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TEACHING TIPS FORUM

SCRABBLE revisited

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SCRABBLE is a well-established word game in many countries and is closely connected with the English language, yet it does not seem to be used a lot by EFL/ESL teachers. This article provides explanations for such a paradox, and then outlines what could be done to turn the situation around. *SCRABBLE* deserves a place in most EFL/ESL classrooms, not only because of the linguistic worthiness of the game, but also because of its social, cultural, intellectual and international value.

***SCRABBLE* and TEFL/TESL**

SCRABBLE is more than just another American family board game. As a word game, it has become a worldwide institution. It was adapted to languages other than English, including Afrikaans, Dutch, French, German, Italian, Norwegian, Russian, and Spanish. There are *SCRABBLE* national associations, *SCRABBLE* international championships, an “Official *SCRABBLE* Players Dictionary” and an “Official *SCRABBLE* Puzzle Book.” Like its forerunner, the crossword puzzle¹, *SCRABBLE* has achieved a permanent place

in the roster of popular games, but in doing so it has remained more deeply connected with Anglo-American cultures and the English language.

Therefore, one would expect *SCRABBLE* sets to be readily available in most EFL or ESL classrooms. This, however, does not appear to be the case, although the game is a fairly common educational tool in other contexts for reasons that would apply to TEFL/TESL as well. For example, it has been used to work with exceptional children in elementary and junior high schools, because it requires active student participation and high rates of student responding (Wesson, 1988) while being compatible with today’s multi-media technology (Allen, 1995; Young, 1998). At the other end of the spectrum, *SCRABBLE* has been called on to boost the memory of “learning disabled” children (Nicholson, no date) or children with minimal brain dysfunction (Gardner, 1975). It has even been utilized to help homeless people improve their literacy skills and eventually enter the mainstream education system (James, 1987).

¹ The first crossword puzzle was published in December 1913 in the Sunday supplement of a New York newspaper (*World*). Eighteen years later, in 1931, Alfred M. Butts, a New York City architect, developed the earliest version of *SCRABBLE*, which was called Criss Cross. It was redesigned, renamed as *SCRABBLE*, and distributed by the *Production & Marketing Company* of Newtown, Connecticut, in 1948. *SCRABBLE* also has a more remote ancestor: anagrams, a game employing letter tiles that is said to have been played since the Middle Ages.

I recently looked for documentary evidence of classroom use for *SCRABBLE*. I searched several databases² and the World Wide Web, but found precious few TEFL/TESL-related citations. When the game is reported to have been employed to develop vocabulary skills, it is, again, mostly in elementary or junior high schools, and for teaching English as a first language (e.g., Chance, 1974). I found only three full-length texts in which *SCRABBLE* is seen as a valuable implement for EFL/ESL teachers. One is an article analyzing the Participatory English Language Learning (PELL) approach in South Africa (Bull, 1996). Another is an article discussing the use of language games in Thai schools (Pollard, 1974). And the third piece is the current online description of the objectives of Sri Lanka's Eastern University's English Language Teaching Unit.

WHY IS *SCRABBLE* UNDERUTILIZED, IF IT IS?

There are reasons why *SCRABBLE* may be underused in EFL/ESL classrooms, but before I go into that I will briefly explain how the game is played, as some readers may not be familiar enough with its rules.

Words must be formed in the same way as they are in crossword puzzles, but on a 225-square board instead of in a book, magazine or newspaper. In addition, words must be created from letters of the alphabet instead of being deduced or guessed from written definitions or clues. Two to four players compete by using 100 lettered tiles with a single letter on each. The tiles are also imprinted with various point values, approximately corresponding to the

frequency of occurrence of each letter in English words. Thus, players try to win as many points as possible. They take turns attaching their tiles to those already on the board in order to form interlocking words. They draw seven tiles from a pool at the beginning, and then one more after each turn. A player may forfeit his turn and exchange any or all of his tiles for some of those in the pool. Each player can only see the tiles on the board and his own – the other tiles are kept secret. Words are scored by adding up the point values of their letters, multiplied by the coefficients of 61 premium squares that may be covered on the board, such as double letter, triple letter, double word and triple word. Scoring is possible both horizontally and vertically, with higher scores attained by forming two or more interlocking words at the same time. At the end of the game, when one player has no tiles left or the board is deadlocked, the person who has scored the greatest number of points is the winner. The values of the letters a player has not used are totaled and deducted from his preliminary score.

Being relatively simple, these rules are not problematic in themselves. EFL/ESL students will obviously have to spend a lot of time adding up points and keeping score, but if they do it in English, so much the better. What will more likely dampen their teachers' enthusiasm is this: *SCRABBLE* generally requires a sustained effort from learners, even as it competes with more 'serious' activities in the curriculum. The time that can (and should) be devoted to games, let alone word games, is limited. Many word games that were specifically designed for the EFL/ESL classroom can be explained and played in twenty-five minutes

or less. For example, take yet another look at George McCallum's classic resource book (1980), *101 word games for students of English as a second or foreign language*. In addition, you don't need anything other than pens, paper and a chalk/whiteboard to play most of these games, so little extra material has to be bought, maintained and ultimately replaced. But with *SCRABBLE* teachers have to procure several sets, which must then be handled with care. Letter tiles are easily lost or left in the wrong place. Game boards can be damaged.

The most serious problem I see, though, has to do with the semantic bias of *SCRABBLE*. Because the least common letters, such as Q, X and Z, are worth more points than the others, and because there is a limited supply of the most frequently used ones, players all too often create words that are 'legitimate' (they are in the dictionary) but perfectly useless in everyday life. A highly respected British weekly, *The Economist* (1992; 1993), has called this phenomenon "Scrabble Babble." When form takes precedence over meaning, as in this case, students learn little. In countries like Japan, *SCRABBLE* can also reinforce a propensity to overuse dictionaries.

POSSIBLE REMEDIES

Going for a children's version of *SCRABBLE* (e.g., *Scrabble Junior*) is one way to make the game more EFL/ESL-friendly. It works well with young, low-level learners. However, the older and the more advanced students are probably better off with the regular version, as the children's game rewards tiny words with big points: too

many players will stop trying to think of words with more than three letters once they realize this.

If the regular version is used, I recommend combining it with different games. Then, almost every time the students play games, "*Scrabble*" can just be the name of one among several other 'learning stations' in the classroom (e.g., "Monopoly," "Cards," "Crossword Puzzles") – and you won't need multiple sets.

Two interesting *SCRABBLE*, like games that have recently been developed in Britain, can easily be employed either in combination with *SCRABBLE* or as an alternative to it. One is called *QUESTIQUE*³ and the other *BLANK*⁴. *QUESTIQUE* comes with board and letter tiles that have no point value. The rules are similar to those of *SCRABBLE* and, for *QUESTIQUE*'s "Standard Play" option, just as simple. Since the objective of the game is not to win points, there is no scoring. Some precious time is saved and the words formed by players are likely to be useful in an EFL/ESL context.

BLANK uses letter chips with a letter on each face, each chip with a unique letter combination. In addition, it comes with a special track to select letters instead of a traditional board. Not only does *BLANK* encourage the use of many different types of words, but players can also see how longer words are derived from simpler roots as these are built up to more complex structures by varying verb forms, adjective endings and nouns. *BLANK* would bring EFL/ESL learners to the threshold of grammatical analysis. On the minus side its rules and scoring system are fairly complex.

Manufactured and distributed by Questique Internationale, 37 Queensway, Lincoln, England LN2 4AJ, United Kingdom.

Manufactured and distributed by Blankgame, PO Box 141, Abingdon, Oxford, England OX14 3WG, United Kingdom.

On the minus side as well, both *BLANK* and *QUESTIQUE* try, for commercial reasons, to be everything to everybody: family games, party games, educational games and language/word games. This makes *ENJOY WORDS*⁵ particularly attractive as a possible third alternative to *SCRABBLE*. *ENJOY WORDS* is a board game that was developed in Thailand in 2001, and was designed specifically for EFL/ESL students. Like *BLANK*, it uses double-sided letter tiles with single letters on the front, *but* groups of two to five compounded letters on the back. For instance A on the front, and compounds such as ABLE, AC, AD, AN, ANCE, AR, ATE, ATION and ATIVE on the back. Players can use either the single letter or the compounded letters to form a word. Both single and clustered letters can be used anywhere – as a prefix, suffix or in the middle of the word. Other rules and patterns are based on (and are very similar to) those of the genuine *SCRABBLE*. The result is a “two-dimensional” version of *SCRABBLE* for the EFL/ESL classroom that removes two of the obstacles mentioned earlier: the rationing of frequently used letters and the semantic bias inherent in the original game. More letter combinations, more word choices and higher scores are possible. For example, to make the word “beautiful” would have previously taken nine tiles and 14 points. In the new game, “beautiful” can be spelled out with only five tiles and still have the same point value – which is why the creators of *ENJOY WORDS* have received three major awards: the Invention Award 2001 from the National Research Council of Thailand⁶, a silver medal at the

Brussels-Eureka 2001 international invention competition, and the Bulgarian-American Chamber of Commerce and Industry Certificate 2001 (Tanchaisawat, 2002).

CONCLUSION

There is little or no evidence that EFL/ESL is an area in which *SCRABBLE* is pulling its weight. EFL/ESL teachers probably utilize *SCRABBLE* even less than crossword puzzles although *SCRABBLE* is an inherently interactive game, whereas crosswords are usually textbook-bound and somewhat out of place in a communicative environment. As a vocabulary building and testing device, *SCRABBLE* is far from being as popular in our classrooms as it is in the outside world. As a word game, it can be a bit demanding of our students. As a language teaching tool, it is not entirely suitable for them. Nonetheless, *SCRABBLE* is out there, everywhere, and one of our greatest challenges has always been to bring more of the real world into the classroom. Therefore, those of us who do not use or rarely use *SCRABBLE* with their students should think again.

An EFL/ESL board game such as *ENJOY WORDS*, whose rules and patterns are very similar to, and as uncomplicated as, those of *SCRABBLE*, can certainly (and should probably) be employed in combination with it *or in preparation for it*, but (in my opinion) should not completely replace it. The social, cultural and intellectual value of the original game is currently irreplaceable. Its name recognition is second to none. Its international significance is huge. Throwing away such capital would be irresponsible.

Manufactured and distributed in Thailand by Wang Aksorn Co., Ltd., 69/3 Arun-Amarin Road, Bangkokyai, Bangkok 10600. Exported by Orchid Vision Co., Ltd., same address as above.
Recognizing the new game as “one of the best inventions of the year in the field of social and cultural development.”

So, yes, *SCRABBLE* has its proper place in EFL/ESL classrooms, because the word game our students are most likely to play with host families and/or foreign friends when they are in Australia, Britain, Canada, Ireland, South Africa, New Zealand or the United States is not *ENJOY WORDS*,

QUESTIQUE or *BLANK* but *SCRABBLE*, the one that has been around for more than 70 years. I also suspect that 70 years from now *SCRABBLE* will still be alive and kicking, but most, if not all, of its present would-be competitors will have fallen into oblivion.

The Author

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