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Joan M. Hoffman

Western Washington University, joan.hoffman@wwu.edu

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IDEA: “Family” Flash Cards for Second-Language or ELL Classes

Joan M. Hoffman

Western Washington University

Abstract: Second-language and ELL students can practice vocabulary building, sentence construction, grammar, culture, and geography using this new and improved take on the flash card.

Key Words: culture, flash cards, geography, grammar, high school, middle school, sentence construction, small-group work, storytelling, vocabulary-building

Here is an enjoyable and effective way to update that old standby foreign-language teaching tool—the flash card. A computer, computer-printable labels, 3 x 5 index cards, color or black-and-white images readily available on the Internet, and lamination help to bring old-fashioned cardstock flash cards into the twenty-first century. “Families” of flash cards can be made including an image and the Spanish name of that image; the name of the “family” is not included on the card. Of course, other languages could be substituted, including English for ELL students. Some examples, in Spanish, of “families” include: la familia real española, los Picapiedras, los personajes de Disney (Cenicienta, Blanca Nieves, los siete enanitos, los príncipes azules, etc.), joyas, flores, países de Latinoamérica, países del mundo, comunidades autónomas de España, los planetas, los siete pecados capitales, banderas del mundo, frutas, colores, días de la semana, meses, etc. In my experience, the students themselves have thought of new “families” that I have then added to my collection.

I first made a set of cards to divide my classes randomly for small-group work, thus avoiding the pitfall of friends always working with friends. Cards are passed out at random, and the students are instructed to find the other members of the “family” with which they will work, completely in the target language, of course. At the beginning as they are searching for the other members of their “family,” they often know neither the names in Spanish (la familia Picapiedras is a good example) nor the connections represented (los siete pecados capitales is a good example).

The cards can also be used for sentence construction and storytelling. In this case, flash cards are handed out randomly with students also put in random groups. The result may be a group of five students with the following cards: Ecuador, el rey de España, la rosa, Pedro Picapiedras, Saturno. The students then must invent a story using all of these elements; the story could also be continued from group to group. Verb-infinitive flash cards, with images included, could be added to the mix for a less-advanced class; subjunctive cues or varying verb tenses may be added for more advanced groups. A variation on this theme would be a version of the childhood memory game, “Voy (Fui) de vacaciones y traigo (traje)...” or “Vamos de vacaciones y quiero que mamá traiga...”; alphabetical order, as in the original game, could be incorporated or avoided, as the teacher sees fit.

Further uses include vocabulary building where one student must define or describe the image on his/her card while the other students must guess, possibly by asking *si/no* questions,

Hoffman, Joan M.

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what is being described. A variation would have the teacher choosing a card, telling the students if the image is a *persona*, *lugar* or *cosa*. The students would then ask *sí/no* questions and try to guess the image.

Family-relationship vocabulary (*madre, padre, hermano, tío, hija*, etc.) can be practiced, as well, using the cards that constitute actual families. Using *la familia real española* or *la familia Picapiedras*, for example, the students would have to describe the relationships: “*Vilma Picapiedras es la madre de Pebbles Picapiedras*” or “*don Iñaki Urdangarin es el yerno de la Reina doña Sofía.*”

It goes without saying, as well, that these cards can be indispensable for the teaching of culture (the fact that Spain has a monarchy, for example) and geography (countries, flags, *comunidades autónomas*, etc.). In this respect, groups of students could be asked to speak briefly about the Spanish monarchy (learning the meanings of such royal title abbreviations as “S. M.” or “Excmo. Señor”) or the different countries or *comunidades* represented in their “family” group. Geographical cards representing South or Central American countries or Spanish *comunidades* could be passed out near the end of a class period with instructions to report back the next day about the locations; the next day the appropriate students would sit in groups and have to work together to place their locations on a map and report to the class on an interesting fact regarding those locations; the other students would be expected to follow along, filling in maps of their own at the same time.

In our ever-more-visual world, the use of an image provides a direct link to the Spanish word, thus avoiding the English translation that sometimes occurs in second-language classrooms. This new take on the flash card has been “road-tested” in my university-level intermediate Spanish grammar classes as well as in my husband’s high-school Spanish classes. They are quite flexible in that an exercise can be tailored to take up most of a class period or just a few minutes at the beginning or the end of a class period. Further, we have found that their applications are almost as endless as the different “families” that could be included. I can only imagine that other teachers, in conjunction with other students, will discover still more uses.