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Using a Virtual Escape Room for Active Learning in an Online University ESL Course

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Abstract

This practical classroom study highlights the effectiveness of a virtual escape room in an online university ESL course and its role in enhancing student engagement and collaborative learning. This article provides a guide to using Genially to create a virtual escape room, its implementation, and gathering feedback. The experience and findings were overwhelmingly positive and suggest a role for virtual escape rooms in online ESL courses.

Keywords

active learning, virtual escape room, student engagement, gamification, collaborative learning

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Introduction

As an online ESL instructor for university students, I was excited to try the new approach of gamification in my classes to improve student engagement. Gamification, incorporating "game design elements in non-game contexts (Khoshnoodifar et al., 2023, p. 230)," enhances learning in online ESL classes. Virtual escape rooms are one example of gamification, where students collaborate to answer course-related mission questions to "escape" a room. Indeed, evidence suggests they improve learner motivation, participation, and collaboration (Bellés-Calvera and Martínez-Hernández, 2021). Therefore, I created one to facilitate learning and aim to share my experiences here to encourage their use in other online ESL classes.

Activity

Students and Course
I used the virtual escape room activity as part of a synchronous online writing support course within Temple University's conditional acceptance program. This course provides additional support for advanced, non-native English-speaking students in their required first-year writing course at Temple University's main campus in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The six mixed-gender students in this support class have diverse language backgrounds, including Mandarin, Arabic, and Albanian.

Virtual Escape Room Creation
My purpose for creating a virtual escape room

was to provide an engaging, learner-centered, and collaborative review activity on sentence types for an upcoming quiz. I created the virtual escape room activity using Genially. Genially (https://genial.ly) is an online tool for creating interactive content in the form of presentations, quizzes, and games for increased engagement in the fields of education and business. Genially offers both free and paid membership options. With the free membership, users have access to numerous, "templates and resources, unlimited creations, and unlimited views (https://genial.ly/plans/)." There are virtual escape room templates appropriate for the educational needs of students of various ages and levels and with different interests.

I chose the free membership to create a virtual escape room for my ESL course. I selected the "horror story" template based on my students' interests. The premise of this escape room is to help a ghost and the players escape a haunted house by answering questions and completing tasks. After I picked the template, I edited the content by directly typing my questions and answers onto each slide. The questions were multiple choice and reviewed the class content on sentence types. I asked questions such as, "What is an independent clause?" It is important to note that Genially permits users to add or delete slides and edit the content and features of each slide as necessary. Upon completion of my virtual escape room, a link and QR code were generated for my students to use at a later time. It is worth noting that with a free membership, you must make your escape rooms visible to the public as only paid memberships can make their work private.

Playing the Virtual Escape Room
During a scheduled Zoom class, I introduced and demonstrated the "horror story" virtual escape room to my students. Then I divided my students into two teams and assigned them breakout rooms. I instructed them to use the link or QR code I provided to sign up and play

the escape room as teams. Throughout the 15-minute game, I monitored the rooms to keep the students on task and to help with any technical problems.

After the Virtual Escape Room

After participating in the virtual escape room activity, my students provided feedback using the polling feature on Zoom. I asked them these 3 closed-ended questions using a 5-point Likert scale: 1. The virtual escape room helped me review sentence types. 2. I had fun playing the virtual escape room game. 3. I would like to play a virtual escape room game again in the future. The students responded "agree or strongly agree" to these questions, except for one student who responded "neutral" to the question about having fun. I also asked follow-up, open-ended questions (*e.g.*, "Is there anything else you would like to share about the virtual escape room?") during a brief 3-minute discussion of the activity to allow them to expand on their answers from the poll. The discussion showed the students were receptive to the virtual escape room and found it useful. Indeed, one of the students suggested having a virtual escape room once per week. Their responses to the poll and their verbal feedback in the discussion aligned, with the students indicating that they enjoyed the activity, felt it improved their learning, and would like to do more of them. This feedback was also consistent with my observations of the teams while they played the game, as I noted collaboration and intense focus on the activity. Specifically, the students used authentic language to navigate the escape room and to come to a consensus on the answers. Thus, this activity afforded the students the opportunity to consolidate their knowledge of sentence types for the upcoming quiz and practice their English and collaborative skills in an authentic manner.

Conclusion

Based on my experiences, observations, and feedback, I suggest that virtual escape rooms for online ESL learners are an easy and effective way to increase student engagement, collaborative learning, and fun. I also feel that with repeated use, virtual escape rooms would likely increase the students' fluency and confidence in using English. Furthermore, I recommend that other ESL instructors use the free membership Genially to create virtual escape rooms to promote active learning in their online classrooms.

References

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