



Abracadabra!

Chris Payne has some magic tricks up his sleeve.



Nowadays, teachers can avail themselves of a variety of methods and approaches to teaching English. Whatever your preferred approach and pedagogic beliefs are, it is generally agreed that it is of paramount importance to recycle language in different contexts in order to consolidate learning.

A fun way to revisit language is to use a few simple magic tricks in your classroom. Magic has the power to enthrall, entertain and motivate young learners, which in turn makes the language more memorable. Another advantage is that some students will know tricks in their L1 and will be keen to come and share them with the class. Trying to do them in English has the potential to generate a lot of new lexis.

It's serious

Don't be put off by the apparent frivolity of magic, because as well as engaging your pupils, it can help foster a positive attitude towards learning.

According to Stephen Krashen's Affective Filter hypothesis, the learner's emotional state can block or favour language acquisition. For Krashen, a low affective filter is desirable for learners to be more receptive to input. I believe that magic in the classroom can lower the affective filter and be highly conducive to learning. Here I hope to share with you its valid contribution to language acquisition.

It's easy

I must point out, too, that you don't need to be a professional magician to perform the tricks I use in class. I am a teacher, not a magician, and the tricks

are mostly mathematical and work out by themselves. They don't require the sleight of hand of a skilled conjuror, just a little practice.

It's magic!

The six easy tricks suggested below revise lexical fields of your choice, prepositions of place, months, clock times, and numbers and adding skills. As you will see, these tricks, and many others, are waiting to be exploited for revision of language, and you can involve your students more by encouraging them to try out their own tricks in class. You will notice how, thanks to magic, your pupils will make an effort to communicate in English because they genuinely have something they want to say – surely the Holy Grail of ELT!

I Guess the word!

Language focus: Any lexical field

Materials: Flashcards of your chosen lexical set. This example uses jobs. If you have been revising jobs, then this trick is a fun way to end the class.

Procedure

- ★ Shuffle the job flashcards and spread them out in a line face up on your desk or on the floor to show the class that they are mixed up. As you do this, glimpse and remember the *ninth* card from the left.
- ★ Now turn the cards face down and gather them into a pack (your remembered card will be the ninth from the top) and ask a student to choose a number between ten and 19. Let's say they choose 14. Deal 14 cards face down onto the floor



or your desk. Deal slowly and show the class each one before you put it down so that they can name the jobs, eg *firefighter, police officer, farmer, etc.*

- ★ Next, ask another student to add the digits of 14: $1 + 4 = 5$. This pupil deals five cards from the 14 cards used earlier, again showing each one so that the jobs can be named.
- ★ Ask a third volunteer to take the next card and show it to the class without showing it to you. This card is the ninth card which you glimpsed earlier, and they will all be amazed when you guess the job depicted on it!

2 The magic match

Language focus: Prepositions of place

Materials: A box of matches and a handkerchief with a hem

Procedure

- ★ Before the class begins, you need to push a match into the hem of one of the corners of the handkerchief.
- ★ At the appropriate moment in the class, lay out the handkerchief on the floor or on your desk.
- ★ Ask a volunteer to take a match and place it *in front of* the handkerchief. Then other students take turns to place the match *behind, next to, under, on, and between* the handkerchief and something else. Finally, ask someone to put the match *in the middle of* the handkerchief.
- ★ Pick up the corners of the handkerchief and fold them in, so that the student's match is covered. Make sure that the corner with the hidden match is not the last one to be folded in.
- ★ Now pick up the handkerchief and take the hidden match in your fingers. Ask a volunteer to feel your match through the handkerchief and hold it. Ask them if they are strong or weak, and whether they can break the match.



- ★ When they have snapped it in half (or more pieces), unfold the handkerchief and show the class that the match is still perfectly intact. They will be baffled, but remember not to let them examine the handkerchief after the trick!

3 Birthday cards

Language focus: The months

Materials: A normal pack of playing cards

Procedure

- ★ Before performing the trick, memorise the thirteenth card from the top of a pack of cards.
- ★ After having focused on the names of the months, take the cards and quickly show them to the class so that they can see that they are all different, but be careful not to shuffle them!
- ★ Now put the pack face down. Turn your back and ask a volunteer to take from the top of the pack the number of cards corresponding to the month they were born in. For example, if they were born in July, they take seven cards.
- ★ Turn round and deal 12 cards face down from the top of the pack, one for each month. As you deal them, the whole class name the months: *January, February, etc.* Pick up these 12 cards and deal each one face up, again getting the class to call out the months. As you do so, ask your volunteer to memorise the card corresponding to the month they were born in.

- ★ You will see the *thirteenth* card, which will tell you the month your volunteer was born in. Go through all the months and then at the end, with a flourish, amaze the class by naming both the chosen card and the month your volunteer was born in.

Variation

If you prefer, you could ask your volunteer to choose the month a friend or family member was born in. If you do this, nobody can accuse you of knowing the month in advance.

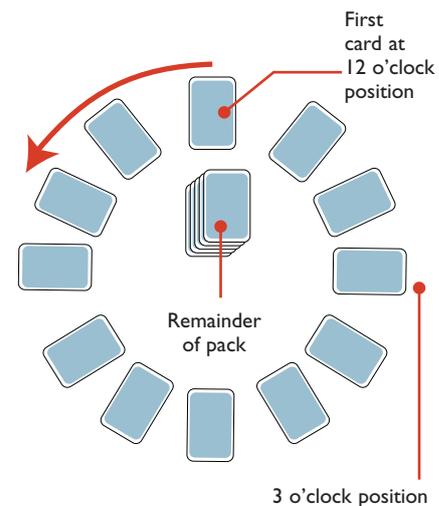
4 The magic clock

Language focus: Telling the time

Materials: A normal pack of playing cards

Procedure

- ★ At the appropriate time in the class, place two piles of cards on the desk or the floor, one with 13 cards and the other with the rest of the deck.
- ★ Give the pile with 13 cards to a student and ask them to remove some of the cards while your back is turned and put them in their pocket. Tell them to shuffle the remainder of their pile, memorise the bottom card and show it to the class. Then ask them to put their pile face down on top of the rest of the deck.
- ★ On the floor, deal out 12 cards face down in an anticlockwise direction to represent a clock face, as in the illustration.



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- ★ Before continuing with the trick, ask the students to touch the cards and go round the clock, saying *one o'clock, two o'clock*, etc.
- ★ Using two Cuisenaire rods, or simply two pencils of different lengths, practise other clock times, such as *half-past two, a quarter to three, a quarter past eight*, etc. The students can take turns to arrange the rods into a time for the others to tell.
- ★ Now back to the trick. Ask your volunteer how many cards they put in their pocket. Let's assume they have six cards. Ask them the name of the card they memorised.
- ★ Now count round the cards with the class from twelve o'clock to the card in the six o'clock position and turn it over. It will be your student's chosen card! (Obviously if they had four cards, you turn over the card in the four o'clock position.)
- ★ In this trick, it's a good idea for the whole class to see the memorised card because it involves everyone, and your volunteer might forget which card it was. This can happen if the playing cards are unfamiliar to the class.

5 Seven up

Language focus: Numbers and adding skills

Materials: Three dice

This is a very short trick and is a good one to teach the students. Although professional magicians don't normally reveal their secrets, in a class situation students will be more involved and motivated if they know you are going to teach them how to do a trick.

Procedure

- ★ After having revised numbers, ask one student to leave the classroom. Another student then throws the three dice. The class must then add

up the numbers shown on the top of the dice. For example: $3 + 2 + 6 = 11$.

- ★ Next, ask a different student to choose one of the dice and add the number on the bottom to 11. If they choose the 6, they add 1 (which is the number on the opposing face), to give a new total of 12. Then they throw that same dice again, and add its new top number to the overall total. Let's assume it is a 3, so the final total is 15.
- ★ The student who initially left the room now comes back in and bedazzles the class by correctly proclaiming 15 as the final number.

What's the secret?

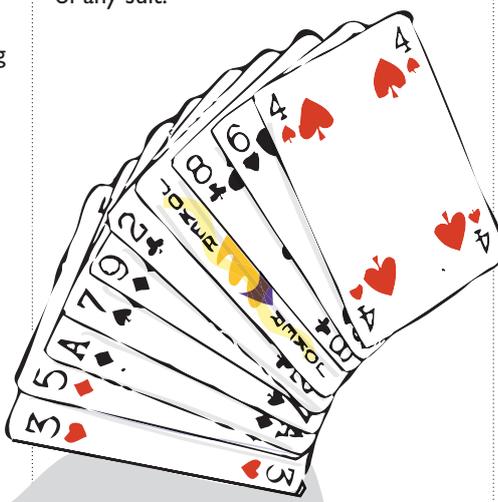
The student who leaves the room is secretly instructed to add seven to the total of the top numbers showing on the dice when they return. In this example, the student sees $3 + 2 + 3$, plus 7, equals 15.

This short trick can be done more than once so that different students learn it.

6 Spell the numbers

Language focus: Spelling the words of numbers 1 to 9

Materials: The ten playing cards shown in the illustration, arranged in this exact order. I use four black cards and five red ones, but the cards can be of any suit.



Procedure

- ★ With the cards face down so that the four is the bottom card, tell the class that together you are going to make the cards appear when you spell out the word for the number correctly. But the cards will only obey the class if the teacher spells the words, too!
- ★ First you and the class spell out *one*. Take the top card and place it underneath the pack as you all say *O*. Take the new top card and you all say *N* as you put it underneath the pack. Turn over the next card as you say *E*. It will be the ace!
- ★ Put it face up on your desk or on the floor.
- ★ You all spell *two* and *three* in the same way, so that as you say the last letter of the words, the corresponding number cards are revealed and placed face up next to the ace.
- ★ Now for some fun! Ask the class to spell *four* without your help. They will turn over the joker. It is vital that you always replace the joker on top of the pack. Now you spell *four* with them ... and the four will appear!
- ★ Invite them to spell *five* and *six*, and again they'll get the joker! You help the class with *five*, *six* and then *seven*.
- ★ Finally, agree to give them one last chance to spell *eight* and *nine* without you. The joker will reappear yet again, and they will be astounded when they see that the number cards will only appear with your magical help. (ET7)



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