

Promoting Interaction in the English Classroom Through the Designing of Board Games with
Sixth Graders at a Public School

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Seminario Integrado I L2

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Medellín

November, 2017

Abstract

This action research project was done with the intention to explore to what extent it is possible promoting interaction in the English classroom through the Designing of Board Games with Sixth Graders at a Public School. This implementation has been carried out in a public school in Medellin with 37 students from 6th grade. The steps of the implementation were building vocabulary with the students, play board games as example. Construction of the material including: questions board and specific mechanics. Finally playing and data collection analysis. The analysis of the data suggests that board games can provide great opportunities for students' interaction with a purpose in the English classroom, as well as a great conductor to integrate different topics.

Key words: Board Games, interaction, Engagement, participation, meaningful learning.

Degree Requirement

This action research project is submitted as a requirement of the Bachelor of Education in Teaching Foreign Languages (English-French) at the Escuela de Idiomas, Universidad de Antioquia, in Medellin, Colombia.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank those who helped me to carry out this action research, without their help this project would not have been possible. First, I would like to express my gratitude to my advisor, Ivan D. Florez G, for all his guidance during the development of this action research. I would also like to thank my cooperating teacher Jader Mora Ramos and the students from who participated in this project. Finally, my classmates from practicum Vanesa Marin, Stivens Arango, Laura castrillon, for all their advice and support.

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Preface

This text presents the development and results of the action research I carried out in a public school in Medellin with the intention to find the effectiveness of designing board games with 6th graders to promote interaction in the English classroom at a public school. To carry out this implementation, several actions were taken considering the different needs of the students whose capacity to communicate was limited although their eagerness to participate in the English class was positive. It was then necessary, as a first step, to build vocabulary with the students to communicate and use in their games. Following the vocabulary building, I brought to class different examples of classroom board games, which gave students the chance to practice the different topics seen through the year, as well as obtain a clear example of their final product. Then we passed to the construction phase, students created the material needed to play their board games including: questions, board and specific mechanics for their games. Finally, students played the games.

In order to find out to what extent student interaction could be promoted through this implementation, I collected data using the following instruments: a teacher journal, semi-structured interviews with students; audio recordings and pictures of the students work to analyze students' level of interactions and participation; a survey and a final interview with students. This data shows that the project had favorable results improving their learning and improving their interaction in English class. The following parts of this document contains the description of the context, the action Research, the theoretical framework that supports the strategies implemented, the techniques used to collect data, and finally the outcomes taken from the analysis.

Description of the context

This implementation took place in the institution Presbítero Antonio José Bernal, a public institution located between the neighborhoods Héctor Abad Gómez and Plaza Colón in Medellín city, and next to Acevedo metro station. The student population comes from strata 1, 2 and 3, and from other nearby neighborhoods such as La Paralela and Andalucía.

The mission of the institution is founded in principles of social integration for the healthy coexistence and the development of the human being, forming citizens capable of assuming challenges in the fields of education, technology, occupational and formative research. The vision of the institution focuses on the acknowledgment achieved by its emphasis on the internationalization of academic and technological processes through formative research. The respect for diversity and the commitment to the academic improvement and bonding of the family as a vital support for the transformation of the context.

The English syllabus describes a general objective and a conceptual framework for each grade, and each period focuses on problematizing questions, competences, criteria for evaluation, and performance indicators. The general objective for the 6th grade, where this action research was carried out, is to provide simple grammar structures in significant contexts through the use of readings, dialogues, and role-plays to ensure the knowledge and skills acquired. Some of the problematizing questions for the 6th grade are the following:

- Do I identify the actions that allow me to take adequate personal care habits?
- Do I know other ways of perceiving the world through the expression of a foreign language?
- How do you define activities for your integral personal care?

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The resources suggested by the syllabus to successfully achieve the goals of the grades are a textbook provided by the government, visual and audio resources, human resources, didactic material, copies, bilingual dictionaries, a board and markers. The classroom in which the 6th grade English class for group C takes place is a computer room. In this class, there are 37 students whose ages range from 11 to 12. Most of these students did not attend English classes in elementary school, so their English vocabulary was limited. Nonetheless, they were eager to learn, showed interest in the class, and were active students.

In the classroom there is a big whiteboard a teacher's desk with a computer linked to a big T.V screen and a couple of lockers to save the laptops and other materials. The room also counts with a series of dictionaries and textbooks called "way to go" provided by the government program "Colombia Bilingüe". On top of the whiteboard, there are some flags of English speaking countries, such as the U.S.A., Australia and England. There are also a couple of vocabulary posters and some useful class expressions in English attached to a small cork board next to the entrance.

Statement of the Problem

During my observation, I noticed that the interaction in class was predominantly teacher-student based, mostly due to the high number of students and the activities carried out in the classroom, such as whole class games and individual work. There was as well as the lack of purpose and opportunities to use the language. These problems were increased by the lack of attention of some students, plus the time division between classes.

When the C.T. provides opportunities to interact, several students participate without even knowing what they are saying. An example of this occurred in a class where "*the C.T. started by*

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saying: “good afternoon” the students answered with: “fine thank you and you?” He corrected them and told them that he would evaluate greetings and farewells with their every class interaction” (Journal entry 4, 24/02/2017). In similar scenarios I saw students not paying attention to the activity, and when participating in a game, students struggle to provide an answer; even if the question was the same as ten minutes before, students will answer something different without noticing similitudes or differences between what they are saying and what was said. Evidence of this occurred in a class during a game where: “, *some students started to scream “bouche” as the answer, the questions was the same uses in the past round by other team the right answer was mouth, but still many continue to scream the word bouche which was never before spoken in class”* (Journal entry 12, 24/03/2017).

Besides, students seem not to achieve an implicit learning through whole class games or activities Sometimes, when a game is taking place, Students often come to me asking for the right answer, even before the C.T. has finished to explain the question, “During the game, *several students asked me for the answer, even before they looked at the T.V. to check the clues, some of them even invented excuses to stand up from the chair to ask”* (Journal entry 12, 24/03/2017). As the evidence points out, students only concern is to win the game rather than use the topics and vocabulary seen in class to accomplish an effective participation.

Another situation to consider is number of missing classes, which in the case of this particular group seems predominant because of the days of the week in which English classes are scheduled are the days submitted to the most changes. Evidence of this is presented in the journey entries number 1 and 5, in which the hour of the class was reduced, and in the journey entries number 7 and 8, in which classes were canceled for different external reasons to the classroom.

After considering all this different factors, it was evident that the kind of interaction taking place in the classroom needed to be improved to enhance students' learning, helping them assimilate the topics they see in the class. Although the C.T. lesson planning seems to follow a scaffolding process in which students do vocabulary building activities, and then practice and use this new vocabulary in activities such as games or presentations, this does not seem to be enough. Taking advantage of the student's dispositions to play games and participate, I intended to create an environment which allowed student all the participate and interact in with each other in the target language though a project in which students would design and play their own board games in the English class.

Theoretical Framework

Interaction is, as stated by Brown (2001), "the heart of communication: it is what communication is all about"; thus, to communicate with others, we need to interact. An interactive learning environment where students can communicate with each other to generate meaning in the target language is constructed by the teacher in the classroom (Mackey, 1999).

One way of creating a classroom interactive environment is through pair- and group-work since students use more language functions than in other form of interaction. (Long et al., as cited in Dagarin, 2004, p.130). Students also perceive pair- and group-work as the most pleasant ways of learning because they feel relaxed, and subsequently communicate better (Phillips, as cited in Dagarin, 2004, p.130). In large groups, such as those from public schools in Medellin Colombia with an average of 40 students, group or pair work can lead to a constructive interactive environment inside the classroom

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In order to build meaningful interactive environments, teachers might implement activities such as classroom games. “Games help the teacher to create contexts in which the language is useful and meaningful” (Wright, Betteridge, & Buckby, 2005). Games also stimulate students’ inner motivation and enhance the interest of the class (Huang & Hu, 2016). Furthermore, even if a game involves discrete language items such as spelling game and miming, meaningful communication takes place as students attempt to understand how to play the game and as they communicate about the game before, during, and after the game (Wright et al., as cited in Huang & Hu, 2016)

Within the variety of games, board games are an important tool to provide hands-on and heads-on skill and knowledge development for people of all ages on all subjects (Treher, 2011). Not only do well-designed games create an engaging atmosphere, they also provide a non-threatening, playful, yet competitive environment in which to focus on content, reinforce and apply learning. Besides,” game elements, discussions, and problem solving with fellow team members about the content are vehicles for learning” (Treher, 2011). Using board games in combination with the previously mentioned theories can lead to meaningful experiences for the students

Meaningful learning occurs when retention and transfer take place in the student. Retention is the ability to remember material from the instruction, and transfer is using what was learned to solve new problems (Mayer & Wittrock, 1996). “Learners need to engage in meaningful communication to attain communicative fluency as well as accuracy in ESL settings” (Hymes, 1971). Meaningful communication is defined in two principles: communication principle, activities that involve real communication promote learning; and meaningfulness

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principle, language that is meaningful to the learner supports the learning process. (Richards & Rodger, 2001, p.161).

To sum up the benefits of interaction, pair- group-work and games can be obtained through board games as they can provide an environment in which interaction can be meaningful; and foster a sense of purpose in communication, a stress-free environment to interact and a proactive activity in which students can apply the language seen in class.

Research Question

To what extent does the strategy of designing board games with 6th graders in a public school promote interaction in the English classroom?

General Objective

To explore the usefulness of designing board games with a group of 6th graders in a public school to promote interaction in the English classroom?

Specific Objective

- To build vocabulary related to physical and personality description, likes and dislikes, daily routine, numbers, and classroom objects.
- To play board games for vocabulary practice and as examples for students' designing of their own games.
- To promote interaction through group work and board games
- To create our own games including questions, board, and game mechanics.

Action Plan

To achieve the general and specific objectives above mentioned, I planned and implemented a series of lessons in which my students engaged in the designing of their own board games. Considering the basic English level of the group at the beginning of this implementation, I needed to focus on building vocabulary through different activities including games and worksheets. Then, students would have to practice this new acquire vocabulary in different activities including pre-designed board games which would be useful for students as a sample to create their games. With the new vocabulary and a clear idea of the final product, students would design their games, and construct the questions that would be used in them. Once questions were ready and mechanics agreed upon, students would construct their games and play.

In order to find out to what extent student interaction could be promoted through this implementation, I would collect data using the following instruments: a teacher journal to follow up students' participation and progress in class; semi-structured interviews with two students after using the board game samples to see students perception about interaction and use of vocabulary with this kind of activities; audio recordings and pictures of the students designing and playing their board games to analyze students' level of interactions and participation; a survey at the end of the implementation to explore the general opinions and views of the students about the whole experience; and a final interview with four students to go deeper in their perception of the entire implementation. This data would be analyzed by following the steps proposed by Burns (2010), that is, to organize, code, and compare the collected data.

Development of Actions

In order to carry out the implementation of this action research project, I first started with activities to build vocabulary. To do this, I used different strategies and different classroom tools such as videos and worksheets to build vocabulary about physical descriptions and personality. We also played games to learn the number in English and learned about daily routines through reading and worksheets. While building the new vocabulary with the students, we played different pre-designed board games in the classroom in order to practice what we had learned, and with the intention to provide students with examples of the final product they would surrender at the end of this project.

Once the new vocabulary was ready, we moved to the creation phase. During this stage, students created the rules and the mechanics for their games. Next step was to create the different questions students would use in their games. To do this, I explained the structure of questions to the students, and in order to practice students designed an interview in which they included questions from personal information, description personality, as well as likes and dislikes.

Then we moved to the creation part where students brought the material and provided their ideas and imagination with a physical form using the different materials such as cardboard scissors among others. Finally, students played their games using the different vocabulary and English resources learned throughout the year, as an extra challenge they interchanged their games with other teams and played those too. While students played their own as well as their classmates' games, there was a high level of interaction taking place in the classroom.

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To see the benefits of this implementation, I collected data through different instruments. I kept a teacher journal in which I recorded my class observations on students' performance and behavior, and where I concurrently wrote my reflections of these events. I also designed semi-structured interviews in which I asked students questions about their opinion on the classroom activities (see Appendix A). Besides, I designed and administered a survey at the end of the implementation to learn about students' perceptions on using board games in the classroom (see Appendix B). Also, I audio-recorded and took pictures of students' interactions in class while designing and playing their board games, as well as of their final products. (see Appendix C)

To analyze the data gathered through these instruments, I made a chart in which I could compare data and find common patterns in the students' answers and observations. This analysis led to the results presented in the next section.

Findings and Interpretations

The aim of this action research project was to examine how designing board games with the students could improve their level of interaction and participation in the English classroom. To see to what extent this implementation was useful, I designed and implemented a unit plan, collected and analyzed data as described above. In this section I present the main findings and my interpretations based on the evidence I collected. These findings have been organized into three broad themes: creating their own board games triggered students' engagement in classroom activities, playing board games enhanced students' interaction in the English class, and board game provided a non-threatening and competitive environment.

Creating their own Board Games Triggered Students' Engagement in Classroom Activities

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During the creating stage of the board games, students' teams worked on putting together sets of questions for their games. It was necessary for students to implement right away the class topic and construct upon it to create their own unique questions different from the examples I provided, these questions were then applied and practiced with their classmates. This provided a sense of purpose which engaged students in the activity. Evidence supporting this point can be seen in the interviews with students. For example, when asked about improving vocabulary through games, student Y stated that games helped practice vocabulary, “nosotros no sabíamos mucho inglés porque nosotros no le parábamos muchas bolas hasta que lo hicimos con el juego, porque eso nos abrió más los ánimos para poder jugar y practicar, participar y ser competitivos”. (Interview 2 with students Y and J). Another student, when asked if playing board games was considered a good strategy to learn English, said that “yo estoy de acuerdo, porque si uno no sabe las preguntas mientras uno se está divirtiendo con el juego uno puede grabarse más todas las palabras y preguntas” (Interview 2 with students C and D).

As a participant observer, I myself could witness their engagement and compromised with this section of the unit as I stated in my journal:

I can say students seemed to progress in the creation of the questions they were working hard on the topic and many were able to create their questions without problems or with only minimum errors, some students even try to go beyond what I have thought them creating questions such as “do you have a girlfriend?” and “who do you like?” (Journal entry 14, 25/08/17)

In sum, board games could enhance students' participation since they started paying attention to the vocabulary needed to complete the game.

Playing Board Games Enhance Students' Interaction in the English Class

Data also suggests that implementing group work to create and play board games, provided students with more opportunities to achieve a meaningful communication inside the classroom. An examples of this can be found in the following extract from my journal: students were working actively in groups, they were really noisy, but their discussions were always about the games, if the answer was correct or not, screams of frustration as well as cheers and cries of victory (Journal entry 8, 04/08/2017).

Similarly, during an interview by the end of the implementation, students stated that board games helped them learn English. The following excerpt from one of the interviews exemplifies this.

Interviewer: ¿crees que jugar juegos de mesa en la clase de inglés, permite más oportunidades de practicar e interactuar en inglés, comparado con las actividades normales de clase?

Student C: estoy de acuerdo porque así uno se graba todo y Digamos que yo no sé inglés y yo jugando diariamente con mis compañeros el juego, así voy a seguir aprendiendo más. (Interview 2 with students C and D).

To the same question, another student answered in a different interview that “sí porque nos salimos más de lo de copiar, es más para divertirnos y así hacemos la clase más chévere nos concentramos más. interactuamos más si estamos jugamos” (Interview 2 with students Y and J). Also, a third student stated that games promoted practice and learning. She answered "si porque practicamos más y aprendemos más con los juegos” to the question “do you think they are a good tool to practice English?” (Interview 1 with students A and B).

It was also clear that opportunities to practice oral production increased through the use of board games, according to the information provided by the students in a survey taken during the final stages of the implementation, when asked do you think that using board games is a good strategy to practice English 97% of the students agreed with this statement, 65% of the students answered: I highly agree with this statement while the other 32 % selected I agreed with the statement.

Board Game Provided a Non-threatening and Competitive Environment

I could observed that a meaningful learning experience in a pleasant environment were possible through the use of board games in the classroom. In an interview, when asked about their emotions while playing board games, students J said that he felt they were able to do the activities. Student Y enhanced the importance of competitiveness in playing the games, while students D and C said that this brought up positive emotions which gave them the sense of learning more (Interview 2 with students Y and J; Interview 2 with D and C).

Other interviewed students also highlighted the positive impact of this kind of environment for learning English as can be seen in the following excerpt.

Interviewer: ¿cuál fue tu parte favorita de la actividad en la que jugamos diferentes juegos de mesa en clase?

Student A: pues que...todo fue Bueno, y todo fue en inglés para practicar más.

Student B: mientras jugaban todos estaban gritando de la emoción (Interview 1 with students A and B).

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In the survey, when asked what emotions they felt while playing board games, students selected positive answers. For example, out of 34 students, 26 selected “entertainment”, 13 chose “tranquility”, and 14 students “competitiveness”.

In sum, the collected data show that building vocabulary and practice this new vocabulary through the use of classroom games, whole class and pre-designed board games was effective in this group in terms of retaining students’ attention and motivation towards the class, besides while playing their created board game students were engaged and active, they interacted in the target language and increased their chance to participate.

Conclusion

The main objective of this implementation was to examine to what extent the strategy of designing board games could promote interaction in the English classroom. The analysis of the collected data suggests that the level of interaction in the classroom increased through the use board games. For instance, students had better opportunities for interaction while participating in a board game since their attention and participation are constantly needed in the game. As players, they are required to interact with the board; as speakers, they must answer the necessary questions to progress in the game; and as active listeners, they need to check their classmates’ answers in their turn. They are also involved in other aspects when playing a board game, from which students can benefit in terms of interaction. For example, students interact when they request the dice, or when they have discussions about how to play or win the game, as well as when asking their classmates for confirmation of a recent taken action in the game.

Games helped to create a stress-free classroom atmosphere which provided students with more confidence and opportunities to speak in the target language. This relaxing environment

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might help shy students who usually have a hard time to get to participate in class, and also increase opportunities for a higher number of students to participate and practice the target language.

Practice the vocabulary built in class with games also proved to be an effective strategy since students had a clear sense of purpose to use the language in the games. Students' engagement in designing and playing board games was also particularly high compared to other activities since they were involved from the beginning in the creation of their own games, considering strategies, vocabulary questions among other factors involved in their games.

To conclude, this implementation allowed me to discover the benefits of using board games in the classroom. All the information gathered reveals an improvement in the levels of interaction and participation in the group, I also discovered that board games could help to provide an immediate sense of purpose to learn the language for the student increasing their engagement and compromised in the class. Moreover, the decision of having students create their own games resulted in great engagement on behalf of the students, which reflects in the high level of interaction reached by the class, making this project a success.

Reflection

This teaching practice experience and the implementation of my action research project allowed me to include something I enjoy in my free time, board games. Bringing board games into the classroom provided great benefits for the students; in fact, I found more positive results with this implementation that I had expected. In this sense, I can say my professional practice was enriched as I successfully tried implementing classroom strategies to help students improve their English level. Therefore, professionally speaking, this experience was a positive one for me

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since my students on this particular research were engaged in the creation of their own board game as a learning strategy, and as a tool to improve interaction and participation in the target language. Building vocabulary and practice of this new vocabulary through the use of classroom games, whole class and pre-designed board games proved effective in retaining students' attention and motivation towards the class. Playing our games was also a success since students were engaged and active, they interacted in the target language, and everybody had the chance to participate.

Reaching the end of the project was not as happy as the results might probably suggest, there were many things happening inside the school, the classroom and students' mind that could have had an effect in every aspect of the class no matter how well planned it was, or how good was the strategy implemented. As I discovered the examples of board games used, proved to be not enough as some students were confused about what kind of game we were designing. Time between classes could also influence this confusion as we sometimes did not have classes for two or three weeks in a row. Group work proved to be challenging for some, as some students changed from team to team during several sessions, mostly due to the laziness of the other team members. To tackle this, I could have implemented several strategies such as assigning roles to students in each team, but it was not possible due to time constraints.

Another challenge in this project was that some activities, such the writing of the questions for the games, consumed more time than I expected. It took several classes to explain students how to make questions, moving from personal questions to descriptions, translation questions, and questions about preferences. However, it was profitable for students as they learned a lot and were able to come up with their own questions for the game. Some of them went beyond my expectations and designed new types of questions based on what they had learned.

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Also, when creating their games, students faced some difficulties due to the abnormalities in the calendar from class to class which caused some students to forget the material needed for their games, but this was overcome as we had so much work to do in class that we always found ourselves busy in other activities that did not require the materials.

To conclude there is much to gain for the students and the teacher by participating in a project of this kind, I feel confident to claim that Board games can provide great opportunities for students' interaction with a purpose in the English classroom, they are also a great conductor to integrate different topics and highlight different sets of skills in the students.

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Appendix A

Interview 1 with students

1. ¿Puedes mencionar algunos de los adjetivos/características/feelings utilizados en las descripciones?
2. ¿consideras que aprendiste acerca de los adjetivos mientras jugábamos el juego de mesa los opuestos se atraen?
3. ¿crees que jugar juegos de mesa es una buena estrategia para practicar el inglés?
¿Por qué?
4. ¿Cuál fue tu parte favorita de la actividad que realizamos al jugar diferentes juegos de mesa?

Interview 2 with students

1. ¿crees que jugar juegos de mesa es una buena estrategia de practicar inglés?
2. ¿crees que jugar juegos de mesa permite mayores oportunidades de participar e interactuar comparado con las actividades regulares de clase?
3. ¿crees que interactuar con tus compañeros y aprender inglés en el proceso es posible a través de los juegos de mesa?
5. ¿Mientras creabas las preguntas para usar en tu juego, crees que mejoraste en tu vocabulario?
7. ¿Qué emociones tuviste mientras jugabas los juegos de mesa?
8. ¿Te gustó utilizar juegos de mesa como una estrategia para aprender inglés?

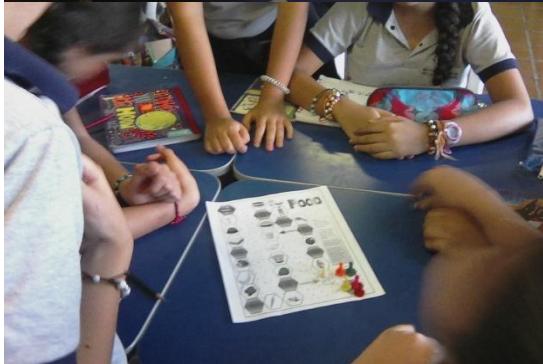
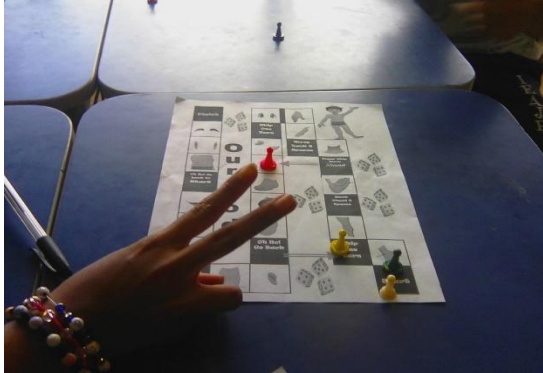
Appendix B

Survey

1. ¿crees que jugar juegos de mesa es una buena estrategia de practicar inglés?
A. estoy muy de acuerdo. B. Estoy de acuerdo. C. Estoy en desacuerdo D. Estoy completamente en desacuerdo.
2. ¿crees que jugar juegos de mesa permite mayores oportunidades de participar e interactuar comparado con las actividades regulares de clase?
A. estoy muy de acuerdo. B. Estoy de acuerdo. C. Estoy en desacuerdo D. Estoy completamente en desacuerdo
3. ¿jugar juegos de mesa con tus compañeros te proporcionó un ambiente adecuado para interactuar y participar en inglés?
A. estoy muy de acuerdo B. Estoy de acuerdo C. Estoy en desacuerdo D. Estoy completamente en desacuerdo
4. ¿crees que interactuar con tus compañeros y aprender inglés en el proceso es posible a través de los juegos de mesa?
A. estoy muy de acuerdo B. Estoy de acuerdo, C. Estoy en desacuerdo D. Estoy completamente en desacuerdo
5. ¿Mientras creabas las preguntas para usar en tu juego, crees que mejoraste en tu vocabulario?
A. estoy muy de acuerdo B. Estoy de acuerdo, C. Estoy en desacuerdo D. Estoy completamente en desacuerdo
6. Tras terminar este proyecto ¿crees que has mejorado tu nivel de inglés?
A. estoy muy de acuerdo B. Estoy de acuerdo, C. Estoy en desacuerdo D. Estoy completamente en desacuerdo
7. ¿Qué emociones tuviste mientras jugabas los juegos de mesa? Puedes seleccionar más de una respuesta en esta pregunta. A. Entretenimiento. B. Tranquilidad. C. Competitividad. D. Temor. E. Aburrimiento.
8. ¿Te gustó utilizar juegos de mesa como una estrategia para aprender inglés?

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