

Murder in the Classroom: Mystery Role Plays for English as a Foreign Language**Brian David Phillips**

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Abstract

This paper introduces a sequence of various techniques and approaches the author has developed to help students develop communicative ability beyond the structured dialog model through the use of Interactive Dramas. Pointers toward resources for the key principles behind sound scenario development and the theoretical basis of the activity is provided within the descriptive framework of the activity. The author uses a graded stage approach whereby students begin with a simple highly structured model activity followed by more difficult and/or freeform activities that culminate in the Interactive Drama Project in which students create their own Interactive Drama scenarios for their classmates to play. Interactive Dramas are similar to traditional role plays as well as to micro-simulations. In the activity, students are assigned characters to role play from a scenario. They are usually given a goal to accomplish, such as find a killer in the *whodunit* variety which works very well for beginner to intermediate conversation classes. Through structured and freeform conversations with the other players (usually in small groups), the students either exchange clues about the crime they are all trying to solve or information related to achieving their other character goals.

Keywords: *Interactive Drama, whodunit, murder mystery party, LARP, roleplay, English as a Foreign Language*

INTRODUCTION

Role play has been a standard component in the language teacher's tool box for just about as long as there's been language teaching. However, for the most part, role play as it is defined for use in language learning is very different from how those of us familiar with the hobby forms. In most cases, traditional language role plays are shorter, simpler, and deal with conventional subjects such as buying a loaf of bread or the like. Objectives are usually very simple and character description all but non-existent. In most cases, the roles are described in two or three sentences — or a short paragraph in the more complicated pieces.

This is all well and good . . . simplistic role plays serve a particular function and do achieve certain well-defined goals in the classroom. For most of the last decade or so this author has been experimenting with the use of more complex role plays in the English as a Foreign Language classroom and have found hobby games to be very worthwhile additions to the language teacher's arsenal of tricks of the trade.

This paper introduces various techniques and approaches the author has developed to help students develop communicative ability beyond the structured dialog model through the use of Interactive Dramas. The author uses a graded stage approach whereby students begin

with a simple highly structured model activity followed by more difficult and/or freeform activities that culminate in the Interactive Drama Project in which students create their own Interactive Drama scenarios for their classmates to play.

NATURE OF INTERACTIVE DRAMA

Interactive Dramas are similar to traditional role plays as well as to micro-simulations. They are also closely related to storytelling language games. In the activity, students are assigned characters to role play from a scenario. They are usually given a goal to accomplish, such as find a killer in the *whodunit* variety which works very well for beginner to intermediate conversation classes (as well as advanced classes with specific modifications to increase freeform discussion). Through structured conversations with the other players (usually in small groups), the players either exchange clues about the crime they are all trying to solve or information related to achieving their other character goals. In this process, they reveal information about others while trying to hide their own character's secrets. In the typical *whodunit* scenario, all players must tell the truth when asked about a character's secret (except for the player portraying the "killer" or "criminal" who may lie) — advanced Interactive Drama scenarios do not follow this convention. At the end of the activity, the class votes through secret ballot on who they think the killer is. The "winner" of the vote is pronounced "guilty" and sent to jail. If the students voted for the wrong person, the actual killer is then revealed and the clues are examined to determine how he or she "got away with murder." Teachers with classes new to this sort of activity may find it useful to assign a particularly bright or advanced member of the class to be the "guilty party" for the first scenario as it takes more care in roleplaying to avoid suspicion.

BACKGROUND TO ACTIVITY

We should sign post right now that this paper is really more of a quick introduction to the author's experiences and techniques than a comprehensive overview of the subject, for that go to other works by the author listed in the bibliography. It is not our purpose here to catalog all of the pedagogical or linguistic training benefits, functions, or the like that role play has in language learning and teaching. That is not our goal here. There are plenty of books and papers in the academic press which you may consult for that (references to a selection of these have been included in the texts descriptions that follow the main body of the paper as well as in the bibliography).

The author teaches English as a Foreign Language to native speakers of Chinese in the English Department at National Chengchi University in Taipei, Taiwan (Republic of China, the "other" China). Many of the classes are oral practice or conversation courses and so the author is often on the lookout for entertaining ways for students to practice oral skills. Since the author has been an RPG hobbyist since 1978, role playing games were a natural resource choice for developmental experimentation. First experiments in the classroom with RPGs were all table-top-based. The program got off to a rocky start but eventually developed something that works quite well. For a role playing system to work in the classroom it has to

be compact and simple to learn and the scenarios have to be playable in a short period that fits into a class session (most appropriate classes for role playing activities are one hundred minutes at NCCU). Since most classes meet just once a week for an entire academic year, there are particular class management problems that must be dealt with.

While the author has found some table top RPGs are very well suited to the classroom, others proved to be unmanageable with non-hobbyists (in the past, the author has periodically taught an advanced class on RPGs for students with particular interest in the hobby so language learning activities employing the more difficult systems may be developed there). We found that Dungeons and Dragons (D&D, the single most popular and widely available table top role playing game ever published) was too difficult to learn quickly for classroom purposes — before the First Quest and starter editions were published — and the background didn't fit the language structures or vocabulary students needed to learn. The Generic Universal Role Play System (GURPS) works well if character generation is done out of class (computer programs are wonderful for that sort of thing) and if combat rules are simplified. Scenarios can be in many genres but it is best to stick with recent past, contemporary, and near future type settings. Over the Edge and Ghostbusters have perfect systems for classroom use (they are very simple and intuitive, the author is particularly fond of OtE), but the backgrounds may not work for most students — fortunately both of these systems are actually well adapted to being used as universal systems minus the backgrounds.

Eventually, the program began to move towards using live roleplaying games (acting situations out rather than staying seated at the table rolling dice) in the classes and the results were amazing! The benefits of language use and immersion found in table top sessions are so much more pronounced in a live game. Because of confusion with the more simplistic situations usually referred to as role play in language learning, the author here prefers the more precise term of “interactive drama” to describe the activity. This works better than Live Action RPG, LARP, Free Form, Freeform, or the like as the other terms are really only understood in context to table top RPGs which most students and academics are not familiar with (particularly in Taiwan where table top activities of this type have historically been all but unknown with RPG play limited to computer or console games). In addition, it is sometimes desirable to avoid the term “game” when describing the activity since many teachers and students have in the past “trivialized” the activity if they think of it as “merely a game” — the term “interactive drama” doesn't carry any of the negative implications that “live role playing game” does.

ADVANTAGES OF INTERACTIVE DRAMA IN LANGUAGE LEARNING CLASSROOMS

When compared to the simplistic situational role plays traditionally associated with language teaching, interactive dramas are more complex, deeper, longer, and more freeform. The activities also engage the “curiosity motive” far more powerfully than other straight non-immersive role plays or simulations. They work specifically well with advanced students and the like. The author has developed a sequence in which over a semester the students are

introduced to increasingly more complex scenarios until they finally write their own for their classmates to play.

INTERACTIVE DRAMA SEQUENCE

The standard sequence for instruction is to start the students with a model interactive drama, a simple piece that is short, sweet, and to the point but which still has integrity in terms of structure, goals, and plot. In many cases, the class will begin with a piece entitled “The Haunted Ship” which was written by some of the author’s NCCU students a number of years ago. This is a very short piece about a pleasure cruise or Love Boat type of ocean liner upon which there are a series of murders. It is basically a simple whodunit of the *How to Host a Murder* or *Murder Mystery Party* variety in which the murder occurs and all the characters are given clues which they share with others. One nice innovation for this piece is that each act of the scenario is based upon a new event. In most of the commercial murder mystery party type games, new clues are based upon old events — it’s as if the characters just remembered material they should have known all along. In this piece, new clues are based upon new events — basically a new murder happens every twenty minutes. It is not a great game but it does introduce key concepts. The basic ideas for the scenario are based upon a Japanese comic book albeit this connection is very heavily disguised.

Next, students play a piece entitled “Revenge in Penghu” by Michael Cheng, an instructor at NCCU. Cheng originally took inspiration from an old *Murder Mystery Party* game “Revenge in Rome” but over the years he has made so many changes to the piece and added characters as he refined his adaptation to the classroom that it is actually a completely new scenario now set at a seaside fort in Taiwan with very little in common with the original piece. The original scenario had six characters whereas the current scenario can be played by groups of twelve or thirteen players (the number of students typically in small oral training classes). Cheng has developed 24 and 30 player versions for larger classes as well. Unlike the original *Murder Mystery Party* games and others of the whodunit variety, this piece has all of the character’s background and clues together. Each player/character is also given specific objectives to accomplish in addition to the main theme of finding the murderer. You will note that the genre is the same as “A Haunted Ship” but the technique has become more complex.

By this time, it is usually worthwhile to introduce a fantasy element into the mix and so Frank Branham’s excellent vampire scenario “Fire at Midnight” serves as the model. This scenario is well known and can be easily obtained via a number of LARP scenario archive web pages and elsewhere (although the original archive has shifted – see the resources section of this paper for more). The scenario is still a murder mystery but now the goals are more complex and characters are given “special abilities.” While the setting is in White Wolf’s campaign settings, it is very easy to play the piece without knowing the rules for *Mind’s Eye Theatre* or all of the background.

Depending upon how advanced the class is in language ability, it may or may not be profitable to continue the difficulty grading in the sequence. If so, then the next scenarios we

use are usually other LARPA Game Bank pieces such as “The Marin County New Age Society Cocktail Party” or “The Final Voyage of the Mary Celeste” as they are easily adapted to classrooms — albeit the author has found there is usually a need to do editing to the characters for gender changes to match player preferences.

Once students have been exposed to the simpler general goal-oriented role plays, teachers may wish to use more advanced scenarios in which each character may have a different goal as well as special abilities to be used during play. There are several resources which carry commonly available material on this subject as well as introduce some freely available scenarios. While there is a great deal of material available, many teachers will wish to adapt scenarios to their specific needs or to create their own scenarios for particular lessons. To this end, it is worthwhile to follow several useful principles for Interactive Drama scenario design — classroom adaptations of the design precepts of well-known interactive dramatists such as John Patrick Hughes, Tonia Walden, Louise Pieper, Stephanie Olmstead, Andrew Rilstone, Gordon Dean, and Robert Prior as well as original techniques developed by the author. These design elements are discussed fully in the resource books and websites found later in this paper.

The next stage for the activity sequence in an advanced class is for the students to create their own scenarios for their classmates to play. When first developing the project for student-created pieces in the classroom, the author did not give specific guidelines or word counts and found that typically the students wrote murder whodunits similar to “Revenge in Rome” or the like. It was also found that the stories were often about college students with no fantasy or science fiction abilities – perfectly acceptable. Students are now given word count minimums and it has become very evident that the longer pieces are more worthwhile for all concerned (with a minimum word count of 5000, five group members are not over-taxed in terms of meeting their deadlines and keeping the work load reasonable for the class). Students also receive more specific instruction and background on how to construct a plot, write a character, spread clues, and the like (skills which can also transfer into writing composition classes as well as general English or literature courses).

In their own classrooms, teachers are encouraged to make certain that prospective vocabulary or language functions are covered beforehand. Vocabulary lists are printed up for each scenario and distributed with the character sheets. It is suggested that teachers interested in classroom applications of interactive drama also devise simple systems for their own use or borrow and simply from published resources. Most of the major published materials — such as *Mind’s Eye Theatre*, *Everlasting*, and the like — are too system heavy for non-hobbyist-gamers using their non-native tongue. Theatre Style scenarios such as those originally found in the LARPA Game Bank or other similar resources seem to work best. Avoid dice or cards and develop simple conflict resolution systems (such as short and quick rounds of the *Rock-Paper-Scissors* children’s game) or avoid combat or other plot functions that require mediation of that type (whodunit mystery, diplomacy, business, and political plot agendas work very well for the classroom with no need to simulate physical confrontation).

In the end, students are assigned small groups in which each group designs an original scenario for classmates to play. After this “playtest” students then practice their evaluation

skills as they complete peer evaluation review forms designed to aid the designers in completing and improving their scenarios. The designers then look at their feedback and do a revision before handing in the files for the final piece. Final revisions of the scenarios are then archived on the WWW for others to use in a special section at the *Interactive Dramas* scenarios archive at <http://www.interactivedramas.info> along with scenarios written by native speakers of English. Many students also go on to participate in English language interactive dramas sponsored by the *Taiwan Interactive Theatre Society* (a hobbyist troupe in Taipei). For those interested, the *Interactive Dramas* archive site also has plenty of design and informative articles of use to live roleplayers in any context.

RESOURCES FOR INTERACTIVE DRAMA ADAPTABLE TO THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

The following are some texts the language teacher (or any teacher) might find useful when adapting interactive dramas to their own classrooms. This is NOT an exhaustive list, nor is it unbiased.

- Alexander, Maria. Unscripted Theater: Guidelines For Running Cross-Genre, Live Action Games. Preliminary Edition. Newark: Dead Earth Productions, 1994. The descriptions of running games and on character creation are very good in this piece. It has been used very successfully as supplemental reading material for students and it has been found that students have a stronger hold on design once they have read it after having played a scenario or two. This is a short, simple, and excellent resource.
- Cowling, Morgana. The Freeform Book. Blackburn: Australian Games Group, 1989. This is not intended as a book for teachers, it is an introduction to freeforming (live roleplaying as it is played in Australia). This is an excellent book for beginners who are not familiar with the subject. There are three short scenarios included in the book and Cowling's writing is easy enough to read — although the editing for the books is rather shoddy in places, despite the glossy cover and slick pages. This is not an easy book to find, even in Australia, since it went out of print long ago — although the author, Morgana Keast (yes, the harpist), may still have some copies. Of course, those who are completists will want a copy for themselves.
- Dutton, Rick, and Walter O. Freitag. Nexus Live Action Roleplaying. Play This Book, Volume One. Oakland: Chaosium, 1994. While the author wishes volume two were more readily available as the first volume is so useful. This series is long out of print but well worth your trouble if you can find a copy. It is intended as an introduction to convention gaming and the included scenario only works in that context — a group of alien beings hidden among the population of a science fiction convention — so it is not the best resource for classroom roleplaying. However, Sandy Petersen's foreword alone is well worth the price of the book. Throughout the book, you will find very practical advice on how to run a live scenario of this type. Save this and use it as a sort of treatise on running large interactive dramas (although most of the advice works for small-scale scenarios as well).

- Gredler, Margaret. Designing And Evaluating Games And Simulations (A Process Approach). Houston: Gulf Publishing, 1994. The scope of this book is fairly wide but the advice Gredler gives will save teachers a great many headaches. She gives very straightforward criteria for scenario and simulation design which any educator should understand before designing a classroom game. One thing so many classroom simulationists forget to ask “What are the educational goals this unit should achieve? What do I want to accomplish?” It is so easy to get so caught up in the game play . . . and this author admits he would not be doing this type of activity in class if not for the love of the activity and the thrill of the discovery within the context of the scenario play . . . that it can become easy to forget to design towards educational goals that are realistic and achievable. This book will help keep you on track. It is not perfectly suited to our needs as interactive dramatists, but it will help do the job until something better comes along.
- Jones, Ken. Simulations In Language Teaching. New Directions in Language Teaching Series. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982. Ken Jones is pretty much the king of language simulations as he has probably published more articles, books, and simulations than anyone else in the field. Now, simulations really are distinct from role plays or interactive dramas. However, all three share enough traits that they are easily confused with one another. This is a short, sweet, and to the point book that is worth having in your library for quick reference.
- Ladousse, Gillian Porter. Role Play. Resource Books for Teachers. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987. Ladousse’s book on role play in language learning is much more theoretical than those by Jones or Livingstone. However, she also has specific role plays that are more detailed than those provided by Livingstone who uses a skeleton approach to design. This book provides an excellent break down of the language learning benefits of role play, no advocate of educational role playing should be without.
- Livingstone, Carol. Role Play In Language Learning. Longman Handbooks for Language Teachers Series. Essex: Longman Group, 1983. This is a very short book which was rather groundbreaking when it was first published. The role plays Livingstone describes are rather simplistic by our standards here and much of her advice on classroom management during role plays would be no-brainer material to most interactive drama folks, but it is very informative and useful to teachers without more detailed experience. Personally, this author disagrees with Livingstone’s idea of inclusion of close-type phrases as role play since those seem more to do with grammar guidance than communicative discussion. Most of the situations Livingstone describes as fodder for role play are actually better used as ILS (improvisational language structure) activities based upon improvisational theatre games rather than role play or interactive drama – at least in the opinion of this author – see <http://phillips.personal.nccu.edu.tw/improvlang/index.html> for more on ILS).

- Shaftel, Fannie R., and George Shaftel. Role Playing In The Curriculum. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1982. This is a text used in many college courses on educational role play. It gives general theory and provides some specific scenarios. The bibliography is worth an exploration. Most of the material is difficult to adapt to adult language learners since the focus is on issues with children. It is still worthwhile for an educator's library. Role players uninterested in educational applications of the hobby need not look here.
- Yardley-Matwiejczuk, Krysia M. Role Play Theory And Practice. London: Sage Publications, 1997. This is another academic treatment of the subject. Unless you are interested in general educational theory, you might as well pass on it. However, those interested will find the theoretical discussion to be fascinating. The overview of current practice is worthwhile as well.

Some excellent internet resources are as follows:

- *Ariel Archives Online* (<http://www.arielarchives.com>). Brett Easterbrook has created a wonderful repository of information about Australian roleplaying, including freeforming, with an archive of scenarios and archives at different levels of availability. The history of this archive is interesting in itself as it is the current inheritor of the original A.R.I.E.L. set which was later maintained as Grant Chapman, one of the premiere roleplaying archivists in Australia, as the Australian Roleplaying Archive.
- *Critical Mass* (<http://www.criticalmiss.com/issue7/index.html>). This web journal periodically has articles on interactive drama.
- *Fools for Christ Interactive Drama Activities* (<http://www.foolsforchrist.net/interactive-drama-activities.html>). Christian scenarios, Can you solve the mystery? All packages contain instructions, character dossiers and clues.
- *Freeform Games* (<http://www.freeformgames.com>). murder mystery scenarios for sale
- *Interactivities Ink, Limited* (<http://www.interactivitiesink.com>). This is a company run by Mike Young. Of particular interest to us in this context is the free downloads section which has several free mini-scenarios appropriate for beginner through intermediate classes.
- *Interactive Dramas Archive* (<http://www.interactivedramas.info>). My personal project, this is the first major web-based archive of interactive drama scenarios and is still considered the major resource for scenario writers. Other scenario archives have been created following the example set here (or, as in some cases, as reaction to the material found here).
- *Irish Gamong* (<http://www.irishgaming.com>). This website is an excellent archive of freeform roleplay scenarios created in Ireland. You do need to be careful when going

through the downloads section as the LARPs are not all clearly labeled and there are more scenarios of the table top variety than the live simulation type.

- *LARP Scenarios at RPG.net Wiki* (http://wiki.rpg.net/index.php/LARP_Scenarios). a meta page with links to a slew of online scenarios with a very helpful categorization by number of characters. This is genuinely one of the best sites to find interactive drama style scenarios with helpful sections for number of players and notes on pricing (many are free).
- *Machiavelli Games* (<http://archmachiavel.tripod.com/index.html>). These fine people produce some wonderful Ars Magica type freeforms. Their work is a must see.
- *New Zealand LARPs* (<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/11jvAAH6iDdBGkzU79B-eDp1cullX-yrx55U4kQeglOk/edit#gid=0>). Spreadsheet with info and links to New Zealand LARPs.
- *Simulation and Gaming* (<http://www.unice.fr/sg/>). An interdisciplinary journal of theory, practice and research, this is one of the best resources for serious scholarly work on roleplay.
- *White Wolf Games* (<http://www.white-wolf.com>). The undisputed champion of commercial interactive drama publishing is White Wolf with their Mind's Eye Theatre is the most successful commercially available product of its type. These products are available through the Interactive Drama Books page.

CONCLUSIONS

While the author has here discussed the Interactive Drama Project as it has been developed at National Chengchi University in Taiwan and provided suggestions on how teachers may adapt it for use with classes at a variety of levels of proficiency (from High School to Advanced Adult) or for specific subjects (English for Special Purposes, Business English, Literature, and others), others are encouraged to take this project further. It is very important when using interactive dramas in the classroom to keep focused on the communicative aspects of the language learning environment. Teachers may wish to take note of mistakes or outruns but withhold comment until the debriefing period. This is very much a task-based activity which is communicative in nature with outcomes the driving force. It is an excellent activity for review of materials already learned as well as for developing new approaches to new material.

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Author Biography

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