulary; grammar; pronunciation	Can be played in pairs or in groups of 4	6–8 8–10 10–12

Table 1. Six card games for young learners (*More students can play the game when you have a tournament in the class.)

students, I adapted it to make it more competitive. You need two cards for each vocabulary item children have just learned. Divide the class into two groups and have them line up. Draw two imaginary rivers on the floor and a treasure chest at the end of each river. Put the two sets of cards face down on the floor in a mixed order. Students imagine that these are the stones of the river that they need to step forward on in order to reach the treasure. As in the game What's That Card?, you say:

Come to the stones of the river. Try to guess what the card is and turn the card up to check whether your guess is correct. If it is correct, you can go on and guess the next card. If your guess is wrong, all cards will be turned down, and another student from your team will come to the river and start guessing the cards from the beginning. The group that guesses all the cards and reaches the treasure first is the winner.

Children have to follow the game carefully to turn over all the cards correctly and to reach the treasure. They need to play the game collaboratively to finish it successfully. As a result, the game can also develop students' social skills. A video demonstration of this game can be found at <https://youtu.be/k1oK32u9bTw>.

3. STICK IT

This game was adapted from a popular game called "Flyswatter," available at various English as a second language websites. In Flyswatter, each student holds one flyswatter and swats the correct word on the board when the teacher says the word. I had problems while playing this game in my classes, as students attempted to slap each other, or they complained that the word I said was nearer to the member of the opposing team. The adapted game, "Stick It," has the same fun elements but removes the problems I have noticed with Flyswatter.

To play, you need to divide the class into two groups. Two cards for each vocabulary item are needed. Put the two sets of cards face up on a table and say:

When I give the command, one student from each group will come to the table. Each of you has the same number of cards in front of you. I will say a word—for example, *pineapple*, and you will try to find the card showing the picture of that word. Whoever finds the correct card and sticks it on the board first gets a point. At the end of the game, the group with more points is the winner.

Games with simple, clear, and logical instructions work best with young learners. The best activity in the world can be a waste of time if students do not understand it. If you have problems in the games as I did while playing Flyswatter, you can adapt the games considering your students' needs and interests.

The game can also be turned into a reading activity. Give a simple text to both students and ask them to find cards showing pictures of words that appear in the text. Whoever finds the correct cards and sticks them on the board in the correct order first will be the winner. A video demonstration of this game can be found at https://youtu.be/ud3q_4IirFA.

4. HAPPY FAMILIES

I have played this game with my students several times in the way that Nixon and Tomlinson (2003) and Phillips (1993) suggest, where students ask each other if they have a certain card. However, I noticed that some children do not respond correctly to their friends' questions. Though they have the card in their hands, they say they do not have it, as a way to get cards themselves later on. Therefore, I adapted the game and decided to play it with the cards face up on the table. All students should see which cards their friends have.

The game requires four each of eight cards, or 32 cards in total. Shuffle the cards and deal four cards face up to four students who stand at a table. Each student tries to collect cards from other players by asking, “Have you got _____?” or “Do you have _____?” If the answer is “Yes,” the other players have to give up the card that was asked for. Each time students give cards to the questioner, they will get new cards from the backup pile; every student should have four cards before a new question is asked. If the answer is “No,” it is the next player’s turn to ask. If players have a matching pair, they can put these cards face up in front of their game-playing cards. The aim is to collect families (a set of four of the same card). Once a player has a set of four, he or she places it face down on the table and gets a point. The game is over when there are no game-playing cards left. The winner is the player with the most sets.

This game is useful in that all forms of a sentence (simple, imperative, and interrogative) can be practiced. A video demonstration of this game can be found at <https://youtu.be/RRhlsyvjJRI>.

5. REPETITION

This game is similar to the one that Shaptoshvili (2002, 35) called the “Memory Game.” There is also a game with the same name in which children try to find pairs of matching cards. That game is also called “Pick Up Twos” (Phillips 1993, 111) and “Pelmanism” (Lewis and Bedson 1999, 120). I have named this game “Repetition,” as a student has to repeat as many target words as he or she can. In this game, you need to deal an equal number of cards to four students and say:

The first student will start the game by putting a card on the table and saying what is on the card—for example, “Pineapple.” The second student will put down a card on top of the first card and call out the names of both cards, starting from the first one—for example, “Pineapple and watermelon.” The third

student will put another card on top of the two cards, then call out the first two cards and the new one—for example, “Pineapple, watermelon, and coconut.” The game goes on until one of you makes a mistake in calling out the names of the cards in order. The one who makes a mistake must drop out of the game. The last player remaining is the winner.

A video demonstration of this game can be found at https://youtu.be/zGP_80B6CZY.

6. BOMB

There are many card games played by adults, but few of them have been adapted to teach English to young learners. This game is similar to the popular card game “Old Maid” or “Odd One Out.” My students named it “Bomb.” To play the game, you need four cards for each vocabulary item, but you must take out one card from the deck; that card is the Bomb. Shuffle the cards and deal them, one at a time to each player, until all the cards have been handed out. Then say:

Players take turns removing all the pairs from their hands, pronouncing the word, and putting those pairs on the table. If you have three-of-a-kind, you can remove only two of those three cards. One of you then will offer your hand to the player on your left, who will draw one card from it. This player will discard any pair that may have been formed by the drawn card. That player then will offer his or her own hand to the player on the left. The game goes on in this way until all cards have been paired except one—the Bomb—which cannot be paired. The player who has that card loses the game.

If you play the game with pictures of action verbs, you can practice grammar as well. While students are putting down the pairs, instruct them to form a statement—“He is playing the piano”—or a question—“What instrument is he playing?” A video demonstration of this game can be found at <https://youtu.be/-pGG4zaC4p0>.

Some of these card games are easy to understand and have clear and simple instructions. Your students can understand what to do after you give the instructions for the game, especially if you make use of demonstration, mime and gestures, and examples. However, some games, such as “Happy Families” and “Put into Order,” have difficult rules to explain. According to Sowell (2017, 10), “instruction-giving has a direct effect on learning; a lesson or activity becomes chaotic and fails when students do not understand what they are supposed to do.” In my experience, once students learn how to play the games, you will not need to give the same instructions again, as they will know what to do when you just tell them the name of the game. Sowell addresses the important issue of using the mother tongue to give instructions:

There might be instances when the use of the L1 for instruction-giving is justified for the sake of efficiency and clarity, but there is a danger of overuse and the possibility that students and teachers will become accustomed to the comfort of instructions in the L1. (Sowell 2017, 11)

While it is useful to clarify the rules of the games using students’ mother tongue, especially for young learners at the beginning level, it can be counterproductive when the students get used to it and expect it.

CONCLUSION

The games presented here are a small sample of the many games that can be played with a set of cards. You can even let your students create their own games; according to Halliwell (1992, 6), “no matter how well we explain an activity, there is often someone in the class who produces a version of their own! Sometimes it is better than the teacher’s original idea.”

Here, I have presented games with easy-to-prepare materials, hoping that other English language teachers will try them in their own classes. Do not hesitate to adapt or change

them. Moreover, try to integrate the games that your students enjoy most into your syllabus, for “if an activity is enjoyable, it will be memorable; the language involved will ‘stick’, and the children will have a sense of achievement which will develop motivation for further learning” (Phillips 1993, 6). What language teachers see as enjoyable may not be true for young learners; therefore, the learners’ needs and interests should be the first thing to consider. Finally, I hope you can create your own card games and contribute to the list provided in this article.

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APPENDIX

Sample Cards for Teaching Vocabulary to Young Learners

