



Ludic Language Pedagogy Playground

#3 (2021)

<https://www.llpjournal.org/>

Teaching students English idioms through a memory game

Jocelyn Kneoh Wan Ting^{a*}, Saki Miura^a

^a Department of International Languages and Cultures, University of Shizuoka, Shizuoka, Japan

Item Details

History:

Submitted: 01/31/2021

Open peer reviewed: ✓

Published: 04/20/2021

Keywords:

English idioms

Flashcard game

Free online game

Pair work

Teacher guide

University students

Worksheet

Peer reviewers:

Paul Horness

Casey Nedry

Key points

- **Background:** We didn't know the common English idioms used by native speakers. We thought that other university students would not know them either. We hoped to learn these kinds of idioms from the teachers in university.
- **Aim:** We want university students to learn common English idioms. Learning English idioms would help non-native speakers speak in more native ways. Through playing games, students are able to learn and apply the importance of idioms and the common idioms that are usually used by native speakers.
- **Methods:** We created an online match memory game and a worksheet. After that, we found some playtesters to play the game and asked them to do the worksheet we made.
- **Results:** Students thought that this interesting game can help them to learn idioms more easily and faster. Moreover, doing the worksheet we made can also help them remember idioms easily. From the worksheet, they used the idioms regardless of the length of the idioms to build sentences. We found which idioms from the 11 idioms we provided are easily used by them.
- **Conclusion:** We found that the method of learning English idioms through the match memory game and related materials is suitable for university students in Japan who are advanced English learners.

Tweet synopsis

Students: let's learn English idioms with match memory games online during COVID-19.

Teachers: let's teach students English idioms through a match memory game online. We recommend and welcome teachers and students all over the world to use the materials we created. #EnglishIdioms #MatchMemoryGame #Pedagogy #UniversityofShizuoka #UniversityStudents #interesting #fun #online

View at the LLP Playground:

<https://llpjournal.org/2021/04/20/jocelyn-saki-learn-idioms-with-memory-game.html>

* Corresponding author. Email address: kneohwanting@gmail.com (Ms. Jocelyn Kneoh Wan Ting)

Background

Who are you and your students?

We are International Relations students at the University of Shizuoka. One is Japanese and the other one is Malaysian. Our students are at the same university with us. Our students are all Japanese people except one who is Malaysian. We created and tested our game and materials as part of an elective class on project-based learning and English taught by Prof. Jonathan deHaan. We wanted to improve our own English and we thought that making and testing a lesson would be a good way for us to not only develop other students' English skills but also our English skills. We worked with Prof. deHaan to discuss the topic, create the materials, test the materials and to report on what we did.

Where did you teach?

We taught the university students how to learn and apply English idioms by playing a match memory game using both zoom and face-to-face at the same time.

What literature, ideas or experiences influenced or inspired you?

We think that advanced English learners not only should master vocabulary, but also should have a comprehensive understanding of English idioms. The reasons why we choose idioms as our theme is we found that Japan's university students have few chances to learn English idioms in their schools (primary, secondary, tertiary) or the vocabulary books available in bookshops. Jocelyn learned some idioms in primary and secondary school English classes in Malaysia, but Saki had only a few opportunities in classes to learn idioms in Japan. Idioms do not seem to be a big part of English education in Japan. But, a lot of English idioms are used by native speakers in their daily conversation. Therefore, to communicate well with native speakers, we should have an understanding of the common English idioms used by them. We think that most Japanese students do not know how to learn idioms in their free time.

We think that advanced English learners not only should master vocabulary, but also should have a comprehensive understanding of English idioms.

Design

How did the background influence your design decisions?

We decided to choose a match memory game as a tool for learning idioms. Since the game is an online game, it is convenient that it can be played face-to-face and online. Besides that, teachers can show the online game in a slideshow online or in class. Furthermore, it doesn't cost much to make and also doesn't take a lot of time in a class.

We decided to use a memory game because we thought that students would have difficulty learning an idiom from a conversation if they only see or use it one time. They would forget it easily. We wanted them to see the idioms many times. So, we decided to give our students a list of the idioms before they played the game and then ask them to play the game to practice and see the idioms many times during the game. They would flip the cards and see the parts of the idioms many times. We thought that the students would be able to memorize the idioms effectively in this way. An idiom memory game can also train students to find matches more quickly if the teacher sets shorter and shorter times each time students play.

Furthermore, we thought that a memory game would be familiar to most people. Many people have played this game from their childhood. So, our players would not have to think about the rules of the game while playing our game and they can focus on the idioms instead. Also, our idiom memory game can be played in teams, so teams of players can compete to do better than other teams and focus more on the idioms. In an individual game, a player doesn't need to talk to anyone, but in a team game, players on a team will talk to each other about the idioms.

Describe your lesson plans, materials, game choices, etc.

We made three materials in total:

1. A game and game rules
2. A worksheet for students
3. A teacher guide

We will describe each of these in this section.

1. Game and game rules

We discussed making a real memory card game or online game. At last we chose to create an online game because we felt that if we play online with a memory card game using real cards, it would be hard to see. We searched and chose some idioms from the internet. To make sure the game is not too easy or too difficult, we also discussed whether we had learned those idioms before. Because our game is for university students, we had to choose idioms that they hadn't learned before.

We used this free website to create our match memory game.

URL: <https://matchthememory.com/>

Reference links:

URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V5-c1VZHXqI>

URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fxJNu1qGc4g>

The URL for our game is shown below.

URL: <https://matchthememory.com/learn-idioms-with-memory-game>

We created a rules sheet to explain the rules of the game before the game started. The rules are shown in Figure 1 and Figure 2.

Learn Idioms With Memory Game

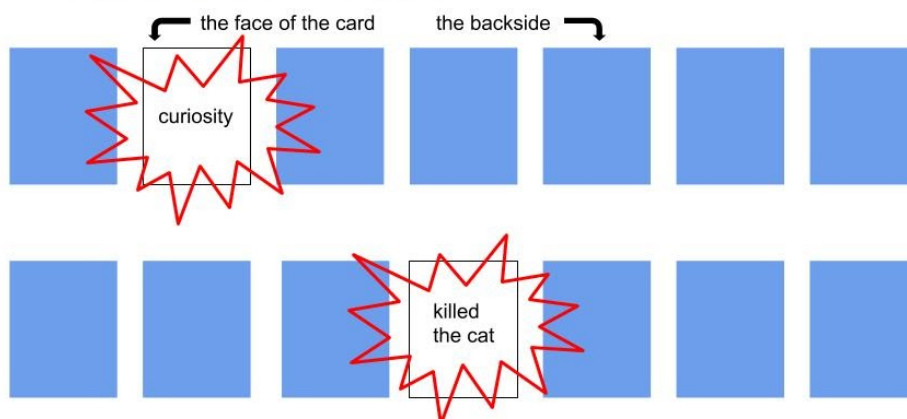


Figure 1 The general look and gameplay of the matching game.

The rule of this online game

- ① This is a team game. One team has 2 players, and they play together.
- ② All teams play together in a same screen. All the cards are placed on the backside. Idioms are written on the face of each card. The host of the game distributes the list of the idioms. Players can see the idioms while playing.
- ③ The host will flip the cards for the players based on players' instructions. Each player in a team will ask the host to flip one card at a time to find the right pairs of idioms. If you match the correct pairs of idioms, the meaning of the idioms will pop up. If you flip two cards and get wrong idiom, the cards will flip down automatically. The players in a team can discuss with each other through the personal chat. It is better not to let other team's players hear the discussion. If the game is played in class face-to-face, players can discuss in person.
- ④ The team who matched the most pairs of idioms' card will win the game.

Figure 2 Slide of the game rules

2. Materials

We wanted students to not only play the game, but also work together on a worksheet in order to help them understand and remember the idioms better. We drafted and revised the worksheet for several weeks. Our worksheet has questions that ask students to recall and apply the idioms then keep them in mind, questions to link to other idioms and questions that ask students what they think about the game.

We wanted students to not only play the game, but also work together on a worksheet in order to help them understand and remember the idioms better. We drafted and revised the worksheet for several weeks.

The worksheet is available here for other teachers' use:

https://docs.google.com/document/d/179bLDX44WgpYB6lOjXH00xBNXHMzOhe-Y_jiYcOWqyk/edit

We shrunk the boxes in the worksheet here. Teachers can make the boxes bigger for their classes.

Students have to use a smartphone or laptop regardless of whether they are in a traditional class or an online class. The URL of the worksheet for students is shown below.

https://docs.google.com/document/d/179bLDX44WgpYB6lOjXH00xBNXHMzOhe-Y_jiYcOWqyk/edit

3. Teacher guide

To help the teachers to run this game, we made a guide. The guide is available here for other teachers' use:

[Learn Idioms with Memory Game](#)

To help the teachers to run this game, we made a guide.

Playtest

What happened? Narrate the intervention from start to finish. What did you and the students do?

We found playtesters (we asked our friends at university) and played with them. After playing the game, we asked them to do the worksheet. In the game, first, we explained the rules of the game to the players. One person was the host and controlled the progress and the other person recorded the time taken and how many pairs each team matched. After playing games, we distributed the worksheets to the students. We gave some hints when they were having some difficulty doing the worksheets.

We gave some hints when they were having some difficulties on doing worksheets.

The students gave us feedback. According to one of the students, "Through this game, we can see the idioms many times until the cards match, so it is easy to memorize the meanings and idioms. Because compared to memorizing the words, I enjoy playing the game to learn idioms."

"... compared to memorizing the words, I enjoy playing the game to learn idioms."

Tables 1 to 4 show how the students played the game (number of pairs and the time they took to play the games). Figure 3 shows the game in progress.

Table 1 Results in round 1

Team	Number of pairs they matched	Which team won	Time used
Team ST& RM (first move)	8 pairs out of 11 pairs	Winner	11 minutes 31 seconds
Team RY & CZM (second move)	3 pairs out of 11 pairs	Loser	

Table 2 Results in round 2

Team	Number of pairs they matched	Which team won	Time used
Team MF & SL (second move)	4 pairs out of 11 pairs	Loser	27 minutes 21 seconds
Team MN & KS (first move)	7 pairs out of 11 pairs	Winner	

Table 3 Idioms that were used to build sentences 2.1

Idioms they used in worksheet question 2.1	Frequency
Once in a blue moon	2
I could eat a horse	2
Let the cat out of the bag	1
A piece of cake	1
Hit the hay	1
See eye to eye	1

Table 4 Idioms that were used to build sentences 2.2

Idioms they used in worksheet question 2.2	Frequency
I could eat a horse	2
Once in a blue moon	1
Cost an arm and a leg	1
A piece of cake	1
Hit the hay	1
Kill two birds with one stone	1

**Figure 3** A screenshot of students playing the game

We found some different comments by other students. Therefore, we extracted part of what the students answered in the question “Do you usually use idioms in any language in daily life?” in the worksheet.

Teachers: Do you usually use idioms in any language in daily life?

Student A: I usually idioms in Japanese like “一石二鳥”.

Student B: Yes I do. Especially in Chinese and English. Sometimes in Malay.

Student C: I rarely use them. I don't learn the meaning of idioms in class and I feel using idioms are old-fashioned.

Evaluation

The good/epic: What was a success? What went well? What worked?

This game was easy to play, therefore students understood the rules easily. When we saw students, they were not confused by playing the game. They were smiling. While playing this game, one of the students told us that this game was fun to learn idioms.

The bad/ugly: What was a failure? What didn't go well? What didn't work?

It was hard for students to communicate with each other. This game was played online, and students needed to communicate with their teammates because this game was played as a team. They had to communicate with them by using personal chat or LINE in Zoom. One of the teams wrote in the worksheet that they had a little difficulty communicating with teammates.

What are the practical implications for other teachers' classrooms?

We recommend that teachers explain the rules of the game and how to do the worksheet in detail. To proceed smoothly, teachers should keep explaining the rules of the game and how to do the worksheet in detail. Also, if students do not understand the rule of the game, teachers should demonstrate it to them.

We recommend that teachers explain the rules of the game and how to do the worksheet in detail.

If you make your own game and materials, you should make them easy to understand. Making them simple is effective to make your project work successfully. If teachers want to make their own memory game, they can watch YouTube videos on how to create the game¹.

In addition to English idioms, teachers can choose other themes such as slang, synonyms and antonyms and increase pairs of cards and also change the design of the game. Teachers also can create other free match memory games on other websites too.

Next steps

We want to continue to make games and materials. We learned that games definitely have a big power. Students who have never learned idioms enjoyed learning idioms. If we need to learn something and teach it, we can use a game, instead of facing the desk and reading textbooks. Next year we want to make more enjoyable games and better materials to help students learn.

We learned that games definitely have a big power.

¹ URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V5-c1VZHXql>
URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fxJNu1qGc4g>

Acknowledgements

To the students, thank you for participating in the pretest of the game. Your feedback was so precious. To Prof. deHaan, thank you for helping our project a lot. Thanks to your advice, we could proceed with our project and write this journal article. Thank you for your cooperation with our project.

References

YouTube that we referenced

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V5-c1VZHXqI>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fxJNu1qGc4g>

IDIOMS WEBSITES / SYNONYMS

<https://www.thesaurus.com/>

ANIMALS IDIOMS / English Club

<https://www.englishclub.com/vocabulary/idioms-animal.htm>

Appendix 1: Student Worksheet

https://docs.google.com/document/d/179bLDX44WgpYB6lOjXHO0xBNXHMzOhe-Y_jiYcOWqyk/edit (p.1~p.4)

Player's name

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1. Fill and complete the blanks :

Note: Please do it without referring to the game or any materials first. If you can't remember, please click the link below and play the game again yourself and then continue to fill in the blank and complete it.

<https://matchthememory.com/learn-idioms-with-memory-game>

meanings	idioms
to be extremely hungry	
a person who is physically and emotionally strong	
to accomplish two different things at the same time.	
to do something harmful to someone who trusted you	
being inquisitive can lead you into an unpleasant situation.	
to reveal a secret carelessly or by mistake.	
	a piece of cake
	see eye to eye
	cost an arm and a leg
	hit the hay
	once in a blue moon

2. Try to make sentences and a story/dialog by using idioms

You can choose one of two tasks. If you can, building sentences and connecting them into a short story/ dialog is helpful for your learning.

2.1. Choose 2 idioms above and build sentences from each one.

(i.e. The diamond ring he used to propose to his girlfriend cost him an arm and a leg.)

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2.2. Use at least 2 idioms to make a short story/dialog.

Any fictional or non-fictional story/dialog is okay.

Tips to make a story/dialog ↓↓

Places: at work, at school, at home

Situation: with friends, with family, with a boss, with colleagues

(i.e.)

A: Rock climbing is a piece of cake for you, isn't it?

B: Not really. It may have been easy for me in the past, but now I only do it once in a blue moon.

A: Oh I see. Well, I hope you can help me get better sometime.

3. List out the synonyms or antonyms of the idioms.

List out at least 3 idioms. If you don't know any synonyms or antonyms, try to research them!

Note: you can search with terms like **a piece of cake synonym**, **let the cat out of bag synonym**. You don't have to search using exact idioms, short phrases will be okay. Some examples:

<https://www.thesaurus.com/browse/let%20the%20cat%20out%20of%20the%20bag>

<https://www.thesaurus.com/browse/piece%20of%20cake>

4. Let's think of other idioms.

【List three idioms that contain the name of animals】 i.e. The early **bird** gets the worm

Note: you can search with the terms like **idioms with animals**, **idioms with dogs**.

5. What did you learn?

6. What is the most interesting/great/bad part of the game?

7.1. Do you prefer this way to learn idioms? Why?

7.2. Suggest other ways to learn idioms.

7.3 Do you usually use idioms in any language in daily life?

7.4 When or what situation would you like to use idioms?

Thank you for your hard work.

Appendix 2: Teacher Guide

https://docs.google.com/document/d/179bLDX44WgpYB6lOjXHO0xBNXHMzOhe-Y_jiYcOWqyk/edit (p.5~p.7)

Instructions for teachers:

1. This worksheet is designed for all English learner's university students in Japan.
2. This goal of the worksheet is to, through playing games, learn and apply the importance of idioms and the common idioms that are usually used by native speakers.
Lesson level: ★★★☆☆☆ medium
3. Lesson time: 1 hour and 10 minutes (half an hour for the game, 30-40 minutes for worksheet)
4. Required materials: smartphone or laptop is okay.
5. Before playing the game, please show the list of idioms. Do not show the meaning of the idioms.. Teachers need to explain the meaning of each idiom first. And then, let the students have a practice conversation using some idioms. Then, students can play the game. There is no time limit for the game as long as a pair of students complete the game. One pair of students that match more will win the game. Normally play 1 time only, but students can play as much as students want.
6. Please distribute the worksheets to students after the game.
7. Each worksheet is meant to be used by 2 students working as a pair.
8. For question 1, students are required to play the game again if they don't remember the idioms. For question 3 and 4, students can search the internet if they don't know.
9. Teachers can always give some small tips to the students if they have trouble with the worksheet. For example, tell them how to apply the idioms in some situations, tell them how teachers remember and learn idioms in a faster and effective way, or tell how native speakers use the idioms, and so on.
10. Ask students to hand in the worksheets to teachers after they have completed them. Teachers need to check whether students are using the appropriate idioms in appropriate situations by giving correct suggestions. If students don't use correct idioms, teachers suggest using the letter of the start of one word. Then, suggest a definition of the idiom.
11. After they complete the worksheets, please distribute the list of idioms to students and have a discussion with the whole class after everyone finishes the worksheet.