

Board Games: An Innovative Attempt to Enhance the Students' Speaking Skill

Kevin Armando Brand Fonseca
Universidad Nacional, Costa Rica
brandfkev@gmail.com

Resumen: El aprendizaje de un idioma extranjero es, por su naturaleza, altamente interactivo. A la luz de esta teoría, Oxford (1990) recalcó que “el lenguaje es una manifestación del comportamiento social, gira en torno a la comunicación, y ésta ocurre entre dos o varias personas” (p. 114). Por ello, la implementación de actividades grupales en la clase de inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL, por sus siglas en inglés) es esencial puesto que los estudiantes construyen destrezas sociales y lingüísticas. Los juegos de mesa son, en este sentido, un medio para hablar en el lenguaje meta, pues estos promueven la interacción en el salón de clase. Se puede asegurar que tales juegos enfatizan la práctica oral mediante el uso de vocabulario que los estudiantes dejarían de lado si no estuviesen participando en una tarea agradable. Es decir, una clase de EFL debería de ser dinámica debido a que la interacción y la participación se manifiestan de diferentes formas. Bajo esta premisa, la siguiente propuesta intentó mejorar la habilidad del habla a través de la utilización de juegos de mesa interactivos en las clases de inglés conversacional. La investigación se desarrolló con el grupo 8-4/B del Liceo Las Mercedes con Orientación Tecnológica y consideró La Enseñanza Comunicativa del Lenguaje (abreviado CLT en inglés) como la metodología de enseñanza correspondiente, ya que dicha filosofía promueve la interacción y la comunicación real en la clase. Durante la realización de estas actividades, los estudiantes practicaron el lenguaje meta con distintos juegos de mesa y comunicaron ideas sencillas a sus compañeros. Al final, los resultados reflejaron que, a través de la ejecución de juegos de mesa basados en la comunicación oral, los estudiantes mostraron una mayor participación y mejoraron su habilidad del habla, cumpliendo así con el objetivo principal planteado inicialmente.

Palabras clave: juegos de mesa, comunicación, interacción, habla, implementación.

Abstract: The nature of foreign language learning is highly interactive. In the light of this principle, Oxford (1990) pointed out that “language is a form of social behavior; it is communication, and communication occurs

between and among people” (p. 114). For this reason, the implementation of group-work based activities in the English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom is essential since students build social and linguistic skills. Board games are, in this sense, a means to reinforce the speaking skill by promoting interaction in the classroom. Certainly, such games emphasize the oral practice through the use of lexical items that students would leave aside if they, as learners, were not participating in an engaging task. This means that an EFL class should be dynamic, for interaction and participation arise in different manners. Following this premise, the next proposal aimed at enhancing the students’ speaking skill by implementing interactive language board games in the conversational English class. Such treatment took place in group 8-4/B at Liceo Las Mercedes con Orientación Tecnológica and considered Communicative Language Teaching as the corresponding teaching methodology because such a philosophy promotes interaction and real-life communication in the class. During the implementation of the activities, the students practiced the target language by playing with different board games and communicating simple ideas to their classmates. In the end, the results indicated that, by playing oral-communication based board games, the students participated more actively and improved their speaking skill, fulfilling the main objective of the study.

Keywords: board games, communication, interaction, speaking, implementation.

I Introduction

The globalization process has forced professionals from different fields to speak English. Due to this fact, the curriculum developers for the Costa Rican Ministry of Public Education (2005), MEP (according to its acronym in Spanish), agreed that English as a subject in public high schools should stress the ability to communicate for practical purposes, developing attitudes required for further study, work, and leisure (p.14). Complying with such requirements entails attaining communicative competence to be fully functional in the target language (TL). Grounded on the interactive nature of language, English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers should have students carry out tasks in pairs, groups, and with teachers and visitors (MEP, 2005, p.20). To encourage teamwork, it is essential to use different didactic resources for the students to participate in a more dynamic way, and board games can be useful to achieve such goal. According to Rief and Heimburge (2007), “game days provide a more relaxing environment for children to interact orally with other students” (p. 112). Therefore, the communicative principles stipulated in the English program demand the incorporation of interactive tasks and games that help student surmount their difficulties when learning English.

This study was conducted with a thirteen-people group of eighth grade EFL students at Liceo Las Mercedes con Orientación Tecnológica, Pérez Zeledón, Costa Rica.

In this rural area, students received both academic and conversational English lessons to ensure more exposure and better results regarding the learning of the foreign language. Despite this advantage, learners showed certain weaknesses with respect to the speaking skill. In four classroom observations carried out before conducting this research, the author detected that oral communication in the TL hardly ever took place in the conversational English classes. Actually, many students avoided the use of English in the classroom and relied on their mother tongue (Spanish) to convey meanings and intentions. On the other hand, the students who used the TL to speak in the classroom performed poorly inasmuch as they used chunks to convey basic meanings but left aside sentence formation in discourse. Considering these scenarios, this research describes how implementing interactive language board games enhanced the students' speaking skill in group 8-4 at Liceo Las Mercedes con Orientación Tecnológica.

Research questions

1. Do interactive language board games contribute to the development of the speaking skill in EFL learners?
2. What kinds of interactive language board games can teachers implement to reinforce the speaking skill?

General objective

- To enhance the students' speaking skill by implementing interactive language board games in group 8-4 at Liceo Las Mercedes con Orientación Tecnológica.

Specific objectives

1. To design language board games so that the spoken language can be used in an interactive way.
2. To implement language board games so that the speaking skill can be emphasized by means of interaction.
3. To provide the students with interactive language board games so that they, as EFL learners, can interact while speaking the target language.
4. To analyze the results of the implementation of interactive language board games in enhancing the speaking skill.

II Theoretical Considerations

2.1 The Communicative Approach

EFL teachers from Costa Rican public high schools uphold a specific philosophy to teach the language in the classroom. The MEP (2005) determined that the *communicative approach* (CL) provides the adequate environment to learn the foreign language (p.23). Such approach “stresses the need to teach communicative competence as opposed to linguistic competence; thus, functions are emphasized over forms” (Doggett, 1986, p. 3). In this sense, students learn the TL to be fully functional and communicate their intentions successfully. On the other hand, from Larsen-Freeman's (1986) viewpoint on the CL, the teacher is a facilitator of students' learning, becoming a manager of

classroom activities. As a matter of fact, the educator is responsible for establishing situations likely to promote communication (p. 131). The previous idea suggests the teacher is an advisor who provides students with feedback and monitors their performance in different tasks. In this fashion, the communicative approach can be considered a practical method to teach EFL nowadays. This approach is usually employed under the *communicative language teaching* and *task based instruction* methodologies.

2.2 Communicative Language Teaching and Task Based Instruction

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is a methodology that promotes communicative competence over grammatical competence. In fact, Richards (2006) pointed out that communicatively competent people can “know how to vary... [their] use of language according to the setting and the participants” (p.3). In addition, Larsen-Freeman (1986) suggested that communication occurs by having the interlocutor and receiver negotiating meaning (p.131). The purpose of this methodology is to address each activity with a communicative intent. For this reason, the students need knowledge of the linguistic forms, meanings, and functions so that they can communicate in real life situations. Based on these facts, CLT is a methodology whose ultimate purpose is to have students attain communicative competence.

Task-based instruction (TBI) is considered one extension of the CLT movement. This methodology arose from a focus on classroom processes (Richards, 2006, p.30). Richards (2006) ascertained that “in the case of TBI, the claim is that language learning will result from creating the right kinds of interactional processes in the classroom, and the best way to create this is to use specially designed instructional tasks” (p. 30). Actually, the author affirmed that, in such methodology, grammar and other dimensions of communicative competence can be developed as a by-product of engaging learners in interactive tasks (Richards, 2006, p. 30). Nunan (as cited in Buyukkarci, 2009) defined task as a piece of classroom work that leads learners to understand, produce, and interact in the target language while the student’s attention is focused on activating their grammatical knowledge to express meaning (p. 314). Such perspectives give way to a more clear understanding of the importance of TBI in the EFL context. Summing up, through TBI, students use the TL interactively to create communicative competence.

2.3 Resources to Enhance Communication

The material used in the class plays a relevant role in teaching speaking properly. Teachers should pay more attention to this means since the students will attempt to fulfill the purpose of any activity by employing it. Crawford (2002) stipulated that for the resource to be useful, it must fulfill a number of specific criteria. Among them, she pointed out that the material should be contextualized, purposeful, realistic, authentic, and learners’ needs oriented (p.84). In the first case, since language is functional, the students should be familiar with what happens in the context presented in the practice for the activity to be meaningful. Likewise, every resource in language teaching has a purpose; in the case of speaking activities, their focus is on achieving communication. Subsequently, since

communication takes place in real events, the material could be authentic so that students do not use the language with artificial constraints. Finally, these resources also have to address the students' needs. This means aim should be to foster the learners' autonomy, cater to individual and contextual differences, and engage learners both affectively and cognitively (Crawford, 2003, p. 84-87). In this light, teachers must make sure that the material employed in class is useful to assure that communication is enhanced.

Interactive activities help learners achieve effective communication in the TL. Brown and Wu (as cited in Poon, 2001) remarked that "it is through constant interactive practice that language skills are acquired and progress is made" (p. 135). In other words, the nature of language learning is interactive; in consequence, implementing activities where two people or more work together making use of the target language is paramount for language acquisition to take place. Rivers (1987) defined *interaction* as a process in which, by eliciting and receiving information of interest, "students achieve facility in using language when their attention is focused on conveying and receiving authentic messages" (p. 4). Certainly, this process makes the learning more meaningful since students use the language with communicative purposes. Under this assumption, employing interactive language exercises is necessary, especially because these activities are means to elicit students' participation and initiative (Rivers, 2002, p.10). An EFL teacher, thereby, cannot expect a class to be quiet at all, for interaction and participation arises in different manners. Based on the previous ideas, interactive activities foster communication in the EFL class and lead students to improving their performance in the TL.

Board games are a novel option for the students to use the target language. Students may find these games not only challenging but also interactive. Brandt, Messeter, and Binder (2008) sustained that these tools promote "...the leveling of power relations or other structuring relations between participants" (p. 61). This statement refers to the fact that board games are interactive; as a result, they enhance language acquisition. As Reif and Heimburge (2007) pointed out, these tools can be used orally to help students become more adept at speaking clearly (p. 112). These games might, indeed, provide oral practice by emphasizing the use of vocabulary and phrases that would be barely used if the students were not involved in an engaging activity (Maxom, 2009, p. 346). Furthermore, according to Dang and Ruitter (2005), these activities are easily adaptable. For instance, the same authors provide the example of a bingo card whose numbers are replaced with grammar points and vocabulary items so that teachers can apply the game in EFL classes (p.284). These authors also consider that students will be more willing to demonstrate their linguistic prowess when they are involved in the activity (p. 283). Hence, board games enhance oral communication because they present meaningful situations to the learners.

III Methodology and Data Analysis

3.1 Design

The implementation of language board games took place during four weeks, one day per week, three lessons each day. The length of every lesson was forty minutes. The techniques included in this methodology are described with in detail subsequently.

Die pronunciation game⁴ (Appendix 1)

This board game consists in having students practice pronunciation with several words from lower to higher levels of difficulty. The student who pronounces more words suitably at the end of the competition wins.

Guess where? (Appendix 2)

The purpose of this game is to have students guess the location of a character on a map by giving oral locations and directions. The student who guesses more people at the end of the game wins.

Town's monopoly (Appendix 3)

In this board game, students practice and learn expressions to locate goods and services on a map by providing accurate information in their answers. In this way, learners can obtain properties and rent them or sell them to their partners. The person with more money wins the game.

How can I get to...? (Appendix 4)

To play this game, students give specific directions by answering questions based on pictures projected by the teacher on the whiteboard. The first participant to reach the finish line wins.

Little town⁵ (Appendix 5)

When playing this interactive language board game, students guide their classmates by giving directions and commands to get to particular places. The student who guides more of their partners to the target location wins.

My die says (Appendix 6)

Using a map to give directions, students answer questions in order to make money according to the level of difficulty suggested by the colors that the die indicates. The student that obtains more money at the end of the competition wins.

Ladders and snakes (Appendix 7)

This next game combines reading and speaking skills, for students answer oral questions based on a reading in order to reach the finish line first.

Honey bee (Appendix 8)

This board game requires a reading about directions in Costa Rica. Students answer questions according to the notes that they take from the text. The students move forward their chips with each correct answer so that they can win.

⁴ This game does not require a board to play, but it is a board game as students need with chips and cards.

⁵ This game was played in two ways, by punishing students when the answer was wrong and by providing them with a specific number of points according to the answer given.

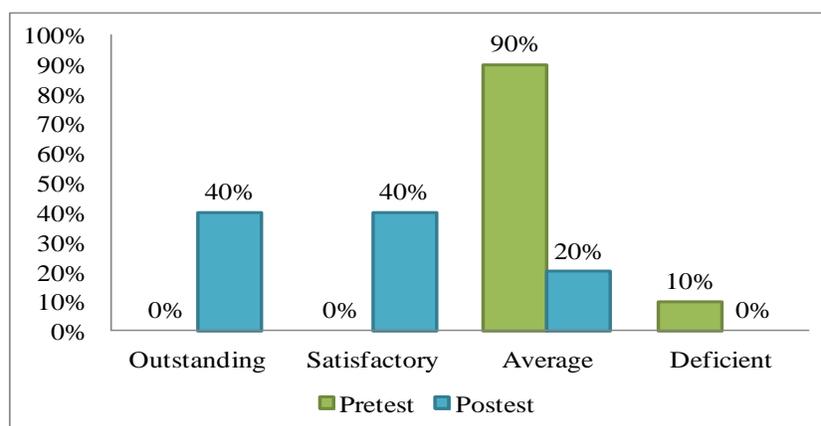
The turtles' race (Appendix 9)

In this interactive language board game, students go over expressions to give directions by replying the teacher's questions about specific places on a map projected onto the wall. With each correct answer, students can move forward their turtles to cross the street (the board game) and win the game.

3.2 Data Analysis and Interpretation

The pretest and the posttest (Appendixes 11 and 12 respectively) were administered to evaluate the effectiveness of language board games in enhancing the students' speaking skill. The instruments tested the learners' oral proficiency level before and after the implementation of such methodology. Figure 3.2.1. illustrates the results

■ **Figure 3.2.1.** Comparison of the Grades Obtained in the Pretest and the Posttest



By comparing the students' oral performance in the pretest and the posttest, the results indicate that there was an important progress after the implementation of this methodology. In fact, according to the speaking level disclosed in the pretest, students were not competent enough to give and follow directions suitably before carrying out this study. The highest grade in the pretest was a 60 while the lowest one was a 20. In contrast, the lowest grade in the posttest was a 64, and the highest one was a 92. This change evidences the improvement that students had in their oral performance when giving directions in English by playing with interactive language board games. In this sense, learners interacted with their classmates to be able to solve specific tasks and activities that entailed a communicative purpose. On the other hand, in the posttest, most students obtained a grade in the outstanding or the satisfactory level. This increment is positive, considering that none of them scored a grade within these levels in the pretest. Moreover, the fact that no student obtained a deficient grade in the posttest indicates that, after the implementation of this methodology, students were more communicatively competent when using their speaking skill to give and follow directions. In the light of

these results, interactive language board games were effective to enhance the speaking skill of students in group 8-4/B at Liceo Las Mercedes con Orientación Tecnológica.

IV Conclusions

The study suggests that interactive language board games are effective to have students practice their speaking skill. The results from the pretest reflect that all students needed to reinforce this ability in the target language. After playing with interactive language board games, students of group 8-4/B at Liceo Las Mercedes con Orientación Tecnológica could enhance their speaking skill. This fact can be verified by analyzing the improvement in the grades of the posttest with respect to the pretest. Based on this evidence, the author can make specific recommendations to develop the teaching/learning process in conversational English classes at public high schools. First, teachers should implement interactive activities more frequently in the classroom so that students can work on reinforcing their speaking skill. In the same way, even though the elaboration of board games can be time consuming and expensive, they should be present in the classroom more regularly because students' participation and use of the target language are fostered through these activities. Therefore, the author of this paper expects that this methodology can be useful for teachers in the MEP that desire to implement it in their English for Conversation lessons.

V References

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Biography

Kevin Armando Brand Fonseca is a student of the licentiate's degree in Applied Linguistics in English at Universidad Nacional, Brunca Extension. He holds a bachelor's degree in English teaching from the same university. He was granted an award of excellence in 2012 for being the best student of the English teaching major. He is currently working for the CI-UNA project, teaching conversational English courses.

Appendix 1: Die pronunciation game

1- What – when – Where – How – Mall -- Bank – Bus – Taxi – Candy — house – city – gas – direct

2- Cinema -- Left - parlor - school -- park— high school – teacher – town – turn -- select – Across

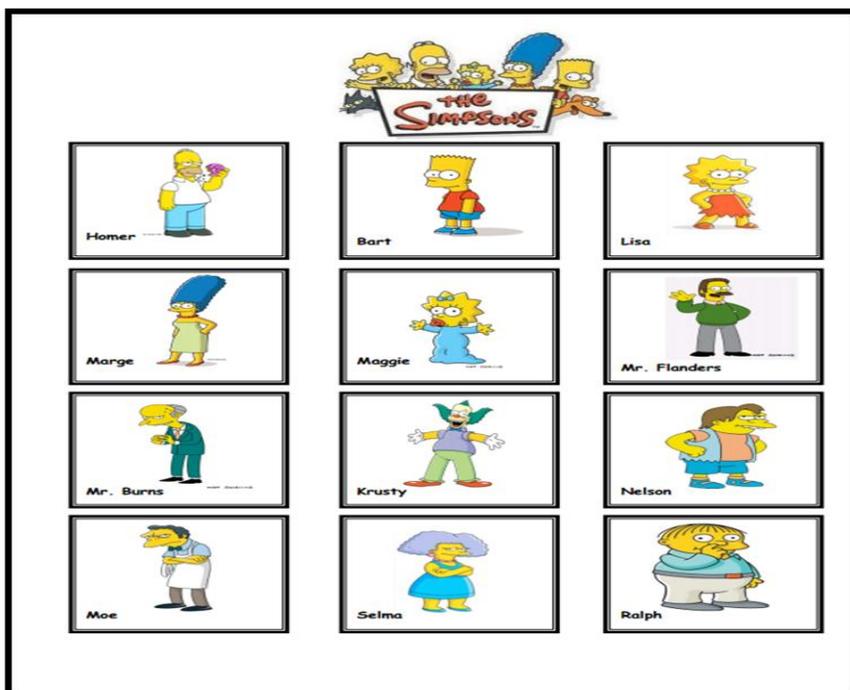
3- Block -- Shop -- Police – Run – East – West – Terminal -- street – people – Doctor - Next between

4- Beside -- Store -- Walk – Hotel -- Shoes - Right – hospital – Airport – gasoline – Church – sign

5- Clothes -- North – South – Factory -- temple -- Apartment – Restaurant – Avenue – path – behind

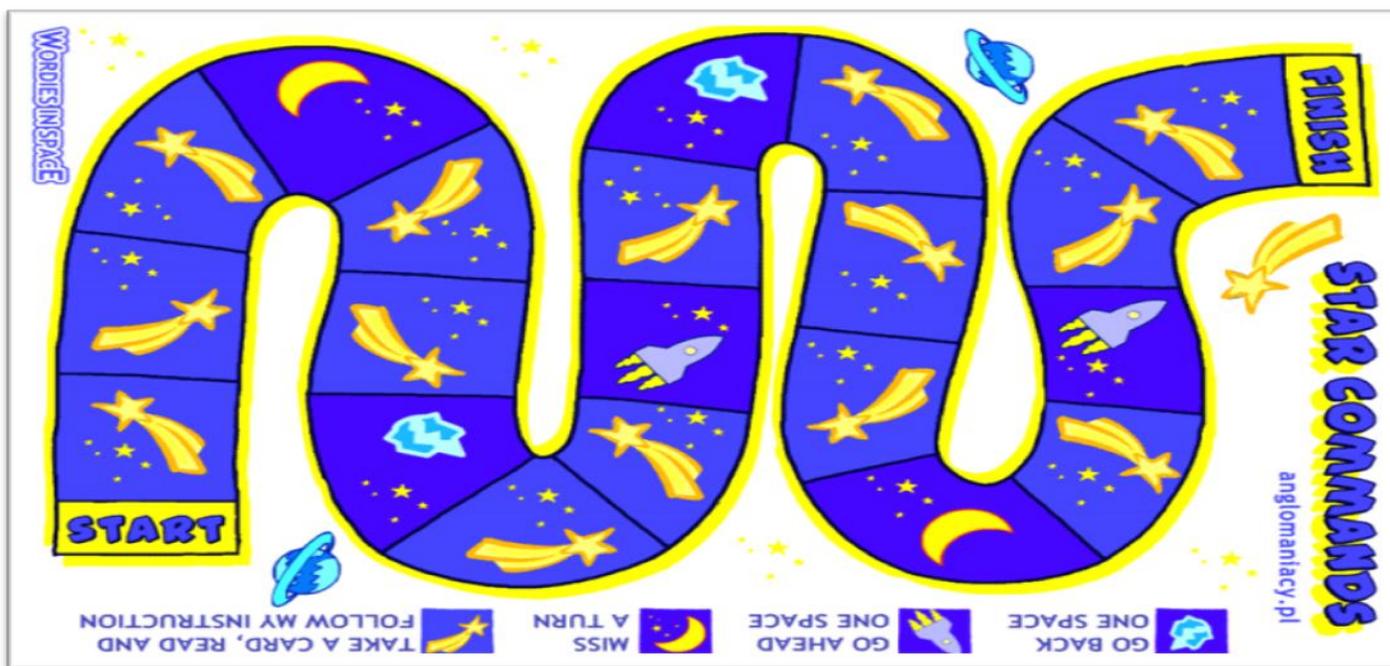
6- Stadium – Museum — Convenience – Clothing -- Grocery -- -- Movie Theater -- Fire Station - lighthouse

Appendix 2: Guess where?

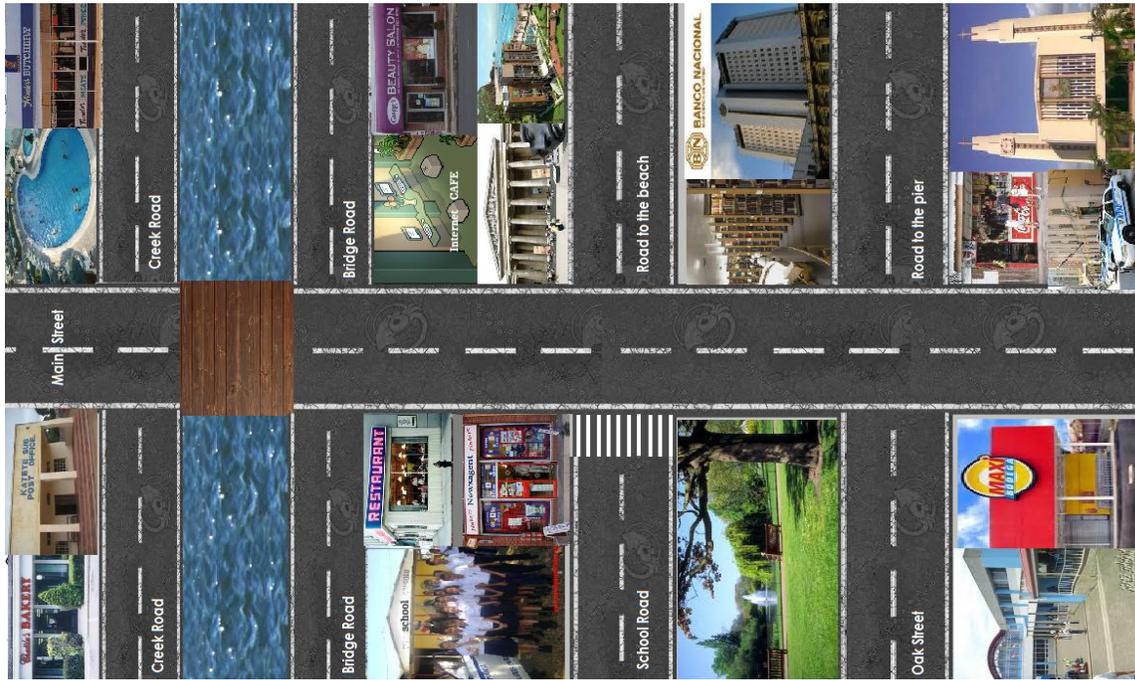


Appendix 3: Town's Monopoly

Appendix 4: How can I get to?



Appendix 5: Little town

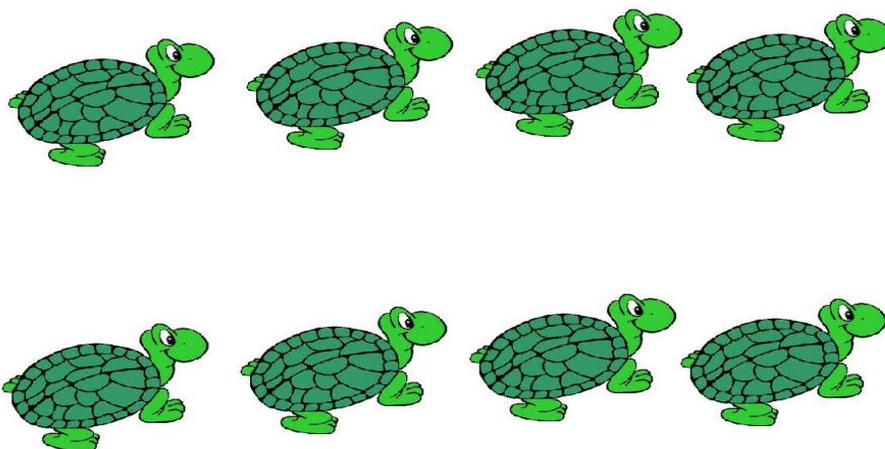
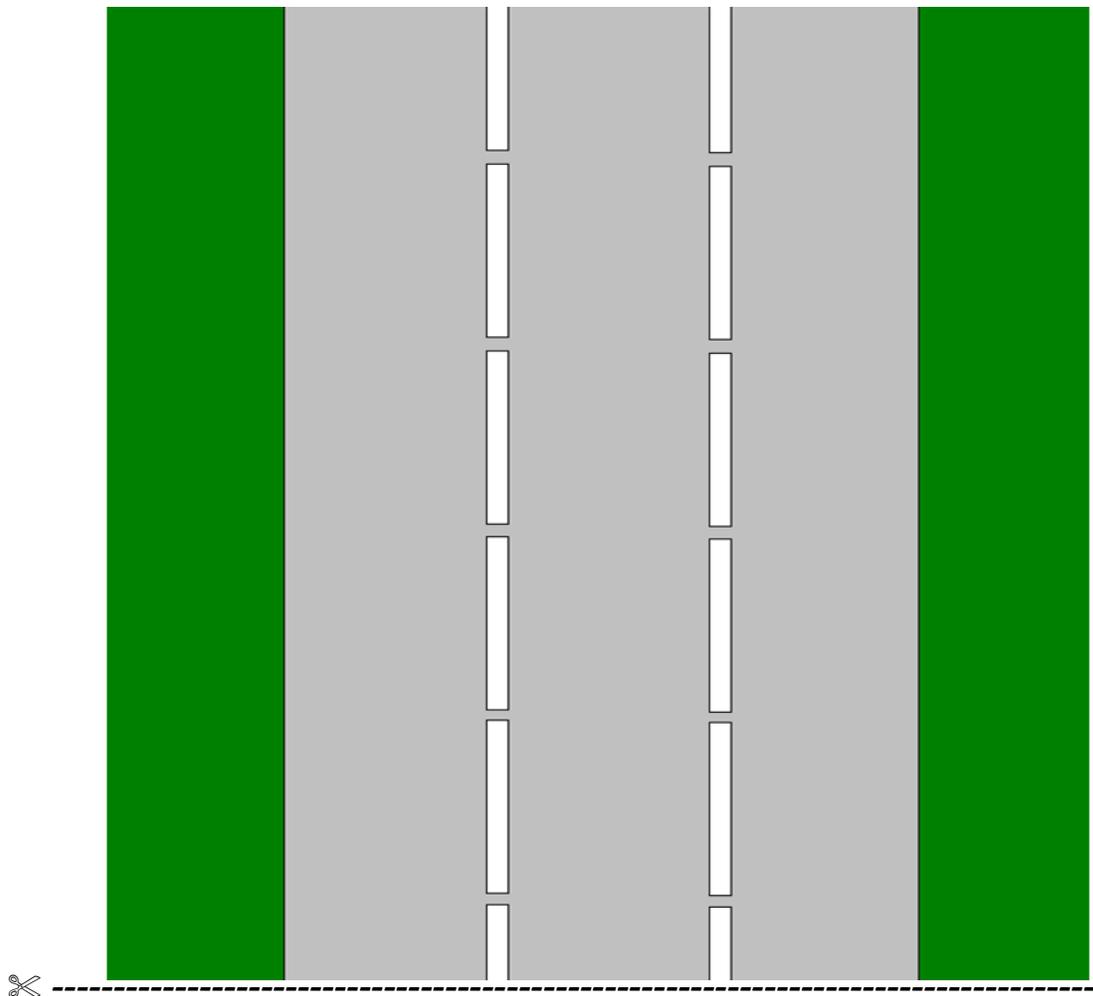


Appendix 6: My die says



HOW CAN I GET TO

Appendix 9: Turtle race



Appendix 10: Pretest and posttest

Universidad Nacional/ Sede Regional Brunca	Total Points: 25
I Congreso de Lingüística Aplicada de la Universidad Nacional	Points Earned
Pre-test and Post-test	Date of Administration: _____
Place of Administration: Liceo Las Mercedes con Orientación Tecnológica	<input type="text"/>
Researcher: Kevin A. Brand Fonseca	SCORE
Subject: English for Conversation	<input type="text"/>
Student: _____ Group: 8-4/B	

Objective: To test the student's oral proficiency level .

General Instructions: Pay attention to the instructor, and ask any question before the test.

Part I: Based on the picture shown by the instructor and the situations presented, choose one of the people named in the image to help him/ her get to his/ her destiny by giving him/ her the appropriate directions and offering the corresponding location. The criteria below shall be used to evaluate the student's performance (25 points).

- Situations:** 1. Luke needs to go to the stadium. 3. Bob needs to go to the bank.
 2. Jenny needs to go to church. 4. John needs to go to school.

RATING SCALE	
Task Completion	
• Outstanding completion of the task; content is rich and very well developed.	5
• Satisfactory completion of the task; content is enough and developed.	4
• Average completion of the task; content is vague.	3
• Limited completion of the task; content is somehow undeveloped.	2
• Poor completion of the task; content is frequently undeveloped and/or somewhat repetitive.	1
Communication	
• Content is delivered smoothly; very accurate use of stress, rhythm and intonation patterns.	5
• Content is delivered with little hesitations; somewhat accurate use of the stress, rhythm and intonation patterns	4
• Content is delivered with some hesitations; fair use of stress, rhythm and intonation patterns.	3
• Content is delivered with many hesitations; deficient use of stress, rhythm and intonation patterns.	2
• Content is delivered with many pauses; very deficient use of stress, rhythm and intonation patterns.	1
Pronunciation	
• Very accurate articulation and enunciation of sounds. Words are very comprehensible.	5
• Somewhat accurate articulation and enunciation of sounds. Words are fairly comprehensible.	4
• Fair articulation and enunciation of sounds. Words are still comprehensible.	3
• Deficient articulation and enunciation of sounds. Words are barely comprehensible.	2
• Very deficient articulation and enunciation of sounds. Words are quite incomprehensible.	1
Vocabulary	
• Rich command of words and idiomatic phrases in context.	5
• Adequate command of words and idiomatic phrases in context.	4
• Average command of words and idiomatic phrases in context.	3
• Limited command of words and idiomatic phrases in context.	2
• Poor command of words and idiomatic phrases in context.	1
Grammar	
• Very adequate control of the basic language structures. Ideas expressed with varied and elaborated syntax.	5
• Adequate control of the basic language structures. Ideas expressed with somewhat varied and elaborated syntax.	4
• Somewhat adequate control of the basic language structures. Ideas expressed with varied and fair syntax.	3
• Deficient control of the basic language structures. Ideas expressed with somewhat undeveloped syntax.	2
• Very deficient control of the basic language structures. Ideas expressed with vey undeveloped syntax.	1

Appendix 10 (Continued): Picture for the pretest and posttest

