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Murder in the Classroom

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A startling title, and a strange concept: learning via murder, yes. And though promoting murder seems inherently wrong, this paper will explain how effective our murder mystery dinner events and projects have been as entertaining learning tools both in the classroom and in the Irish speaking community in Dublin. Having just finished our eighth murderous event, we feel that it is time to let others in on our dirty secret.

English-language box dinner party kits have been used as the basis for task-based learning projects and oral exams for Trinity College's Irish language module courses for the past three years to great effect. Participants in these courses were mostly first-year students, with varying levels of fluency in Irish, working together on group projects in Irish as a means of improving their language skills. Their final term task was to produce a murder mystery dinner party event conducted completely in Irish. The events were filmed and an external examiner evaluated their language ability while they combed through character relationships, events and clues to find out whodunit!

These projects were also used as Irish language community dinner party events during *Seachtain na Gaeilge* in Dublin and proved to be valuable in drawing people from different Irish language circles together, linking learners and seasoned fluent speakers of all ages in the process.

This paper will thoroughly illustrate the benefits and challenges encountered during these past eight events. In particular, how the use of role-play in a simulated scenario of pleasant panic gently forces participants to explain themselves—to prove their innocence or disguise their guilt—through the target language. It will provide guidelines and examples showing how these kits could be used successfully and hilariously in a variety of language-learning and speaking communities.

Introduction

While working part-time in the Irish language modules classes at Trinity College, I've found myself becoming a bit obsessed with murder. Murder Mystery Dinner Projects, to be exact. The language module courses at Trinity are designed for students from disciplines of study outside of language departments who wish to improve their language skills by means of several autonomous learning and task-based learning projects. In the third term's final project, students normally organize a trip to the country whose language they are studying. In my first year, I stuck to this plan, as this is what was mentioned in the guidelines and what the students were expecting, but it seemed particularly strange to me, a teacher from abroad asking Irish students to plan a trip to Ireland. When asked what suggestions I had for a replacement project, murder somehow came first to mind.

Each term, the students were given an English-language box kit designed to include all of the required components

for a murder-mystery themed dinner party. Their task was to work together through the medium of Irish to translate this kit completely and host just such a murder mystery dinner party completely in Irish.

The box kit that we first chose for the 2006 final project was 'Pizza, Pasta & Pistols', a mafia type story based in New York's Little Italy. 2007 had students doing 'The Champagne Murders', an Austin Powers-esque spoof set in London in the swinging seventies. This current year's class produced 'Bás le Seacláid' or 'Death By Chocolate'—a deliciously messy Willy Wonka-esque murder that occurs in 1900 in Paris among the Chocolate Industry's elite inner circles.

What are Murder Dinner Party Kits?

All of the mystery dinner party kits mentioned here were produced by 'Murder à la Carte'. Their format seemed the most conducive and appropriate for learners who were possibly nervous and surely unfamiliar with the concept. This company's kits come with excellently detailed brochures for each character that contain three or four scripted dialogs to be read aloud at different points of the dinner with rounds that follow each dialog. The booklets contain hints to each character suggesting how they might challenge, interrogate or accuse their fellow dinner guests/characters/suspects as well as suggestions for how they might answer accusations or inquiries directed at their own character.

Specific Components

Rounds and Dialogs

The dialogs give the participant a chance to get to know their character with a safe scripted parameter of language. For the translated version, they provide an opportunity for all to get to know new, often very unfamiliar vocabulary (words and phrases that might not slip easily out of any native Irish speakers tongue, for example, such as:

- embezzlement
- evil plan for world domination
- explosive timing device
- neighbourhood extortion ring
- criminal mastermind
- sent a ripple through the chocolate manufacturing industry

The rounds that follow the dialog give instructions in the third person, for example:

Facts you will reveal Only After Challenged:

Answer to Marco's challenge

Your 'gang' as Marco calls them, is a respectable team of neighbourhood teenagers who work with you to offer protection services to local merchants. The merchants pay you to prevent their stores from being vandalized or robbed. You are not a violent person. Hardly anyone gets hurt.

(From Angel Roni's booklet, Round Two of Pasta, Passion and Pistols)

Students must then put this suggested response in their own words, converting the third person format in the booklet to the first person. They must also respond to interruptions and exclamations of protest from fellow suspects, all anxious that the blame fall on anyone but themselves.

Secret Clues

Most of the suspects also receive a secret clue, a piece of hard evidence given to them by the inspector or perhaps some piece of information that their character decides is relevant to the crime at hand. These pieces are all to be revealed at specified times during the event and are pivotal to the plot.

The Audio/Video Inspector

The box kits usually contain an audio tape, or DVD that stands for the Police Inspector. It is essential that this part is perfectly performed and understood by all parties, for these reports sum up the events that have been disclosed in earlier rounds, dialogs and discussion. Even when the kit is done in English by native speakers as it was originally intended, it is easy to lose track of important points amidst the laughter, moments of distraction, food and drink. But the possibility of misunderstanding the most important plot thickeners increases greatly in translation and when performed by learners.

It is important of course to translate the inspector's part. By making the audio role live we create another part to play and give everyone a chance to ask the live inspector questions if needed. We have found that it is very important to

make sure that a student or participant with very clear, easy-to-understand pronunciation performs this part. It is also essential to indicate that the inspector's words are gospel or not to be argued with or challenged.

Extra Parts

Each of the Murder à la Carte kits we have used offered two optional character parts. These characters had smaller parts with little or no scripted dialog and parts that could be eliminated without destroying the plot. This is helpful in case someone cancels or is unable to attend at the last minute. But it also provided us with an excellent opportunity to give an optional character role to the test examiner, the teacher, or an invited native-speaker guest. As we were using this event as an official oral exam as well as an entertaining learning project, this extra role gave people outside of the class the opportunity to participate in the conversation. As the teacher responsible for the class, who had read and corrected all of the students' previously submitted written work, I could easily help to rephrase facts that some students seemed to miss, or reiterate complicated pieces for students who were stumbling through without looking like I was correcting them. I could also help shift the focus from a murderer who was sounding too guilty, too early in the game. In one instance, a nervous student with a good level of fluency was sticking to closely to her page, taking few risks with her own words and with the optional character's part it was easy to coax her out from her pages by asking her questions that I knew were not in her book that she had no difficulty answering.

I have supervised and organized:

- The Bullet, the Brie and the Black Cat
 - in Irish twice with very fluent speakers
- The Last Train to Paris –in Irish
 - once with very fluent adults and young teenagers together
- Pizza, Passion & Pasta
 - once with EFL students,
 - once with Trinity students in Irish
 - once with mostly very fluent (non-learner speakers) in Irish
- The Champagne Murders
 - once with EFL students, once with Trinity students in Irish
- Death By Chocolate
 - once with Trinity students in Irish

After eight successfully performed linguistically-justified murder events, I feel qualified to present information on how valid these games are for certain learners as well as present several tips for anyone who wants to try putting their own hands into murder.

What works well

They all have very silly themes, that make the whole process very entertaining for all participating or observing the event. While only background listening to the last event as its recording was transferring from video camera to com-

puter, I was surprised to notice how often the lines were interrupted and surrounded by unanimous rounds of laughter.

Quieter students/participants become forcibly more talkative, when faced with proving their innocence, particularly those who happen to find themselves in the position of murderer.

The meal, the costumes, any attempts at room decoration or props improve the sense of involvement and the students' attitude toward the task. With English language students, who had more time and often more money to invest into the project, it was easier to delegate or suggest team captains who took charge of various planning aspects. The teamwork and discussion about these matters that took place in the target language was nearly as valuable as the event itself.

In Irish language modules classes, the students worked on their own versions or booklets but had to liaise with others to format booklets and secret clues, to make sure the translations of their dialogs fit logically together and were understood. Some classes compiled their vocabulary lists to form a glossary that all could read through ahead of time. Some worked together on costumes; with the most adept at fashion awareness helping the less adept while those more knowledgeable helped others with words and phrases they didn't know.

One of the EFL groups had nearly twenty-five students. The box was put into the 'murder captain's hands and he was free to organize roles in any way he chose, but encouraged to find a role for as many people as possible. Students who were nervous, sceptical, or less fluent were paired with

the more extroverted, stronger, and more adventurous speakers and the eleven roles were each shared by two participants. Most wore matching or complimentary outfits to show they were dually representing their characters. Some pairs took turns speaking; sharing each line quite comically others spoke as one, simultaneously. Still others, shared the part with the less fluent person taking the scripted pieces while the more-able speaker handled the more spontaneous round challenges. In most event, all participants, both learners and native speakers seemed to become almost competitive, their communication skills as well as their acting and performing skills increasing, with everyone wanting to outdo each others' remarks.

You could almost tangibly see people going from worried, and nervous, at times unwilling participants to falling into the story and overcoming their fear of the language, their dislike for acting or silliness, the strangeness of the event to just having a go at proving their innocence and enjoying the process.

In groups of non-learner, fluent Irish speakers, I had the opportunity to mix groups of people that didn't often seem to find themselves at a table together. Several times with a young teenager or a group of young teenagers together with much older adults. Other times in groups where the more literary professional Irish speakers mixed with less casual fluent speakers, or where excellent speakers participated with learners. These pairings give learners a chance to hear the beautiful sounds of the language at its best pronunciation, and giving the great speakers a chance to watch the learners become more confident and blossom to fluency

over a space of several hours pleasant entertainment. The events are also a great new way or excuse for cross-pollination, breaking barriers in the Irish language communities and circles that their well-intentioned participants often don't realize exist, giving new access to the language to people who were born and raised outside of the established language community, or for some reason find themselves outside them.

What didn't work so well

The biggest difficulty was that the project is bigger than it looks. It took an overwhelming amount of enthusiasm, not to mention incentives, such as several class-fieldtrips to the Irish language club, tantalizing promises of anything from champagne, chocolate, pizza, Chinese food and vodka, (only some of which they got) to motivate them. As an Estonian assistant explained to me, the idea was so strange that many participated only out of kindness, unwilling to see me disappointed, though all were pleased and satisfied with the memorable event that they created in the end.

Suggested solutions to this problem

We video recorded all of the Trinity events, and showing pieces of this video to students as well as samples of well completed past assignments should help. I'm thinking of starting next year's class with the task of polishing up this year's nearly completed projects for the first term's Focus on Language project.

In every project, someone dropped-out or quit the project, often in the last hour. Several Trinity students, who had already invested a good bit of time on their work, had to drop this optional class to concentrate on their primary field of study. Although nearly all of the work could have been completed within the classroom hours as directed, students procrastinated with work, had difficulty making decisions on what to do, or missed classes at early stages, leaving more pressure on other students, who were awaiting their pieces of the project, and on the person who was ultimately responsible for coordination of the correction work. It's essential to start early, clearly explain what the project entails and clearly designate task leaders and deadlines from the beginning.

Suggested solution to this problem

To always invite extra guests, ringers as it were, who are ready to fill in these spaces. Two or more native speakers, who are older or sillier or more extroverted can change the whole environment for the better in an instant. One of these extra guests, a seasoned professional actor, came with a rolling suitcase full of possible costume accessories, prepared to take on a range of potential identities at a moment's notice.

In every project, pieces of the kit went missing, once even requiring a last minute dash to the murder shop for an extra box kit. (Yes, there is a murder shop on Dawson Street in Dublin and it's totally normal that I know this...)

Possible solution to this problem

We always photocopied everything and tried not to let the originals escape from the box, but it's essential to have someone, (preferably the murderer, or the person in charge of the inspector's statement translation, so that as few people as possible know the horrible truth ahead of time) in charge of proofreading, and verifying that all of the pieces are in proper order.

In all of the Irish learner's teams, the task was to hand back a totally finished, polished project, with all copies of drafts, corrections and vocabulary lists handed in together on the day of the event as well as artistically formatted booklets with a design that had been created and agreed upon by the group. Not all groups were sufficiently computer literate to do this, and although nearly everyone's skills at group e-communication improved, including my own, each project ended up with one or two people left with the huge job of frantically putting the corrected material into the booklets at the last minute. For this year's project only a few booklets came together in time and unfortunately, several students did not get a chance to input their corrections in time for the event.

I hope to find a way to better use the native speaker assistant resources to help correct the students' drafts and get their work back to them earlier. Going over the rough drafts that are turned in with the students each week gave us the opportunity to flesh out and discuss grammar errors that weren't often very apparent in their normal conversation.

As an Irish language learner, I find that there are few opportunities to use Irish in times of crisis or conflict, to argue or explain yourself in Irish. I remember when studying French abroad, the feeling that I had arrived somehow when I found myself arguing with a waiter in French in a restaurant, my dinner companion, by passing my discussion of customer service injustice to praise and point out that I had just successfully argued my point in French with a native French speaker. These situations don't often present themselves in the Irish speaking community, where it seems normal to slip into English when the argument becomes heated. This may also be the case for other Celtic languages, as well. These events create just such scenarios, and not unlike car crash simulations in driving courses, give the learner a chance to react to angry accusations and to in fact angrily accuse others in a safe, even comical, albeit unreal situation. You don't want to wait until you're faced with a real crisis to deal with the language skills you need to get through it, so again, Murder can be used for just this purpose!

Last year we wrote to the 'Murder à la Carte' folks and asked if they would consider doing an Irish language version and if they were not interested, would they give us permission to publish the Irish language versions. They responded that they would think about our request but have not contacted us yet...

In the meantime, I hope you consider trying this project with your own Celtic language learner/speaker groups in the future. I have several versions of the projects saved in electronic format and would be happy to send them to any-

one who would like a chance to look them over. You would want to still purchase the English language kit to have the pieces and the party planner, instructions, etc. as a back up because none of the projects have been 100% completed with perfectly accurate translations, as of yet, but it's a work in progress!

Commentary on Seven Books for Learners of Irish

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I am often asked by people who have achieved a reasonably decent level of competency in Irish for suggestions for reading matter. There are many interesting and readable books available in Irish. I have selected seven books for brief reviews together with my estimate of their level of difficulty. I have checked with Caitlín Fitz and all of them are now available at www.litriocht.com.

An Béal Bocht by Myles na gCopaleen: Mercier Press. ISBN 0853427941.

My copy of this savage satire is the 1964 reprint of the original which is in modified Gaelic script with overdotted consonants rather than the more modern convention of writing <h> after the consonant. "Myles" was one of the pen names of Brian Ó Nualláin, aka Flann O'Brien, the author of 'At Swim-Two-Birds'. *An Béal Bocht* is a first person account of the life of the self-styled Bónapáirt Míchealangaló Pheadair Eoghain Shorcha Thomáis Mháire Sheáin Shéamais Dhiarmada... who is told by his school teacher that he is to be known as Jams O'Donnell. The satire is aimed not only at the school system, but even more so at the 'professional *gaeilgeoiri*' (language enthusiasts) who see the preservation of the true gaelic culture and language as de-