

## MYSTERY THEATER IN THE FRENCH CLASSROOM

It was a dark and stormy day, and I was looking for a way to light up my French language classroom with some fun, interactive activities to get students speaking, writing, and thinking in French. Why not pique their curiosity with a little mystery? For years, I have used the mystery story as a vehicle to test verb conjugations (fill-in the blanks of the story with an appropriate verb form) or to target certain language functions (for example, students act as detectives and pose questions about a crime scene drawing of a room). However, I wanted to try to go beyond these discreet tasks. Rather than have the students read mystery stories imagined by myself or others, I decided to try to find ways to engage them in actively creating their own mysteries while still accomplishing classroom objectives. One mystery-related activity I have used successfully in my intermediate and advanced French language courses is "mystery theater."

In the tradition of popular dinner theaters and mystery weekend vacations, this activity engages students in speaking and listening situations where accurate self-expression and listening comprehension are imperative to solve a mystery. The activity requires a significant amount of preparation on the part of the instructor (even more for larger classes), but the results have been fantastic in my courses. On a particular chosen day, usually towards the end of a unit, I will set aside 30-40 minutes for this activity, depending on the size of the class. I begin by writing on the blackboard and explaining (1) where we are (sometimes I draw scenes on the blackboard or bring in posters), (2) what the date is, (3) who is at this site (listing character names and the names of students playing the characters on the board), and (4) what the main mystery plot is. The setting and topic are chosen to correspond to the cultural context and/or language functions studied in the unit we are completing. For example, when my second-year French students were finishing a chapter on Quebec in which there was a review of the past tenses and the vocabulary focus was on professions, our mystery theater setting was a bus accident on the highway between Gaspé and Quebec.

After the initial introduction of the setting, each student is given an index card with a name on one side and on the other side a description of the person's character, a goal for the person to accomplish, and any relevant vocabulary terms the student may need to accomplish this goal. The trick is that there must be more than one plot line in order to engage all of the students in the game and to encourage students to speak to a variety of other characters in search of

answers. Each student must have a personal issue or mystery to solve, in addition to being curious about the main mystery plot.

After spending a minute or two studying their roles, the students must get up and walk around the classroom, speaking to as many different people as possible in order to get answers to their questions and to answer others' questions. If organized properly, there will be at least one person who has the answer needed to solve each character's personal quest, as well as answers to the main mystery. If there is a culprit in the story, it should be indicated on the student's card that he or she is guilty of the crime and should only admit it at the end of the game.

In the case of "Un accident au Québec," the main mystery revolves around why the accident occurred (Was the bus driver drunk? Was the road icy? Did another car cause the accident?). Subplots included one person whose luggage was stolen from the bus after the accident (Did anyone see the luggage? Did anyone witness the theft of the luggage? Who was near the luggage compartment after the accident?) Another person was concerned about her boyfriend flirting with one of the other passengers while she was asleep (Did anyone notice? What were they talking about?) Another has a deadline to meet and needs to find out when he will make it to Quebec.

Another person is Céline Dion in disguise and who does not want to be recognized so avoids giving out personal information. Another is an insurance salesperson who wants to sell policies. Yet another is an undercover police inspector, and so on. The smaller the class, the easier it is to coordinate the characters so that each student will need to speak to at least three or four different people to get the answers needed and to provide information for others but will probably speak to many more people in order to find the three or four needed to give/seek specific answers to questions.

For example, for a class of students playing the mystery theater "Un accident au Québec," some of the character cards (written in English or French, depending on the level of the class) could resemble the following:

1. Jean-Paul Soif, the Bus Driver: You have been a bus driver in Quebec for 10 years and this is your first accident. You think it was caused by ice on the road (you would never drink on the job!). You are not sure because you were distracted by the conversation of a man and woman flirting in the second row. You think you overheard the man plotting to murder his girlfriend!

2. Julie LaFont, Police Inspector: You are

an undercover police inspector who happened to be returning to Quebec on the bus in question. Take charge of the investigation and find out what caused the accident. Be sure to get everyone's name and profession for your official report and decide, based on your interviews with the passengers, what was the most likely cause for the bus accident.

3. Pierre Dubois, Insurance Salesperson: You are an insurance salesperson riding on the bus from Gaspé. You saw a sports car cut in front of the bus right before the accident but are not sure if it caused the accident. Anyway, this seems like a great opportunity to sell some new policies. Try to get the names and professions of the passengers and sell as many auto insurance policies as you can.

4. Céline Dion: You are the famous singer Céline Dion traveling in disguise from a friend's house in Gaspé back to Quebec. You saw the bus driver have a glass or two of wine at the last rest stop, but you don't want to get too involved with the investigation. Try to avoid giving out personal information to anyone who asks. It's cold and snowy and you just want to get out of there because you have a concert in Montreal tomorrow night!

5. Claire Appel: You are the girlfriend of Henri Larouche, and you don't know what happened to cause the accident because you were asleep, but the roads were very icy the whole way and it was snowing a bit before you fell asleep. You think your boyfriend might be flirting with another woman on the bus. Try to find out who she is and whether or not your boyfriend is cheating on you. You looked for a name tag on her leather luggage, but there was no name or address. (You can choose your own profession, if asked.)

6. Henri Larouche: You are the flirtatious boyfriend of Claire Appel and a passenger on the bus. You did not notice anything prior to the accident (you were busy talking to the pretty woman across the aisle, Lulu Plouffe), but you did see your girlfriend near the luggage compartment after the accident and you did see the bus driver throwing something that looked like an empty bottle in the trash can. Try to get the pretty woman's phone number, but don't let your girlfriend catch you! (You can choose your own profession, if asked.)

7. Lulu Plouffe: You are a psychologist from Quebec who is returning from a weekend visiting your family in Gaspé. You were speaking briefly with Henri Larouche, primarily to see if he would sign up to be a patient in your next psychological study of human behavior under stress, but now

seems like a good opportunity to interview all of the passengers about how they are handling this stressful situation. Find out if there are any patterns. You do not know for sure what caused the bus accident. It was icy, but you think the driver may not have been paying attention.

8. Chantal Pierrot: You are a business woman from Quebec traveling on the bus. You know the roads were icy, but don't know if that caused the accident. You are very concerned about your missing leather luggage. The police inspector is too busy to address missing luggage, so you must find out for yourself what happened to it. Ask around to see if anyone saw anything suspicious.

The more students you have in the class, the more subplots you need to invent to keep everyone involved. For a larger class, some of the characters may repeat information from other characters to save on preparation time or in case some students are absent. With a small class, you can tailor the names/genders/personalities of the characters to each individual student.

Students do not know ahead of time exactly who has the particular answer to the question they want resolved and therefore must speak with a variety of people. I also encourage small talk to break the ice before jumping right in to the questions. As the students mingle in the classroom and talk with the other characters, they will often get conflicting reports or strange reactions and must keep talking to a number of people to try to find out the truth of what happened. In this way, students are constantly either asking or answering questions (all in the target language, of course!) for a good 15-20 minutes (sometimes longer...they often did not want to stop!). The instructor can also have a role to play or can just mingle and ask random questions to make sure students are staying on task. At the end of the time limit, or when all possible questioning has been exhausted, the answers to the main mystery and the subplots are revealed as each character states what s/he learned from questioning others. The main mystery is revealed when the culprit confesses or, in the case of "Un accident au Quebec," the police detective character comes to the most logical conclusion based on the stories of the witnesses.

A follow-up writing activity is to have small groups of students write a series of headlines that could be found in the next day's paper regarding the mystery incident. Each group writes its headlines on a section of the blackboard, and the class reviews them for grammatical correctness and imagination. For example, after "Un accident au Quebec" students wrote headlines such as "Céline Dion: voleuse de valises?" or

"Conducteur enivré est arrêté hier près de Gaspé" or "Céline échappe au destin de Diane." To take the process one step further, ask students to choose one of the headlines and write a short newspaper article to be turned in as an individual writing assignment at the next class meeting. These can be critiqued by the instructor or through peer review.

The mystery theater activity not only moves students out of their seats and motivates them to talk and listen and write and read, but also gets them thinking in French and actively using the language in a semi-realistic situation. Since the students are playing roles, the affective filter is lower, and students seem to enjoy using the language. The activity also serves as a review of verb tenses, vocabulary, cultural information about a particular Francophone country, and language functions. In addition, during the game, students must often improvise some information. The flirtatious boyfriend in the Quebec story, for example, may decide on his own to try to buy a life insurance policy on his girlfriend from the insurance salesperson. My students, once they had played mystery theater a couple of times and felt comfortable with each other and with the format, really became engaged in the game and started improvising their own plot twists to the story that surprised even me when the final outcomes were revealed! Mystery theater is a nice break from the ordinary and a way to enliven and revitalize the learning experience for students.

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