

Learning American Holidays Through Greeting Cards

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Introduction

The exchange of greeting cards has become a unique part of the American culture. Americans send more prepackaged sentiment than any other people on earth. One homemaker in Garland, Texas sends about 2,500 cards per year. She spends US\$15,000 including postage (Caudron, 1993).

Greeting cards is one of the many authentic teaching materials and have many benefits in teaching English. First of all, teaching a language is inevitably teaching culture implicitly (Alptekin, 1993, Buttjes, 1990, McKay, 2003). Cultural awareness is crucial in language education. By embracing the cultural competence or awareness, students will develop knowledge of the target culture and master some skills in culturally appropriate communication and behavior for the target culture. Therefore, American greeting cards provide a good way to view daily American life, tradition, custom, and background of holidays. Furthermore, Howard Gardner reveals a wider family of human intelligences. Using greeting cards in language classrooms can help learners develop verbal-linguistic, kinesthetic, and interpersonal intelligence.

The following is a lesson plan on how to use greeting cards to teach American holidays.

Lesson Plan

- Levels: All levels
- Materials: Varieties of greeting cards

1. Warm-up Activities

1. Introduce varieties of greeting cards and their functions to students.
2. Activity: "Name Six"

Arrange six chairs in a circle and choose one person to stand outside the circle. Give someone in the circle a soft object (such as a small pillow, stuffed animal, etc.). The person outside the circle may say "Name six kinds of greeting cards." The person sitting in the circle begins naming six kinds of greeting cards and, at the same time, passes the soft object to the next person. The object is for the player to name 6 cards before the soft object comes back to him/her. Otherwise, the person has lost and it's his/her turn to stand outside the group.

2. Holiday Discussion

1. Divide students into groups of three or four. Ask students to discuss the following questions:
 - Name three holidays in your country and in the United States.
 - Do people send greeting cards on these holidays in your country? (See Handout--"Holiday Discussion").
2. Each group shares their own ideas with the whole class.

3. Holidays and Symbols

1. Each team chooses a holiday that they are interested in. Each group surfs on the Internet and gather information regarding holiday symbols. Draw these symbols on the handout. (See Handout--"Holidays and Symbols")

2. Each group shares their own ideas. The teacher can give additional explanations regarding these symbols.

3. Concentration

Cards of items on greeting cards and their names are prepared prior to lesson (such as a picture of Christmas tree and word "Christmas tree.") Students get into two teams (or get into pairs) and have to flip over the cards of items and names of items and try to match them. If there is a correct match, the team (or student) gets to keep the cards. If not, the team (or student) needs to flip the cards back and let the other team have a turn. The team (or student) who gets the most matches wins.

4. Who Am I?

Tape a symbol chosen from the greeting cards (such as a turkey) on the forehead of each student without letting the student see what it is. Each student should not be able to see his or her paper, but others could. To find out what holiday symbol is taped on his or her forehead, each student can only ask yes or no questions. A student may ask, "Am I a turkey?" If the answer is yes, the student gets one point. The game continues until everyone guesses who he/she is.

4. Holidays and Expressions

1. Each team chooses a holiday that they are interested in. Surf on the Internet and find out the holiday expressions. Write down these expressions on the handout. (See Handout--Holidays and Expressions)
2. Each group will share the results of their Internet research with the rest of the class. The teacher can give additional explanations on the meaning of these symbols.
3. **What holiday is it?**
The teacher reads the sentences and has students guess which holiday it is. For example, "So, don't let any ghosts or goblins scare your pants off." (Hallmark Greeting Cards Inc.)

5. Designing Your Own Greeting Cards

- Ask students to write, design, and send an e-card.

Conclusion

Americans send eight million cards per day (Caudron, 1993). Therefore, card-giving has become an American social ritual. American greeting cards provide a general view of American life. Therefore, greeting cards are handy English teaching materials. From the words and pictures on greeting cards, English learners can gain a basic understanding of the customs and traditions of American celebrations.

References

- Alptekin, C. (1993). Target-language culture in EFL materials. *ELT Journal*, 47, 2, p.136-143.
- Buttjet (1990). Teaching foreign language and culture: social impact and political significance. *Language Learning Journal*, 2, 53-57.
- Caudron, S. (1993). Only in America. *Studio Classroom*, April, 33.
- McKay, S. L. (2003). The cultural basis of teaching English as an international language. *TESOL Matters*, 13, 4.

Handout

Group Members: _____

1. Holiday Discussion

(1) Name three holidays in your country and in the United States.

(2) Do people send greeting cards on these holidays?

2. Holiday Symbols

(1) Holiday name: _____

(2) Draw or copy the holiday symbols.

3. Holiday and Expression

(1) Write down the holiday expressions.

4. My Own Greeting Cards

Web sites on Greeting Cards

- Blue Mountain <http://www.bluemountain.com/>
- Yahoo Greeting Card <http://greetings.yahoo.com/>
- 123 Greeting Card <http://www.123greetings.com/>
- Awesome Cyber Cards <http://www.marlo.com/>