The Effectiveness of *Bananagrams* Game for Honing Spelling Competence of Students Who Study English as a Second Language: An Action Research

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Abstract

A total of thirty two students (16 female and 16 male) of class nine C in Phuentsholing Higher Secondary School in Phuentsholing needed to improve their spelling competence as it was found through their weekly test that their major mistake was with spelling. Therefore, an action research titled 'The Effectiveness of *Bananagrams* Game for Honing Spelling Competence of Students Who Study English as a Second Language' was carried out to examine whether *bananagrams* game was effective in improving student's spelling proficiency. Mixed method was used for the study. Pre and Post-test data were collected through students' score in the spelling tests. The result revealed improvement in students' spelling indicating the effectiveness of *bananagrams* game for enhancing students' spelling skills. The action research recommends English teachers to use *bananagrams* game daily either before or after the lesson.

Keywords: *bananagrams, spelling, ESL, weekly test*

Introduction

Phuentsholing Higher Secondary was established in 1983 with 200 students and 9 teachers including the head teacher. When the Primary School could no longer accommodate the rapidly growing population, the school was upgraded as a Junior High School with classes ranging from 6 to 8. The school was inaugurated and formally upgraded to a High School in 2000 which was further upgraded to a Higher Secondary School in 2003 offering classes 11 and 12. In 2004, the first batch of students graduated from class 12 with 100% pass percentage. The school was awarded with Top Ten school certificate in 2009, 2012, and 2013. In 2014, a class 10 student topped whole Bhutan with third position. Though the result fluctuated in the later years, Phuentsholing Higher Secondary School was recognized by the Education Monitoring and Support Section Division (EMSD) for commendable increase in pass percentage in 2018 in comparison to 2017. Besides various awards for academic excellence, improving students' academic excellence has been a challenge.

The researcher taught English for the last eleven years at various class levels ranging from class Pre-Primary till class twelve. Currently the researcher teaches English for classes 9, 11 and 12. Students are aware English is the main subject for

them and for them to score better in English, spelling is vital. On the contrary, students expressed their difficulty in English, especially retention of spelling. Although the researcher tried to use different types of teaching strategies, the result was dim as students continued to commit spelling errors more than any other grammatical structures.

One study states that spelling instruction continues to have a cycle of debate among educational theorists, dividing them into two separate camps with the behaviourist theorists advocating for "bottom-up" processes while psycholinguistic theorists favouring "top-down" processes in reading and spelling acquisition (Sawyer & Joyce, 2006). Since different students appeal to different approaches, teachers must understand and identify which student needs a mere spelling tests and which student wants to rote-learn the words, and implement the strategies accordingly. Strategies considered as feasible and applicable by the teachers may not be students' preferred one, and thus, students would not be able to spell the words correctly. It is from this very issue that this examination came into consideration.

Significance of the Action Research

The participants in this study were one section of class nine students. Out of 32 students, 16 were girls and 16 were boys. Both the researcher and students understand English is the main subject for students of all levels of classes, and to excel in English, spelling is imperative. Although the researcher adopted varied strategies to teach spelling, students continued to commit more spelling errors than any other grammatical features. Students answered 'no' whenever they were asked whether they would want to have spelling tests.

Students' weakness in spelling was further proven correct during the first term weekly test where more than 70 percent of students committed spelling errors in the range of 5–10. The purpose of this action research, therefore, is to try out an alternative strategy particularly to enhance spelling competence of students.

Literature Review

Graham, Harris and Loynachan (1993) say educators ought to know which spelling words should be taught to which level of children. Educators must understand which strategy best suit for students to retain and develop their spelling competence. Behaviour of teachers is decisive in "enhancing students' ability to think critically, develop confidence and speaking skills, contribute towards collaborative learning and develop self-esteem" (Dukpa, 2010, p. 83).

Numerous studies were conducted to evaluate which strategy best assists students' spelling retention. Gettinger (1985) examined the effectiveness of "student-

directed versus teacher-directed spelling instruction on children's spelling accuracy and retention" (p.167). Nine children received four alternating experimental treatments during a 16-week spelling program. Results indicated that student-directed instruction that incorporated visual and verbal cues was most effective in increasing children's spelling accuracy.

A similar study was undertaken by van Staden (2010) to develop a visual imagery programme for Grade 3 learners by compromising between direct instructions in specific spelling skills whilst also immersing learners in meaningful authentic reading activities. The results of the quasi-experimental study corroborated the importance of considering visual imaging teaching strategies to improve the spelling ability of learners with spelling problems.

Yet another study was conducted by Darch and Simpson (1990) to investigate the relative effectiveness of two approaches for teaching spelling with 28 upper elementary learning disabled students. While one group of students was taught spelling with a visual imagery mnemonic, the other was taught spelling with rule-based spelling strategies. But the result of their study indicated that students taught with explicit rule-based strategies out-performed students presented with a visual imagery model.

Gordon (1994) steered an experiment to explore new approaches to teaching spelling to adult learners. Strategies used were "correction of own tests; systematic teaching; careful diagnosis; guided practice; spelling strategies most adaptable to the personal learning style; word study; frequent writing; and phonetic realization" (p. 1). The study recommends teaching spelling patterns and providing phonetic analysis using an integrated approach where reading and writing are included.

An examination about whether a correlation existed between the teachers' comfort level with word study instruction and their implementation of a word study program was conducted by Coine (1995). Results showed a positive correlation.

In 2008, a group of researchers surveyed the instructional practices in spelling and the types of adaptations Primary School teachers made for struggling spellers (Graham, Morphy, Harris, Barbara, Saddler, Mora, & Mason). Most of the teachers surveyed reported teaching spelling, and the vast majority of respondents implemented a complex and multifaceted instructional program that applied a variety of research-supported procedures. Yet, with "27% of their students experienced difficulty with spelling" (p. 796), the study indicated that teachers failed to apply a number of important instructional procedures when teaching spelling.

An examination by Duckworth, Kirby, Tsukayama, Berstein and Ericsson (2011) distinguished deliberate practice and less effective practice activities to understand how children improve in an academic skill, specifically, spelling skill. Their result specified that:

> Deliberate practice, operationally defined as studying and memorizing words while alone, mediated the prediction of final performance by the personality trait of grit, suggesting that perseverance and passion for long-term goals enable spellers to persist with practice activities that are less intrinsically rewarding – but more effective – than other types of preparation (p. 1).

A study was conducted by Skarr, McLaughlin, Derby, Meade and Williams (2012) to evaluate the efficacy of "methods of cover, copy and compare (CCC) and Direction Instruction (DI) flashcards in spelling" (p. 247). The result showed mastery of spelling words with both CCC and DI flashcards.

In 2015, Pan, Rubin and Rickard examined the ability of testing in enhancing adult spelling acquisition, relative to copying and reading. The result showed that, in general, adult spelling skill acquisition benefitted both from testing and copying, but substantially less from reading.

Tshomo, Choden, Thinley and Sherab (2018) conducted an action research to investigate spelling errors involving 160 class 7 and 8 students in Bhutan who study English as a second language. The study recommends teachers to "spend about 15 minutes in a day or 60 – 70 minutes in a week as spelling period" (p. 18).

There are considerable researches conducted to study about various strategies adopted by educators to help students improve their spelling skills, yet studies have not stressed on analysing how gaming helps students retain their spelling competence. Therefore, the question of whether *bananagrams* gaming will be effective in assisting students spelling retention skill captured the interest of the researcher.

Objectives of the Action Research

Despite various strategies adopted by the researcher to lessen the spelling errors of students, the result was dim. This action research aims to:

1. Investigate the effectiveness of *bananagrams* game in enhancing the spelling skills of students.
2. Lessen spelling errors by the use of *bananagrams* game.

Action Research Question

This Action Research aims to answer the following main question:

Would *bananagrams* game be an effective tool for honing students' spelling competence?

Research Design and Methodology

This action research was conducted with thirty two class nine students of one section for three months from Mid of April till the second week of June. Mixed method was used in this action research. Students were conducted with a spelling test and the individual score was compiled. As soon as the baseline data was collected from the participants, intervention action was put into practice. Finally, during the post intervention stage, the participants were conducted with a spelling test and individual students' score was collected. In order to authenticate the finding, intervention action was put into action once again and students were conducted with a spelling test. Following two phases of intervention actions and spelling tests, the effectiveness of the intervention action was analysed by comparing the scores of pre-intervention and two phases of post interventions. Moreover, a structured questionnaire was used to gather students' view on the effectiveness of *bananagrams* game.

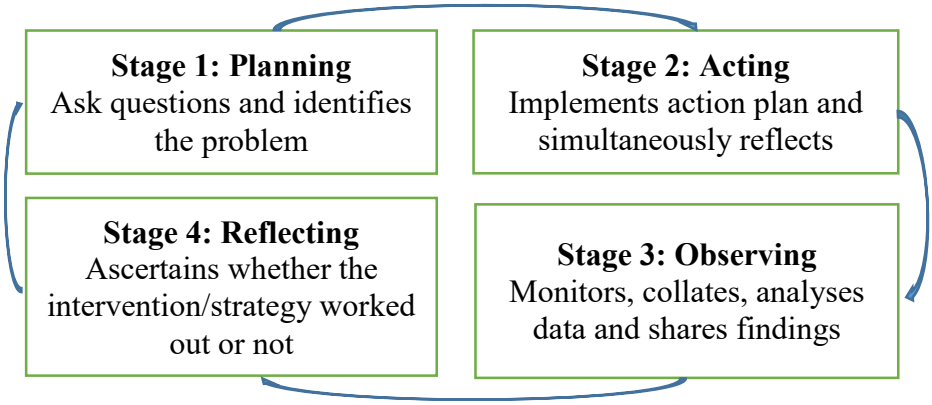

Figure 1. Action Research Process (Royal Education Council, 2018, p.5)

The theoretical framework and action research plan adopted in this research are "a cyclical and spiral four stage process, namely planning, acting, observing and reflecting" (Royal Education Council, 2018).

Baseline Data Collection

Data was collected through students' spelling test. Table 1 shows list of commonly misspelled words which were dictated for students during baseline data collection.

Table 1. List of commonly misspelled words

1	Accommodate	11	Basically
2	Achieve	12	Benefit
3	Acquire	13	Calendar
4	Across	14	Coming
5	Address	15	Competition
6	Advertise	16	Disappear
7	Apparent	17	Embarrass
8	Argument	18	Exercise
9	Athlete	19	Explanation
10	Beginning	20	Forty

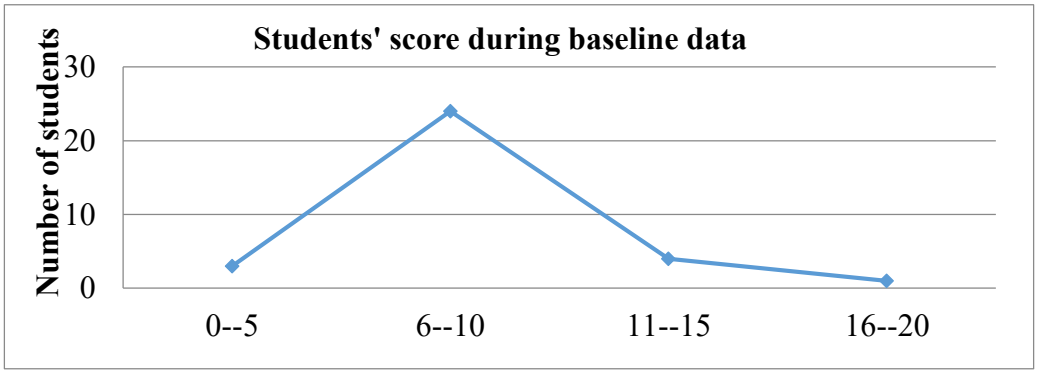

Figure 2. Students' score during baseline data

Slightly over 9 percent and 3 percent of students fell in the score range of 0 – 5 and 16 – 20 respectively. With 24 students, 75 percent of students are decked in the score range of 6 – 10. The pass percentage was a little over 43 percent and the average score in the pre-intervention was 40 percent (Figure 2).

Intervention

An ethical approval was sought from the school vice principal and the participants. The researcher informed the aim and objective of the action research. The students were briefed about the planned action research and its purpose to ensure proper usage of the method. They were ensured anonymity and confidentiality and briefed on how the data was going to be used and protected. The researcher could not take on a critical friend to authenticate the data due to time constraint.

After the baseline data was conducted, the researcher instituted the *bananagrams* game for class 9 C students either as a pre or post lesson activity,

depending upon the suitability of lesson, for ten minutes. The steps of game were adapted as per the explanation by The SCRABBLE World (2012) in YouTube.

Students were grouped into four teams with eight members each. Each team was given a *bananagrams* bag. When students were told to start the game, they spread the tiles, upside down, on the table.

Every member in a team took 11 tiles each leaving fifty six tiles on the table. These remaining tiles on the table are called as BUNCH. Upon a count of 3, the researcher shouted 'SPLIT' and students flipped their tiles and started forming words that intersected like a crossword grid. Each player connected tiles to form words horizontally and vertically whichever possible but proper nouns and names were not allowed. Any player was allowed to rearrange their words. When a player has used all the tiles s/he had, s/he shouted 'PEEL' and all the members in the team took one additional tile from the bunch. The process continued until no tile remained on the table.

A team member shouted 'DUMP' if s/he had hard time arranging the tiles, and upon discarding a tile to the bunch, s/he took three more tiles from the bunch. The process of arranging and 'PEEL' and 'DUMP' continued.

When a player had used and arranged all the tiles, s/he shouted 'BANANAS'. The other members inspected the grid for misspellings and proper nouns. If there were any mistake, the team member shouted 'ROTTEN BANANA' and the student who made an error returned the tiles to the bunch. The other team members continued the game. Whoever arranged first without any spelling error was declared the WINNER.

Post-Data Collection – I

After the intervention for one month, students were conducted with a spelling test. List of commonly misspelled words which students were asked to write are reflected in Table 2.

Table 2. List of commonly misspelled words

1	Writing	11	Sacrifice
2	Weird	12	Rhythm
3	Usually	13	Restaurant
4	Twelfth	14	Repetition
5	Temporary	15	Recommend
6	Surprise	16	Receive
7	Successful	17	Psychology
8	Soldier	18	Professional
9	Separate	19	Privilege
10	Scissors	20	Personally

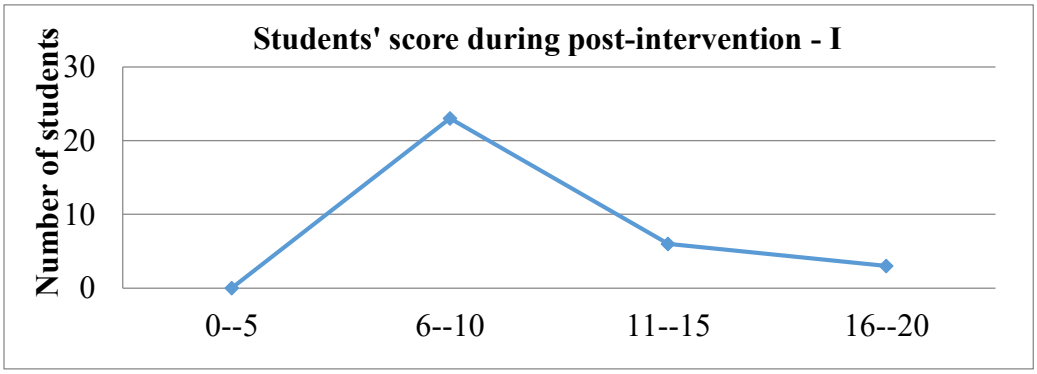

Figure 3. Students' score during post intervention – I

While none of the students scored in the category of 0 – 5, maximum number of students are in the category of 6–10 with a little over 71 percent. With 3 students, 9 percent of total students scored in the range of 16–20. Although the pass percentage was approximately 88, average score during the post intervention – I was 49 percent (Figure 3).

Post-Data Collection – II

In order to authenticate the effectiveness of *bananagrams* game, the researcher conducted yet another spelling test after one moth of intervention. The commonly misspelled words are listed in Table 3.

Table 3. List of commonly misspelled words

1	Permanent	11	Knowledge
2	Peculiar	12	Judgment
3	Original	13	Island
4	Occasion	14	Invitation
5	Mysterious	15	Interruption
6	Mathematics	16	Interfere
7	Wednesday	17	Intelligent
8	Library	18	Immediately
9	Length	19	Imaginary
10	Laboratory	20	Humorous

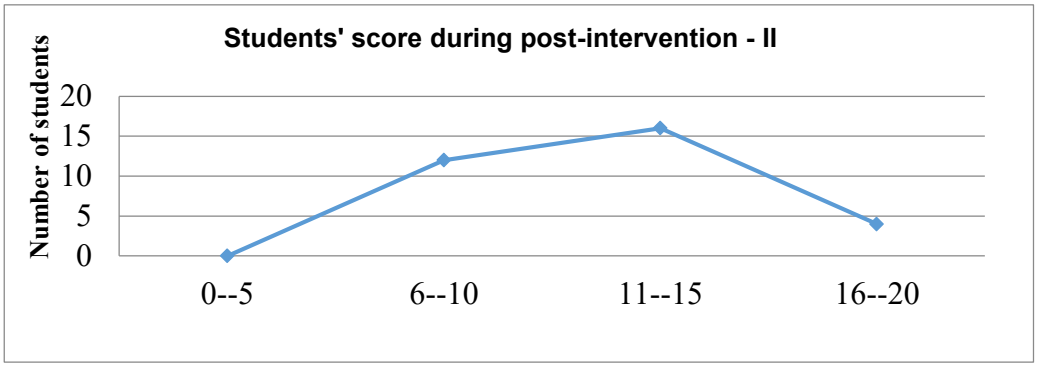

Figure 4. Students' score during post-intervention – II

50 percent of students scored 11–15 while none of the students fell in the score range of 0–5. Over 12 percent of students scored in the range of 16–20, yet none of them scored 20 out of 20. The pass percentage was a little more than 96 and average score during the post intervention – II was around 60 percent (Figure 4).

Result and Findings

Figure 5 illustrates the comparison of students' score among baseline data and the post intervention I and II.

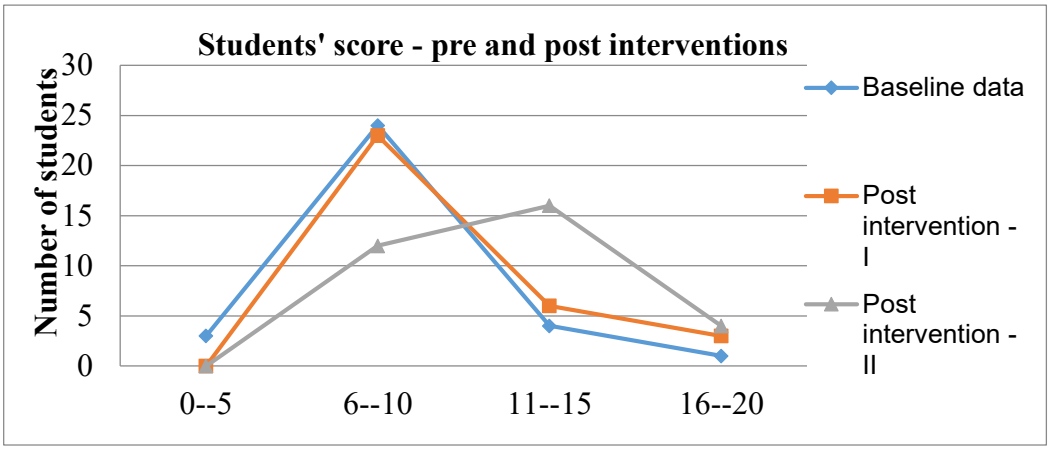

Figure 5. Comparison of students' score – pre and post interventions

To begin with, none of the students scored in the range of 0 – 5 during post interventions while there were 3 students during the pre-intervention. There is a decrease of students in the category of 6–10 during the post intervention – II in comparison to pre and post intervention – I, but the score range increased from 4 and 6 students during pre-intervention and post intervention – I respectively to 16 students during post intervention – II in the score range of 11–15. An increase of students to 4 from 1 during pre-intervention and 3 during post intervention – I in the score range of 16 – 20 is noteworthy.

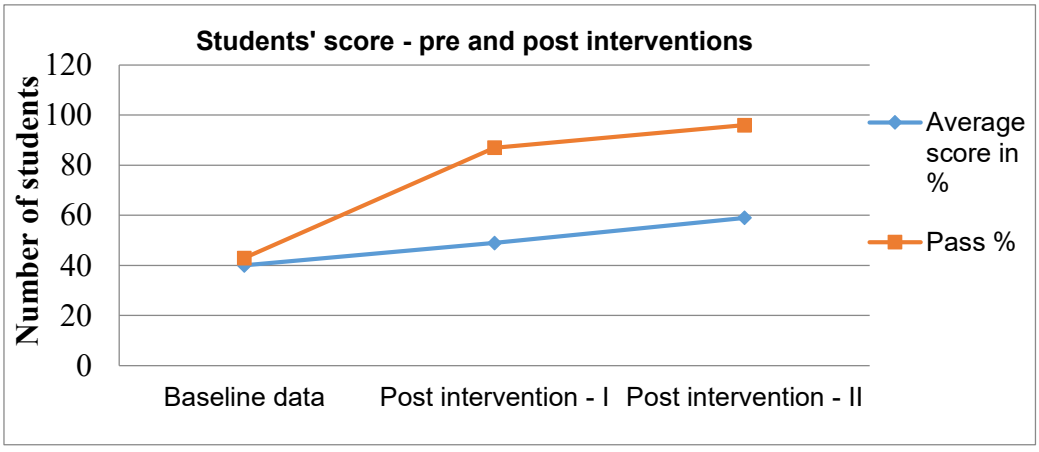

Figure 6. Comparison of students' average score – pre and post interventions

Although it is not a whopping increase, there is a 9 percent rise in average score in the post intervention – I from baseline data. During the post intervention – II, students average score increased with 10 percent in comparison to post intervention

– I. Generally, students' average score has a notable increase of 19 percent from baseline data to post intervention – II.

Similarly, there is prominent increase in pass percentage from baseline data to post intervention II. Pass percentage leap-frogged from around 44 percent during baseline data to more than 87 percent during post intervention – I which further increased to 96 percent during the post intervention – II. To conclude, there is a distinguishing increase in pass percentage of 53 percent from baseline data to post intervention – II.

After the two phases of interventions, students were provided with a structured questionnaire to assess whether *bananagrams* game helped them in their spelling skills. The first question in the questionnaire asked whether students liked *bananagrams* game. 100 percent of students responded positively. The second question enquired them to explain how *bananagrams* helped them in their spelling skills. 25 percent of total respondents have abstained from answering the question.

One student has written thus:
If teachers have used such games, we would not have had spelling errors.

In his response, another student hopes for similar type of game activities for them. The main reason, the respondent stated, was games kept them active and thus learned whatever was taught. These responses conform to the increased trend in pass percentage and average score in % of students from pre-intervention to two phases of post interventions indicating the effectiveness of *bananagrams* in honing students' spelling competence.

Conclusion

The researcher believes this study was carried out successfully as the planned actions were implemented on time according to the timeline. Most importantly, the effectiveness of *bananagrams* game in honing students' spelling skills was unearthed. The result of the experiment runs in parallel with one blog writer's opinion about the importance of the game. Johnson (2019), in his blog titled *Using Bananagrams to Build Language Skills*, puts that forcing students to race to spell as quickly as they can would broaden their vocabulary and reinforce spelling skills as they gain familiarity with word parts. Thus educators are recommended to put in practice *banangrams* game for ten to fifteen minutes either before or after the lesson to lessen spelling errors of ESL students.

Limitation

The limitations to this study are restricted sample size and participants being only a handful of 32 students from one section. The result would have been more authentic

and applicable to the general population if the participants were selected from different schools.

Implications for further Action Research

The researcher could not take on a critical friend to authenticate the data due to time constraint. Therefore time span considered for the research can also be questioned. Since the research suggests that a lot more could be explored, the researcher intends to do a further research with more data samples from different schools to ascertain the effectiveness of *bananagrams* in honing spelling skills of students who study English as a second language.

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