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gamevironments

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Report

Murder on the Language Express: Bringing Murder Mystery Party Games to Language Class

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Abstract
This practice-based report argues that murder-mystery party games (MMPGs) offer a compelling, outcome-driven context for EFL speaking classrooms that aligns closely with Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT). MMPG mechanics beautifully fulfill TBLT's core task conditions: focus on meaning, gap-bridging communication, free deployment of linguistic resources, and a clearly defined nonlinguistic outcome. In the practice of two trials at a university in Japan, the author used off-the-shelf commercial scenarios in a small group (two and eight students; A2-B1), with scaffoldings such as structured speaking turns and character diaries. Observed benefits included high engagement, emergent linguistic patterns beyond prudence, and sustained negotiation of meaning. Challenges were also found for cognitive/linguistic load, group-size constraints for class, and content sensitivity around the murder theme. The paper concludes that, with careful scaffolding, MMPGs can constitute practical, classroom-friendly narrative tasks that stimulate authentic speaking while preserving game enjoyment, and they merit further exploration within game-based TBLT.

Keywords: Murder Mystery Party Game, Task-Based Language Teaching, Language Learning, Tabletop, Social Deduction Game, gamevironments

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Introduction

Speaking remains a persistent challenge in Japanese EFL classrooms. The students have little authentic need to interact and give minimal response only when called on. In one of the earlier discussions of this problem, Doyon (2000) reported frustration of language teachers as their students rarely initiate discussion, avoid unfamiliar topics, do not interact with them or seldom volunteer answers. Contemporary studies echo this; Masutani (2021) notes that, although grammar-translation method has given way to more communicative methods, learners continue to encounter difficulties in speaking as speaking activities induce more anxiety than other tasks. Yalçın and İnceçay (2014) similarly observed anxious language learners identify speaking as the most frightening skill and often freeze when they are required to speak or act out a role-play. Such studies indicate Japanese learners have high affective barriers and speaking is avoided unless there is a compelling, non-academic reason to engage.

In my own practice I have looked for ways to create that compelling reason. Previously I incorporated commercially available, off-the-shelf board games into English speaking classes, aiming at students' meaningful negotiation, greater fluency, and engagement in the activities (Kaneta 2021). While my attempts were generally received fruitful, I found the discourse in such games was constrained by game designs and the communicative demands were limited to short exchanges. This led me to explore murder mystery party games (MMPGs). These games require players to work on far more complex interactions to assume characters, absorb a narrative and work together (and against each other). Because game success depends on gathering information, questioning others and persuading them, the games are intrinsically interactive and outcome-driven. Kaneta's (2021) report on using the social deduction game Insider in an online speaking class during the COVID-19 pandemic reinforces this point: the game's communicative nature encouraged students to use their L2 to

ask and answer questions, and it provided “authentic, meaningful interaction” (ibid., 9) while keeping the activity enjoyable. The success shows that tabletop party games focused on conversation can stimulate speaking even in difficult circumstances.

In this paper based on my new practice, I discuss how powerful MMPGs can be in a classroom setting and especially, how they align with the principles of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT). TBLT is now considered one of the mainstream approaches to teaching second and foreign languages. This project is still experimental: off-the-shelf MMPGs are designed for entertainment, not for education, so their playtime, player numbers and sometimes grisly themes may not be ideal for classroom settings; learners with limited proficiency often found the tasks difficult, and scaffolding, e.g., pre-task vocabulary work, role diaries, or structured turns, was essential, and it is still under development. Moreover, as with any murder-themed content, some students tried to avoid being involved. Nevertheless, the combination of narrative immersion, information gaps and clear non-linguistic goals makes MMPGs a promising resource for game-based TBLT. While my discussion focuses on Japan, the insights should be transferable to other contexts where learners need compelling reasons to speak.

What are Murder Mystery Party Games?

Definition and History

A murder mystery party game (MMPG) is a narrative role-playing game in which players collectively investigate a fictional crime case. Each player receives a different character sheet describing their background, relationships, and secrets, and take on that character in the game. These sheets include private information and objectives that guide the player’s behavior. The group’s collective goal is to unravel the

circumstances of the crime and identify the culprit. MMPGs share some elements with other social deduction games such as *Mafia* (1986, sometimes with the title *Werewolf*) or *Cluedo* (1949), but differ from them because they ask players to *roleplay* the characters, and build on improvised dialogue and negotiate competing narratives from the first-person point of view. They also differ from live-action role-playing (LARP) or tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs): mostly due to the lighter rules, limited scenes and interactions, strictly controlled number of players, and a certain number of predetermined outcomes, rather than an open-ended campaign.

The history of Murder Mystery Party Games is said to date back to the 20th-century parlor games (Villagomez 2019). The *Jury Box* (1937) is cited as a precursor, where players are asked to determine whether the defendant is either guilty or innocent using the evidence provided to them. The game's spirit was inherited to the commercially successful board game *Cluedo*. Through the 1980s and 1990s publishers turned murder mysteries into *dinner party* kits, providing scripts, invitations and prop evidence for home entertainment. Digitalization has expanded this type of games' format in the 21st century. However, traditional murder mystery dinners and most of the descendent murder mystery party games are still hosted off-line, and they are marketed alongside escape-room-in-a-box titles (Wood 2023).

Japan has long embraced social deduction games, and captured the market surge quickly. More recently Japanese publishers have begun localizing and creating boxed murder mystery kits. Group SNE's Mystery Party in a Box and Murder Mystery Mini lines package scenarios with character booklets and props; fan-created scripts circulate at conventions. Such commonly available packages demonstrate that MMPGs are in Japanese and can be integrated into domestic classrooms without extensive translation.

Core Mechanics and Pedagogical Relevance

MMPGs derive their educational value from their mechanics. Each player receives a character sheet containing private information, relationships and objectives. Compared with shorter social-deduction games, these sheets include a few to several pages of backstory, giving learners substantial reading input and prompting them to adopt a persona. The game unfolds in phases: a briefing or prologue introduces the characters and sets the scene; one or more inquiry rounds allow players to question one another, reveal or conceal information and attempt to establish alibis; and a final accusation/solution phase asks players to identify the culprit and to reconstruct the events. These phases demand a range of interaction patterns including interrogation, hypothesis testing, coalition building, persuasion and deception, and thus expose learners to various speech acts. It is true that most learners do not have reiterative opportunities to clear an alibi or confront inconsistencies outside the game, yet in addition to those, they have to persuade, refuse, demand or disguise information too, all of which are very relevant in their own life; such exchanges align with the development of communicative competence.

MMPGs also provide a non-linguistic outcome that structures discourse. The game ends when players agree on a solution and uncover the official explanation within time constraint; there is a clear task completion point. In contrast to TRPGs or live-action role-play, which can virtually continue indefinitely, MMPGs have a tighter narrative arc and simplified rule set, making them easier to prepare and more predictable in classroom settings. However, this simplicity does not reduce the communicative demands: the need to collate information from multiple perspectives and to argue convincingly fosters extensive negotiation of meaning. Because the characters' goals may conflict, players have to manage factors like rhetoric, politeness strategies, hedging and turn-taking as they interrogate or persuade. These mechanics

map well onto the four TBLT task conditions: the primary focus on meaning, free use of linguistic resources, the information and opinion gaps, and a nonlinguistic outcome. They also illustrate why learners may find MMPGs both challenging and engaging: the speech acts required are intricate, but the narrative stakes motivate them to attempt language they might avoid otherwise.

Task-Based Language Teaching Definition and Why Murder Mystery Party Games Fit

Definition and Alignment

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) holds that learners develop language through the performance of tasks that require them to use their linguistic resources to achieve a nonlinguistic outcome. A widely cited description of a task notes four core conditions: (1) a task has its primary focus on meaning; (2) there is some kind of *gap* that participants must bridge by communicating; (3) learners should be able to use their own linguistic resources freely to complete the task; and (4) a task has a clearly defined non-linguistic outcome (Ellis 2017, Nunan 2004).

These conditions can be used to evaluate how closely an activity aligns with TBLT, which Murder-mystery party games (MMPGs) fulfills inherently.

(1) *A task's primary focus is on meaning*: conversation in an MMPG is directed toward solving a fictional murder (or at least pretending to do so). Players share their findings and hypotheses, cross-examine alibis, and persuade others based on clues and motives, so language is used to progress the story rather than practice linguistic patterns mechanically. Each session becomes an improvised narrative in which players' individual goals and the emergent

storyline drive what language gets used. My students reported that they quickly forgot they were *doing speaking practice* because the need to investigate and persuade took precedence.

(2) *There is some kind of gap to bridge by communication*: information gaps and opinion gaps are inherently built into MMPG's design. Each character sheet contains hidden information and private objectives; the distribution of clues means that no single player sees the whole picture; the need to piece together the narrative creates authentic information gaps. These gaps drive players to ask probing questions and make inferences, and their different goals generate opinion gaps as they debate who is suspicious or trustworthy. Strategic deception or concealing widens these gaps because some players must lie or obscure details to protect their secret agendas.

(3) *Learners can use their own linguistic resources freely*: the rules provide a structure (roles, secrets and winning conditions), but players are free to formulate questions, paraphrase, gesture, draw pictures, sort the information into a table, etc. as they wish. Unlike some deduction games where their rules constrain what can be said, MMPGs invite players to craft their own narratives. The same scenario produces a different story with each group because discourse is improvised. That improvisation, combined with the requirement to roleplay a character, pushes learners to incorporate a wide repertoire of vocabulary and pragmatic strategies.

(4) *A task has a clearly-defined nonlinguistic outcome*: an MMPG has a clear, non-linguistic goal: identify the culprit (and sometimes achieve secondary objectives such as concealing one's fault or achieving a personal mission). The group must reach a final accusation or explanation to resolve the plot. Success is not measured by linguistic accuracy but by whether the group creates a good narrative; the language stays the means to achieve a substantive

outcome.

The alignments shown above suggest why MMPGs can be considered tasks in the framework of TBLT. They extend the board-game-based approach described by York (2019), where a TBLT framework built around commercial games promoted collaborative learning and *translanguaging* episodes – learners moved between L1 and L2 to co-construct meaning during research, play, analysis and reflection. While board games such as Codenames or Settlers of Catan encourage turn-taking and rule-driven talk, MMPGs replace fixed rounds with continuous negotiation and narration. This freer interaction addresses the persistent challenge in Japanese university speaking classes: students often lack an authentic need to speak. As the introduction argued, the stakes of solving a murder and persuading peers create a communicative urgency that typical classroom activities may not provide.

Role-Play within TBLT

Role-play has long been considered a meaning-focused task in language teaching. It allows learners to simulate real-life situations, adopt different social roles and practice pragmatic language in context. Research on pragmatic role-play tasks shows that these activities create a de facto real-life situation, encouraging learners to imagine themselves as characters and draw on their own experiences. In a study of academic role-plays, Bi (2021) found that students mentally placed themselves in the described situations, thinking about what they would say in such scenarios. Participants reported using metacognitive strategies such as setting goals and monitoring. Such findings suggest that role-play tasks engage learners' pragmatic competence and require them to manage not only the language but also the social norms and emotions of interaction.

TRPGs as Precedent

TBLT pedagogy already incorporates role-play, drama and game-based tasks. Schneider (2023) observes that classroom role-play activities, drama projects and digital games have been integrated within TBLT for decades, laying the groundwork for using more complex narrative games. MMPGs extend the spectrum of role-play tasks by providing richer backstories and clearer goals than simple information-gap role-plays. The detailed character sheets encourage learners to adopt a persona and maintain it throughout the session. Many of the communicative moves required– providing or questioning alibis, hedging accusations, bluffing, forming alliances and narrating events–are speech acts that language learners rarely practice. An MMPG compresses these pragmatically rich interactions into a single, goal-oriented task cycle. For lower-proficiency students, scaffolding (e.g., language frames for questioning, hedging and interrupting) will be necessary, but the structure remains focused on meaning rather than language form.

Tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs) offer another example of how narrative gaming can align with TBLT. Schneider's comparison of TRPGs and TBLT argues that both share a constructivist basis and a problem-solving character (Schneider 2023). TRPGs combine game mechanics, cooperative narration and character play, and they rely on language for both controlling the game and dramatizing characters. Because narration, game dynamics and character control are all "regulated through verbal output" (Schneider 2023, 11), learners must improvise language in real time, often facing unexpected turns (e.g., a dice failure) that create "Sprachnotsituation" (ibid.), a situation, where language users are in need of emergent use of language without much time to organize, structure or gather resources (Tselikas 1999 cited in Schneider 2023). Schneider notes that TBLT can profit from TRPGs because they supply authentic materials and simulate real-life situations; however, the lack of pedagogical

structure in TRPGs means that teachers need a framework such as TBLT to guide analysis and reflection.

Murder-mystery party games can be viewed as a stripped-down version of TRPGs. They retain the essential features identified by Schneider (2023), e.g., goal-oriented tasks, collaborative problem solving, emergent narratives and immersion, while reducing the preparation time and rule complexity. MMPGs typically run in a single session with a fixed cast of characters and have a clearly defined win condition. Their scripted clues and dossiers provide enough structure for novice game masters or teachers, yet still allow learners to improvise within the narrative. Thus, MMPGs offer a low-cost gateway to narrative role-play tasks within TBLT: they achieve the same communicative and pragmatic benefits as TRPGs but are more practical for classroom use.

In summary, MMPGs meet the core criteria of TBLT, enrich the repertoire of role-play tasks by adding intricate backstories and goal-driven interaction, and draw on the emerging literature on TRPGs as authentic, task-like gaming environments. When integrated with appropriate scaffolding and reflection, they can provide learners with an engaging platform for sustained, meaning-focused language use.

The Author's Test Play Practice

Context and Materials

In this section, I describe my practices. The trials described here were conducted in a Japanese university's teacher-training program that the author is in charge of. The course is an optional game-based English communication class where students prepare to become language teachers; class size is small and the students' English

proficiency was around CEFR A2 to B1 (beginner – intermediate). In the first trial, only two students attended. I chose Studio SNE's murder-mystery kit *Monochrome Maritime Game* (2024) based on the number of players, and devoted more than 180 minutes over two periods. At first, we tried to execute everything in English, but I, as a facilitator, decided to provide glosses in English after seeing the players' struggle. The limited class size gave opportunities to every player to share critical narrative information, however, since the physical components of the game, e.g. character sheets and clue cards are in Japanese, the information sharing and negotiation based on those needed to be smoothed out.

In the second trial, the class grew to eight students with comparable language ability, and I brought Group SNE's *The Murder at Cthulhu Manor* (2019). To maintain English use and support less-proficient learners, I added a role-play diary assignment: before each session, students wrote short diary entries from their character's perspective, summarizing what they had learned, what they believed and how they felt. These diaries served multiple purposes – they provided linguistic output beyond the game, helped students organize the complex plot, and functioned as a safety net to quote English expressions.

In both trials I did not restrict the use of Japanese (the shared L1) to prioritize the game progress and complete the game within class time. In the first trial, about 20% of the conversation was done in Japanese, especially language-specific clues were discussed in their L1. In the second trial, over 50% was done in Japanese and this time, emotional expressions were often found in their L1.

Student's Name

Diary

I am the (character #1).
I have a secret that I cannot tell anyone.
My hobby is [REDACTED — Copyrighted Content #1].
This time, I targeted (character #2) (Player Name) and [REDACTED — Copyrighted Content #1].
However, (character #3) got in the way, and I couldn't kill (character #2).
When morning came, the psychic was found dead!
My hobby might be revealed…
I must find the person who killed the psychic and keep my secret…!

Figure 1. A Sample Student Diary Entry from the Murder at *Cthulhu Manor*.

Observed benefits

The MMPGs sessions lead to some of the most engaged talk I have witnessed in a university EFL classroom. The students eagerly took on their roles and treated the narrative as a real-world conversation. They autonomously asked spontaneous questions, hypothesized based on new evidence, and challenged each other without teacher intervention. For example, two participants in the second trial spontaneously formed a secret alliance to enter a forbidden place (tower) in the scenario. The tower was locked, and it required a hidden key item, which was not discovered during the trial. Their alliance was to break into the place, but it went far beyond what the scenario suggested: they cooperated temporarily while simultaneously trying to deceive and outmaneuver each other. One of them invented a detailed story about a "missing relative" to win sympathy, while the other fabricated a legendary heirloom that only they supposedly possessed. They negotiated how to share in victory, even

though both were clearly preparing to betray each other at the final stage.

This level of creativity was not something a teacher could aim to design in advance. It was clear that Murder Mystery Party Game made it possible, since the participants set their own goals and used the narrative resources freely. They created a dynamic, social situation resembling real-world interaction: collaborating while maintaining suspicion, balancing personal aims with interpersonal relationships, and improvising persuasive language. In contrast to typical classroom role-plays, where students often avoid speaking due to linguistic insecurity or fear of errors, the murder-mystery setting created a small world in which they get willingly engaged in extended English conversation.

Below I would like to present a reconstructed example from my notes in order to illustrates how participants used evidence and accusation in real time. During one exchange, one of the participants confronted another by saying:

> "He says he is a journalist, but there is no item in his room that shows the occupation. All he has is a blank notebook, which is very strange if he really works as a reporter. The evidence suggests he is hiding something from us."[i]

As he proceeded, he gradually started to shift tone:

> "Well... I wasn't telling the truth either. I came here for the revenge of my sister…"

This short sequence shows how learners built tension, interpreted clues, challenged credibility, and managed improvised dialogue that rarely emerge in conventional language-practice tasks.

The game's nature, i.e. the immersive, story-driven context seemed to address two

common criticisms of TBLT: that classroom tasks often lack novelty and that they are not always perceived as real-world activities. TBLT emphasizes the use of meaningful tasks that mimic real-world language use and connect learning to experience, but typical information-gap or jigsaw activities can sometimes feel routine. In contrast, the MMPG sessions presented an authentic-feeling problem with intrinsic stakes – solving the case – which drove the learners to speak and interact with others. While the students' utterances often entailed stuttering and misuses, I observed an emergence of pragmatic strategies such as persuasive rhetoric, which rarely does from pattern-practices. Such observations mirror the benefits reported in other game-based TBLT interventions: York's board-game study (2024) found that collaborative play encouraged students to plan, discuss and reflect together.

Challenges and Reflection

The trials also exposed several challenges, and I believe it is worth noting them in this report for future investigation.

Linguistic load and cognitive complexity were the most obvious and immediate problems. The combination of unfamiliar vocabulary, secret character settings, and the need to highly contextual communicative goals such as inferring or betraying lead to frequent breakdowns. Similar issues are found in reports of TBLT been reported where people can't speak well when a simple task is presented to them. It eloquently demonstrates the necessity of practice based on authentic needs. However, considering a game progress not to ruin fun aspect, they need scaffolding, especially in a competitive situation where players try to talk each other into something, a lopsided outcome tends to occur when there is a significant difference in proficiency levels.

The student took turn and then stalled because they were unable to formulate utterances quickly enough. To mitigate this issue, I introduced structured turns (the players took turns to speak in a given time) and experimented with character diaries as an assignment, giving them opportunities to get prepared to smooth out their speaking. These supports gave learners planning time to produce while preserving the interactive feel. In the trial though, we ended up using Japanese to some extent, to balance learning and fun, and to finish the game within class time.

Group-size sensitivity is another issue. MMPGs typically require a fixed number of players; absent students or uneven numbers can disrupt the scenario. Fortunately, none of the students missed a session in my trial, but had even one done, the entire game would have collapsed. Possible mitigations include the teacher takes on a role, but it still covers only one character. The same issue is found in the project-based language learning, but since MMPG scenarios are more tightly designed, they entail this issue.

Finally, content sensitivity needs further consideration. The murder theme, although almost unavoidable in MMPGs, may seem violent and unsettle some students. If there is a chance to design an MMPG scenario for class, offering alternative themes (e.g., a heist or treasure-hunt mystery) can be a viable option. Additionally, some students were found uncomfortable improvising deception; warm-up activities and explicit discussions about role-play norms as pre-task activity will build confidence. Throughout the sessions, I acted as a facilitator and a game master, monitoring tone and pace, clarifying rules and modelling respectful disagreement. Implementing TBLT tasks requires substantial planning and preparation, and the MMPG trials were no exception: teachers must balance narrative authenticity with linguistic accessibility, prepare scaffolding materials and be ready to adapt on the fly.

Despite these challenges, I should reemphasize, the overall impact of the murder-mystery party game was overwhelmingly positive. The combination of a clear goal, rich narrative and social interaction created a communicative need for speaking class. With careful scaffolding and flexible management, MMPGs can provide a powerful task for developing practical speaking competence in an EFL context.

Conclusion

This practice-based report has argued that murder-mystery party games (MMPGs) can function as powerful, classroom-friendly tasks within a TBLT framework. MMPGs generate meaning-focused interaction while preserving the pleasures that motivate students to speak. There were challenges to overcome such as high cognitive/linguistic load, group-size constraints, and potential content sensitivity as well, but it was possible to mitigate them and balance game progress and language learning. With thoughtful design, MMPGs offer a promising route to provide authentic speaking activities in EFL settings.

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[i] This and the next quotations are not direct quotations from the interviewed persons, but rather rebuild by the author on the basis of his notes.