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USING FLASHCARDS TO TEACH ENGLISH VOCABULARY TO BEGINNERS

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Abstract: Vocabulary is a central component of communicative competence, yet beginners often find it difficult to remember unfamiliar English words and connect their forms with meanings. Flashcards offer a practical, flexible and low-cost resource for presenting, practising and reviewing vocabulary. This article discusses how picture and word cards can support beginner learners, outlines principles for their effective classroom use, and presents sample activities and a short lesson sequence. Research on word-card learning and retrieval practice suggests that cards can contribute to vocabulary learning when they are used purposefully, with active recall, feedback and repeated review. Flashcards should not replace meaningful communication; rather, they should serve as a bridge from recognizing words to using them in simple spoken and written contexts.

Keywords: flashcards, vocabulary teaching, beginner learners, visual aids, active recall, English as a foreign language (EFL)

Introduction

Vocabulary knowledge enables learners to understand messages and express their own ideas. For beginners, learning a new word involves more than memorizing its translation: learners need to recognize its written and spoken form, understand its meaning, pronounce it, and gradually use it in context. At the early stages of English learning, abstract explanations may be difficult to follow. Concrete images, gestures and familiar objects can therefore make new language more accessible.

Flashcards are small cards that present a picture, a word, or both. Teachers can use them to introduce vocabulary, check understanding, practise pronunciation, encourage recall and revisit previously taught items. Joanna Budden's TeachingEnglish resource describes flashcards as useful throughout a lesson and offers memory, drilling, identification and movement-based activities (Budden, n.d.). Their value lies not simply in displaying pictures, but in creating repeated opportunities for learners to retrieve and use words.

First, flashcards provide visual support. A clear picture of an apple, for example, can help a learner connect the English word apple with its meaning without relying only on translation. Second, cards make vocabulary practice concrete and manageable: a teacher can introduce a small set of words, check each item, and adjust the pace according to learners' responses. Third, flashcards can increase participation because students can point, choose, match, sort, speak or move instead of listening passively.

Flashcards also support retrieval practice. When learners see a picture and try to say the word before the teacher reveals it, they actively retrieve information from memory. A research synthesis by Lei and Reynolds (2022), which reviewed 32 studies, found that word cards can support vocabulary learning and emphasized the importance of learner guidance, appropriate word selection and repeated practice. Webb, Yanagisawa and Uchihara (2020) likewise found vocabulary gains from intentional word-focused activities, while noting that results vary and that learning is not guaranteed. Therefore, cards are most helpful when used as part of a structured learning process rather than as a one-time presentation. Begin with concrete, high-frequency vocabulary such as animals, colours, food, numbers and classroom objects. A set of about 5–8 new items is often a manageable starting point for a short beginner lesson; the exact number should depend on learners' age and level.

Use one main object per card, with a simple image and little background detail. Avoid pictures that could be interpreted in several ways. Show the picture, say the word clearly, and invite learners to listen and repeat. Written word cards can then be paired with picture cards to connect sound, spelling and meaning. Initially, learners may choose a picture when they hear a word. Later, hide the word or image and ask them to retrieve it independently. Revisit vocabulary in later lessons, not only immediately after presentation. Combine quick in-class review with brief home practice. Confirm correct answers, model pronunciation when needed, and ask learners to use a target word in a short phrase or sentence.

Activity	How to play	Learning aim / checking
Guess the Picture	Cover a picture and reveal it slowly. Learners guess the word; then the class repeats it.	Checks word recognition and pronunciation. Note whether learners name the item before it is fully revealed.
Matching Pairs	Place picture cards and word cards face up. Learners match each picture to its written word.	Checks the connection between meaning and written form. Ask learners to read each matched word aloud.
What's Missing?	Display 5–6 cards. Learners close their eyes; remove one card. They identify the missing item.	Practises memory and active recall. Learners should say the missing word without seeing it.
Point or Race	Place cards around the room. Say a word and learners point to or walk quickly toward the matching card.	Checks listening comprehension and word-meaning recognition. Keep movement safe and orderly.

A short lesson on the topic Animals can demonstrate how flashcards move learners from first exposure to independent recall. (1) Warm-up: show familiar animal pictures and invite learners to name any animals they already know. (2) Presentation: introduce five target words–cat, dog, fish, bird and rabbit–one at a time. Say each word, model pronunciation and let learners repeat. (3) Guided practice: say a word and ask learners to point to the matching card. (4) Active recall: turn the cards over and invite learners to name each animal from memory. (5) Communicative use: learners choose a card and say a simple sentence, such as "I see a cat." (6) Assessment: show the pictures in a new order and record which words learners can name without help. Review difficult items in the

next lesson. This sequence is illustrative rather than a report of an experimental study. It can be adapted to different beginner groups by changing the number of cards, allowing additional response time, or using gestures and real objects alongside pictures.

Conclusion

Flashcards have limitations. A learner may memorize a picture-word pair but still be unable to use the word in conversation. Repeated card drills can also become monotonous if they are not varied. Some vocabulary–especially abstract concepts or words with several meanings–is difficult to represent with a single image. Teachers should therefore combine flashcards with stories, classroom objects, songs, short dialogues, reading and writing tasks. In conclusion, flashcards are an accessible and adaptable tool for teaching English vocabulary to beginners. Their strongest classroom use combines clear visuals, accurate pronunciation models, learner participation, active recall, feedback and spaced review. When teachers progress from recognizing a word to retrieving it and using it in a meaningful phrase, flashcards can help build a foundation for further language learning.

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