



Scrabbling for Points

Gavin Rude is forced to reevaluate the English teacher's favorite game

I had the pleasure recently of playing Scrabble™

with a Malaysian, the outcome of which was a sad commentary on my knowledge of English, a language I have studied for 35 years and apparently still don't have down.

"I used to play competitive Scrabble in Singapore," she said. "Teams play other teams. I belonged to the college team where I worked, and we would play teams like the city engineers. It's really a math game."

Scrabble is indeed a math game at heart. Opponents are contested on the grounds of vocabulary, yet the better players must calculate their moves based on tile potentials, bringing both spheres of the mind, the analytical left and creative right brain, into play. For someone like me, this kind of thinking can blow a fuse, and I'm suddenly befuddled as how to even spell 'any' or 'awry.'

But despite the joy of eliciting awestruck gasps from your opponent for coming up with 'azimuth' or 'jodhpurs' on triple word score, the game is still won by points. And points are best won by gaining as many multiple combinations of words in one play.

Hence the advent of the two-character and three-character word lists, examples of which can be found at <http://members.ozemail.com.au/~rjackman/3threes.html>. By memorizing these approved combinations of characters ('ch' is a word, so is 'ph' and 'ee'), players gain multiplicity in their strategy. That strategy lies in nesting the wordplay alongside other words, getting points for as many as three or four words in one turn. The benefit of such a play also minimizes opening the board for an opponent to play their next hand.

Does this take all the fun out of the game? Hardly. Because now you have to keep a steady eye on what may, or may not be, a word. Indeed, when you read the three-character lists of such words as 'aah, aal, aba, amu, ayu, azo, baa, bah, bal, boh, bok, caw, cep, cha, cly, cru, cuz, dae, dak, daw, dee, dob, doo, dor, dow, eau' etc., you get the feeling its pretty much a free-for-all for your imagination.

"Gid' is not a word," I exclaimed, "and neither is 'aga.'"

"They are!" she said confidently.

"What do they mean?"

"I don't know. But they are words!"

It cost me five points for each word to challenge her play but she was right. Gid is a disease of sheep and an aga is a high-ranking Turkish officer.

Definitions in the end don't really matter. We're talking about large numbers of players gathering in timed competitions of 25-minutes per

player. No one has time to care if you know what an 'ich' is. If it is on the list and it adds another 24 points, then that's what matters.

What you have to watch for is how many words from other languages find themselves appearing in the game. "*Djin*" is a word with a variety of spellings, all of which mean ghost or spirit. The word is originally from Arabic, and is from where we get the more common words "genie" and "genius." Reading through the dictionaries is an amazing testimony of how English absorbs everything. Hearing about the U.S. intelligence czar on the radio the other day made me wonder when that word crept into our lexicon. I assume they spell it "czar" instead of "tsar" because it has more points that way.

The game is not without its own disappointments. According to the Official Scrabble Words Dictionary, "keb," "kex," and "oka" are words, but not 'OK.'

"'OK' is too a word!" I demanded. "It's an acronym that has long lost any relationship to what it stood for! Its usage is now so common as to be a word in its own right!" (I know this because I read Richard Lederer's column in *Language Magazine*, August 2004).

"It's not a word because you pronounce the characters," she said. "Oh-kay. Like TV is not a word." She pronounces it again slowly so I'll get it. "Tee-vee."

All my kvetching doesn't avail me, "OK" is not in either the red or green volume of the official dictionary. The Americans and the Canadians use the green version, the rest of the world uses the red. Nobody is on my side.

In fact, it was clearly evident that I had no comprehension of my own native tongue. My Malaysian friend ended our games with at least double my score. I studied English in college, yet felt like a simpleton who was happy to get his underwear on correctly. It only made me wonder how dangerous this world would have become if I had taken up engineering instead.

I am not daunted. There is a \$25,000 annual purse for the scrabble championship. But if I am going to win it, I've got to get back to 'ech, ecu, emf, euk, fah, gif, hic,' and 'jak.'

By the way, "etc." is NOT an approved Scrabble word, but it is acceptable English. **X**

Gavin Rude teaches English in Los Angeles when he is not playing Scrabble or hiking with his pet rottweiler.