

Assessing Speaking Skills through the Implementation of TBLA in a Group of  
Second Graders

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### **Abstract**

This action research explored the usefulness of implementing Task-based Language Assessment (TBLA) to help assess second graders' speaking skills at a public school in Medellin. To do this, I designed and implemented a task about food to help students do an oral presentation about their likes and dislikes, and thus assessing their speaking skills. Data collection of this project included interviews, a survey, journals, and students' artifacts. Findings showed that TBLA helped the students to have a better performance in their task since they were able to connect the different topics and be more prepared to face the final assessment. Furthermore, group work was a meaningful strategy for students to gain confidence during the development of the task.

*Keys words:* Task-based language assessment, speaking skills, group work, assessment.

### **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 Medellín, Colombia.

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In addition, a very special thank you to my cooperating teacher and students at I.E. Prebistero Jose Antonio Bernal, for their ongoing collaboration and commitment with this project. We worked together to make a change for the better in the English classroom, and their voices will be heard.

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### **Preface**

This document portrays the development and results of the action research I carried out in my practicum as a pre-service teacher of English as a Foreign Language, which explored to what extent the implementation of TBLA was useful to assess students' speaking skills. Such implementation arose from the observations I made in the first semester of my practicum year where I could identify that the students were only being assessed in a written way, and speaking was not so relevant in the English class.

This project included the following stages: the first stage in which the students were contextualized and prepared to perform the assessment task which in this case was about likes and dislikes related to food. The second stage was to simulate the presentation of a task in small groups, and then do some of them in front of the class. Finally, the third stage was the presentation of the final task through a poster where students presented a plate with their favorite food, and then they asked their partner about their likes or dislikes. Also, feedback was provided to students as a part of the assessment process, especially in the second and third stage.

The implementation of this project has rendered valuable insights on the benefits of TBLA to assess students' speaking skills at public schools where there are usually unfavorable conditions such as lack of time and the large number of students in the group. despite these constraints, TBLA may be useful to help the students improve their performance in their tasks since they were able to connect the different topics and be more prepared to face the final assessment.

### **Description of the context**

Presbítero Antonio José Bernal Institution is a public school located in Medellín city. This one has two sites: one in Hector Abad Gomez neighborhood which has a coverage to hold the preschool, first grade, middle school and high school groups; and the other one in Toscana neighborhood which has a coverage to hold 2nd grade to 5th grade groups. The students are populations from strata 1, 2, and 3.

My practicum takes place in 2nd grade, with a group of 38 students (21 boys and 17 girls) ranging from 7 to 9 years old. They are active students who like to participate in class. However, their attention span is very short and they get distracted easily. All of them can already read and write in Spanish, but there are some of them that still have some difficulties. In general, they are well behaved students who listen to the teacher, and work in the activities assigned. It is important to say that there are 8 students that have been, or are in a process of being diagnosed with special learning conditions. According to my Cooperating Teacher (henceforth CT), there are four students with ADHD, one student with depression and anxiety disorder, one student who is getting language therapy, and two who are in the process to be diagnosed.

The English Program at the school is organized into three terms throughout the school year. English lessons take place twice a week. The general objective of the second grade is to motivate students to learn English as a foreign language through a confident environment by using games, songs, rounds, and rhymes. Each term has a leading or problematizing question:

- First term: “Can I say in English words and sentences regarding to my school surrounding and my family?”
- Second term, “Can I use English to speak about what I like and dislike of my school surrounding?”

- Third term, “Do I communicate some expressions in English regarding my daily routine?”.

These questions are guided by the linguistic, pragmatic and sociolinguistic competences.

My CT is being a teacher for 12 years. She has a Bachelor Degree in Mathematics, and a MA in Literature. She has some English notions, but she does not feel prepared to teach this subject. Also, she knows her students very well as she has been working with them since last year.

### **Statement of the problem**

Speaking as one of the communicative skills should be as important as the other ones. As well, this skill should be assessed as part of the learning process of the students. However, a large amount of students can be a big influence or an easy strategy for teachers to apply written tasks the most of the time as a way to assess the learning process of students. The implementation of task based approach could help students to develop different activities to have a better balance among the four skills and to take advantage of their potential.

The lack of preparation of the teachers to teach English and a large group are certainly a strong problem that has a big influence in the way students are assessed. That is why, the second grade students at Antonio Bernal School are assessed in a written way the most of the time. Students usually practice the themes through songs, rhymes, repetition, and some activities on the notebook. Despite the activities developed in class imply speaking, the assessment is written.

Some studies done in Colombia can help to know that large groups and assessment of speaking skills are a common difficulty and a tedious work. However, Gutiérrez (2005) provides an example of how task-based teaching can help students develop speaking skills in a large group. She states, “The learners have the opportunity to interact in different situations,



in different groups and audiences” and that “task-based teaching involves an approach where communicative tasks are important because students need to engage in interactions inside and outside the classrooms” (p. 85).

In order to have a good assessment of speaking skills in the English classes, it is necessary to make some changes to the class methodology and assessment procedures. This way, students will be able to achieve goals easily and take advantage of all their potential. That is why task-based Language Assessment (TBLA) can be a good tool to tackle some of the problematics that are evident in my group of practicum. The students are very receptive, active, and willing to learn and “a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form” (Nunan, 1989, p. 10) could be a good opportunity to foster English learning.

### **Theoretical Background**

This action research proposal followed principles of Task-based Language Assessment (TBLA), which is in turn rooted in the theories of Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT). First, a description of the stages of TBLT, then the main principles of TBLA, and its application to assessing speaking skills in the EFL classroom. Lastly, a brief discussion on the concept of assessment will be provided.

#### **Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT)**

All this process was carried out with the implementation of TBLT “where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose (goal) in order to achieve an outcome” (Willis & Willis, 2001, p. 173).

To keep this process is necessary to follow three stages in order to perform a task. First, the ‘pre-task task stage’ which consists in familiarizing the students with the

instructions, content, and objectives. As Sketan (1998) suggests, this stage is also for the students to know all the necessary requirements they have to take into account to perform their outcomes. Second, the 'during the task stage' is the opportunity for students to work on the development of the task. Seedhouse (1999) suggests that the accompanying and guidance from the teacher's part is essential in this stage as the teacher can check if students are doing what they really have to do, check their progress and provide feedback. Third, the 'post-task' can be considered as a stage of reflection. Ellis (2014) states that after the task is done is a good idea to go over their errors through the teacher's notes or the classmates' perceptions. Besides, Rahimpour and Magsoudpour (2011) and Long (1985) said that this is an appropriate and necessary moment for students to reflect about their performance.

### **Task-Based Language Assessment**

As part of this research project, assessment procedures are also necessary to apply. Therefore, Task-based Language Teaching approach encompasses Task-based Language Assessment (TBLA) which focuses more directly about assessing students' outcomes. Likewise, TBLA follows very similar principles as TBLT since "learners are required to carry out a task that simulates the kinds of tasks they will be required to perform outside of the classroom" (Education and Manpower of Hong Kong, 2005, section 1.2). Another important principle is that "teaching and assessment should be in harmony" (Education and Manpower of Hong Kong, 2005, section 1.2) The task should be a set of activities that help students to be successful in the achievement of the task outcomes. Moreover, it is important to not forget that tasks should be as authentic as possible, and because there is a performance, they must have clear criteria. (Norris, Brown, Hudson & Yoshioka, 1998).

When assessing an assessment task is crucial to take into account clear criteria, as it was mention, and feedback for learners. Students have to know what it will be assessed and

how they will be assessed. “When assessing a group oral presentation, for example, the criteria would include: linguistic accuracy, fluency, presentation style, content, and collaboration with others” (Education and Manpower of Hong Kong, 2005, section 1.8) In fact, feedback is very connected to criteria since the feedback will be according the aspects listed in the criteria. However,

feedback can take many shapes and forms from quantitative feedback in the form of marks and grades through to qualitative feedback from the teacher. The form it takes will depend much on the purpose of the feedback which, in turn, will depend on the purpose of the assessment. (Education and Manpower of Hong Kong, 2005, section 1.9)

### **Assessment**

Assessment is important as to students as to teachers. Teachers need to make sure that students are learning and students need to demonstrate what they learned. Knowing that, there are two types of assessment which play an essential role in all this process of assessment. One of them is summative assessment, which consists in those assessments designed to determine students’ academic development after a set unit of material (i.e., assessment of learning) and the other one is formative assessment, which consists in those assessments designed to monitor student progress during the learning process. (i.e., assessment for learning) . (Education and Manpower of Hong Kong, 2005, section 1.6)

### **Research Question**

How does Task Based Language Assessment help to assess second graders’ speaking skills at a public school in Medellin, Colombia?

### **General Objective**

To explore the usefulness of Task Based Language Assessment in assessing the speaking skills of a group of second graders at a public school in Medellin, Colombia.

### **Specific Objectives**

- To design one assessment task.
- To implement one assessment task.
- To examine how group work helps improve students' speaking skills through the tasks.
- To analyze students' gains and difficulties in developing speaking skills throughout the tasks.

### **Action Plan**

In order to achieve the above-mentioned objectives, I designed a plan for the implementation of TBLA in a group of second graders, and for the collection of the data, which would help evaluate the results of such implementation. First, taking into account the school syllabus, my Cooperating Teacher (CT) would help me with the planning and design of the task, which initially consisted in four stages: the pre-task, task, task assessment, and post-task. The pre- task stage would take place to contextualize the students and prepare them for the topic of the assessment task, which would be about, likes and dislikes related to food. Therefore, in this stage, I would help students with both content and language elements related to the assessment task.

Next, in the task stage, the students would simulate the presentation of a task in small groups. Then, some of them would do the same in front of the class. After that, they would do

a poster in pairs through which they would present a plate with their favorite food. Finally, they would start to plan how they would report their final assessment task to the rest of the class. The following stage would be the task assessment where the students report their outcome of the assessment task to other students through an oral presentation, and then they would ask their partner about their likes or dislikes. Lastly, the post task would be about providing feedback to students as a part of the assessment process.

To collect data, I would use a set of data collection instruments before, during and after the implementation of the task. Before the task, I would implement a group survey to know students' perceptions of English speaking activities and assessment before starting the task. During the development of the task, I would write down reflective notes on my observation journals, and collect students' artifacts. Finally, at the end of the task, I would interview some students to learn about their opinions on the activities, and my CT to know her viewpoint on this implementation.

### **Development of the Actions**

The action plan described above was carried out in the third term of the school year, and was actually developed in three stages: pre-task, task, and task assessment; and data were collected through the instruments also mentioned above.

After planning and designing the task with the help of my CT, I started with the first stage. This one was called the pre-task where I did activities that help students with content and language elements related to the topic of food. Some of the activities were: food concentration, matching words and pictures, puzzles to work on the vocabulary about food. Then, I worked on singing songs about likes and dislikes, activities by rows, in small groups, surveys among the partners to work on the structure 'I like...', 'I don't like...' and the question 'do you like...?' as well as its affirmative and negative short answers (see Appendix B).

On the second stage called the task, they did a mini presentation by expressing their likes and dislikes and by asking their partners one or two questions by using the question ‘do you like...?’ Before this, I did a mini presentation for them to have a model and then they got a worksheet with an example and a section for them to prepare their own mini presentation (see Appendix C). Although not all the students could present, due to lack of time and the large number of students, those who had the chance to present received feedback. As I tried to constantly monitor students’ work in the classroom, feedback was also provided to most of the students. Feedback, even though initially planned as a final stage, was present throughout the development of each stage of the task. Besides, on this stage, the students had the possibility to join to a partner to prepare their final task presentation. They spent two hours of class working on the poster which portrayed a plate with their favorite food (see Appendix A), and practicing for the oral presentation.

The third stage, called the assessment task, aimed to assess the students’ performance. The students presented their plate, and then asked questions to their classmates by using the structure ‘do you like...?’ (See Appendix D). As this activity took around three classes, it was necessary to do a review activity in the third class so that the rest of group could continue working on it while I assessed those students who had not presented yet.

As part of the task and students’ assessment, I also included feedback as I already mentioned in the stage two, and it was included in the stage third as well. I provided feedback to the students by doing recommendations, corrections, giving them a second chance or simply praising their good job. This was done with the purpose to value their progress and expect improvements in their process or future activities.

Apart from the implementation of the task, I also implemented the following data collection instruments as a group survey, my observation journals, the students’ artifacts, seven individual interviews with students, and an interview to my CT. The group survey was

done before starting the implementation of the task to know students' perceptions of speaking activities and assessment, their feelings towards it, their preferences and difficulties. During the implementation, I analyzed the observation of my journals, which helped them find out facts about my classes and my research and I collected some students' artifacts pictures of the posters, worksheets and some videos of the final task presentation to see their participations and improvements. When I finished the task, I interviewed seven students individually to know more deeply their perceptions, gains and challenges. At last, I interviewed my CT to know her perception of my implementation.

### **Findings and Interpretation**

The purpose of this action research study was to explore the usefulness of TBLA to assess the speaking skills of a group of second graders. In general, data suggest that TBLA helped the students improve their performance in their tasks since they were able to connect better the different topics and they are more prepared to face the final assessment. In this section, I will present evidence of these findings and provide a possible interpretation.

#### **Tasks Help Students Have Better Performance**

During the English lessons, classroom activities were meant to prepare students for the final speaking task. Hence, most of these activities included singing songs, going to the front, working by groups or in pairs, doing some mini-presentations, and asking and answering questions. These activities helped students improve their performance, which can be seen in the following excerpt where my CT said,

I could observe that the activities of the class helped a lot, the songs, go to the front, the activities by lines or by small groups. All of this was helping, so at the end they did a good presentation, I saw they enjoy it and did a good job. It was good they could listen to English and practice orally, because as I told you before, it was not an ability

I could work so much with them when they had class with me. (Cooperating Teacher Interview).

I could observe the importance of working according to the ability that you want to assess, because by suggestion of my CT, I did a written quiz about what I had worked with the students so far. First, I did some exercises on the board as a sample about how the quiz was going to be. Then, I gave them the quiz.

During the quiz, the students were asking a lot, they were having some difficulties writing the words and reading. My CT and I were around helping them specially to read. I think that they were having many difficulties because we were not working written activities a lot. The most of the classes were focus on speaking activities. (Journal Entry 12).

Therefore, it is not fair and it will not be meaningful to assess something when it is not according to what you have been working on class with the students. As in one of the TBLA principles: “teaching and assessment should be in harmony” (Education and Manpower of Hong Kong, 2005, section 1.2)

That is why one of the activities was to do a mini presentation about likes and dislikes related to food.

But before I did a mini presentation for them to have a sample about what I wanted they do. After they completed the worksheet, I let them socialize some of the things they wrote and then I asked them to tell their likes and dislikes to her/ his partner.

Finally, some of them had the chance to present it in front of the class what they did in the worksheet (Journal Entry 11).

In addition, “it was interesting that after the practice they wanted to present and I was giving candy to the ones who took the risk to go to the front to present their likes and dislikes. This worked very well because some students who were not thinking to do it, they did it. I



really wanted they experienced how it felt to do a presentation since that is what they are going to do as a final task” (Journal Entry 11).

This activity was with the purpose of helping students feel familiar presenting to the class since 15 students out of 31 expressed in the survey that they felt nervous when they had to go to the front or they had to talk to the class (Students Survey).

Finally, the final task day, I gave them some time to practice.

While they were practicing, I observed that some students were presenting to my CT. It looked like they were feeling proud of their job. I was happy to see their presentations. I didn't need to say who wanted to do it first; they were volunteers all the time” (Journal Entry 16).

In general, they achieved good results: “fifteen students got between 4.5 to 5.0, ten students got between 4.0 to 4.4, six students got between 3.5 to 3.9 and three students got between 3.0 to 3.5” (Journal Entry 17).

Going over some videos I did about the final task, I could notice they could pronounce most of words well, and they were able to ask and answer questions about their likes and dislikes related to food. Nevertheless, factors as a large group and the absences to class affected the development of the task as some students had needed more accompanying or they were feeling lost because they missed some classes, so this caused some variations on the results of their grades.

### **The Usefulness of Feedback and Monitoring in the Assessment Process**

Feedback and monitoring were present in the most of the classes, since the students needed accompanying all the time, especially because of their age. As a pre service teacher, I had the possibility to monitor my students, at the same time I could have the possibility to

give them feedback. In addition, going around the classroom helped me to find out things that pass unnoticed when one just observes the whole group.

When I went around listening what they were practicing, I took advantage to make suggestions and help them with pronunciation; I realized they had improved a lot.

Their posters had the pictures of the food and the name and finally they were pronouncing so much better. They were able to read the words aloud with the correct pronunciation. (Journal Entry 16).

According to the previous piece of data, I could notice not only the progress students were making, but also the specific difficulties they were having. I also found out that corrections and help came not only from my part, the classmates also tended to do part of the feedback. “It is good idea to monitor while they were working in groups because, I could give them feedback and some classmates made corrections to their partners which I consider it can be kind of feedback” (Journal Entry 11).

During my classes, feedback was present before and after the final task. When they did their presentations, which was the final task,

Some students needed some prompting and the ones who needed so much, I gave them some recommendations and I suggested them to practice more and then they had the opportunity to present again. Sometimes, it was because they did not agree with their partner about what each one had to say, because they forgot what they had to say or because they were having difficulties to pronounce. (Journal Entry 16).

The opportunity to present again gave the possibility to students to not only listen to suggestions and know how their performance was, but also to improve, demonstrate their gains, and feel more satisfied with their grades.

My CT also realized the usefulness of feedback and monitoring. When asked about the assessment process, she said “all the time you were helping them, giving them

suggestions, making corrections and practicing before the presentation, I guess that gave them more confidence” (Cooperating Teacher Interview).

### **Gaining Confidence Through Group Work**

Since the focus of my research was on assessing speaking skills, group work was necessary and useful. Group work was one of the most positive and meaningful aspects on my implementation. Although I initially thought, it would be difficult because of their age and the large number of students, students demonstrated an outstanding ability to work by groups and realized the importance of it as well. They learned from their partners, helped each other and gained confidence.

There were some activities requiring students to the front of the classroom and talk public by expressing something in English. In a classroom activity where the students had to do a survey about their classmates’ likes and dislikes related to food, those who were usually so quiet were having an active participation, so I was glad they could practice and show up what they knew. That means that “group work was good for students who are shy since they were working in small groups; I observed they were being more spontaneous” (Journal Entry 9).

This kind of activity was not the only thing that helped with shyness. Fifteen students out of 31 said in the survey that they felt nervous to go to the front or to talk in front of the class. However, the partners played an important function as “some students are so shy, but her/his partner encouraged them to go to the front and present their job”. (Journal Entry 16). Some students expressed in the interview opinions as “there are days I feel shy and others not. But I think and then I go to the front, I had studied a lot with my partner” (Interview with Student B). Another student said, “She helped me and gave me advices, I did not know and she told me to be relaxed” (Interview with Student A).

### Conclusions

This action research project aimed to explore the usefulness of TBLA to assess a group of second grade students' English speaking skills. In general, findings indicate that TBLA helped the students improve their performance in their tasks since they were able to connect the different topics and they were more prepared to face the final assessment. Task really helped students to focus on their outcomes as the activities they carried out were planned to prepare them and help them achieve the goals of a specific task.

In the implementation of TBLA in this project, feedback and monitoring were essential in the development of the task and in the assessment of the students' tasks. Through monitoring, I had the possibility to give feedback to students, which proved to be very helpful for me as well as for the students. This helped me as a teacher because I realized my students' strengths and weaknesses, and helped the students because they could not only show their progress, but also have comments and recommendations about how they were going during the task or how they did after the task was done. This way, feedback was so useful not only for students who had difficulties, needed recommendation, corrections or a second opportunity, but also for the students who did a good job, because they felt proud of themselves and felt their effort was being valued.

Another meaningful finding of this research project was students' gaining confidence through group work. In spite of their age and the large number of students, students demonstrated an outstanding ability to work by groups and realized the importance of it as well, thus learning from their partners, helping each other and gaining confidence.

Finally, despite the fact that I had no the intention to focus on the effects of using songs in the classroom, I consider they helped my students to improve one important aspect on speaking skills which is pronunciation. Songs are not only a way to entertain students, but also a way to contribute to the students' learning. Songs were useful during my

implementation since they helped students to remember vocabulary and sentence structure and to practice their pronunciation.

Notwithstanding the positive results of this project, there were some difficulties that had to do with lack of time and the large number of students. I would have liked to have more time to accompany students' process and provide more feedback. In addition, I would have liked to do one more task to really achieve a more meaningful improvement on my students' speaking skills and to find out more aspects about the usefulness of TBLA in the classroom. The other difficulty during this implementation was the large number of students as well as the frequent absences of students to class, which affected their process in the development of the task.

### **Reflection**

This experience was very significant for me to grow as an English teacher. During this practicum, I had gains, difficulties and challenges, which made this experience something more enriching.

I learned that students are telling you things all the time not only because of the things they say but also because of their attitudes and behaviors. Things they say or do help you to think about how you can change some practices in the classroom or about what they prefer. For example, a bad behavior does not mean necessarily they are impolite children, sometimes this just means is not an appropriate activity for them or instructions were not clear. Also, it was good chance to observe an experienced teacher (My CT) from whom I learned to deal some common situations in the classroom.

Some of the difficulties presented during my practicum year was the high amount of missed classes because of the institution activities, the absences of students to class and new students arriving during the whole school year. I considered that specially children need to have a constant process and, with these difficulties, it was hard because sometimes I felt I

made progress with the group, but then I felt the process was stuck. Thus, sometimes, it was necessary to restart and this was time consuming.

The large number of students will always be a challenge for a public school teacher. In my opinion, it is not easy to deal with many students who have very different paces of learning, different ages and different necessities. Hence, it happens that you cannot pay enough attention to all these aspects or you do not notice many things that happen around the classroom or you cannot focus on students' needs.

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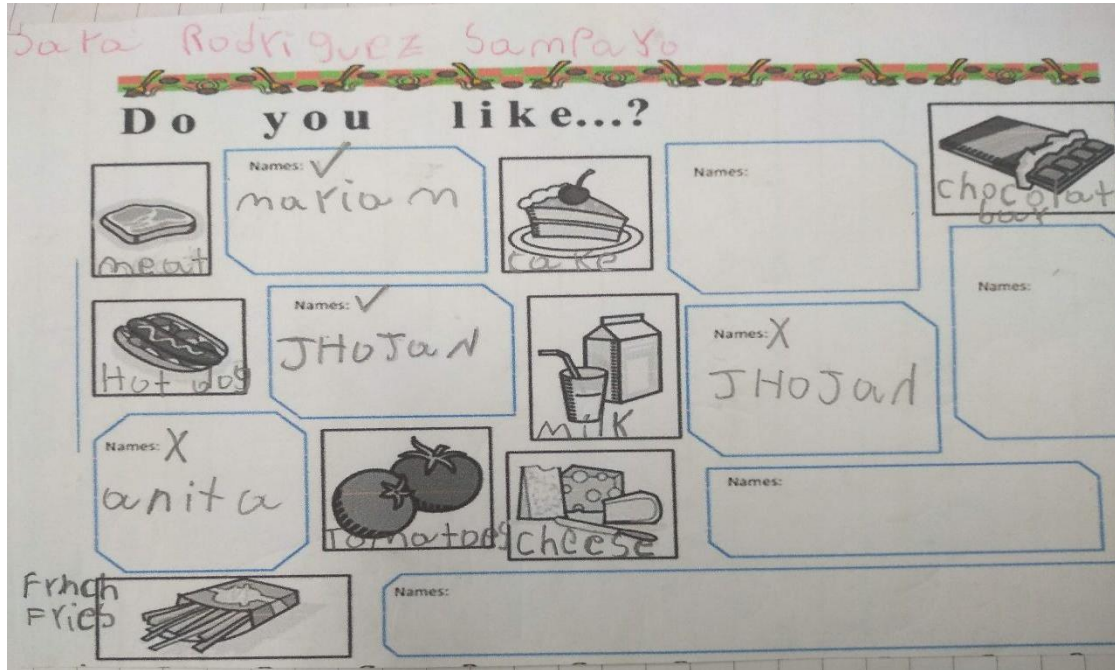
### Appendix A

Students Working by Groups on their Final Task Poster



### Appendix B

Example of the Classroom Survey Titled *Do you like...?*




Appendix C

Example of Likes and Dislikes Worksheet



Name: Caren Velosquez Velazquez Today is Friday, September 14<sup>th</sup>, 2018


### Likes and Dislikes


1. Complete the boy's likes and dislikes about food.






Hello! My name is Mike.


I like  Pizza 

I like salad 


I like ice cream 

I don't like  Cheese 



I don't like Hot dog 


I don't like Tomatoes 

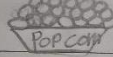
2. Draw yourself and write your likes and dislikes.






Hello! My name is Caren


I like   Ice Cream

I like  Hot dog

I like  Popcorn pop corn

I don't like   Onion

I don't like  broccoli

I don't like  Soup

### Appendix D

#### Students Performing the Final Assessment Task

