Scrabble® unscrabbled: Adult ESL students' perceptions of Scrabble® as a classroom learning tool

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ABSTRACT

Scrabble®, the proprietary word-building board game, is widely used by teachers in English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms. However, there has been little research conducted into how it benefits students. This project aimed to find out what a class of adult, upper-intermediate general English students in New Zealand, thought of playing the game in class – whether it was valuable and in what ways. They were taken through a series of Scrabble® games, completed questionnaires and check-sheets, had peer-group and focus-group discussions and were systematically observed 'at play'. The results showed a universal enjoyment of Scrabble® and appreciation of the 'fun factor' in their learning. They also enjoyed the opportunity to practise receptive and productive skills in negotiating the task. They felt the game aided their acquisition and retention of lexis. However, they wanted to find ways to speed up the game, and there was confusion and dissension about how best to use dictionaries.

Purpose and significance of the research

Most ESL schools' resource rooms house at least one Scrabble® set. Many teachers introduce this widely recognised proprietary game into the classroom from time to time for a variety of reasons: it is a good time-filler; it helps to wind down a busy week (for both students and teachers); it involves making words, so must be relevant; it encourages teamwork; it is visually stimulating; it aids cognitive processes. At times it may be used just because the resource exists, without much thought given to the learning or linguistic value to students.

But what do the *students* think of this game? Do they enjoy it? Does it aid their English? Are they focused on the words, the scoring or the communication around the board? Or do they just go along for the ride?

This paper summarises a research project to find out what an upper-intermediate class of adult ESL students thought of Scrabble® as part of their learning program. It yields some insights into whether Scrabble® is a viable teaching tool at this level, and suggests some effective ways of using the game.

Setting

The research was conducted through the third term of 2004 using an upper-intermediate general ESL class of 12 adult students at a private language school in Auckland, New Zealand. The class included students from the People's Republic of China, Taiwan, Korea, Japan and Cambodia. Eight students were female and four were male. They ranged in age from their 20s to 50s, with an average age of around 35. Their motivations for being in the class were varied and included: migrants wanting to improve their language for living and doing business in their new country; international students planning to either continue tertiary studies in New Zealand or improve employment/business prospects back home; and parents of children getting a mainstream English-language education in New Zealand.

The researcher, who was also the classroom teacher, taught them for four hours every each weekday morning, in a formal classroom setting using a communicative approach to teaching including team games or 'brain sports'. This person also is a long-time competitive Scrabble® player, both nationally and internationally, and has won a number of major titles. From the start of the course, students knew of his passion for the game.

Research question and definition of terms

How do adult students in a general ESL class at upper-intermediate level perceive the value of Scrabble® as a learning tool in the classroom?

Value refers to the benefits that students gain from a particular activity towards achieving their goals, compared with other classroom activities.

Scrabble® is a proprietary board game, which involves the building of words for point scores, for two or more players (or teams). In this paper, it refers to the standard rules and conventions for playing the game.

Learning tool means an activity designed to help students learn.

Review of relevant literature

The diverse collections of language 'games' and supporting research studies focus heavily on target language structures, on creating contexts in which language is useful and meaningful. As Larsen-Freeman says,

> Games are important because they have certain features in common with real communication events – there is a purpose to the exchange. Also the speaker receives immediate feedback from the listener on whether or not she has successfully communicated.   (Larsen-Freeman 1986: 129)

Standard Scrabble®, though a popular activity in the ESL class, does not fit such target language-based models, perhaps because of its lack of context and the randomness of the letter tiles. Whatever the reason, it has failed to inspire teachers and researchers of language games to both research and publish on it, judging by the dearth of literature.

Cruickshank and Telfer (2001: 76) divide games into non-academic or 'primarily for fun' games (including card games, bingo and table-tennis) and academic or 'primarily for or based on learning' games. The latter category is further divided into 'simulation', in which players work within a simulated environment, and 'non-simulation', in which players solve problems by using the principles of their topic. The former includes many types of game commonly used in second-language learning. The latter includes Scrabble® and puzzles, 'in which players use principles of a subject or discipline and solve related problems, as in math or spelling' (Cruickshank and Telfer 2001: 76).

Hadfield (2000: 5), in a speech to the International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language Special Interest Group conference in Croatia, referred to the functional value of goal-based ESL games, such as board games. 'Even if the goal is non-linguistic, to get to it you have to use language … asking questions, explaining, describing, persuading, narrating, instructing, etc.' Lee (1979: 3) says the competitive element of a language game can distract learners' attention from the 'study of linguistic forms' but, on the positive side, gives them practice in using language naturally.

Scrabble® can be used in developing problem-solving skills and is motivating for students. Littlewood (1981: 29) questions whether a learning group's 'motivation to perform would decline' if games were overdone. This question is pertinent to Scrabble®, in that it can be a long game if played to completion. Petersen-Perlman et al (1999: 255) present UpWords®, the three-dimensional Scrabble-type board game, as a 'prototypical partnership model', whose rules can also apply in the classroom generally.

> The focus of the envisioned partnership model is on interaction within an inherently hierarchical framework; only within this model the boundaries between the different hierarchical levels are conceived of as permeable; information can pass across the boundaries. (Petersen-Perlman et al 1999: 255)

There is a reasonable case to be made that the standard game needs to be adapted, the rules changed, so Scrabble® can be used more effectively as a linguistic aid. Hugh Rutledge (1994: 72–4) offers it as a vocabulary-learning tool by adding an element of extra points for 'successfully defining words played'. *Word freak*, Stefan Fatsis' (2001) definitive book on competitive Scrabble®, looks at the issue from the other end, showing ways

that top competitors learn and practise specific game skills, including ones requiring a linguistic awareness (anagramming, inflectional hooking, memorising lexis).

'School Scrabble®' programs have been springing up around the world, both in English-speaking and English as a Foreign Language environments. Some are sponsored by one of the Scrabble's two patent-holders of Scrabble®, Mattel and Hasbro, as quasi-commercial outlets. Others are run by enthusiastic local organisations that are recreational rather than educational. India, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Bahrain, the West Indies, Hong Kong, Germany, Canada, the U.S.A, England, South Africa and Australia have professional-looking websites to promote such programs. However, they all use rhetoric or anecdotal evidence rather than any validated research findings to extol the educational virtues of the game. For example, the website for the National School Scrabble® Championship (USA) simply says:

> Educators have praised the Scrabble game for helping to improve a wide range of skills, including vocab, spelling, dictionary skills, math (traditional and non-traditional), co-operative learning, conflict resolution and creative problem-solving.

Its page on the 'educational applications' offers no information but asks for questions and suggestions from 'teachers and parents'.

The Baulkham Hills Scrabble Club (NSW) (2004) website talks of the value of Scrabble® in expanding vocabulary; making words 'valuable' so students will find ways to 'collect' them; propagating dictionary use; expanding critical thinking skills (including imagining, planning, evaluating options and decision-making); developing social and personal skills (team play, friendly competition); and growing self-esteem in an 'atmosphere … of successful participation'.

The study: Steps taken

This study chose to follow an action research methodology. Ross (1997, cited in Burns 1999: 11) calls action research 'rewarding because it validates classroom observation and encourages you to value your own judgements'. The process is also 'refreshing, as it is concerned with the classroom as it really is'. The steps taken are summarised in Table 1.

Preliminary observation of the upper-intermediate class playing Scrabble® made the researcher realise just how little was known of how students approach the task. He first gained a general picture of their attitudes to games in the classroom and their knowledge and experiences of Scrabble® before focusing in on specifics.

The 12 students read an information sheet about the intended research and signed a consent form. An introductory questionnaire was distributed with a series of graded, multiple-choice questions and one ranking question. The first part asked about a participant's country of origin, gender, age group and English study history. The second part was concerned with learning styles (including games experience). The third part introduced the topic of Scrabble®. All the students completed the questionnaire efficiently and enthusiastically.

There followed a series of Scrabble® game classes, each accompanied by one or more data-collection activities. The first class ran for two hours. The Scrabble® equipment was set up at two games tables. Each game had three 'doubles' teams (two players working together on a team). One player at each game (the most 'experienced' one) kept score for all three teams. Apart from an initial recap of rules, players were largely left to their own devices, including decisions as to how to find words and rule on their acceptability. Neither game was finished in the two hours. The students were given check-sheets before the game, to complete afterwards. These included open questions, closed questions, rankings and an opportunity for comments and suggestions 'in their own words'.

Before the second Scrabble® class a week later, the check-sheets were collated and analysed. Based on the responses, some variations for round two were introduced. Again, 12 students were present. Three games tables (instead of two) were set up. Two games had two doubles teams, and one had four single players. One of the doubles teams for the researcher to 'observe' was set up, according to a set of prepared criteria. This was to obtain a view of the group dynamics in action, to add to the participants' subjective assessments. Ninety minutes of playing time was allocated, divided into three equal time slots. After the first half an hour, and again after one hour, some doubles players and single players were swapped between the two non-observed groups, without changing the progress of the games. This was to give players an opportunity to try the game both ways: in teams and solo.

Another change for each time slot concerned dictionary use. For the first half hour, all students could use dictionaries any way they liked (as for the first round of games). For the second half hour, they had to make words without the aid of dictionaries. For the third half hour, the groups were able to decide whether to use dictionaries or not, and they all chose a compromise ('spell-check only') rule. They then completed a second check-sheet, in which some questions had been changed to reflect responses from the previous week and the variations to that day's games.

Table 1: Steps taken by the researcher and students

Classes	Teacher/researcher tasks	Student tasks
	Out of class: Designed information sheet and consent form	
Class One	1: Gave out information info sheet and consent form 2: Observedation of students playing Scrabble®	1: Read information sheet and signed form 2: Played Scrabble® two-hour class with two games tables and three doubles teams 3: Students Completed check-sheets after playing
	Out of class: Collated and analysed check-sheets	
Class Two	1: Set up Scrabble® tables 2: Observed one of the playing doubles teams playing on one table and wrote down observations to viewabout the group dynamics	1: Three by 30-minute games on three tables. Two games had two doubles teams and one game had four single players. Players rotated.
	Out of class: Read through observations	
Class Three	1: Set up Scrabble® tables 2: Repeated observations of one group 3: Facilitated discussion 4: Facilitated focus-group discussion after the playing of Scrabble® (taped)	1: Two by two-hour games. Only two games tables (one singles and the other doubles). 2: Peer-group discussions 3: Focus-group discussion (taped)
	Out of class: Listened to tapes, analysed all data and write wrote paper	

In the third week, the students returned to two games tables (either singles or doubles), kept the same partners as in the first week, had a two-hour Scrabble® class and kept the spell-check-only rule on dictionaries, which the students themselves mooted and agreed on. In the application of this rule, however, some students were still confused between checking spelling and browsing lists for words that to fit their racks of tiles.

The researcher repeated the observation exercise with one of the groups and facilitated a focus-group discussion immediately afterwards. As a lead-in to the focus group, two informal peer-group discussions (one for each of the playing groups) were held. This was to give students an opportunity to gather their thoughts and debate any issues, based on nine key questions, among their playing peers. These they entered into enthusiastically.

The focus-group discussion was teacher-led and audio-taped. It was a mix of qualitative expressions of opinion and quantitative (show of hands) conclusions about the most contentious issues, such as how long to play for,

how to use dictionaries and whether to play solo or in teams. Unfortunately, this discussion proved less open and fluent than the previous small-group discussions, probably because of a general awareness of the running tape.

Throughout the data-gathering process, in an attempt to ensure reliability of the methodology as much as possible, the research was triangulated from a number of different angles. Burns (1999: 25) cites this as an important procedure in action research, so that 'data from a number of different sources can be tested out against each other' and to ensure that the eventual findings are more valid, reliable and 'generalisable'. This was done by using different methods including a questionnaire, check-sheet, recorded focus group and teacher observations.

After games one and two, the data were analysed from the check-sheets and, cross-referenced with the researcher's own observations, in order to adjust the following Scrabble® class. Following the final data-gathering task (the recorded focus group), the data was compiled from all stages to analyse for themes, incidence, patterns and trends (MacIntyre 2000).

Results and discussion

Despite the traditional definition of action research as 'a collaboration between researcher and researched' (Burns 1999: 27, quoting Lewin 1946), the researcher was aiming for a process in which the students could reveal their own concerns and issues, uninfluenced as much as possible by the teacher's perceptions of the game outside an educational context. Yet at the same time the researcher wanted to be able to intervene in the process to reflect back, test out and challenge their concerns. There may also have been some influence on the students to enjoy the playing of Scrabble® and not dissent in this research project, as they knew that the researcher had a passion for the game and was a successful competitive player. Also, students were from countries where teachers are held in high esteem, which may have influenced their responses to playing the game. These two factors need to be noted as possible limitations of the study.

In the section below the findings are examined under categories that emerged from the students' answers and discussions, moving from the general to the specific.

Fun and games in the classroom

For the students, the research process began with an exploration of the place of games in the ESL classroom. Significantly, 8 of the 12 (66%) of respondents said in the preliminary questionnaire that they enjoyed playing games in class 'very much', 4 of the 12 (34%) said 'not much' and none said

'not at all'. However, the same measure, when applied to Scrabble®, yielded 11 out of 12 (92%) for 'very much' and 1 out of 12 for 'not much'. By the first check-sheet (after game one), all respondents stated they enjoyed playing Scrabble® 'very much'.

It became apparent from solicited and unsolicited comments throughout the process that the students considered having fun a legitimate outcome of classroom activities. When suggesting ways to improve the activity, such as instituting a time limit on turns, they always cited 'increasing the fun' as the reason. During the focus group, a young Japanese man commented: 'Fun is the most important element of the game for me – especially because I came from an IELTS [International English Language Testing System] class, which focuses on tests.' And an older Korean man said: 'I played Scrabble® in class here for the first time. I enjoyed it because it is fun and I learn new words. These things are both important in a language class.'

Experience of playing Scrabble®

All but two of the 12 students in the class had played Scrabble® at least once before. All had learned it in an ESL class in New Zealand, and most had only played the game in class. Two students had each played the game about ten times. Both had bought sets and continued playing outside of class: a young woman with her brother, and a man both with his wife and online.

Reason for playing

This data category is one of the most important for the ESL teacher, as it could feasibly underpin any policy on frequency of Scrabble® use in the classroom. It also goes to the heart of student 'perceptions'.

The introductory questionnaire posed five possible purposes (winning, having fun, learning, practising skills and teamwork) and asked students to grade them, from 'most important' to 'least important'. The largest number of respondents selected 'learning' (40%) as the most important reason, followed by 'fun' (30%), while 'winning' was selected as the least important reason by all respondents. Apart from 'winning', all skills were evenly spread across the spectrum.

Duration of game

It took most of the research process for students to crystallise their opinions on the ideal duration of a Scrabble® class. The game two check-sheet revealed a split: half of the students favoured one hour and half preferred two hours or until the game was finished. The final show-of-hands vote, as recorded in the focus group, was almost unanimous for a 90-minute Scrabble® class.

Perhaps the change was due to the trial of different durations. However, it may also have reflected the growing concerns about length of turns. Many of the solicited comments in the check-sheets and focus group, and a few unsolicited ones between games, focused on this. For many, it was tied to the question of how to use dictionaries. One student commented: 'Every time someone takes a long time, I feel a little bored. But I don't do anything about it – I just lose interest in the game.' Another explained: 'If I take a long time on a turn, it is to get the best score I can.' And yet another: 'Sometimes it is because you can't make a word easily – because of your letters or the board is blocked.'

Some students suggested having an arbitrary time limit on turns to speed up the game, by using an hour-glass or time-clock. One student had been allowed one-minute turns in Scrabble® at a previous school, but this group thought two minutes more reasonable.

How often, when to play

Everybody agreed that Scrabble® should be part of their learning program, but they were divided on how often it should be played. Half felt once a week was appropriate, while half preferred once a fortnight. Most considered Friday the best day to play, because they associated it with 'fun' communicative language learning activities.

Teams, numbers

In tournament Scrabble®, competitors always play one on one. In domestic Scrabble®, there are often several players, but still playing solo. During the sample games, the students tried playing both solo and in two-person teams. The number of teams per game ranged from two to four.

After game two, 9 of the 12 students (75%) said they liked playing with a partner. The focus group reinforced this preference. One student said: 'Two heads are better than one.' In theory, pair work should allow another opportunity for authentic speaking, as learners negotiate the task. Observation showed varying amounts of talk and varying ways of negotiation. Sometimes a pair discussed word-building on the rack; sometimes the individuals found their own words, placed them on the board and then negotiated the merits of their choice. The students sorted themselves easily into pairs, mostly according to friendships. However, there were some complaints on the check-sheets and in the focus group about students using their first language (L1) for such discussion. Only the more experienced players favoured solo play – this may be a consideration if Scrabble® is regularly used in class.

Most of the students preferred fewer teams, because they felt it sped up and enlivened the game. After game two, 55% said they liked two teams, compared with 28% who liked three teams and 17% who liked four.

Scoring and competitiveness

The researcher observed that the students were meticulous about getting their own scores right, even though this sometimes detracted from a focus on the word played. It seemed to work well having one person at each game recording and totalling the scores. This person would guide the individual scoring process and update the group regularly on totals. Also, scoring produced natural conversation among the group.

In the preliminary questionnaire, the students were unanimous that winning was the least important feature of classroom games. This was reinforced in both the second check-sheet and the focus group. The significance of the competitive element was qualified in the focus group and comments during games. The students liked having a score because it gave the game shape and added interest, but it was not the overriding element as it is for tournament players. One student, the most experienced player, said: 'I want to make the highest score I can. But it is not necessary for enjoying the game in class, because it is not a real competition. For me, the most important part is talking with my classmates.'

Dictionaries

The students agreed that the words were important and playing Scrabble® was an aid to learning vocabulary. It was an aid for them as they had to search their minds for words and check with the dictionary, but also they could learn from their opponents' words. One said: 'I like to search for new words – that is fun.' Another, a middle-aged Japanese woman, revealed: 'It is very useful for me to learn new words. I have learned a lot of new words in this school but forgot them the next day. I note all the words played in my game so I can revise them later. Because they happened in my game, I can remember them easily.'

The researcher observed that students did not always question unfamiliar words. This was confirmed in the second check-sheet: 55% said players noted meanings 'after every turn', 36% said 'sometimes' and 9% said 'occasionally'. One player commented that they always looked up the meaning of any word they played but only imparted it if asked. It was also observed that players sometimes paused to compare meanings from various dictionaries.

Only two players – the two experienced ones who play outside class – checked the parts of speech of words played, so they could 'hook' new words on (for example, –s for countable noun or present-tense verb).

Throughout the research process, how to use dictionaries became a major issue. Excessive reading or scrolling through dictionaries for new words to fit the letters on the rack took time and annoyed those waiting their turns. There was confusion between 'looking up words' and 'checking spelling', even after the class had developed and agreed on this terminology. Some students continued 'looking up' to get a competitive edge. There was also occasional disagreement about the acceptability of a word, caused by the range of dictionaries in use.

As a result of the researcher's intervention, where there were no dictionaries used in a game, the observed group's game sped up noticeably. Also, the players seemed more relaxed and the words played were all high-frequency words yet showed a good range of vocabulary knowledge. However, the game did slow down towards the end as the board 'got stuck'.

Oral use of English

The students reported in the focus group that most group talking had focused on explaining the meanings of new words, working out the scoring and discussing rules or board strategies. One student said this was the most important part of the game for him: 'It is good for practising talking and having good relations with your classmates.'

As noted earlier, the amount of conversation between partners varied. Also, some partners of the same nationality slipped unthinkingly into their L1 – this annoyed others in the group who were seeking opportunities to practise English. As there was not a wide range of different language groups in the class, some of the students playing Scrabble® did speak the same L1. Ideally each player would speak a different L1 so that slipping into L1 would not be an option.

Strategy

All but one class member said they would like to be 'taught' some Scrabble® skills in class to deal with difficult racks and blocked boards. Some students wanted coaching in strategic aspects of the game, such as board placement or scoring, and some in how to make or find words, such as anagramming or hooking.

Students in the focus group also said they appreciated that the difficulties actually promoted group discussion in English. In particular, the more experienced players felt their language skills were called on for explaining the finer points to their group.

Extension of Scrabble® for autonomous learning

Two players had reported in the preliminary questionnaire that they enjoyed the game outside class after learning to play in previous classes. In the games

observed by the researcher, these two became instrumental in scoring, clarifying rules and encouraging strategic considerations. Since then, one more student has taken up the game independently. All three have reported informally that playing Scrabble® has fed their passion for acquiring and learning vocabulary.

Conclusion: Summary, response to research process and further research

The study has shown that students recognise Scrabble® as a valid learning tool in the classroom – and beyond, in some cases. The research process has crystallised for them the place of fun and games in the learning process, even for learners who come from a background where fun is absent from the classroom.

Scrabble® is not as direct a learning tool as some, such as studying dialogues or learning words based around a topic. Perhaps its main value lies in the very enjoyment of the activity and the way it absorbs and focuses the participants. Because of that, the language that emerges is more likely to 'stick'. Also valuable is the unself-conscious use of language needed to negotiate the intricacies of the activity and the language confidence engendered by an activity which that the students can manage for themselves.

The findings raise a number of issues about how to use dictionaries. Wright's (1998) take on dictionaries is that they are commonly used in the classroom yet often taken for granted. There was a wide variation of how they were used in the Scrabble® classes. Perhaps some pre-teaching of skills on how to use dictionaries to improve one's knowledge of linguistic features, particularly as related to Scrabble®, would have been good.

For the researcher/teacher, the study confirmed his thoughts about the enjoyment and focus this activity brings to the classroom. It reinforced his thinking about the value of 'functional fluency' – using the target language to negotiate the task. It also opened his eyes to the vocabulary-learning potential.

The research process was most valuable because the topic has been so little studied. However, that also meant that there was a lack of models on which to base the research. In retrospect, there may have been too many quantitative surveying methods used with too much variation in the question types. In consequence, it was harder to quantify perceptions. The information gained by qualitative methods was especially salient. The students seemed to enjoy being the focus of action research, and the experience has given their subsequent Scrabble® classes a special 'vigour'.

The challenge for teachers is how to incorporate this activity into a syllabus, what proportion of time to devote to it, and how (or whether) to break it down into more manageable components. ESL teachers, themselves, present an obvious extension for this area of research. How do they perceive Scrabble® as a teaching (or learning) tool? Why do they use it? How do they use it? How often? Another interesting area to focus on is to examine if learning processes from different cultures produce different strategic approaches in this game.

From this much under-researched topic, a number of ESL-specific projects suggest themselves: a guide to using Scrabble® in the ESL classroom (for both learners and teachers), including training tasks, extension activities and terminology; a lexicon of high-frequency usage words, including meanings, inflections and anagrams; and a website for Scrabble® news, discussion, online play, downloading of resources, links and maybe even competition.

Several further research topics could lead on from the one summarised in this paper. First, it would be interesting to do a technique analysis on the activity as described in Nation's *Learning vocabulary in another language* (2001: 60–73). Secondly, it would be worth recording and observing the interaction during the playing of a game and analysing it for evidence of learning or opportunities for learning. For example, do learners explain the meaning of a challenged word to others? Do spelling errors get corrected? After the game, do learners recall any of the previously unknown words they looked up or saw used? A third research project would be to keep a record of the vocabulary used and check the frequency levels using, for example, the British National Corpus to evaluate the usefulness of the vocabulary.

Overall the study shows that Scrabble® has excellent potential as a self-directed learning activity. However, teachers or Scrabble® organisations could assist by developing a structure or at least providing links and referrals.

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