Article Title

Using Mystery Stories in the Language Classroom

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Abstract

Everyone loves a mystery. Mystery stories provide interesting and enjoyable material in the language classroom (Krashen 1982, Gold 1983, Somers and Worthington 1979). They provide rich environments for the productive and receptive skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing (Johnson and Louis 1987). Mystery stories also provide useful sources of practice and reinforcement in the areas of critical thinking and deductive reasoning (Raths et al. 1967). This paper explores the ways that mystery stories can be successfully utilized to improve language proficiency and linguistic ability.

Background

Howard Haycraft states in his introduction to A Treasury of Great Mysteries,

. . . people read mystery stories for a diversity of reasons. Some, for the intellectual challenge of the puzzles they present, others for the vicarious pleasure of the chase. Others believe . . . that the vast popularity of the genre lies in the fact that, in a disorderly world, it represents one of the few fixed points of order and morality, where justice may be counted on to emerge triumphant.

It is these reasons that make the mystery story a very powerful tool in the teacher's arsenal of activities. Whether you are using a 1 minute mystery story to give the class something to

talk about or do while you take attendance, a filler at the end of class if you have time left over from your daily plan, or a full fledged dissection of a mystery story over a 2 hour class, mystery stories are very versatile (Dills 1989). Mystery stories range from the 1 minute mystery story that occupies 3 paragraphs to full length novels of Sherlock Holmes or Agatha Christie. Mystery stories can also be found to suit any number or type of class objectives whether it be a focus on pronunciation, grammar, listening, reading, or speaking (Green 1987).

There are many kinds of mysteries. Some can be solved and some cannot. The mystery of the Great Pyramids, or the mystery of UFOs have yet to be explained and solved. Everyone is faced with a mystery of some kind or another in their lives. Missing objects such as keys or important papers, or even missing people and crimes constitute many of the mysteries we face on a daily basis. A certain type of mystery that can be solved and that has a definite conclusion is the mystery story. A mystery story is a genre of literature that has a plot which involves the solving of a puzzle, esp. a crime.

Mysteries such as Sherlock Holmes and Agatha Christie, provide insight and context into the time that they were written. If the writer is successful, they can appeal to the reader on an emotional level and reveal significant insights about the way people lived and will live. The writer develops the characters, setting, and plot so they elucidate the times in which they live. Attention to detail even in romantic mystery novels provides the reader with excellent sources to improve vocabulary (Sage 1987). The writer of good mysteries uses research and realizes the importance of accuracy and detail in leaving clues for the reader to follow. The mystery writer is as interested in conveying a story as they are in providing clues to the puzzle and solving the crime.

Good mysteries must also be good stories. The mystery story presents the reader with characters and suspects caught up in a web of intrigue and untruthfulness, and builds the mystery with clues and details. As the reader becomes involved with the characters and story line, they begin to absorb the information and begin to recognize the many clues that the writer leaves them . Gradually the characters become real to the reader and the reader

can begin to "cheer" for one character, the sleuth, over another, the culprit.

And, at this moment, the reader is unconsciously using their cognitive ability to sort and group these details and clues; they compare them to other characters and positions in the story and begin to discern the differences in the truth of what they are reading about and to compare it to realistic and probable circumstances (McLaughlin 1987). If the writer accomplishes this kind of reader involvement, they can make some impact on the reader's conscience.

Mysteries make the reader think, consider, discover, and, most important, begin to realize the importance and usefulness of studying English. The writer has, of course, as their central purpose, also described and explained some aspects of critical thinking along with reasoning and deductive skills.

The mystery writer who is writing mysteries for the general public is writing literature too. The writer finds many half-truths, many unspoken words and many different views of the same facts as plot or character development. One is looking for the clues, but it is sometimes difficult to say what is a clue and what is not, and it is even harder to say which clues are meaningful and which are subsidiary. The reader determines what clues to consider, and in performing this, they are synthesizing and analyzing clues and facts in interpreting the story. The reader chooses the clues and they say what these chosen clues mean.

The mystery writer sets their ideas down in writing. They are writing for people about mysterious events and in doing so they are writing literature. The mystery is fiction, unless it is in the true detective genre, and the writer uses the skills of the literary writer.

The writer of good mysteries is aware of the various aspects of the time period in which the story takes place, and if they are sophisticated about the historical view, they will integrate this in their story. In including the historical dimension, the writer incorporates facts about history that are important to the readers' understanding of the mystery story. These facts are

important because the characters and the story cannot be understood without knowing them.

In addition to attention to the historical dimension, the good mystery writer incorporates accuracy in specific detail of characters and suspects, clues, and other information to lead the reader directly or indirectly to the solving of the mystery. Only an honest portrayal of the past events illuminates the times accurately. Mystery writing is a demanding art form because the writer has to spend a considerable amount of time ensuring that details are precise and accurate.

Teachers should appreciate the importance of mystery stories. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie are masters in the art of mystery writing. American and British writers such as Dashiell Hammett and Ellery Queen have a tremendous public following because of their strict attention to accurate detail. American writers such as Hy Conrad, Stan Smith, and Carol Farley write mystery stories for young adults. They, too, combine accuracy with fictional form in exciting and interesting literature. These writers of mystery stories provide an invaluable experience for readers.

When the language teacher brings this kind of fiction into the classroom, they are providing the student with the ability to understand language. The mystery story uses imaginative and figurative language to entice students into a realistic exploration of events. The characters and drama interact with each other in such a way as to involve the student in a study of the story on an emotional level as well as a cognitive level. This student involvement is a logical reason why language teachers should be persuaded to use mystery stories (Brumfit and Carter 1986).

Once students become immersed in the story's setting, character, plot and theme, they become interested and stimulated by the story. While reading the mystery, they begin to draw inferences about history, social attitudes and manners, customs and beliefs. They begin to absorb the mystery story details without even realizing they are being instructed. In contrast, if these same language techniques were presented in a textbook and the teacher

asked the students to memorize or know them, it is likely that little information would be retained by many students.

The events become more significant because the students must understand them in order to understand the story. Students retain information more easily because it has been understood within the context of the plot, character, setting and theme of the story (Mason and Au 1986). Students begin to consider the relevancy of learning language in relation to the amount of enjoyment and interest they receive. The students begin to see how a study of the mystery helps them to understand the English language.

The impact of a mystery story on students cannot be minimized. The range of their imagination and understanding can be broadened. If they respond to a good mystery, they might be motivated to read more, and use English on a more frequent basis. They begin to develop their own sense of enjoyment from discovering information on their own. Students would then be expected to read more complex mysteries after they have finished reading simpler ones.

Piaget, Vygotsky, and others established the relationship between thinking and language. Many aspects of language are important to critical thinking skills. There is a close relationship between what students say in class discussions and their ability to think (Stanford and Roark 1974, Staton 1984). Many people view reading as an active mental process involving the ability to construct meaning (Pearson and Tierney 1984).

Boyer (1983) considers thinking skills to be the "centrality of language." Critical analysis and evaluative judgments of elements in any context involves language. From the abstract to the concrete, thinking skills are inherent in all that we do.

Critical thinking skills are a necessary ingredient to learn language content (Raths et al 1967). Thinking skills and language content are inseparable. The mystery story provides practice in logic, analysis, comparison and contrast, questioning, and evaluation. Isolating thinking skills without adequate context and environment ill prepares the student for

competency (Spache and Spache 1986). When combined with contextually rich environments in vocabulary and pronunciation, thinking skills focus are very effective for realistic learning of language.

By studying and analyzing mystery stories, students can become more discerning readers and develop critical thinking skills. This has many kinds of ramifications for the students and teacher. When students become critical thinkers they are able to discern what is correct and what is not. They begin to think about what is good and what is bad, and why it is good or why it is bad, and what is wrong and what is right, or why it is wrong or why it is right. They see the value of objectivity and learn to consider the many different possibilities before they decide on an answer or solution. They begin to recognize biases, review judgments, identify values, and develop criteria for making generalizations. They are thinking about ideas, theories, and philosophies. They attempt to consider and to discuss, intelligently, the various interpretations of mysteries. If a mystery story can inspire these kinds of learning experiences, then students can understand the importance of studying English as a means to understanding themselves, and their role in society.

The idea that students should be able to think while learning language should be central to the language classroom. Reading, pragmatic speaking, listening and reading play vital roles in the student's life. It is essential that students be given the skills to learn to evaluate, draw inferences, and arrive at conclusions based on the evidence (Zintz and Maggert, 1984). Language, thinking, and learning cannot be separated (Thaiss 1984). "If we do not apply the full range of language resources to our learning of any subject, then we stifle thought, conscious and unconscious, and so deprive ourselves of more than the most superficial understanding (Thaiss 1984)."

And, perhaps the students begin to grasp what is meant by a mystery. If a particular event is described in a situation and they perceive that event as a mystery that still exists in the present as well as the future, they might draw from their own knowledge and skills and with what they have learned previously, begin to find a solution. Thus a student can adapt their previous mystery story skills and understanding to possible real life situations or

circumstances. They then begin to comprehend the significance of the study of mystery stories. Agatha Christie novels are an example of historical mystery stories that deal with the theme of how men regard and treat women from the perspective of her detective Hercule Poirot. His attitude towards women in her novels provide glimpses of attitudes toward women in a historical light, attitudes that remain problematic to this day.

Somers and Worthington (1979) stated that "...literature...offers more opportunities than any other area of the curriculum to consider ideas, values, and ethical questions." And, literature that challenges and motivates helps students learn to take a more engaged approach to their learning. When students delve into the mystery story, they become immersed in characters moving through events and places; they begin to perceive the continuity of learning. By reading about a historical character in a mystery story, they begin to place that character's life in its context; they more readily grasp the process of age and the progression of time. This leads to an understanding of the concept of the present and the past in terms of learning language and how we are the way we are now as individuals.

Mystery stories, throughout history, are the study of characters whether good or bad. Students can learn that language is vital to their success and well-being and that by studying attitudes and surroundings of characters, they will begin to appreciate the learning process. Their good characters and bad characters are just a steeping stone to good language production and the elements of the mystery story must be understood in order for them to understand language. They will begin to understand the process of learning.

Mystery stories can also help students to resolve some of the emptiness they feel as they study English. They will understand the necessity needed to understand problems as they identify with characters dealing with culprits in a certain time and setting. The form of a well-written mystery story allows students' imaginations to meld into the scenes of that story. They begin to understand English as a human experience, rather than a series of isolated structures and grammar points, and, most importantly, learn that it is not merely a matter of vocabulary to be memorized for a test.

Students admire, respect, identify with, or reject as unworthy, some of the characters involved in mystery stories. They begin to understand the courage needed to deal with challenges, the personal risk involved in fighting crime or other social evils and the agony in accepting defeat when the perpetrator escapes, and the determination needed to succeed. Are the characters in mystery stories any less important than other types of English study? Can the study of mystery stories make students realize that they can learn English and, in doing so, help them become smarter, and better prepared to deal with their future? Can students realize that an understanding of the mystery story is a means of dealing with the challenges of learning language? Language teachers who bring mystery stories into their classrooms can help their students to realize some of the answers to these important questions.

Brief History of the Mystery Story

The mystery story can be traced to the earliest of civilizations. As long as there will be laws, the inherent need to get at the truth of crime scenes, and the questioning of suspects, people will be drawn to these suspenseful elements of the crime or mystery story. Trials of individuals from the earliest of times will no doubt have lawyers and the investigation and representation of their clients that lead to a finding of guilt or innocence. In written form as a story, the mystery genre began in the late 18th century. A group of writers known as the American Renaissance, developed mystery stories as well as other kinds of fiction (Grossvogel 1979). The greatest of these writers were Edgar Allen Poe and Herman Melville.

Poe invented the first fictional detective, C. Auguste Dupin, in the classic story "Murders in the Rue Morgue." He later wrote "The Purloined Letter" in 1845. Poe modeled his detective on the real life aspects of a French detective, Vidocq, who became the first head of the French Criminal Investigation Department in 1811. Vidocq's exploits were also written about in Melville's "Moby Dick," and Charles Dickens' "Great Expectations."

In Britain in the 1850's and 1860, writers developed incredible and melodramatic mysteries (Murch 1975). The best known of these stories was "The Woman in White" by Wilkie Collins. This was the haunting story of a terrified young woman aided only by her half sister. Other British and French writers during this time started writing realistic crime stories involving the police. These stories are the beginnings of modern detective fiction. Actual policemen such as Emile Gaboriau made clever deductions based on physical evidence at crime scenes. They also used techniques such as tracking criminals and the use of disguises.

In America in 1878, Anna Katherine Green wrote "The Circular Study", a novel containing skilled detective work, in which the hero uncovers hidden facts about the past and the characters related to the crime. In the late 1800's the best writer of detective mystery stories emerged. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle created Sherlock Holmes, the greatest fictional detective of all, and wrote about him in a series of short stories. The best are collected in two volumes, "The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes" and "The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes."

The early to mid 20th Century saw the greatest production of mystery fiction. Many different kinds of books were published then. One major group included writers whose detectives solved mysteries through pure logic and reasoning. These mystery plots tended to be extremely clever puzzles, with tricky, surprising solutions (Rodell 1943). These authors have tremendous followings of loyal fans. The British author G. K. Chesterson invented the character of the priest-detective Father Brown. These stories and others of the time period made sleuths more realistic and believable compared to the exploits of characters such as Sherlock Holmes.

The best known of these mystery writers included the greatest mystery writer of all, England-born Agatha Christie. She wrote, in 1920, "The Mysterious Affair at Styles," which introduced the Belgian detective Hercule Poirot; later she introduced Jane Marple, through whose a number of tales are told. Her most celebrated works include: "The Tuesday Night Club Murders" and "And Then There Were None." The most staggering characteristic of Agatha Christie's work is that she is only outsold in production by the

Bible and Shakespeare. That is Christie's amazing legacy to her craft of the mystery story.

The American author S. S. Van Dine created his own style of impossible crimes in his novel "The Kidnap Murder Case." Van Dine's greatest follower, and 20th Century America's greatest mystery writer, was Ellery Queen. His stories feature highly complex plots, bizarre events, and mysteries solved through clever chains of reasoning. His best works include "The Siamese Twin Mystery" and "The Tragedy of Z."

In the 1920's and 1930's, the mystery story developed a "tougher edge" known as the "hard-boiled" detective. Writers in this sub-genre included Erle Stanley Gardner with his lawyer; detective Perry Mason, , Raymond Chandler, with his detective Philip Marlowe and Dashiell Hammett, author of "The Big Knockover" and "The Continental Op." These mystery stories provided a great deal of action and drama and let the actual solving of the crime take a more subdued place.

Bridging the cultural gap between the philosophies of East and West saw the rise of the popular detective Charlie Chan in The United States in the 1930's. Charlie Chan was both Hawaiian and Chinese. This character replaced the stereotypical "evil Asian villain," and saw the philosophies and thinking between the East and West come together.

Classroom Application

This section is designed to help teachers use mysteries in the language classroom. The language teacher can use this genre of literature to clarify, reinforce and dramatize significant language structures and main points that students might not otherwise remember or understand. These mysteries can provide unusual insights into language for the student who is confused, uninterested, or unreceptive to textbook language. The student's personal response to an interesting and enjoyable mystery novel can be the beginning of an understanding of what language is all about and why. This helps the student to find pleasure in reading and allows material to be utilized by the student in school libraries, public libraries, and book stores.

Mystery writers write about logic and reasoning. They allow the reader to interpret and remember those important clues and events in the story that give meaning to our involvement as a reader. As a working definition a mystery story is "facts. The writer does not distort logic nor simple deduction. Very often, in the classroom, mere vocabulary and grammar facts become a body of information that seems irrelevant and dull to students. Textbook exercises often become so dull and uninteresting or so unchallenging and lifeless that students cannot conceive of these linguistic points as useful or necessary to themselves. Students cannot comprehend that these linguistic structures are important to their education and profession. When students cannot grasp the relevance of language structures and meanings, then their motivation becomes depleted day by day.

All students love a good mystery, a story with excitement, adventure and challenge; if a mystery is written well, it includes these elements and more. The "more" is accuracy in detail and "realistic probability," the necessary elements of a meaningful exploration through mysteries. The antagonistic conflicts of sleuth and criminal, of and between characters, become real to the student because these characters can be presented in a lively dimension. They are ordinary people taking advantage of a particular event. Their defeats and successes evoke an emotional response from readers. This response draws students into the world of the mystery and imparts their perspective with an analytical dimension. The characters emerge as human beings responding to a human condition in the context of crime, mischief, and troubles.

The language teacher can devise numerous strategies and techniques for sifting the clues from the story. The clues may be picked out by students who see textbook English come to life in mystery stories. Students can become experts in deduction and analysis and the elements of the mystery can be stimulating for class discussion. Reference sources for checking the accuracy of the vocabulary in the story and clues include encyclopedias, almanacs, dictionaries, libraries and other readily available sources.

As language teachers use more mystery stories in the classroom students will develop the

ability to recognize and analyze, remember significant details, and form opinions as to the identity of culprits. More important, the mystery story will become a subject of interest for students. There is no mystery in using mystery stories in the language classroom. It's a positive way to learn language.

Guidelines for Using Mystery Stories

The guidelines for teaching a mystery story can be divided into six main categories: linguistic components, introduction, setting, characters, plot, and summary. Here are some suggested ideas and examples for using mystery stories.

I. Linguistic components
a. Insure that all students are able to pronounce the names of characters, places, and vocabulary items that are involved in the mystery story. This can be achieved with information-gap exercises, matching exercises, fluency square activities, and dialogues (Bowen 1975).

Information-gap exercises require some preparation. An example of this can be for the teacher to show or hold up several caricatures of a detective involved in various activities and the students have to guess what is happening. If the students are having difficulty with a particular sound such as /f/ or /v/, the pictures might show, falling, praying, fighting, painting, etc. Another exercise would be for the students to come up with words containing these sounds.

Matching exercises are a good source for vocabulary development. An example would be to divide the class into small groups. Several students have a written description of a character. The other students in the group have the pictures of the characters. The object of the activity is to match the written descriptions of the characters with the pictures. Some examples of written descriptions might be:

Nick is wearing a short-sleeve shirt and shorts. (For lower level students)

Dr. Alcott, mid-fifties and extremely short, is an over-weight pharmacist who works at the Severance Hospital. (For higher-level students)

Large square activities are another way to practice pronunciation and vocabulary. A large square is divided up into smaller squares with activities taking place that differ from a contrasting square in terms of one variable. This can be a vocabulary item to be found, or an activity to be explained. For example, divide the class into pairs or teams. Each pair has pictures handed to them, and the object is to correctly either find the vocabulary objects or say what the activity is in the picture. Students must be able to describe the activities in each square or correctly pronounce the vocabulary items to successfully finish the activity.

a. Crossword puzzles and word search puzzles can be made with the following common vocabulary of mysteries: alibi, caper, clue, corpse, crime, deduction, detective, evidence, fingerprints, hunch, investigate, logical, motive, plot, scene, sleuth, suspect, tracks, victim, witness.

b. Read a short passage from the mystery story and have students guess certain elements such as, what happened, what does the person (or persons) mean, who might say that, where it might be located, or the time period it might be located in.

c. Take out some dialogues or passages from the mystery story beforehand and before the students receive the actual mystery story; have them read a small dialogue or passage of not more than a few sentences from the mystery story to further highlight pronunciation and reading skills.

II. Introduction

a. Have students solve a simple word problem or math problem.

b. Discuss the basic ways in which we solve problems, and the strategies that should be utilized, such as sequence of events and the use of reported speech.

c. Discuss the meaning of the word 'mystery'.

d. Discuss what a mystery story is.

d. Ask a question such as "What do you think of when you hear the word 'mystery'?"

e. Discuss popular and favorite mystery TV programs, novels, and movies.

f. Discuss what a detective is.

g. Discuss how a detective solves mysteries.

III. Setting

a. Discuss where the mystery story takes place.

b. Discuss the time period in which the mystery story takes place.

c. Discuss some customs such as food and clothing that are appropriate for that particular place and time.

d. Is the setting real or imaginary?

e. Discuss ways in which people lived during the time period.

IV. Characters

a. Who are the characters in the mystery story?

b. Are the characters real and historical, imaginary, or a combination of both?

c. What are the physical and psychological features of the characters?

c(1) A rather interesting question for the fictional detective Sherlock Holmes is, What role does his taking drugs play and do they interfere with his crime solving abilities?

d. Are the historical characters accurately portrayed?

e. Are fictional characters in keeping with the historical setting?

f. List positive and negative character traits of the characters. Show parts of the mystery story that illustrate these traits.

g. Explain the characters' involvement in the mystery story.

V. Plot

a. Discuss what happens in the mystery story.

b. Discuss alibis and what witnesses said.

c. Discuss clues and evidence at crime scenes.

d. Discuss possible suspects.

e. Discuss motives for each character.

f. Discuss the timeline of events.

g. Discuss the chain of events in the story.

VI. Summary

a. Discuss the ways in which the detectives solve the mysteries.

b. Discuss how the sleuths reach their conclusions.

c. Have students write their own mystery with simple story plots and no more than three suspects.

d. Discuss ways in which particular popular detectives and crime solvers solve mysteries.

e. Discuss any insights about the characters or events.

f. Discuss good mystery stories and how students perceive mystery stories after the classroom experience.

g. Discuss positive aspects and negative aspects of studying mystery stories.

h. Discuss what students have learned from reading mysteries including any morals or lessons.

i. Discuss ways in which the author tries to make any comments about personal character.

Suggested Strategies for Using Mystery Stories in the Language Classroom

After studying a particular mystery story, have students bring in their own mystery stories to read and discuss.

Divide the class up into groups of three or four. These groups are responsible for presenting a mystery story to the class using the guidelines listed above.

For example, one group has read a The Case of the Costumed Thief, by Carol Farley. This is a lower-level mystery suitable for beginners to intermediate students of English. Each

member of the group can divide up the guidelines: one person responsible for plot, one student responsible for the setting, introduction, characters, etc.

Examples of questions and activities to cover:

I. Background

Define the following vocabulary words. Make sure students can pronounce them correctly.

1) adjusted 2) plopped 3) weird

4) plastic 5) thinnest 6) patted

7) floppy 8) admiring 9) stuffed

10) turned down 11) stringy 12) hobo

13) props 14) character 15) lying

16) cousin 17) rec room 18) velveteen

19) skeleton 20) denied 21) swear

22 vouch

Pronounce the following names correctly.

1) Nina Chase

2) Max Decker

3) Pete

4) Ann

5) Marylea

6) Jerry

7) Ginger

8) Nathan

9) Darlene

10) Bill

Review the past tense of verbs ending in -ed. Pronounce the following past tense verbs correctly. Note that there are three possible sounds for past tense verbs that end in -ed: /t/, /d/, /id/. The following verbs are taken directly from the story and should be placed in the proper column according to the sound of -ed.

/t/ /d/ /id/

laughed feathered adjusted

plopped covered patted

dressed peered nodded

stuffed followed noted

shocked unaccounted

looked

dropped

asked

Listen to the following conversations. Repeat and practice them.

Conversation #1

N: Are you ready?

M: This is stupid. I feel like a clown.

N: You are a clown. This costume party at Pete's house is going to be fun. He told me that he's going to be a hobo. The party's in his basement.

M: I've been in his basement before. There's a neat rec room down there, next to his bedroom. Pete he invited nine of us, so I guess we'll all look weird.

Conversation #2

M: You were right. This party is lots of fun. Good music. And the food's great! Did you try--?

P: Hey! Somebody stole my best baseball card! I had it lying on the table by my bed and now it's gone!

N: Did you see anybody leave this room and go in there?"

M: I was too busy eating. Can we see inside?

Conversation #3

N: I admit that I have lots of yellow feathers on this costume. Big Bird is nothing but yellow feathers. But I swear I never left this room.

A: That's the truth. Nathan and I have been sitting here beside each other ever since we got here. I can vouch for him.

G: Well, I never left this room either.

D: She really didn't. Ginger and I have been talking together the whole time. Neither one of us ever left this room. She's telling the truth.

II. Introduction

1) Discuss the characters of Max and Nina.

2) Review common mystery vocabulary words such as alibi, witness, suspect, sleuth, etc.

3) Discuss what a mystery story is.

4) Discuss what's involved in solving the story.

5) What are some common circumstances are there in a mystery story?

6) Review the following vocabulary words: stealing, missing, vandalism.

III. Setting

1) Where does the story take place?

2) Whose house are they in?

3) Why are the people in the house?

4) What room are they in?

IV. Characters

1) Who are Max Decker and Nina Chase?

2) How old are they?

3) What do they do?

4) What did each person wear to the party?

5) Match the following people with the costumes they wore.

A) Max 1) Big Bird

B) Nathan 2) Skeleton

C) Jerry 3) Clown

D) Pete 4) Witch

E) Darlene 5) Raggedy Ann

F) Marylea 6) Dancer

G) Nina 7) Hobo

H) Bill 8) Bo Peep

I) Ginger 9) Pirate

J) Ann 10) Ghost

V. Plot

1) What was happening at the beginning of the story?

2) What was stolen?

3) Where was it?

4) Who owned it?

5) What was the clue that someone had taken it?

6) Whose costume could have contained a feather?

7) What was Nathan's alibi?

8) What was Ginger's alibi?

9) What was Jerry's alibi?

10) Who is the most likely suspect?

11) What do you think of Marylea's costume?

12) What about Bill's costume?

13) Why aren't Marylea or Bill suspects?

14) Whose party was it?

VI. Summary

1) How did Nina and Max know that Jerry was the culprit?

2) Could Nathan have stolen the baseball card?

3) What do you think Jerry's punishment should be?

4) Is there a lesson to be learned from this mystery?

Another group has read The Adventure of The Three Students, by Arthur Conan Doyle. This is a higher-level mystery suitable for students at an intermediate level and above. Students can focus on questions and activities such as:

I. Background

Pronounce the following names correctly.

1) Sherlock Holmes

2) Dr. Watson

3) College of St. Luke

4) Mr. Hilton Soames

5) Fortescue

6) Bannister

7) Daulat Ras

8) Gilchrist

9) Miles McLaren

Define and pronounce the following vocabulary words.

1) injudicious 2) discretion 3) endeavor

4) laborious 5) charters 6) proofs

7) temperament 8) agitation 9) utterly

10) congenial 11) untidiness 12) Thucydides

13) baize 14) gesticulation 15) rummaged

16) deplorable 17) unpardonable 18) rumpled

19) devoid 20) enigmatic 21) latticed

22) lichen 23) doughy 24) flaxen

25) flushing 26) babbled 27) fidget

28) callous 29) corroborative 30) tenacious

Listen to the following conversations. Repeat and practice them.

Conversation #1

SH: The case is not entirely devoid of interest. Had anyone visited you in your room after the papers came to you?"

S: Yes, young Daulat Ras, an Indian student, who lives on the same stair, came in to ask me some particulars about the examination.

SH: For which he was entered?

S: Yes.

SH: And the papers were on your table?

S: To the best of my belief, they were rolled up.

SH: But might be recognized as proofs?

S: Possibly.

SH: No one else in your room?

S: No.

SH: Did anyone know that these proofs would be there?

S: No one save the printer.

SH: Did this man Bannister know?

S: No, certainly not. No one knew.

SH: Where is Bannister now?

S: He was very ill, poor fellow. I left him collapsed in the chair. I was in such a hurry to come to you.

SH: You left your door open?

S: I locked up the papers first.

SH: Then it amounts to this, Mr. Soames: that, unless the Indian student recognized the roll as being proofs, the man who tampered with them came upon them accidentally without knowing that they were there.

S: So it seems to me.

Conversation #2

S: We are investigating this unhappy business, Bannister,.

B: Yes, sir.

SH: I understand that you left your key in the door?

B: Yes, sir.

SH: Was it not very extraordinary that you should do this on the very day when there were these papers inside?

B: It was most unfortunate. sir. But I have occasionally done the same thing at other times.

SH: When did you enter the room?

B: It was about half-past four. That is Mr. Soames's tea time.

SH: How long did you stay?

B: When I saw that he was absent. I withdrew at once.

SH: Did you look at these papers on the table?

B: No, sir certainly not.

SH: How came you to leave the key in the door?

B: I had the tea-tray in my hand. I thought I would come back for the key. Then I forgot.

SH: Has the outer door a spring lock?

B: No, sir.

SH: Then it was open all the time?

B: Yes, sir.

SH: Anyone in the room could get out?

B: Yes, sir.

SH: When Mr. Soames returned and called for you, you were very much disturbed?

B: Yes, sir. Such a thing has never happened during the many years that I have been here. I nearly fainted, sir.

SH: So I understand. Where were you when you began to feel bad?

B: Where was I, sir? Why, here, near the door.

Conversation #3

SH: Well, Watson, what do you think of it? Quite a little parlour game -- sort of three-card trick, is it not? There are your three men. It must be one of them. You take your choice. Which is yours?

DW: The foul-mouthed fellow at the top. He is the one with the worst record. And yet that Indian was a sly fellow also. Why should he be pacing his room all the time?"

SH: There is nothing in that. Many men do it when they are trying to learn anything by heart.

DW: He looked at us in a queer way.

SH: So would you, if a flock of strangers came in on you when you were preparing for an examination next day, and every moment was of value. No, I see nothing in that. Pencils, too, and knives -- all was satisfactory. But that fellow does puzzle me.

DW: Who?

SH: Why, Bannister, the servant. What's his game in the matter?

DW: He impressed me as being a perfectly honest man.

SH: So he did me. That's the puzzling part. Why should a perfectly honest man -- Well, well, here's a large stationer's. We shall begin our researches here.

II. Introduction

1) Discuss the life of Arthur Conan Doyle.

2) Discuss the characters of Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson.

3) Discuss other Sherlock Holmes mystery stories and describe how Sherlock Holmes solved other mysteries.

III. Setting

1) Describe England in 1895.

2) Discuss what inventions have not been made yet.

3) Describe colleges during that time period.

4) What were some of the classes students had to take during that time?

5) Discuss the ways in which students lived then.

6) What is St. Luke's College like?

7) What subjects are offered there?

IV. Characters

1) Describe the main characters of Holmes and Watson.

2) What kinds of things would be on their resumes?

3) What kind of a person is Bannister?

4) What kind of a person is Mr. Soames?

5) Who is the best student?

6) Who is the worst student?

7) Who is least likely to steal the proofs?

8) Who is most likely to steal the proofs?

9) What were Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson doing at the beginning of the story?

V. Plot

1) Discuss the four characters that Holmes asks to see

2) Discuss which character Holmes does not see.

3) What does Holmes discover about meeting with the others?

4) In Soame's opinion, who is the "least likely" suspect? Is he correct?

5) Does he demonstrate any prejudice in his decision?

6) Discuss the clues that finally help Holmes to identify the culprit. How do they help?

7) Discuss how Holmes knew that the guilty person was in Soame's bedroom at some time.

8) How does Holmes know that the guilty person went from the office into the bedroom?

9) What role do the gloves play?

10) Why are the gloves included in the story?

11) What role does the pencil play?

12) Why is the pencil included in the story?

VI. Summary

1) Why did Gilchrist steal the proofs?

2) Why did he decide not to take the examination?

3) Who helped Gilchrist change his mind?

4) Do you think Gilchrist should be prosecuted?

5) What is the country of Rhodesia currently called?

These strategies are a few examples to illustrate the kinds of activities that can be organized around a mystery story. Teachers are encouraged to develop their own activities in order to help the students gain a greater motivation for learning and understanding English.

Students and teachers themselves will become mystery detectives as they begin to study and learn about the mystery story. This is a very satisfying learning experience.

Author's Note

I have used mystery stories in all of my language classes whether in Korea, Japan or the United States. Mystery stories have no cultural bias and work well in any setting. I carry approximately 5 different types of mystery stories wherever I go. One of my favorite uses is to allow students to solve a short mystery story, generally a 3 to 5 minute mystery of Hy Conrad or Ken Weber, while I am involved with class administrative duties such as record keeping or taking attendance. Also my favorites are Hy Conrad mysteries because they range from a page or so to 5 page mysteries that utilize affidavits, lab reports, crime scene analysis reports, autopsy reports, and miscellaneous reports that students have to sift through in order to find the culprit. These work well if you want to divide the class into groups.

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