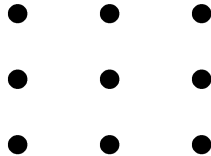# Connecting Dots: Using Some of the 20th Century's Most Significant "Whodunits" to Teach Low English Proficient Students

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Here's a brief mental exercise for the armchair detective: Connect all nine dots above using four unbroken lines. Do not lift your pen to start another line. Need clues? Try these: "Think outside the box (no intended reference to a fast food commercial)," and "the northwest is where an arrow starts to hit the mark." Got it? If you did, you certainly have what it takes to be a detective, and if you enjoyed solving this puzzle, you probably will enjoy reading and teaching detective stories. If you are an ESL or Language Arts teacher who loves reading detective stories and is thinking of using detective stories to challenge students to go beyond the obvious, then this curriculum unit is written specifically for you.

INTRODUCTION

I teach at Fonville Middle School, a typical middle school in the highly urban Houston Independent School District. There are great needs here. In 2001-2002, 96% of the students were receiving a free or reduced-cost lunch. 52% were judged to be at risk of dropping out. 86% of the 1,100 students were Hispanic, 8% African-American, and 6% white. In 1998-99, only 20% of sixth graders met minimum expectations in reading, according to TAAS tests, and only 42% met minimum expectations in math.

I teach Language Arts to Low English Proficient (LEP) students in this school. The needs here are even greater. About 25% of the 70 sixth and seventh grade students I teach everyday are new to the country, and this means they do not understand or speak a word of English beyond the usual "hello," "thank you," and "goodbye." A significant number of this group has literacy problems in Spanish, their first language, and English, their target language. The results of this year's Stanford Test show that 80% of both my sixth and seventh classes are reading at the third grade level. The causes of this dismal performance are no mystery even to the novice teacher, i.e. low level of motivation due to the socio-psychological background of the students, deficiencies in language and other academic skills due to the limited experience they have in learning the district curriculum (being newcomers to the district), and maladjustments to the system, structure, and culture of an American school because they are recent immigrants to the country. With

the new policy to test the academic achievement of LEP students as a promotion requirement, there is enormous pressure for these students to hasten their development in all aspects relating to academic knowledge and skills, and cultural immersion to learning in an American secondary school setting.

I have spent a large part of my job as teacher planning, innovating, and creating ways to raise the achievement levels of my students, and, honestly, I feel that I have already exhausted every available and appropriate English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) strategy in my attempts to develop my students. Still, my efforts are not enough, as evidenced by their Stanford Test results. Perhaps it is time to think outside the box. Perhaps it is time to raise the level of expectations even higher than usual, but at the same time to further strengthen the scaffoldings and frameworks that support the students' learning processes, in order to raise them to, or even beyond, the level where they should be. Thus, my ultimate goals are to provide an integrated instructional program designed to enable each student to progress as rapidly as possible in mastering English, interpersonal skills, and the academic language needed in their new school environment; and to raise my students' level of confidence so that they become independent learners. I hope to achieve these by using "whodunits" as the focal point of this curriculum unit.

"WHODUNITS" AS CLASSROOM READING MATERIALS

To understand how "whodunits" can be used to achieve my goals for my LEP students, it is necessary to first define what "whodunits" are. This form of writing falls under the broad category of mystery fiction. The constellation of mystery fiction includes such genres as spy/espionage, thrillers, detective fiction, women P.I.s, historical, police/professional, Sherlockian, suspense, adventure, and romantic. (mysterynet.com) Within whodunits there is a broad range of forms, for example, novels, short stories, narratives written in free verse, films, TV series, chapter books, picture books, one-page mysteries, and serial novels; and a wide range of readership: from very young kids (TV's "Blues Clues" audience) to adults.

Whodunits as a Genre

Whodunits are a tightly told fictional tale that features a crime, usually a murder, and emphasizes the convoluted search for its solution. They are distinguished from other forms of fiction by the fact that they are primarily a puzzle. Usually a crime has been committed, but the reader's attention is generally directed to puzzling circumstances surrounding the crime rather than to the event itself. The tale's climax is the solution of the puzzle, and the bulk of the narrative is concerned with the logical process by which the investigator follows a series of clues to this solution. Very often the mystery is solved by means of deductive reasoning from facts known both to the character in the story that tries to solve the puzzle, and the reader. (Educational Dimensions 1989)

The origin of whodunits can be traced to the great American writer-poet, Edgar Allan Poe, more than 150 years ago. Poe's *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* (published in 1841) is considered a classic and seminal work in this genre because it is here that he started to create "so many of the standard elements and devices of the form" (Gorman 1993). In this work, Poe pioneered the idea of taking the reader inside the mind of the detective who solved crimes through deductive reasoning. He also introduced the use of the archetypal eccentric amateur detective and his loyal sidekick, the idea of least suspected person as the culprit, and the concept of the locked-room mystery. Fifty years later, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle developed the genre a step further by giving us Sherlock Holmes, the quintessential master detective, and providing us the blueprint on which mystery fiction is based: a mysterious death that moves the events of the story, a closed circle of suspects each of whom has a believable motive, a reasonable opportunity to commit the crime and access to the means of committing it, a detective who uncovers the mystery by sheer common sense and logical deduction from the facts that have been fairly presented to the reader, and mistaken or confused identity. At the center of a mystery are the commission of a crime and the discovery of who committed it. The structure in all mysteries is that an important element is not revealed until the end of the story. In most mysteries, what is revealed is who murdered the victim, along with the criminal's motive and method. Danger is a main ingredient in mysteries. Danger is sometimes only threatened; however, it must always be real.

There are two broad classifications of whodunits: police procedural and private detective. The police procedural whodunits have realistic and, necessarily, accurate narratives. Here the reader is privy to all the intricacies of the squad room, morgue, courts, and crime scene. The plot of the procedural is intricate, and the detective is besieged with pressures from all sides. Usually he or she is juggling a brimming caseload, is plagued by personal problems such as a marriage on the rocks, and is being pressured by a superior to solve the crime yesterday. The procedural requires a sizeable cast of secondary characters - suspects, fellow cops, lawyers, informants, and criminals - to provide realism.

Within the private detective sub-genre, there are two specific categories, namely: the "cozy," and the "hard-boiled" private detective. In the case of the not-so-realistic cozy private detective, the sleuth is usually an amateur, the violence is mostly off-stage, the setting is often a small town, and the detective uses the powers of observation, deduction, and special knowledge (for example, antiques, poison, etc.) to unveil the criminal. Its narrative tradition can be traced to the formal detective novel that uses a very British form of writing (Grella 1988). Its notable authors and characters include Agatha Christie, who brought us some of the genre's most unforgettable characters such as Hercule Poirot and Miss Jane Marple. The hard-boiled private detective is similar to police procedurals in terms of its dark and realistic treatment of the crime story; they are different only in their use of the protagonist – one is a police officer, and the other is a private detective. Hard-boiled whodunits inhabit the opposite sphere to that of the cozy whodunits. Here the private detective operates in a large city, and the violence is staged in front of the

reader as he tramps through the "mean streets" meeting criminals and combing the gritty underbelly of the city for clues. Modern private investigators are sometimes women, often former cops, and wise-cracking loners who usually carry a gun or a weapon. The narrative tradition here is American and among the most popular examples are Hammett's Sam Spade, Chandler's Philip Marlowe, Ross Macdonald's Lew Archer, and Robert Parker's Spenser. Common to both types of whodunits is a plot involving a crime that is interesting and realistic, and a conflict that has serious ramifications in the lives of the characters. Setting plays an important role in the story, particularly when it comes to the clues and details of the crime scene. The investigator is heroic yet human, and the dialogue seems realistic.

This curriculum unit will use the cozy private detective whodunits in consideration of the maturity level, knowledge of the world, and cognitive capabilities of my sixth and seventh graders. In particular, it will use some of the 20th century's *significant* whodunit novels written for children and young adults as the target reading. The question to ask at this juncture is: What might be considered *significant*?

Significant Whodunits

Every reading teacher knows that for given reading material to be deemed suitable for classroom use, it must first pass the test criteria of appropriateness, readability, literary and artistic merit, and inherent value. These criteria are also useful when choosing ESL materials. For example, *appropriateness* could help an ESL teacher choose readings that present familiar cultural contexts they could use to understand the culture of the target language. *Readability* could help the teacher assess the level of vocabulary of the reading through which he/she could decide whether to use the modified or simplified version of a reading or simply stick to the authentic or original version. The *literary/artistic merit* and *inherent value* criteria must also be a primary consideration when choosing readings for ESL classes since students in these classes need as much development in these areas as do regular students.

Applying these criteria, however, does not always guarantee that a chosen reading is a *significant* work of literature. In fact, many of the books we use in the classroom that meet these criteria may be *useful* for our purposes but are not necessarily *significant*. Recently, a team of experts sat down to select one hundred most significant books of the 20th century. In the beginning they agonized over what to call the list ("The Best Books of the Century?") and what to include on such a list (classics, popular titles, etc.). Eventually, they decided on using the word *significant*, to mean books with literary and artistic merit, books that are perennially popular with young readers, books that have blazed new trails, and books that have exerted a lasting influence on the world of children's book publishing (Breen, et al.). The result is a wonderful collection that speaks of what this century's young minds have thought, felt, experienced, discovered, and fought and aspired for – all in books from as old as Rudyard Kipling's *Just So Stories* (1902) to the most recent *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* by J.K. Rowling (1998).

Of the one hundred titles, however, only three books can be classified under the whodunit genre: a whodunit (*The Westing Game* by Ellen Raskin, 1978), a mystery (*From the Mixed-up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler* by E.L. Konigsburg, 1967), and a fantasy/mystery (the first book of the *Harry Potter series*). The reason for this scarcity could be that because detective fiction is popular to a mass audience, it is, rightly or wrongly, considered as cheap entertainment. This forces us, then, to broaden our criteria and look elsewhere for more titles.

A rich resource of titles is the various award-giving bodies that give annual recognition to books specifically aimed at children and young adults. Perhaps the most prestigious of these awards are the *Newbery Medal* and the *Caldecott Medal* given by the American Library Association for the most distinguished American children's book (Newbery) and picture book (Caldecott) published the previous year. The long list of winners for these awards, however, again includes only a few whodunits. Thus, one needs to look beyond these mainstream awards to discover that the best resources for whodunit titles are the groups that specifically recognize mystery fiction. America's most revered group is the Edgar Awards given by the Mystery Writers of America. Founded in 1945, this preeminent group of American mystery writers bestows the coveted *Edgar Allan Poe Award* for achievement in various categories, including a special category for both young adult and juvenile. Among its many winners, I have chosen Joan Lowery Nixon as the main author for this curriculum unit for two reasons: 1) being the only four-time winner of the *Edgars,* she is considered one of the leading and most influential figures in the development of the genre and its promotion to broader readership; and 2) being a Houston resident and a known advocate for education, she is most accessible to my students either as resource person to give background information on the works that we will be reading in the classroom, or as a source of inspiration for my students to seriously read mystery fiction, or even to write it.

I have personally met Joan Lowery Nixon at a "meet-the-author" session coordinated by Dr. Richard F. Abrahamson, the leader of *The 20th Century's Most Significant Books for Children and Young Adults* seminar. The truth is that she is the inspiration for this curriculum unit. Listening to her talk about her love for mystery fiction - even in the informal, small audience at my seminar - one ceases to wonder why she has been called the "grand dame" of young adult mysteries. Her enthusiasm for mystery fiction is infectious. She describes the pleasure she gets from writing mystery and suspense, to wit: "When I was young I discovered an evening radio program called 'I Love a Mystery.' It was intriguing, suspenseful, and at times, absolutely terrifying, and the title was correct. I did love a mystery. Maybe I am really a detective by heart because much later in my life, when I began to write books for young people, I discovered that writing mysteries was even more fun than reading them." (Nixon 2003). In explaining how she creates her numerous chilling mysteries and suspense-filled page-turners, Nixon says:

> A mystery begins to develop in my mind when something sparks an idea and a
> question grows from it. What would it be like to move into a house in which a

murder had taken place? How would I feel if my best friend were arrested for murder on circumstantial evidence? As a question develops into an answer I give a great deal of thought to my main character. She is the most important part of the story, and I see it take shape through her eyes. Before I write a word of the story I know how I'll begin it and how I'll end it, making sure to put in honest clues and distracting red herrings – just to make the mystery all the more fun to solve. I love mysteries, and I want my readers to love them, too. (*ibid*)

Even more valuable than these outstanding contributions to mystery fiction is Nixon's commitment to educating young people. During that same meeting, she surprised us by dedicating her newest novel to Shirley Lyons, one of the fellows in the seminar. This gesture shows how much Nixon appreciates the passion and dedication that teachers like Lyons have in educating children. Later, Lyons informed us that the author has not only been a friend for more than fifteen years, but also a collaborator in turning around the lives of quite a few 'lost souls' in her class. Indeed, if one has to choose significant books to use in the classroom, one must also consider the author: Is the author significant in the literary field for which she is writing? Are her ideas relevant? Is the author a strong, passionate, committed, and active advocate to educating our children?

All told, this curriculum unit will recommend any of Joan Lowery Nixon's award winning mystery novels: *The Kidnapping of Christina Lattimore, The Séance, The Name of the Game was Murder,* and *The Other Side of Dark.* If time permits, these additional titles could also be used:(*The Westing Game* by Ellen Raskin, *From the Mixed-up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler* by E.L. Konigsburg, and *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* by J. K. Rowling. The question to ask next is: What exactly will the LEP students get from reading these whodunits?

Benefits of Reading Whodunit

If you come to think of it, given that there are many other genres to choose from, why use whodunits for LEP students? The answer is no great mystery. Whodunits appeal to readers because here, good triumphs and "in this way it adds subtly but on a large scale to the necessary quantum of optimism in the world" (Keating 18). Ah, but this, perhaps, is merely circumstantial evidence. There are other, much more consequential benefits of reading whodunits.

First, whodunits match the whims, interests, and attitudes of modern readers. Today's readers are to the TV born. As such, they are generally with short attention spans, demanding of action packed events, often cynical, and wanting to interact in any way they can with the characters and events of the story. These kinds of readers are attracted to detective stories because whodunits offer fast-moving plots, believable resolutions to problems and conflicts, and active engagement with the events of the story in ways that are not quite possible with other genres.

Whodunits challenge the minds of the critical-thinking-trained readers, as well as entertain those with less sophisticated reading skills. The former will sort out clues, make judgments, and arrive at conclusions as they attempt to solve the mystery while reading. The latter will sit back, relax and enjoy the twists and turns of the story, content with the knowledge that, always, the truth will out, the mystery will be solved, and the culprit will get what he/she deserves in the end - whether or not they analyze the clues while reading. This is, perhaps, one of the main reasons why whodunits continue to be popular: there are no losers here but the culprit – the detective solves the mystery, the victim finally gets justice, and the reader is entertained. The case is closed and everyone's happy. Life is back to normal.

Whodunits also get reluctant readers enthusiastic about reading, thinking, and writing. While textbooks can be dry, whodunits, with their intrigue, characters, and gradually revealed storyline, hold the students' interest. The inherent excitement that these readings have allows students to become enthused about the plot development, character analysis, clues, and gathering of evidence and possible solutions. Students become involved in what they are reading because they can activate their thinking skills - particularly deductive reasoning and research skills - to solve the puzzle. As presented in Bloom's Taxonomy, whodunits can be used to achieve higher levels of thinking. For example, at the **knowledge** level, students arrange characters and events in the mystery. At the level of **comprehension**, students classify events, describe characters, and explain precisely what has occurred. In **application**, students apply existing knowledge to the mystery by illustrating, dramatizing, and writing their interpretations. In **analysis**, students analyze, categorize, and differentiate characters and events. At the **synthesis** level, students collect and organize facts to form hypotheses. Finally, at the **evaluation** level, students appraise, argue, assess, and evaluate their opinions in the process of solving the mystery. Once students are exposed to the mystery genre, they will want to write their own for others to enjoy and solve. When writing an original mystery, the student will brainstorm, research, and develop specific elements that demonstrate his/her knowledge and their exciting vision. After these elements are completed, they can then go through the whole gamut of writing: outlining, drafting, conferencing, revising, and publishing. Consequently, when students activate their higher order thinking skills while reading, creativity becomes possible. Understanding detective fiction requires imagination, and solving a mystery requires invention (Barzun 1989). Imagination is the mother of creativity and invention is its child. I believe that there are but only a few genres that can do this, especially for young, reluctant readers.

Reading mystery fiction is an effective means of recognizing a story's plot – an area in literary analysis where middle school students have difficulty. Whodunits allow students to get in tune with the author, which leads to the student having a better appreciation of the setting and characters in a book. While reading a mystery, a young reader is forced to listen to the author, or he/she will miss the clues, and therefore, the whole story. Much more than any other type of literature, mystery fiction can command

the readers' attention, and literally grip them to the edge of their seats. This focus on how an author goes about contriving his tale brings about a clearer understanding of the plot. While enjoying a good book, the student is also learning how a good author works. Once a student's grasp of plot is firm, the study of setting and character will make more sense to them. Setting is the primary motivational factor in mysteries as it forces characters to think and behave in certain ways. (Winks 1988) For example, the setting of the cozy/formal detective novel is usually in an isolated, luxurious place depicting an elite segment of society that is disrupted by a crime. These characters are a collection of the usual suspects as well: doctors, lawyers, professors, sporting types, military men, and vicars. A beautiful girl and a handsome man are often needed to provide romance, and once the detective is provided to clean up the mess, are allowed the to marry and live happily ever after. These patterns allow for predictability. Predictability is not bad in the classroom; in fact, it makes reluctant readers feel more comfortable and less threatened.

Aside from these educational benefits, whodunits also allow students to reflect about the society in which they live, and on the essential questions of what is right or wrong. Middle school students have an affinity for detective fiction. Given to analyzing his or her own motives and those of others, the middle schooler is drawn to the psychological elements of mystery and detective fiction. My sixth or seventh graders, for example, know that it is wrong to cheat. They tell on others who cheat and attempt to cheat on their own, but always, they know that there are bad consequences to it and that it is morally wrong. Young adolescents instinctively know that if they do anything prohibited, either by specified rules, laws, or morality, they are going to be hounded by what may be called "conscience." This guiding principle of what is right and fair is satisfied by the tidy conclusion of a whodunit. To a middle school student, perhaps curiosity and a touch of paranoia add to the enjoyment of this genre, which deals with essential and urgent problems. Thus, whodunits, centering as they do on breaches of morality, seem an ideal vehicle for employing the values clarification approach to young students (Haycraft1957). Some of the premises which underlie the creation of detective fiction are: 1) there is such things as cause and effect in the universe; 2) the human mind can solve problems, provided it is fed enough information; 3) much of this correct information is collected through luck, careful observation, and hard work; 4) good detective stories attempt to minimize luck and coincidence as much as possible; and 5) the human mind is fascinated by its own ability to think. These premises certainly sound like someone's moral mantra. Any creative teacher could easily make use of detective fiction to teach students some moral principles, a lesson that is essential to the human development of students, but one that is not always easy to do in the classroom. In reading detective fiction, there is always the possibility of students taking these premises to heart and applying them in their own life.

To sum up, if detective fiction were only books that ask the reader "whodunit," they would still be valuable for bringing the fun of a puzzle to a classroom. In fact they bring much more. They inform about the infinite variability of human beings. They indicate the importance of how one perceives situations. They quickly make real places and

institutions that are otherwise inaccessible to students. They offer materials which can be used easily for productive reading and writing assignments. More importantly, by the fact that whodunits revolve around a crime, they force students to consider issues of justice, of identifying the acts which are so irrevocable as to be beyond any hope of atonement. Whodunits separate the good people from the bad people and implicitly urge a student to be one of the good people. Whatever he or she ultimately does, at least the lesson is taught. The question to ask now is: How do you make whodunits readable to LEP students?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In the field of ESL teaching, there are two kinds of *readable* books and resources you can use in the classroom: either a modified/simplified version of a material whose vocabulary is too high for the level of the students; or an authentic/original version of the reading. There is an ongoing debate among ESL practitioners as to which of these materials could benefit the students more. This paper does not have the space to discuss the pertinent issues in this debate. Suffice it to say, then, that there are both advantages and disadvantages to using either of these materials. However, by suggesting the use of significant whodunits in their original form as readings for this curriculum unit, I am advancing the idea that using authentic materials is ultimately more beneficial to LEP students.

In my twenty year**s** of experience teaching ESL to a variety of students, I have proven that it is when students face the challenge of comprehending materials way beyond their current level that they are able to raise their level of motivation and eventually succeed in acquiring the target language. Bigger challenges produce bigger successes, and nothing motivates more than success. I remember using Edgar Allan Poe's "The Bells" with my Vietnamese, high-school age, beginning level refugee students, for a choral recitation activity at a refugee camp in Southeast Asia back in the 1980s. Of course they had a difficult time learning to read, pronounce, and memorize Poe's wonderful verses, but they persevered and successfully presented the poem before an audience of United Nations dignitaries. This success raised their level of confidence to the extent that from then on, they positively responded to all other difficult materials I presented them in class. At another time and place, I introduced Shakespeare's original version of *Romeo and Juliet* as reading to my middle school, non-English speaking Japanese students. I had never seen my quiet, highly disciplined adolescent Japanese students become so engaged in a discussion (using English, of course) on whether Romeo and Juliet should kill themselves for love, or on whether love is reason enough to go against one's parents. Clearly, when you set a high level of expectation for your students, they surprise you by not only attaining that level you desire for them, but also by becoming enthusiastic learners.

These experiences, however, are not the only bases for my conviction that using authentic readings produce better results. Two theories, in particular, have informed this

belief. One is Stephen Krashen's *Comprehensible Input Hypothesis*, which, I believe, is the most influential theory in language acquisition in recent times. The other is Lev Vygotsky's *Zone of Proximal Development* theory, an idea that puts a sociological dimension to our understanding of how language is learned or acquired.

Comprehensible Input

The role of *comprehensible input* has been of prime importance in the second language acquisition (SLA) research and theory, especially during the past two decades. Since Krashen's seminal book *Principles and Practices in Second Language Acquisition* (1982), there has been widespread conviction that input must be comprehended by the learner if it is to assist in the acquisition process. Krashen claims that in order for second language (L2) acquisition to take place, learners must be exposed to comprehensible input which contains language structures that are beyond their current stage of interlanguage development (Krashen 21). He calls this development *"i+1,"* which means that in moving from stage *i* to *i+1*, it is necessary for the acquirer to understand input that contains *i+1*, where *understand* is taken to mean that the acquirer focuses on the meaning and not the form of the utterance. The main assumptions of the Input Hypothesis are as follows: access to comprehensible input is characteristic of all cases of successful language acquisition, in both first and second language acquisition; greater quantities of comprehensible input seem to result in better or faster L2 acquisition; and lack of access to comprehensible input results in little or no acquisition (Long 1981). How, then, is input made comprehensible? There are three ways through which this can be done: (1) modified input; (2) interactionally modified input; and 3) modified output.

The first one, modified input, is characterized by input such as speech or text that has been modified or simplified in some way before the learner hears or sees it. This can be done through repetition, paraphrasing of words or sentences, and reduction of sentence length and complexity. Studies that examine L2 acquisition within this framework concentrate on describing modifications that different speakers make when addressing a child or an L2 learner. Some typical examples of such modified speech are motherese (Snow and Ferguson 1977), foreigner talk (Arthur et al. 1980; and Ferguson 1975), and teacher talk (Ellis 1985; Long and Sato 1983; Wong-Filmore 1985). It has been widely acknowledged that such simplifications serve to facilitate comprehension; however, it has also been noted that not all types of modified input are equally effective. Chaudron's (1983) study, for example, demonstrates that teacher vocabulary elaboration may in some cases lead to learner confusion about what is an alternative and what is additional information. This is one argument used against the use of simplified or modified readings in the classroom. Similarly, in a study which investigates the acquisition of word meaning from oral input, Ellis (1995) cautions that even though elaborations may help, over-elaborated input could be counter-productive. Analyzing the body of research done on this framework, one could roughly speculate that slower speech rate and semantic redundancy have a considerable effect in increasing comprehension; that input

simplification may facilitate comprehension for beginners; and that elaborative modifications may be more suitable for advanced students (Oh 2001).

The next linguistic environment that could drive comprehensible input for L2 acquisition, interactionally modified input, is one in which the native speaker (NS) or a more competent speaker interacts with a nonnative speaker (NSS), and where both parties modify and restructure the interaction to arrive at mutual understanding. (Pica et al. 739). The role of interaction in SLA evolved from an earlier work by E. Hatch, which emphasizes the importance of conversation in developing grammar (1978). These strategies include aspects of conversation such as comprehension checks, clarification requests, topic shifts, and self and other repetitions and expansions. Long (1983) claims that speakers modify interactions using these devices in order to avoid conversation problems, and repair discourse when non-understanding sequences arise. Long (1982) asserts that the need to exchange unknown information will result in *negotiation* for meaning characterized by modifications in the interactional structure of conversation, as participants seek to make incoming speech comprehensible. Interactionally modified input happens in an ESL reading classroom when teachers or peer tutors engage students in a discussion about a reading. Both teacher/tutor and students modify their speech in an effort to make themselves understood.

The last potential source of comprehensible input for L2 acquisition, modified output, happens when learners are required to produce language in response to someone's input. In an attempt to make himself/herself comprehensible, the learner modifies his/her utterance/writing in ways that may be understood by the person he/she is speaking with or writing to. In Swain's Comprehensible Output Hypothesis (1985, 1995, 2000), she argues that while comprehensible input and the emphasis on interactional negotiation are essential, language acquisition ultimately takes place when learners attempt to modify what they have to say or write. Swain (1995) identifies a number of different roles for output: 1) it may help learners to recognize a gap between what they want to say and what they actually can say; 2) it serves as a means by which learners can test self-formulated hypotheses on whether they can be understood or what they are saying is correct; and 3) it can help learners to develop meta-linguistic knowledge of how L2 acquisition works. You would know that there is comprehensible output in a reading classroom when you see students attempting to use verbal and non-verbal expressions and activating their vocabulary as they try to meaningfully respond to inputs in the classroom.

To summarize, research on sources of comprehensible input indicates that L2 acquisition happens faster and better by having the teacher modify input, by having both teacher and student modify their input during interaction, and by having the student modify her/his output. What this means to ESL practitioners is that learning activities in the classroom must create opportunities where the need to understand or to *negotiate for meaning* drives the process of L2 acquisition. This implies that reading materials for middle school LEP students need not always be simplified to the kindergarten level. In

fact, authentic materials appropriate to any regular middle school students could be used as long as teachers teach the readings using strategies that create moments of comprehensible input.

Zone of Proximal Development

The second theory that informs the conception of this curriculum unit is Lev Vygotsky's *zone of proximal development*. Vygotsky, born in the U.S.S.R. in 1896, is responsible for the social development theory of learning. He proposes that social interaction profoundly influences cognitive development. Vygotsky approached development differently than Piaget. The latter believed that cognitive development consists of four main periods of cognitive growth: sensorimotor, preoperational, concrete operations, and formal operations (Saettler 331). Piaget's theory suggests that development must have an endpoint or goal. Vygotsky, in contrast, believes that development is a process that should be analyzed, instead of a product to be obtained. According to him, the development process that begins at birth and continues until death is too complex to be defined by stages (Driscoll 1994; Hausfather 1996).

Vygotsky contends that this lifelong process of development is dependent on social interaction and that social learning actually leads to cognitive development. This phenomenon is called the *zone of proximal development*. He describes it as "the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky 1978). In other words, a student can perform a task under adult guidance or with peer collaboration that could not be achieved alone. The *zone of proximal development* bridges the gap between what is known and what can be known. Vygotsky claims that learning occurs in this zone.

Traditionally, schools have not promoted environments in which the students play an active role in their own education as well as their peers. This theory, however, requires teachers and students to play untraditional roles as they collaborate with each other. Instead of a teacher dictating his/her meaning to students for future recitation, a teacher should collaborate with his/her students in order to create meaning in ways that students can make their own (Hausfather 1996). Learning becomes reciprocal experience for the students and teacher.

The physical classroom, based on Vygotsky's theory, would provide clustered desks or tables and work space for peer instruction, collaboration, and small group instruction. Like the environment, the instructional design of material to be learned would be structured to promote and encourage student interaction and collaboration. Thus, the classroom becomes a community of learning. Vygotsky's assertion that cognitive change occurs within the zone of proximal development implies that instruction would be designed to reach a developmental level that is just above the student's current developmental level. He proclaims: "learning which is oriented toward developmental

levels that have already been reached is ineffective from the view point of the child's overall development. It does not aim for a new stage of the developmental process but rather lags behind this process" (Vygotsky 1978).

Scaffolding and reciprocal teaching are effective strategies to access the *zone of proximal development*. Scaffolding requires the teacher to provide students the opportunity to extend their current skills and knowledge. The teacher must engage students' interest, simplify tasks so that they are manageable, and motivate students to pursue the instructional goal. In addition, the teacher must look for discrepancies between students' efforts and solution, control for frustration and risk, and model an idealized version of the learning act (Hausfather 1996).

Teaching Strategies: Practical Applications of Comprehensible Input and ZPD

When applied to teaching strategies, the theories of comprehensible input and ZPD can take many forms. Below are some of the most common strategies:

The Natural Approach

Stephen Krashen's *Natural Approach* is a communicative-oriented and comprehension-based approach to language learning. Specific strategies are used at certain stage of language development. For example, at the Comprehension Stage, students are given opportunities to develop comprehension without having to use language; at the Early Production Stage, students respond with one word utterances and then move to short phrases; and finally, at the Speech Emergence Stage, students are made to produce more complete speech patterns. Here, language is always used in conjunction with concrete meaning. All forms of input, whether it is oral language, a book, or a video must be comprehensible to students, and new language and content are learned in comprehensible contexts. This strategy reflects the developmental process young children go through as they learn to talk. Through self-motivating activities that are motivational and meaningful, students develop language naturally. Students experience simultaneously the integration of language, listening, speaking, reading, and writing – as they use it in functional situations and to communicate meaning.

Total Physical Response (TPR)

TPR is a language teaching method in which items are presented in the target language as orders, commands, and instructions requiring a physical response from the learner. The cognitive process of language acquisition is synchronized with and partially facilitated by the movements of the body. It's fun and it gets the students moving!

Project- and Performance- based Learning

L2 learners should be provided opportunities to learn and use language in a variety of forms and expressions. In addition to storytelling, there are several other methods which are recommended. For example, drama-based activities can heighten a student's ability to acquire concepts and language while being absorbed in the creative process. Students are able to improve their ability to produce the target language, lower anxiety, acquire nonverbal communication skills and improve their ability to work cooperatively in groups. Students can dramatize storybooks and read in class. Students can develop their own dramatizations with the teacher as guide. Dramatization would make whodunits come alive! Another example is role-play. Here a whodunit situation is presented. Students take the roles of participants in acting out what might typically happen. Students discuss dilemmas, options, choices, and opinions. The use of puppets is also a stimulating, student-centered approach which encourages communication. As in role-play and dramatization, students become someone else, thus feeling less inhibited and less focused on their speech production. Whodunits can be done though puppetry, or students can create their own mystery stories and characters. To increase fun and creativity, make puppetry a project where students create their own puppets.

Shared Reading

The single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to students. There is no substitute for a teacher who reads good stories to children. Teachers should incorporate shared reading into their classrooms on an ongoing, if not a daily, basis. Riddles, detective short stories, excerpts from novel whodunits, and news involving police and detective work would make for interesting shared reading. Teachers could also write whodunit storybooks specifically for our LEP students. These books should be designed as high interest and culturally relevant readers for students. The benefits of shared reading are: it develops students' interest and skills in reading; students benefit from one another by reading together, storybooks provide teachers with a wealth of opportunities, since one storybook can be accompanied by several complimentary learning activities; and students can learn about culture in context through reading stories.

Journal Writing

The most effective form of journal writing for students is the **dialogue journal.** A dialogue journal is a written conversation in which a student and teacher communicate regularly over the entire program of study. It can be done though a special notebook that a student chooses for this purpose, or though an exchange of letters. For the latter option, a teacher-made mailbox could be installed in one corner of the classroom. Through dialogue journals, students write about their solutions to puzzles, riddles, and mysteries. Dialogue journals serve a variety of purposes. They help develop students' reading and writing skills, allow for expression which may be inhibited in a classroom setting and

enable teachers to get to know students in a way not possible through classroom activities. It provides a venue for individualized instruction, and it provides teachers with a record of students' progress in writing. One perceived drawback of dialogue journals is the time to read and respond to journal entries. If used successfully, however, it is time well spent given the potential benefits gained.

Cooperative Learning

An effective ESL curriculum is one that is based on the principle that administrators, teachers, parents and students can and should work cooperatively to make the classroom a better place for learning and working. Cooperation does not happen by chance but must be consciously planned to achieve the desired results. Cooperative Learning offers structures for classroom learning which empower students to: make choices, participate more, take leadership roles, acquire social and linguistic skills, become peer teachers, support each other, negotiate, and manage themselves and others. Cooperative learning is where students work in small groups (preferably of mixed ability) in which they help one another meet individual and/or group goals. The Cooperative Learning movement has, in recent years, evolved into various practices and forms. One structure that has gained wide acceptance because of its effectiveness is the Kagan Cooperative Learning Strategy developed by Dr. Spencer Kagan. This structure emphasizes on the social organization of a classroom where the following concepts are fostered: individual accountability, positive interdependence, equal participation, and simultaneous interaction.

Learning Centers

Learning centers are an excellent strategy for enabling students to work independently in learning, practicing and extending skills and concepts. In a learning center, students can work without direct teacher supervision. Learning centers provide opportunities for optimal student involvement in learning activities. Students do not all learn and complete tasks at the same rate. In a learning center classroom, there are always things to do. There are a number of centers that can work for teachers and students; however, one should consider the following guidelines for making centers especially conducive to cooperation and language learning:

- Directions should be clear and appropriate for independent use. Students should know what is expected of them when they go to the centers. Directions should be clearly posted, stated on an audiotape or depicted through visuals.
- Centers should include a number of activities at different levels to meet the needs of learners. A range of activities will also allow for choice and increase interest.
- Centers should include hands-on activities as well as paper-and-pencil tasks.
- Centers should provide a way for students to evaluate themselves while participating in the activity or afterward.
- Students should know how to care for or maintain the centers.

Rooms for Learning

The classroom environment exerts a subtle but powerful influence over the kinds of interactions and language experiences that students have. It can either support or impede language and literacy development. A classroom where whodunits are taught should be organized to facilitate optimum language learning opportunities and to help students become increasingly interested in mysteries. Riddles and clippings from newspapers could be posted in bulletin boards, and so could pictures and descriptions of great mystery writers; soundtracks of known mystery films could be played as background music on certain class activities, and mystery books can be found in class libraries.

To recapitulate, we have emphasized in the preceding discussion that difficult readings, such as the original versions of some of the 20th century's most significant whodunits, can be made readable to LEP students, as long as the teacher creates moments of comprehensible input, and establishes a *learning community* in the classroom. The question that remains now is: How do we structure a curriculum on whodunits specifically aimed at LEP students so that student can progress as rapidly as possible in the target language, and raise their level of confidence so that they become independent learners?

DESIGN OF CURRICULUM UNIT

Designed primarily to hasten the language development of LEP students and aimed to foster interest and success in reading, this unit on whodunits is structured around ten sets of learning activities, namely: 1) Picture Puzzles; 2) Games; 3) Riddles and Word Puzzles; 4) Short Stories; 5) Simple Chapter Readings; 6) Projects; 7) Simulations; 8) Movies and TV Shows; 9) Significant Whodunits (Novels); and 10) Writing Whodunits.

SKILLS	CONTENT
COMPLEX	Novels
	Simulation
	Chapter Books
	Short Stories
	Riddles
SIMPLE	Pictures/Puzzles

Fig 1: Curriculum Design

In general, constructing this unit as several sets of learning activities serves two important purposes: first, it divides into teachable chunks a very broad topic; and second, it provides the context through which the TEKS (Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills) and TAKS (Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills) objectives can be taught. The activities are arranged from the easiest to the most difficult, with the first eight learning activities serving as scaffolding lessons for the remaining two more difficult activities. The intention is to get students to read authentic whodunits on their own, and to write an original whodunit towards the end of the unit.
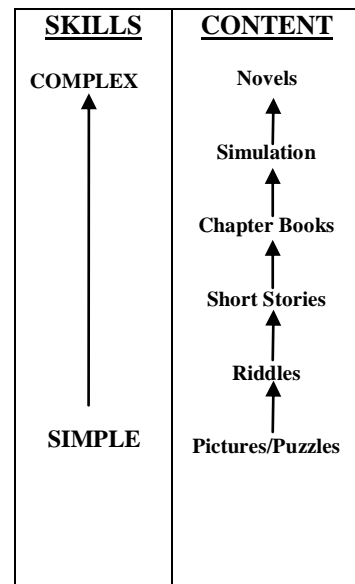
Each lesson in this curriculum unit is **activity-based**, and is aimed at providing opportunities for students to develop and apply skills through meaningful tasks. Teachers facilitate activities in which students take responsibility for their own learning. In this kind of lesson, learning in the classroom is shifted away from the "teacher as the giver, to students as the learner," so that students participate more actively in their own learning and, as a consequence, develop confidence in, interest in, and enthusiasm for learning.

The approach to learning in this curriculum unit is **holistic**. Listening, speaking, reading, and writing as well as content and skills are applied simultaneously to solve problems and accomplish tasks. As students progress through the unit they will continually build on prior knowledge and experience and use that in new contexts and in solving problems. I intend for this unit to be implemented based on a **spiraling**, **developmental** concept in which language, skills, and knowledge are recycled progressively at higher levels and through increasingly complex tasks (see Figure 1). The lessons are designed so that from the onset of the unit, the students begin to learn in highly contextualized activities and then gradually progress to more unfamiliar, abstract concepts and language with fewer contextual clues

Curriculum Schedule

Study in these learning activities is done in my language arts class with students devoting two one-and-a-half hour periods a week to writing, and two forty-five-minute periods for critical thinking and reading skills. Both grade levels – sixth and seventh – will have the same learning activities; however, the content for each unit will differ from one grade level to another. The unit could be done in 12 weeks. In other words, students could be ready to read any of the significant whodunits listed above, and then write a mystery story of their own, if careful planning of lessons using the scaffolding (learning activities) is done. This time frame may be a bit demanding, but as already argued here, setting high expectations is ultimately more beneficial to students. It is not necessary to use all the sets of learning activities if students quickly show progress; however, the scaffolding activities may have to be recycled if progress is slow. In other words, you might not have students read Joan Lowery Nixon yet if they still could not comprehend short stories. The time frame could be adjusted, too, depending on how students advance in knowledge and skills. A sample syllabus is shown in Fig. 2.

The design of this curriculum unit will maximize learning opportunities for each student, and will ensure that: 1) each student will learn the district-required curriculum objectives; 2) each student will develop proficiency in the English language by learning it in meaningful contexts where he/she can solve real problems and deal with real meaning; 3) each student will learn the academic language, concepts, and skills needed for success in American high schools implicit in the learning activities; and 4) each student will develop a broader understanding of the world around him/her.

Learning Activities

All of the teaching strategies described above could be applied to most of the following learning activities. For example, TPR could be used as one of the strategies for teaching picture puzzles and games. Detailed descriptions of how these strategies are used in the learning activities are provided in the sample lesson plans that follow right after this section.

Picture Puzzles

The first set of activities, "*Picture Puzzles*," uses picture puzzles to develop vocabulary and the skill to make inferences. Non-textual reading activities like solving picture puzzles are utilized to orient students to the kind of thought processes needed to solve mysteries presented in written form, in ways that are not threatening and overwhelming especially to beginning LEPs. "I Spy" books and picture puzzles where students look for specific figures in a picture may be used. Internet resources are more accessible, and some of the best sites are: *cyberkids.com, Kid's Corner, Kid's Crambo, David's Puzzle Page, Kidz Rule: K-6,* to mention a few.

Games

Week 1: "I Spy" (Picture Puzzles), Crossword Puzzle (Game), and "Mexican Riddles (Riddles and Word Puzzles)

Week 2: "More Stories to Solve" (Riddles), "Clue" (Game), One-page mystery (Short Story)

Week 3: More riddles, "The Sign of the 400" (Short Story), "Scooby Doo: The Movie" A mystery movie for children

Week 4-5: A mystery short story, "The Case of the Elevator Duck" (Chapter Book), "The Case of the Missing Laptop" (Simulation)

Week 6-7: "The Boxcar Children – The Panther Mystery" (Chapter Book)

Week 8-12: The Other Side of Dark (Significant Whodunit Novel), Writing a Whodunit Short Story.

Fig. 2: Sample Syllabus

While it is true that games are usually considered to be fun, they also have pedagogical value, particularly in second language teaching. Games are usually used to reinforce, apply and practice language and skills. Games which encourage cooperation are more valuable than those which rely on competition. There are numerous games which can be incorporated into activities, many of which could be made by the teacher, such as: cryptograms, crossword puzzles, word jumbles, word finds, and hang man games. There are also commercial board games, the most popular of which is "Clue." Again, there are internet sites which are rich sources whodunit games. I highly recommend: *The Kid's Clubhouse* from Houghton Mifflin publishers for its entertaining and mentally challenging brainteasers.

Riddles and Word Puzzles

The third set of activities, *Riddles and Word Puzzles,* initiates students into solving mysteries written with simple vocabulary and sentence structure. Again, the purpose is to slowly introduce to students the experience of solving written puzzles. By using fewer

words and sentences, the students learn to become aware of clues hidden in words and sentences, and to start making inferences from these clues. Some word puzzles and riddles can become co-curricular. You could easily teach social studies as well as language arts if you have students invent rhymes that include facts about various states or other geographical areas you're studying. You might also have groups of students work on constructing word finds based on, for example, things associated with Abraham Lincoln or another historical figure. One book of riddles that has a multi-cultural perspective is George Shannon's *More Stories to Solve.* Also check out *The Internet Kids Yellow Pages* for some child-friendly riddles and puzzles.

Simple Chapter Readings

The fourth set of activities, *Simple Chapter Readings,* introduces students to longer whodunits that are divided into chapters. Again, these will provide students enough practice for the more difficult readings later, and strengthen their 'detective skills.' Choices include shorter chapter books like Polly Berrien Berends' *The Case of the Elevator Duck,* to a much longer *The Boxcar Children* series, or the once-popular *Hardy Boys* and *Nancy Drew* mystery series.

Short Stories

The fifth set of activities, *Detective Short Stories*, provides students with longer readings that will challenge their reading comprehension and ability to infer the solution to the mystery from the clues presented in the reading. In relation to the overall purpose of this unit, these learning activities are essential to evaluating whether or not the students have the necessary vocabulary and skills to tackle more difficult reading materials. A sample lesson of *The Sign of the 400* is presented here, and is recommended as a reading here because the story's structure offers more opportunities to teach genre study. Aside from the internet, other sources of short stories include magazines for children like *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine* and class set booklets like Scholastic *Scope: Mysteries in the Spotlight.* Both are readily available in bookstores and local libraries.

Simulations

Unlike the previous learning activities that are packaged as sets of several textual and non-textual materials, the fifth activity, simulations, are learning experiences where students can actually collect and analyze clues to a crime, and then identify a culprit at the end. The aim is for students to not only internalize the concepts and skills in solving mysteries, but also increase their level of interest and enthusiasm for whodunits. A sample lesson, *The Case of the Missing Laptop* is described below. A possible follow-up to simulations like this could be a court trial involving the culprit where students assume roles as judge, lawyers, witnesses, and members of the jury. Simulations involve a lot of planning and preparation, and demand a lot of creativity on the part of the teacher. Thus,

it is important that the activity maximizes learning by making sure that the tasks are interdisciplinary and multi-cultural.

Movies and TV Shows

A disadvantage of using popular movies and TV shows is their use of age-inappropriate language and situations. This is really unfortunate because these media are some of the best tools of teaching LEP students due to their audio-visual nature. Although the choices are limited, some shows can be used to teach students to think like a detective, and visualize setting and characters. I recommend *Scooby Doo: The Movie*, and Children Television Workshop's *Ghost Writer,* which used to air on PBS.

Significant Whodunits (Novels)

The last two sets of activities, *Significant Whodunits* and *Writing Whodunits* can be planned as one lesson, where writing follows reading. Both are the culminating activities of this unit. In reading significant whodunits, students read, discuss, and hopefully, enjoy reading some of 20th century's significant novels enumerated earlier in this paper. Study of the chapters could be scattered across several days and weeks, with lessons focusing mostly on how character and setting affect plot development. Lessons may also be planned around the various clues and suspects, stopping at every clue/suspect and allowing students to discuss and evaluate specific suspects and their motives. This way, suspense and excitement is built and maintained. Lessons should follow the pre-reading to post-reading cycle (at which stage journals could be written or creative mystery writing could be done). Ideally, students should be able to read independently at this stage, but because these are LEP students, more vocabulary reinforcement and comprehensible input might be necessary for every lesson.

Writing Whodunits

Having students creatively write whodunits provides closure for the unit. Having learned the literary patterns and characteristics of whodunits through the various stories read, students could write simple whodunits of their own. Lessons should follow the usual writing tasks (i.e. brainstorming, organizing, drafting, revising, and publishing).

SAMPLE LESSONS

Lesson 1: Burglary Simulation - *The Case of the Missing Laptop*

Objectives

Based on the L2 Acquisition theory that LEP students learn best when provided with real and active learning experiences, an integrated and interdisciplinary curriculum, and high-interest activities, this **classroom simulation lesson** will focus on the students' ability to

activate their vocabulary and higher-order thinking skills to solve a crime. There are three main objectives for the lesson. The students will: 1) use his/her four language functions (listening, speaking, reading, writing) to solve a crime *(TEKS Viewing: 22.A, B; Reading: 10.B; Writing: 15.A; Listening and Speaking: 1A)*; 2) apply critical thinking skills to analyze various clues and data *(TAKS: 4)*; and 3) practice social communication skills in cooperative learning situations *(TEKS ESL)*.

Activity One: Students are deputized as Police Officers or Private Detectives

Before students collect and analyze clues, they first learn about the "burglary" and receive their "mission" as newly deputized police officers. First, the teacher shows students the scene of the crime. He/she explains that there has been a burglary in the classroom. He/she tells them that when he/she got in early this morning, she/he discovered that the door was unlocked, the teacher's desk a mess and the teacher' laptop gone (show picture of laptop).

Have a brief review of the duties and responsibilities of a police officer or a private detective. Inform the students that before they can help solve the crime, they have to be deputized first. Simulate a "swearing in" ceremony: have the students read a "pledge" promising to do their duties to the best of their abilities, afterwards, pin on each student a police badge. Allow a few minutes for students to "celebrate" their "acceptance to the police force" in order to build excitement and enthusiasm for their role as detectives/police officers. The "pledge" and badges have to be prepared beforehand.

Activity Two: Students collect clues

Explain the details of their mission. Using gestures and/or illustrations show that their job includes collecting and then analyzing clues from the crime scene, investigating evidence, and interviewing witnesses to the crime. Tell them that at the end of the lesson, they are expected to identify the burglar.

Ask students what sort of clues or evidence they could gather from the scene of the crime. Have students brainstorm for a few minutes. Next, lead a discussion on how to collect and protect from contamination the clues and evidence (e.g. fingerprints). Then, give students a few minutes to collect clues and evidence from the crime scene. Assign a mission to students (4-6 students to a group) according to clues they have gathered from the crime scene: those who picked up things with fingerprints will go to the Science Corner; those who got the bag of written documents left by the burglar will analyze it for clues at the Reading Corner; and those who will establish the time of the crime by viewing a security video tape of the classroom and hallway and interviewing witnesses, will do it at the Math Corner. Another group tasked to analyze a computerized police file of known burglars in the area will work in the Social Studies Corner.

Activity Three: Students analyze data and clues

Move around the various corners to monitor how the students are doing their tasks. The instructions on how to do specific tasks have to be prominently displayed in the corresponding corners. Make sure these instructions have both texts and illustrations to make it comprehensible to students at different levels. If possible, have a trained peer tutor guide the students through the steps.

Students analyze fingerprints at the Science Corner

Have students follow an illustrated copy of the steps on *How to Lift Fingerprints*. Tell them to verbalize the steps as they do them for added oral practice. Allow a few minutes for students to lift fingerprints from specimens gathered from the crime scene. Then, have the students compare the fingerprints they have lifted from the specimens with the fingerprints of known criminals from a police file. After they have completed their analysis, instruct students to write a report of their findings using *Framed Sentences*. Finally, tell students to practice for an oral presentation on the result of their experiment, which they will present at the end of the lesson.

Students analyze contents of a bag found at the crime scene at the Reading Corner

The students start by identifying the contents of a bag left at the crime scene (an addressed and stamped envelop with a letter inside, a driver's license, some personal effects, grocery receipts, and several I.D. badges). Have the students read and write down the names and addresses on the envelope. Tell them to read the letter. Have them underline or highlight the unfamiliar/difficult words in the letter. Then, tell students to list all the words on construction paper and brainstorm the meaning of the words by using their prior knowledge of context clues. Next, students scan the letter for names, and examine the identification badges, grocery receipts, and personal effects. They should make another list of names and places on construction paper, and then analyze which pieces of this information are useful in finding to the solution to the case. Then, have the students write a report of their findings using *Framed Sentences*. Finally, tell them to practice for an oral presentation on the result of their experiment.

Students investigate witnesses and view a security video tape at the Math Corner

You will need to train "witnesses" and shoot on video the burglary prior to the lesson. Have students practice reading the interrogation questions and recording the responses on an Interrogation Report Form. Then introduce one or two witnesses to the students. The group interrogates the witnesses and writes down their responses. Next, have the students view the security video tape. They note details, especially the time recorded on the tape. Have the students analyze the responses from the interview and the time data from the tape. Tell them to construct the time that elapsed when the crime occurred. When they have done their analysis, tell them to write a report of their findings using *Framed*

Sentences. Finally, tell students to practice for an oral presentation on the result of their experiment, which they will present at the end of the lesson.

Students research about suspects in the Police File at the Social Studies Corner

Students should first learn how to access files in the computer by following some illustrated instructions. Students should then study the personal information, description, and modus operandi of the suspects, and then identify the burglar. Next, have students write a report of their findings using *Framed Sentences*; then, tell students to practice for an oral presentation on the result of their research, which they will present at the end of the lesson.

Activity Four: Students present their findings

Gather all groups to the center of the room. Have the groups present their findings. They identify the burglar and justify their answer. Expect students to argue and persuade each other, especially if they have different findings. Allow students to use their primary language when communicating their opinions, but encourage them to use the target language when stating facts of the case. Note patterns of errors in the students' discourse, and identify those students who still lack the confidence to participate in the discussion. Analyze the errors later for future grammar lessons, and remind yourself to speak personally with the less confident students about how you can help them improve.

Evaluation

Prepare a rubric that assesses the students' performance as they perform their tasks during the activity. The rubric should evaluate their ability to use the four language functions, how they apply their critical thinking skills to solve the problem, and their behavior during the cooperative learning activity.

Lesson 2: Whodunit Short Story – *The Sign of the 400* by R.K. Munkitrick

Objectives

This lesson introduces students to the elements and characteristics of whodunits as a genre. In particular, it aims to have students: 1) comprehend the selection using a variety of reading strategies *(TEKS Reading: 10; TAKS 4)*; 2) identify the characteristics of detective fiction (*TEKS Reading: 12; TAKS 2*); and 3) write a report based on information from an interview *(TEKS Writing: 15, 18, 19)*.

Activity 1: Preparing to Read

Do the "nine dots puzzle" found at the beginning of this paper. Instruct the students to connect the nine dots using four continuous
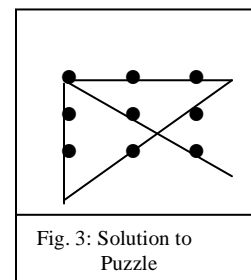

Fig. 3: Solution to Puzzle

lines, without lifting their pens. Provide clues while students try to solve the puzzle at their seats. Call some students to present their solution on the board. Encourage the other students to coach whomever is at the board. Allow only a few minutes for the students to do the task. If no one solves the problem, show the solution yourself (see box). Ask: "What did it take to connect all the dots?" (answer: *going beyond the dots, or going beyond the obvious*). Explain that going beyond the obvious is what makes the scientific mind. Tell the students that like scientists, detectives often go beyond the obvious to solve cases. Explain that in the reading that they are about to do, they will try to go "outside the box."

Activity 2: Reading Activity

Begin by reading aloud the title, author, and other information about the reading. Explain to students that the story involves a problem or a mystery that the detective has to solve. Present the graphic organizer below (Fig. 4) and explain what information and data from the reading must go into the corresponding spaces. (If you have an overhead projector, copy this on a transparency and use it when students make their presentations later. If none is available, copy the chart on the board.) Have the students read the story silently for several minutes. Tell them to write their answers on the corresponding spaces. They may add or subtract the number of CLUE spaces depending on the number of clues they find in the story.

Then, have students share their charts with a partner. Call some pairs to present their charts to the whole class. These pairs should write their data on the chart and then explain the data. Have the students locate the information in the reading. Remind them to always back up both explicitly and implicitly stated information with supporting details from the reading. Summarize the ideas presented, emphasizing the importance of logical thinking in solving a mystery.
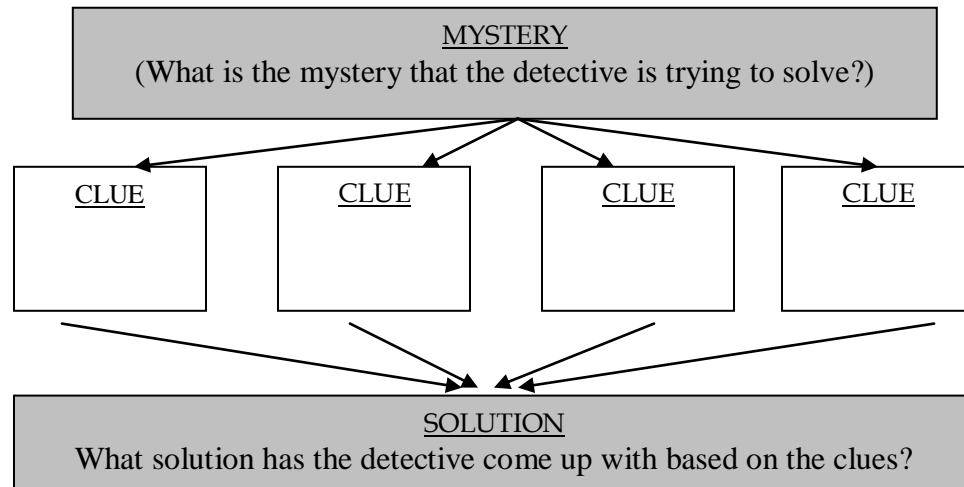
Activity 3: Understanding Detective Fiction

Write the following names on the board: Sherlock Holmes, James Bond "Agent 007," and Alfred Hitchcock. Then, ask the students what theses names have in common (answer: *They are all famous names in "thriller" or "mystery" stories*). Ask students what mystery/thriller stories they know (short story, novel, or movies). Have them give a brief summary of the stories. Explain that the short story they just read is a kind of mystery/thriller story. Specifically, it is a detective fiction. Define what a detective story or "whodunit" is. Explain that there are several variations to this genre, all dealing with a mystery or puzzle, but each one having different protagonists. Describe each variation and provide examples. Explain that what is essential in detective stories is the way the puzzle is solved, i.e. through the process of observation, investigation, and deduction. Have the students discuss with a partner how Sherlock Holmes used the process of observation, investigation, and deduction in the story they had just read. Call some

students to share their answers with the whole class. Encourage other students to react and comment on the ideas given. Wind up by summarizing the important ideas given.

Fig. 4: MYSTERY-SOLUTION CHART

```
┌───────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│                         MYSTERY                            │
│    (What is the mystery that the detective is trying to    │
│                         solve?)                            │
└───────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘

┌──────────┐   ┌──────────┐   ┌──────────┐   ┌──────────┐
│   CLUE   │   │   CLUE   │   │   CLUE   │   │   CLUE   │
│          │   │          │   │          │   │          │
└──────────┘   └──────────┘   └──────────┘   └──────────┘

┌───────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│                        SOLUTION                            │
│    What solution has the detective come up with based on   │
│                        the clues?                          │
└───────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
```

Activity 3: Writing a Report

Have the students imagine that they are TV news reporters. Tell them that they have been chosen to interview Sherlock Holmes after the case of the stolen Coleslaw diamonds has been solved. Instruct the students to list three questions that they would ask Holmes and answers they think Holmes would give. Tell the students that the report they will write will be used in two TV news programs: the primetime news, and the magazine news format. Have students think of other detail questions to ask that would be appropriate for the format of each programs.

Have each student discuss his/her list of questions with a partner. Have the partners decide on a final list of questions and possible answers. Tell the partners to decide between themselves what format to write – primetime or news magazine. Have the students write their specific news report.

Direct students to show their reports to their partners. Have them make suggestions on the content of the report. Are the questions and answers proposed earlier substantially written in the report? Tell the students to write another draft of their reports giving due consideration to their partners' ideas. Then, have students do the final editing and revision of their own reports.

Have students simulate a TV primetime news show and a news magazine show. Have some students present their report. Encourage the other students to react and make comments on the presentations.

Evaluation

Do an *Anecdotal Record* assessment strategy for this lesson by writing down the students' common mistakes in usage, grammar, pronunciation, and their difficulties in comprehensible output. Note that most of the entries to the record must be done while you are having the lesson with the students. Analyze the record at the end of the lesson and plan to address the errors and difficulties in the next lesson.

Lesson 3: Writing Original Whodunits

One of the most effective ways to see whether students can apply the knowledge that they have learned in a series of related lessons is to have them produce a written product. In this lesson, students will follow the mystery-writing format to write their own original mysteries *(TEKS: 15, 18, 19).* You will need to prepare mystery photos (you can download photos from mystery.com) for this activity.

Activity 1: Preparing to Write

Review the elements and characteristics of whodunits as a genre. Once this is clear, tell students that they will be writing an original whodunit. Show some mystery photos to get students to start thinking of a story. Review some writing techniques. You may refer to the following resources for writing whodunits: *Twenty Rules of Writing Detective Stories* (by S.S. Van Dine)*; Great Detectives: Seven Original Investigations* (by Julian Symons); *Read and Retell* (by Hazel Brown, et al.). Using a graphic organizer similar to the Mystery-Solution Chart (Fig.4), begin brainstorming possible events, characters and setting for the students' original mysteries.

Activity 2: Writing the Mystery

Have students write a first draft. In pairs, students should check each other's drafts. Then have them return the drafts with comments for revision. Allow time for students to revise their drafts. If necessary have them check their second drafts again, and then make some more rewrites. Do as many peer collaborations and rewrites as needed. Finally, have the students present their stories to the whole class.

Evaluation

Assess the students' behavior during the activity and their written output on the following questions: Were the students able to effectively collaborate with each other? Were the students able to follow the principles of writing a whodunit? Were the students able to analyze the mystery during the class presentation?

A FINAL WORD

A word in parting should be said with regard to whodunits as popular reading. Despite criticisms that they are cheap entertainment, whodunits continue to be written and read by talented people. Part of the fascination with this genre is our morbid and elemental curiosity towards crime (specifically murder). It may have been more interesting to delve deeper into its psychological explanations as most scholarly works have done, but given the unaddressed needs of LEP students in advancing rapidly in the second language, I have chosen to explore the potentials of this genre as a means of developing their thinking and language skills. So, while my LEP students will miss learning the psychological and sociological dimensions to whodunits, they will nevertheless move from being reluctant readers to interested readers, in much the same was as whodunits have entertained even the most cynical of readers for over a century. It is my hope that in writing this curriculum unit, I have provided a way of thinking outside the ESL box.

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