

# Promoting Interaction in Emergency Remote Language Teaching and Learning: A Proposal of Seven Tasks to Negotiate Meaning<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic required that people make rapid changes in their lifestyles. Since the beginning of the pandemic, it was necessary for teachers and learners to adapt teaching and learning practices to a remote mode. Following this, our study seeks to contribute to the field of English as a foreign language (EFL) teaching and learning by suggesting tasks. These tasks which intend to assist EFL teachers in the promotion of interactions and particularly negotiation for meaning (NfM) in virtual classes. Seven tasks are included, six of which are adaptations of the tasks that were used in the previous studies that explored NfM. The seven tasks were modified since they were originally designed to be carried out in face-to-face interactions, but our objective is to encourage virtual NfM. To this end, we include a review of the literature that will serve as the rationale behind each task, and we also provide the details regarding their implementation in virtual classes.

## Resumen

La situación derivada de la pandemia sanitaria ha requerido una rápida evolución y cambios en nuestras vidas. Esto no ha sido la excepción para la educación de lenguas. Desde el inicio de la pandemia por el COVID19, fue necesaria la transición a la enseñanza a distancia. En respuesta a esto, el presente artículo pretende contribuir a la enseñanza y aprendizaje del inglés como lengua extranjera al proponer una serie de tareas cuyo fin es asistir a profesores de inglés promuevan la interacción y la negociación del significado en clases virtuales. Se presentan siete tareas de las cuales seis son adaptaciones de tareas que han sido propuestas en estudios sobre la negociación del significado. Las tareas fueron modificadas debido a que originalmente fueron diseñadas para implementarse en clases presenciales; sin embargo, nuestro objetivo es promover la negociación del significado en ambientes virtuales. Para este propósito, hacemos una revisión de literatura la cual pretende mostrar las bases teóricas de las tareas; asimismo, hacemos una descripción de las tareas y su implementación en plataformas virtuales.

## Introduction

It is widely known that the pandemic caused English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers and learners to experience challenges which were motivated by the abrupt transition to virtual teaching and learning, i.e., *emergency remote teaching* (ERT). We are a group of EFL teachers who have taught the language in face-to-face classes, but none of us had any experience teaching the language virtually using platforms for this purpose. We believe that the objective of any EFL teacher is to promote teacher-learner and peer interactions with a view to develop learners' communicative skills. However, since educational activities (as many others) changed because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the need to promote interactions in the virtual classroom is apparent.

To respond to the above challenge, in this article we propose some tasks which promote interactions and particularly negotiation for meaning (NfM) in EFL remote classes. This proposal consists of seven different tasks, six of which are based on previous research aimed at exploring NfM in English language teaching (ELT). The seven tasks were adapted to be taught online: information gap, sharing opinions and decision-making tasks. To develop the proposal, we considered some key concepts that represent the basis of these tasks, i.e., ERT, the Interaction Hypothesis (IH) and NfM. This conceptual framework will be presented in the following section.

## Emergency remote teaching

The COVID-19 pandemic has prompted multiple sectors to quickly adapt to a variety of changes. These changes are notorious in the education sector, where teachers rapidly adapted their practice to a digital environment. In doing so, some teachers encountered difficulties because of a lack of pedagogical content knowledge for online education (Rapanta et al., 2020). This includes not only experience using platforms or

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technological requirements, but also an understanding of how to achieve significant learning. For this reason, it is important to distinguish between online teaching and ERT. Hodges et al. (2020) defined ERT as:

*A temporary shift of instructional delivery to an alternate delivery mode due to crisis circumstances. It involves the use of fully remote teaching solutions for instruction or education that would otherwise be delivered face-to-face or as blended or hybrid courses and that will return to that format once the crisis or emergency has abated. (p. 14)*

Therefore, ERT was implemented only to respond to the lockdown conditions. ERT includes the diverse solutions that have been applied to continue with instruction, such as blended teaching and learning, use of educational platforms or learning applications. One of the disadvantages of the ERT mentioned by Hodges et al. (2020) is that the quality of education was diminished in some settings because teachers were not prepared to face this abrupt shift. Also, Syahrin and Salih (2020) observed that in an English as a Second Language (ESL) context, learners reduced their productive skills. The reason receptive skills were more salient was that teachers controlled the interactions and only produced language input for learners. These findings are significant because they are similar to what we observed in an online class for young adults in Mexico. In this observation, reduced interactions were noticed, as well as a lack of control over the ways learners communicate with each other. Consequently, we decided to suggest activities that can be adapted to ERT supported by the IH. More information about this topic is provided in the following section.

### The Interaction Hypothesis and Negotiation for Meaning

The IH was put forward by Long (1980) as a result of analyzing conversations between native speakers and non-native speakers in Japan for his doctoral dissertation. The hypothesis suggests the relevance of interaction and communication in language learning. In the IH, several concepts are discussed, in particular, comprehensible input (language made comprehensible in interaction), speech modifications and NfM. For the purpose of this article and the tasks we propose, we will focus on the notion of NfM.

The IH has gone through several revisions. The first revision took place in 1983. However, because of strengths and challenges in observing and applying the IH, Long reformulated the hypothesis for a second time in 1996. In this second revision of the hypothesis, he establishes the roles of attention, awareness, and focus on form during NfM in foreigner talks, as well as positive and negative evidence. Motivated by this second revision, several authors (Foster, 1998; Foster & Ohta, 2005) have attempted to identify the benefits of NfM. The results of their research studies have confirmed that interaction in class can bring clarity, accuracy, and comprehensibility in messages. More recently, Gass and Mackey (2006) identified the main constructs of this hypothesis. They claim that output, input and feedback represent the parts of a cycle of the IH. It is widely known that NfM can bring several language learning benefits, and these have been corroborated by research evidence (Foster, 1998; Foster & Ohta, 2005).

Long (1996) explains that in the IH the concept of NfM is central. He defines it as a “negotiation for meaning, and especially negotiation work that triggers interactional adjustments by the NS [native speaker] or more competent interlocutor, facilitates acquisition because it connects input, internal learner capacities, particularly selective attention, and output in productive ways” (pp. 451-452). In other words, it is:

*the process in which, in an effort to communicate, learners and competent speakers provide and interpret signals of their own and their interlocutor's perceived comprehension, thus provoking adjustments to linguistic form, conversational structure, message content, or all three, until an acceptable level of understanding is achieved. (Long, 1996, p. 418)*

Different factors can affect NfM. For example, the types of signals interpreted by each participant are also known as positive evidence and negative evidence. The first type refers to signals that show understanding of communication. The second type results from breakdowns in communication and learners need to modify their speech to solve those problems. Pica (1996) mentions that the following components are necessary in the process of NfM:

*Access to [second language] input that is meaningful and comprehensible in its message, and modified to draw attention to its form; 2) to be given feedback on the comprehensibility and accuracy of their messages, and 3) to modify their production of output toward greater comprehensibility, complexity, and accuracy. (p. 248)*

Hence, negotiation implies a communicative process in which two or more learners (and the teacher) are involved. In this interaction, a source of input is needed, as well as positive and negative evidence, so that learners can modify their speech to be understood. Long (1996) sustains that “[NfM] facilitates acquisition because it connects input, internal learner capacities, particularly selective attention, and output in productive ways” (p. 452). Therefore, NfM can be an important source of acquisition in the language

classroom. Research has shown the benefits of negotiation in face-to-face classrooms (Bitchener, 2004; Fujii et al., 2008; Palma, 2014). We maintain that NfM is beneficial not only in face-to-face interactions in class but also to learners in a remote environment. Therefore, we decided to make adaptations to tasks suggested in previous research (Bitchener, 2004; Fujii et al., 2008; Palma, 2014). This decision is also based on studies such as Foster's (1998), and Pica's (1996) which present NfM in authentic classroom interactions.

### Proposal of Tasks

The COVID-19 pandemic led people around the world to modify their domestic, educational and economic activities. These adjustments involved transforming the daily face-to-face interactions into virtual ones, which necessitated new approaches to teachers' usual duties. However, teachers needed to adapt them virtually and at a distance, as well as to seek different technological resources to carry out language activities.

According to Prabhu (1987), a task is "an activity which require[s] learners to arrive at an outcome from given information through some process of thought and which allow[s] teachers to control and regulate that process" (p. 24). This definition suits the nature of the tasks that will be presented next because they encourage other learners' skills besides the linguistic ones, such as critical thinking, and decision-making, among others.

We will present a proposal that includes seven different tasks which can assist teachers/educators in fostering NfM in the virtual EFL classroom. Six of them are adaptations of ones used in three previous studies. The first study is: The relationship between the negotiation of meaning and language learning: A longitudinal study by Bitchener (2004), in which it was investigated the extent to which participants successfully retained linguistic features acquired through NfM. The second study is: Training learners to negotiate for meaning: An exploratory case study. As the title indicates, Fujii et al. (2008) trained their participants to be aware of NfM and to put this into practice in language learning interactions. The final study is: A classroom view of negotiation of meaning with EFL adult Mexican pupils. In this research, Palma (2014) explored modified output (including NfM) during interactions between EFL learners. These adaptations were developed for the upper-immediate young adult virtual classroom. However, they could be modified to be used in other specific contexts with learners of different ages and/or language levels. The seventh task we propose is an adaptation into the virtual mode of the well-known game named "Taboo". Next, a detailed description of each task will be provided. The first one is presented in Table 1 below.

Type of the task:	Information gap.
Objective:	To promote negotiations, learners have to "discover how their partner's picture is different from their own" (Bitchener, 2004, p. 85). To do this, the participants have to share information missing with their partners.
Material:	Sets of pictures.
Length:	5 min.
Group arrangement:	Pairs.
Process:	1. The teacher sends learners a set of pictures (Appendix 1). On platforms like Zoom: 2. Learners work in pairs in breakout rooms. They describe their pictures to find the differences between their own picture and their partner's. On platforms like Google Meet: 2. The teacher asks learners in pairs to share their responses with the rest of the class.
Product:	Video.

Table 1: Task 1. Spot the difference

This information gap task is adapted from one employed by Bitchener (2004). This task is to be implemented in pairs. If there are many learners, the teacher may ask them to work in pairs to complete the task. They would have to record themselves so that there would be evidence of their proficiency level. If the class works with platforms like Zoom, the teacher could create breakout rooms and have the pairs interact. In platforms like Google Meet, where it is not possible to create breakout rooms, learners could be asked to share their responses with the whole class. It is known that activities like this tend to be time consuming when there is a large number of learners in the class. If that is the case, the task could be set as homework and learners would have to record their interactions and send the recordings to the teacher.

Table 2 displays the second task, which is also an adaptation from Bitchener (2004) for a study focused on NfM.

Type of the task:	Sharing views (discussion).
Objective:	To promote negotiations, learners share their opinions about moral dilemmas. Since this topic is controversial, learners normally engage in oral interactions in which they negotiate meaning. So, by expressing their views on moral dilemmas, learners discuss and negotiate meaning.
Material:	Dilemmas.
Length:	10-15 min.
Group arrangement:	Pairs/whole class.
Process:	1. The teacher sends learners the dilemmas. (This is the link for the suggested worksheet <a href="https://en.islcollective.com/english-esl-worksheets/material-type/role-plays-and-improvisation-activities/end-world-survival-game/2184">https://en.islcollective.com/english-esl-worksheets/material-type/role-plays-and-improvisation-activities/end-world-survival-game/2184</a> ). On platforms like Zoom: 2. Learners work in pairs in breakout rooms. They discuss about the dilemma and decide about who the three most important characters are. On platforms like Google meet: 3. The teacher asks learners to share their responses with the rest of the class.
Product:	Video.

Table 2: Task 2. A sad story

This is a decision-making task. If the class is large, the teacher can ask them to have work in pairs and to complete the task. Alternatively, they would have to record themselves so that there is an evidence of their proficiency level.

Table 3 is an adaptation of a task proposed by Bitchener (2004).

Type of the task:	Decision making.
Objective:	To promote negotiations for meaning, learners choose their favorite movie trailer. Based upon the movie trailer that they chose, they discuss it and then agree on information about the video.
Material:	Google Forms questionnaires (links) and the following YouTube videos: Two feet apart (sad and romantic) <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XtgCqMZofqM">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XtgCqMZofqM</a> The conjuring (Horror) <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OrySKUayGh4">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OrySKUayGh4</a> Oblivion (futurist movie) <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ItlB1cnqyU">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ItlB1cnqyU</a>
Length:	10 - 15 min.
Group arrangement:	Triads.
Process:	1. The teacher sends the three videos, and learners choose their favorite. 2. Later on, learners discuss the video in pairs. 3. After the discussion learners answer a questionnaire regarding the video. At this point they discuss and agree on their responses (This is the link for the suggested questionnaire <a href="https://docs.google.com/forms/d/177UMAr0vXeOOxwv_eptr2pqHa4FwvIF8izxJiYnvJkM/edit?usp=sharing">https://docs.google.com/forms/d/177UMAr0vXeOOxwv_eptr2pqHa4FwvIF8izxJiYnvJkM/edit?usp=sharing</a> ).
Product:	Discussion of the audio. Google questionnaire answered.

Table 3: Task 3. Movie trailers

This decision-making task is aimed at promoting NfM through a discussion. It is recommended that learners work in pairs. Teachers can use the suggested questionnaire or elaborate a similar one that corresponds to their classroom's needs. Learners can work on any platform during the discussion activity, but they must save evidence, such as videos, text or voice-messages, or emails. A possible problem would be that learners may experience a bad internet connection to watch the videos on YouTube. To address this, the teacher can download the videos and send them to the learners in advance. Additionally, the videos can be uploaded on a different free platform (e.g., Facebook) for learners' use.

The fourth task is presented in Table 4. It is an adaptation from Fujii et al.'s (2008) task for training learners in negotiating meaning.

Type of the task:	Information gap
Objective:	To promote NfM, learners "complete the missing portions of the illustration" (Fujii et al., 2008, p. 4). In other words, learners have to share information in order to complete the task.
Material:	Comic strip story
Length:	10 – 15 min.
Group arrangement:	triads
Process:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The teacher provides learners with a comic strip with some parts missing (Appendix 2).</li> <li>2. In triads, learners complete the strip story.</li> <li>3. On platforms like Zoom learners could work in breakout rooms.</li> <li>3. On platforms like Google Meet, this task could be set as homework.</li> <li>4. If possible, one of the learners prints out the strip story and completes it with drawings.</li> <li>5. Then s/he takes pictures of it and sends them to the team and teacher.</li> </ol>
Product:	Complete strip stories.

Table 4: Task 4. Completing the comic strip story

This is an information gap task aimed at promoting NfM by completing a comic strip story. If they work on other platforms which do not allow to split the group into breakout rooms, the task could be set as homework. If possible, one learner should print out the strip story and draw on it what the team agrees that could best complete the strip story. If they cannot print it out, they could try to draw the digital image, or one learner could make the drawings on a piece of paper, and then take pictures of the drawings and complete the digital strip story with those pictures. Learners could also make use of digital images and/or photographs. It could be left up to their creativity. The teacher could collect the complete strip stories as evidence of the learners' performance.

Table 5 illustrates the fifth task, which is an adaptation of Fujii et al. (2008).

Type of the task:	Information gap
Objective:	To promote NfM, learners play the online game <i>Who Am I?</i> in order to discuss physical appearance features by sending videos or audios to describe certain characters.
Material:	WhatsApp and <i>Who Am I?</i> game app.
Length:	10 - 15 min.
Group arrangement:	Pairs.
Process:	<p>On platforms like Zoom.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The teacher sends the name or the link of the game, so learners can download it in advance. (This is the link for the suggested game: <a href="https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.Offs.WhoIAm.guess.who.is.the.character.monsters.edition">https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.Offs.WhoIAm.guess.who.is.the.character.monsters.edition</a>)</li> <li>2. Learners work in pairs and keep in touch using the resources of WhatsApp. They need to communicate and discuss physical appearance to find the selected character of their opponent.</li> <li>3. After doing the preceding process, they start a discussion on WhatsApp, which they send to the teacher.</li> </ol>
Product:	Video.

Table 5: Task 5. Who Am I?

This is a two-way interaction task which aims at promoting NfM by spotting the difference regarding physical appearance. It is also suggested that if they work on platforms like Zoom, this task could be carried out during class time by sending learners to breakout rooms. If they work on other platforms which do not allow splitting the group into break out rooms, then the task could be set as homework and the activity could be recorded by using WhatsApp videos or audios. The recordings would represent the evidence in which they discussed the characters' physical appearance. Also, if learners have a bad internet connection or not enough data, the facilitator could ask them to download the game in advance.

Table 6 shows a slightly different task from Task 2. It is a decision-making task, based on a story but this one was originally applied in a study carried out by Palma (2014).

Type of the task:	Decision making.
Objective:	To promote NfM, learners engage in a discussion to guess and decide on who might be guilty of a diamond robbery.
Material:	Description of the situation and suspects.
Length:	10 min.
Group arrangement:	Teams of five / whole class.
Process:	For platforms like Zoom: 1. The teacher sets breakout rooms of five learners For other platforms: 1. The group can work together. 2. The teacher explains that a diamond was stolen and gives details about the situation (Appendix 3). 3. The teacher might share the document on the screen so everybody can read. 4. Learners need to discuss who they think is guilty and agree on a solution.
Product:	Oral argument about the solution of a mystery

Table 6: Task 6. A diamond robbery

This task consists of finding the guilty party in a diamond robbery. If possible, the teacher could divide the group into teams of five members each. If the platform with which they work does not allow this, learners could interact as a whole class. A possible problem would be that shy learners may not participate frequently but the teacher can intervene, so the whole class interacts.

Table 7 presents the last task, which is our proposal for carrying out a version of the taboo game in a virtual mode.

Type of the task:	Information gap.
Objective:	To promote NfM, learners have to provide clues for the class to guess a word.
Material:	Lists of vocabulary items.
Length:	7 min. (per participant).
Group arrangement:	Whole class.
Process:	1. Through the private chat, the teacher sends each learner a different word that they have to make their classmates guess, together with a series of other words that cannot be used while describing the main one. Learners cannot comment on their words until the activity starts. 2. Learners can take turns describing their respective word. The other learners can intervene to try to guess the word and/or to negotiate meaning. A list of suggested words and the ones that learners cannot include in the description is given in Appendix 5 3. This activity continues until each learner participates.

Table 7: Task 7. Taboo game

The taboo game is well known since it is useful to encourage interactions among peers and NfM. This task could be handled with the whole class. Teachers need to be aware that learners may need help to describe the words and teachers can provide positive or negative evidence to engage in the NfM.

### Discussion and Conclusion

This paper presented some tasks which could be useful for the ERT in situation like the COVID-19 pandemic. It was motivated by our observations of the difficulties that teachers encountered when trying to promote interactions in a digital classroom. As previously discussed, there are several benefits in terms of second language learning from the promotion of interactions and NfM. This is why it is relevant to implement tasks that provide learners with the opportunity to interact with their peers and their teacher. ERT has affected in diverse ways the educational routines that English teachers were accustomed to using. Therefore, seeking alternatives that nurture effective learning became a priority. This process was not easy and still it had to be developed as quickly as possible.

Regarding specifically NfM, we are aware that even in face-to-face classes having learners interact and negotiate for meaning is difficult to achieve. So, it becomes more challenging to achieve it in virtual classes since the teachers do not have the same control as they do in face-to-face lessons. Therefore, the tasks proposed in this paper may represent a useful tool to assist NfM in digital classrooms. We have considered two ways in which the tasks can be carried out. One implies access to software with tools that facilitate learning such as Zoom, which offers a free version, so the majority of teachers who are interested can implement these tasks. Pica (1996) indicates that other tasks which engage learners in a higher degree of thought can be included in NfM tasks. Some examples are information gap, opinion sharing, and decision-

making tasks. However, the most important characteristic is that learners share objectives, and the tasks be relevant to them. In this case, we consider that teachers can first explain the instructions and then promote collaborative learning.

For research on NfM, we recommend that researchers continue counting instances of negotiation moves (clarification requests, comprehension checks and confirmation checks) using the tasks suggested in this paper. In this way the debate on the importance of the IH and NfM can be expanded to ERT. Additionally, teachers might also contribute by addressing their impressions of implementing the activities and discuss its feasibility in their contexts. We maintain that classroom teachers can also produce research of quality and engage in topics of second language acquisition in order to inform their practices.

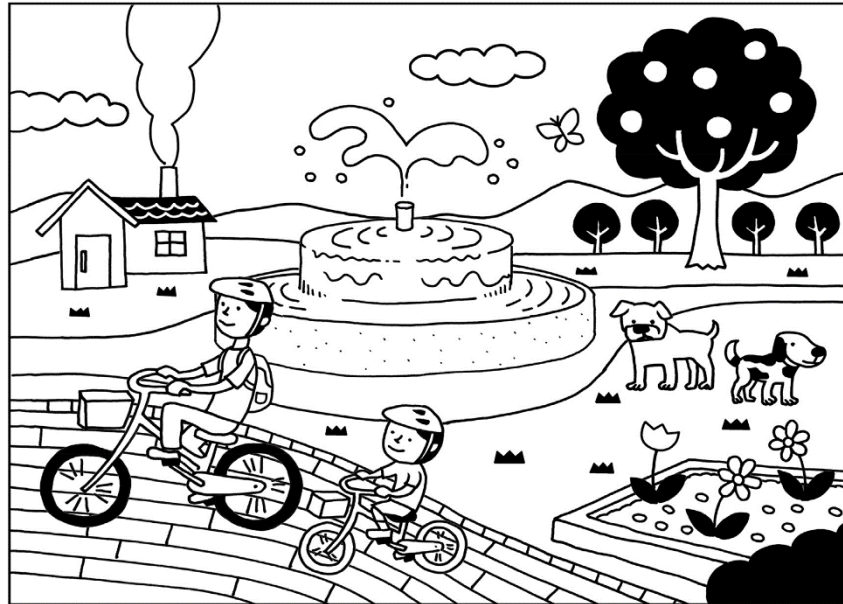
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Appendix 1

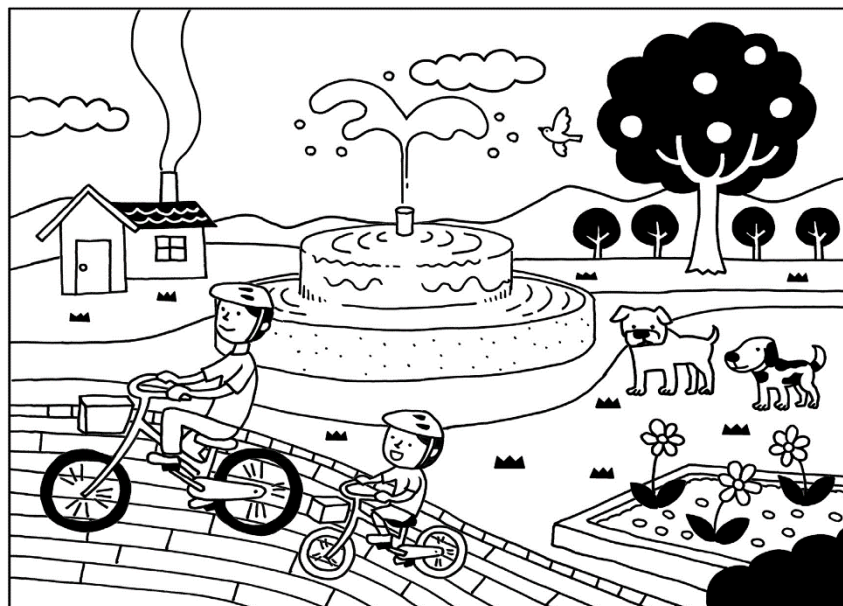
Spot the difference

Picture A



Note. Taken from Nishiguchi, et al. (2014), p. 2.

Picture B

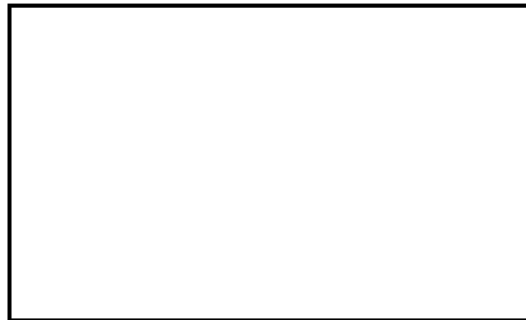
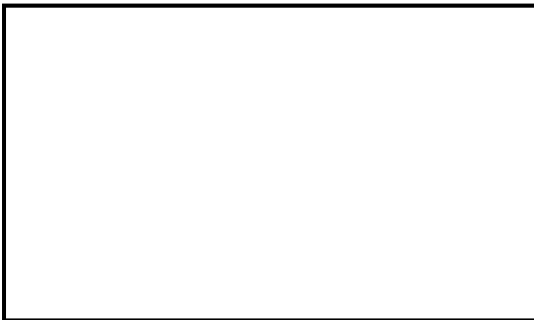


Note. Taken from Nishiguchi, et al. (2014), p. 3.



Appendix 2

Comic strip story



## Appendix 3

## A diamond robbery

A large and valuable diamond has been stolen from the California home of billionaire muscle man and film star, Artemis Lenkoran. The diamond, known as the Nur-i-Dunya or 'Light of the World' was kept in a special display case in Lenkoran's Beverley Hills mansion. It was protected by a special laser alarm system.

Lenkoran lives in the mansion with his girlfriend, Ms Rita Chevrolet, and his servant, Oddjob.

Oddjob noticed the diamond was missing at 7 am on Monday morning when he made his morning rounds. The laser alarm had been disabled by cutting the wires. Lenkoran went to bed at ten saying he felt tired. Rita Chevrolet was at a party in Hollywood and says she returned at 1 am. Oddjob worked out in the gym until midnight and then went to bed.

Note. Taken from <https://www.eltbody.com/worksheet-609-making-deductions-the-diamond-robbery->

## Appendix 4

## Clues

There were no fingerprints.
A bathroom window to the rear of the house was broken.
Oddjob is known to be a compulsive gambler with a sick mother in Miami.
A black sports car was seen driving away from the house around 4 am.
A pair of wire cutters was found in Oddjob's room among other tools.
Oddjob thinks he heard a noise at 4 am. but assumed it was Rita.
Another guest at the Hollywood party that Rita went to, says she left at 3 am.
An investigation of Oddjob's bank account shows a recent deposit for \$100,000.
A diagram of the alarm system was found in Lenkoran's desk.
Rita's in-box contains this email: 'Rita, baby. Thanks for a great evening. Tomorrow? Signed 'Zak.' It's dated the day after the robbery.
A handwritten note was found hidden in Lenkoran's study saying 'Fifteen million, Lenkoran...or I'll tell all'.
A journalist in Rome claims to have seen Lenkoran coming out of a famous gay club a month ago.
Some fragments of broken glass were found on Lenkoran's clothing.
Lenkoran recently increased the insurance on the diamond from five to fifteen million dollars.

Note. Taken from <https://www.eltbody.com/worksheet-609-making-deductions-the-diamond-robbery->

## Appendix 5

## List of words for the taboo game

CAR	DINOSAUR	HAMBURGER	INTERNET	VIDEOGAMES
Driver	Big	America	Computer	Control
Ride	Animal	Bread	Web	Console
Transport	Extinct	Beef	Technology	Computer
Travel	Fossil	McDonalds	Wi-fi	Play
Fast	Reptile	Unhealthy	Wireless	Game

ICE CREAM	MUSIC	MOVIES	DOG	BOAT
Cold	Instrument	Popcorn	Animal	Sea
Summer	Melody	Cinema	Paws	Transport
Snack	Rhythm	Soda	Guardian	Travel
Sweet	Lyrics	Theater	Cat	Fish
Cone	Play	Film	Bark	Sail

Adapted from <https://embracingchina.files.wordpress.com/2014/08/taboo-game.pdf>