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Gamification and ESL Learning: Enhancing Language Skills through Literary-Themed Escape Room Activities

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how the *LitEscape Challenge*, a gamified literary escape-room activity, enhances ESL students' understanding of key narrative elements, such as plot, character, setting, theme, conflict, and moral values, while simultaneously promoting a deeper engagement with the linguistic structures found in literary texts. The activity was conceptualized to provide a problem-based learning environment where students work collaboratively to progress through stages by decoding the literary clues. Grounded in behaviourist, constructivist, and engagement theories, the intervention was carried out over four weeks with 30 Form 5 students in Malaysia. Utilising a quasi-experimental, mixed-methods design, learning outcomes were assessed through pre- and post-tests, supplemented by a thematic analysis of reflective writing. The results reveal significant improvements in literary comprehension ($p < 0.001$, $d = 2.25$), indicating a large effect size. Qualitative evidence further revealed an increase in learners' motivation, collaboration, critical thinking and heightened the metalinguistic awareness through active problem-solving, peer interaction and reflective engagement with the literary text. These findings suggest that when gamification is thoughtfully designed around linguistic objectives and narrative structures, it can improve both aesthetic appreciation and language competence in ESL literature instruction. This study presents practical implications for ESL teachers by offering a replicable, low-technology, game-based model that incorporates language-focused pedagogy to support meaningful, engaging and skill-oriented literature instruction.

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1. Introduction

In English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms, developing students' four core skills, which are listening, speaking, reading, and writing, requires more than just grammar drills or mechanical exercises; it necessitates rich, authentic input and meaningful engagement. Drills may provide a foundation in accuracy, but they often fall short in fostering communicative competence, critical thinking, and the higher-order thinking skills that are essential in today's globalised world. Effective language learning mandates authenticity, rich input, and engagement that extend beyond what is typically provided by coursebooks. These elements can be effectively incorporated through the study of literature, which familiarises learners with a diverse range of vocabulary, idiomatic expressions, and complex syntactic structures. Additionally, integrating literary texts into EFL/ESL classrooms not only strengthens students' linguistic competence but also enhances their cultural and emotional awareness by exposing them to authentic language use and varied communicative contexts. This multidimensional exposure enables learners to engage more deeply with the language, improving both their linguistic accuracy and intercultural understanding[1].

Literature serves as an active tool for language acquisition rather than merely a field of study. When students are engaged with characters, themes, conflicts, and moral choices in the text, they're involved in more than decoding words, interpreting and constructing meaning. This process enables learners to internalise linguistic patterns within meaningful contexts while simultaneously developing critical reading skills. From the perspective of many scholars, literature can be regarded as putting students in contact with L2 in a personal and holistic way, which is not only linguistically enriching but also provides room for individual and intercultural development[2]. For ESL learners, who, like those in Malaysia, learn English as a second language for instrumental and integrative purposes, literature education can promote both communicative competence and aesthetic appreciation through an integrated systems view[2,3].

In many Malaysian classrooms, however, English literature is often viewed as dull, leading to declining student enrollment and reduced emphasis in public examinations[4]. Research reveals that literature is sidelined in many schools, where students have low proficiency levels in English, often overshadowed by grammar exercises or reading comprehension drills. This perception has led to a gradual decline in the uptake of elective literature courses and the inclusion of literary elements in public examinations[5]. The recent narrowing of the scope of literature in the SPM English syllabus further extends this marginalisation, highlighting the urgent need for pedagogical innovations that can transform the role of literature in ESL education.

Several key issues contribute to this challenge. First, a language barrier that limits ESL learners' exposure to authentic literary texts in the target language, particularly for students at a young age, as there are limited appropriate resources available. Additionally, foreign literary texts are still genuine ones, but they might be too complex and linguistically challenging for low-level language learners. Second, there is a cultural perception and bias that prioritises science and technology over the arts and literature, weakening the societal appreciation for literary studies[6]. Third, conventional teaching methods with predominantly teacher-centred instruction and test-oriented practice suppress creativity and authentic involvement. Collectively, these issues create a hostile learning environment where literature is viewed less as an enriching encounter with ideas and more as a hurdle to overcome.

To address these challenges, recent scholarship emphasises the need for new innovative teaching methods that encourage readers to become active participants in their literary experiences. One such promising approach is gamification, which is described as the application of game-design elements to non-game contexts such as point, scores, levels, and other ways to incentivise desired behaviours and responses in a learning environment[7]. Research indicates that gamified learning can enhance motivation, engagement, and learning outcomes by transforming abstract content into interactive and meaningful experiences[8]. While Tulyaganova's study focused on using interactive games to teach English forms, similar principles can be extended to literature learning, where abstract literary concepts can likewise be explored through

gamified, problem-solving, or storytelling activities [8]. These practices provide active engagement, as well as the development of collaboration, creativity and critical thinking, which are priorities in 21st-century learning standards.

A particularly effective form of gamification for educational settings is the Educational Escape Room (EER). Inspired by recreational escape room games, EERs encourage learners to engage with content through collaborative problem-solving, thereby creating an immersive and interactive learning experience [9,10]. In the EER format, students are immersed in situations that induce them to apply subject-specific knowledge to "escape" or achieve a designated objective. When applied to literature education, this framework allows students to experience stories and poems not just as content to be memorised, but as challenges that invite exploration and discovery. For instance, learners may need to decode narrative structures or characterisations to advance within the game.

Placing literature-based activities within the escape room context allows educators to transform traditional literary study methodologies into collaborative, student-centred experiences. This approach offers several pedagogical advantages. Firstly, the time-sensitive and problem-oriented nature of escape rooms introduces an element of suspense and excitement, which can enhance student engagement and mitigate the risk of classroom disengagement [11]. Secondly, the collaborative environment inherent in escape rooms encourages peer learning, good communication and allows less confident students to benefit from their peers [12,13]. Thirdly, the problem-solving tasks involved in EERs demand higher-order thinking skills, requiring learners to analyse, synthesise, and evaluate information, rather than just recalling information. Lastly, the immersive and game-based environment creates memorable learning experiences and increases the likelihood that students will retain the content [14,15].

Educational escape rooms have a significant effect on enhancing students' motivation and their attitudes toward learning [11]. Effective escape room games provide a form of "meaningful gamification," characterised by intrinsic engagement with the educational content rather than superficial rewards [16]. Incorporating gamification into ESL classes can bridge traditional teaching practices with the digital preferences of contemporary learners [4]. Although the effectiveness of EERs has been documented in various subjects, empirical studies examining escape-room gamification specifically in English literature education in Malaysian secondary schools remain limited. Although the effectiveness of educational escape rooms has been documented in Mathematics, Science, and general language instruction, empirical studies focusing on their integration into English literature classrooms, particularly within the Malaysian ESL context, remain scarce. This highlights a gap in the literature, as prior studies have mainly concentrated on digital gamification [7,8] or teacher perceptions [12,13], leaving limited evidence on how gamified escape rooms impact secondary-level ESL students' comprehension of literary elements.

In response to these gaps in the literature, this study introduces The *LitEscape Challenge*, a hybrid, low-technology gamified activity aimed at enhancing reading comprehension and language proficiency. Unlike much of the existing digital gamification work that is dependent on devices and platforms, the *LitEscape Challenge* is intentionally designed to function in low-resource environments, thereby ensuring inclusivity for schools with restricted access to technology. Grounded in key educational theories, this analysis explores the pedagogical relevance of integrating an escape-room model into literature classes by drawing on behaviourist principles of reinforcement through extrinsic rewards. These constructivist perspectives emphasise collaborative meaning-making, and motivational engagement theories reflected in immersive and challenging tasks [16]. By incorporating these theoretical underpinnings, the study addresses the need for engaging, language-rich literature instruction through the *LitEscape Challenge*. Two key research questions guide it:

1. How does the *LitEscape Challenge* affect students' understanding of literary elements?
2. In what ways does the *LitEscape Challenge* foster engagement in literature learning?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Issues and Challenges in Teaching and Learning English Literature

Literature plays a significant role in English language teaching (ELT) and is widely recognised as an essential source of genuine content for language development [2]. However, teaching and learning English literature comes with various challenges.

A systematic literature review identifies several obstacles to teaching English Literature in ESL classes, which can be grouped into disposition, character, proficiency in the language, and fundamental literary understanding[5]. This systematic review identifies unfavourable attitudes among students as one of the difficulties in teaching English literature. A number of factors may contribute to students' disinterest in studying literature. First, students' lack of interest in learning foreign literature is the most common cause, as five articles have noted. In addition, students' dismal attitudes towards studying literature are concerning and can present a significant challenge for English teachers, because a positive attitude is essential when learning a second language, as it can speed up acquisition of the target language compared to studens with a negative attitude[5].

Another big challenge in employing literary texts in the English classroom is the language of the chosen texts, which creates difficulties in understanding the texts, especially for students with low English proficiency[17]. In Malaysia, employing foreign texts in literary classes may challenge students' comprehension of the CEFR. Many teachers favour local or culturally familiar texts because those are more relatable and easier for students to understand[18]. Moreover, graphic novels are popular among primary students, but they may struggle to understand the storyline due to their focus on the illustrations rather than the dialogue[17]. Therefore, students' reading comprehension skills can be affected if they read for enjoyment instead of critically analysing and appreciating literature.

Another challenge is a common misunderstanding of the value of English literature and the arts in general[6]. Since literature demands extensive reading, students often see it as unimportant or overly complex. After not qualifying for science or business tracks, many find themselves placed in arts classes by default, and this leads to a lack of interest in the subject, which is often viewed as a last option[6]. The societal focus on science and technology reinforces this negative perception, suggesting that the arts are meant for those with lower IQs. Such attitudes demotivate students and create an environment that is not conducive to deep literary engagement. Additionally, poetry is often the least appreciated and most dreaded genre among students. Many avoid poetry because they find it complicated and believe it requires careful analysis[6]. Though poems are accessible online, students generally do not show much interest in reading them. This anxiety around poetry stems from limited exposure and ineffective teaching methods, impacting students' overall performance in literature assessments.

In summary, teaching and learning English literature brings various challenges, such as students' attitudes, language limitations, a lack of resources, and societal views. To engage with literature more deeply, enhance students' learning effectiveness, and reiterate the importance of literature in facilitating language learning for English language learning, these perceived problems should be tackled.

2.2. Gamification in Literature

Gamification can engage students and produce a positive learning environment as it is a dynamic task given to students in new and inventive ways of teaching short stories, poetry, and other literary works[15]. Gamification is a creative method to make literature learning sessions more attractive, engaging, and interactive. Studies also mentioned playing to learn and learning to play, noting that students enjoyed the games for literature learning and were more active than before. Positive responses from the teachers involved in the research were an indication that a gamified literature course was a successful strategy in creating a conducive learning environment for the students to be engaged in learning[15].

Additionally, researchers agreed on the motivational benefits of gamification in English language teaching[19]. Gamification enhances students' intrinsic motivation, or the internal urge to learn. Additionally, students are more motivated to take on challenges, overcome hurdles, and attain their learning objectives when they are having fun and are passionate about the learning process[19]. Similarly, recent studies reported that the potential of gamification to enhance student motivation, engagement, and involvement in the classroom while enabling them to immerse themselves in experiential learning fully was confirmed[12]. However, the lack of studies in this field, particularly the disconnect between classroom theory and practice, has contributed to the relative obscurity of gamification's integration in English classes[12].

Besides, a study indicates that pre-service teachers have a favourable opinion of gamification in the context of teaching English[12]. Pre-service teachers in the study claimed that gamification enhances students' understanding of En-

glish language proficiency by fostering an engaging learning environment and encouraging active engagement. This also holds for English literary teaching and learning. Another study also reported that the pre-service teachers emphasised that game components should boost students' intrinsic motivation rather than only reward points, so that gamification has long-term benefits[13]. Therefore, although gamification can significantly increase student engagement, it must be used carefully to prevent sacrificing the breadth of student comprehension.

Moreover, there are commonly used elements of the game in gamification, such as a leaderboard, competition, collaboration, quest, prize, challenge, level, and rapid response[14]. In English classes, gamification could start by giving points or scores to students after they complete an English assignment or exercise[14]. These points may be provided, depending on the difficulty of the task or the student's level of maturity. If students complete tasks on literature, for example, and earn a high score, points can be allocated based on the outcome. These reward types motivate students to engage in learning tasks and to do well to get points and track their cumulative score.

To sum up, bringing gamification into English literature induces active engagement from students, provides essential 21st-century skills such as collaboration and critical thinking, and makes literature accessible and fun for students. By connecting conventional teaching approaches with contemporary digital learning in an integrated manner, it offers students more engagement with the literature.

2.3. Theories and Approaches Behind the Study

A fundamental framework for understanding the efficacy of gamification in English language teaching (ELT) is provided by behaviourist ideas, which have significantly influenced our understanding of motivation and learning. However, it is crucial to understand that behaviourism is only one theoretical framework that influences how gamification is used in ELT. Constructivist and engagement theories are also included in gamification to produce a comprehensive strategy for improving language acquisition. Together, these theories advance our knowledge of how gamification might effectively engage and inspire language learners in the digital era.

Behaviourism, associated with psychologists such as B.F. Skinner, emphasises observable behaviours and the external forces that determine them[20,21]. In the space of gamification, behaviourist theories inform several important aspects. Based on behaviourism's theory, reinforcement, including prizes made of points, badges, or any other benefits, can influence and enhance the desired behaviour[20]. By motivating students to take an active part in language learning tasks, the use of incentives in the context of gamified ELT is in line with behaviourist principles.

Athough not as novel as gamification, engagement is still a hotly debated topic. There has been a lot of research on student participation, and because there are so many different theoretical frameworks, keeping things concise can be difficult[22]. Building a gamification for engagement framework that not only matches desirable engagement states with pertinent game qualities but also enables us to quantify the results requires considering how these fit with learning outcomes, a viewpoint that is shared by others[22].

Finally, constructivist theories, which have greatly influenced contemporary educational methods, provide an essential context for understanding how to use gamification in English language teaching[20]. Constructivism, founded on the works of Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky, highlights the role of learners in creating their knowledge via active engagement with their environment, as opposed to behaviourism, which focuses on external causes and observable behaviours.

Collectively, these theoretical perspectives, behaviourism, constructivism, and engagement have led to the development of the *LitEscape Challenge*. They informed each stage of its development, from plotting the storyline and placing puzzle tasks in sequence to piloting and revising the materials according to student input. Evidence from behaviourism informed making use of rewards and points tied to badges as incentives to engage, while evidence from constructivism underpinned the collaborative character of meaning-making activities where students join forces to decode clues, solve literary puzzles and make sense of it. Narratives were immersive, and time-bound missions were implemented to maintain interest; the experience facilitated community building. During implementation, teachers acted as facilitators by providing an introduction to the storyline, managing group processes, tracking progress and conducting a debriefing following each session. The combination of

theory-based design, quality puzzle materials, and direct facilitation from the teacher will all facilitate the reproduction of the *LitEscape Challenge* within other classrooms in order to boost students' overall literary understanding and increase language learning.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This innovation employs a quasi-experimental trial that uses a mixed-method approach to assess the impact of the *LitEscape Challenge* on students' knowledge of literary elements and involvement in literature learning. During the qualitative phase, written reflections were collected to understand the students' experiential engagement[23].

This approach aligns with the ADDIE instructional design framework (Analysis, Design, Development, Implementation, Evaluation)[23], allowing for the systematic implementation of the gamified process into the literature curriculum. The intervention was executed for a duration of four weeks, involving organised escape room sessions and traditional training for specific literary topics (see **Figures 1** and **2**).
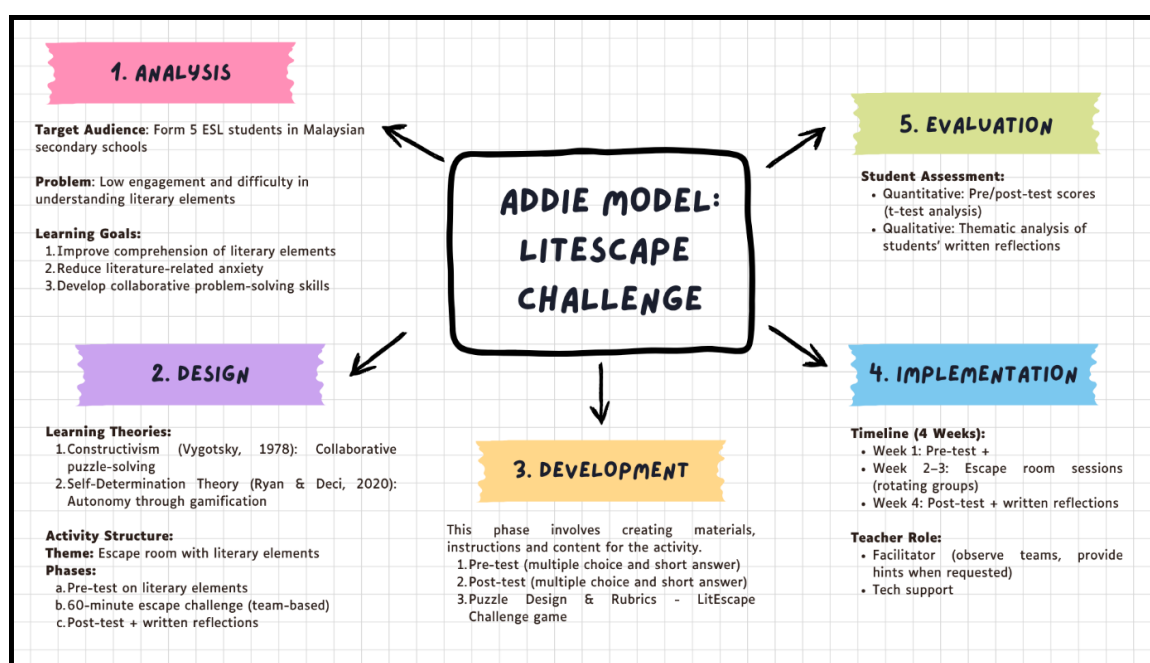

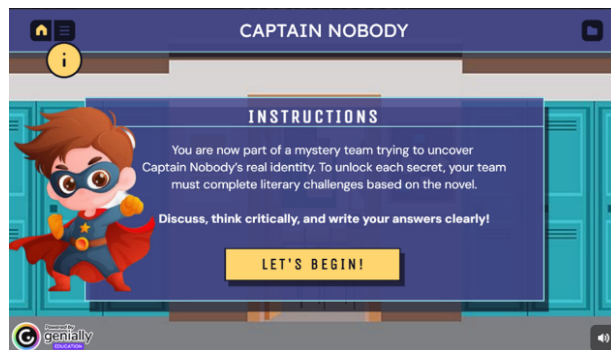**Figure 1.** Utilising the ADDIE Model in *LitEscape Challenge*.
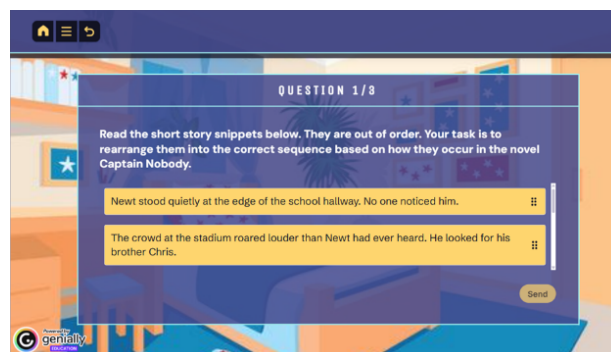

Figure 2. *Cont.*

Figure 2. Student View of Puzzle-Based Learning Activity in the *LitEscape Challenge* Using Captain Nobody.

The diagram outlines how the ADDIE Model is adapted to the *LitEscape Challenge*, which uses an escape room framework to teach literary elements. The framework follows five stages: Analysis determines engagement and understanding difficulties and establishes learning objectives; Design defines puzzle-based activities with links to the literarture curriculum standards; Development produces low-tech resources such as clue cards and teacher directions; Implementation schedules group-based gameplay with teacher roles; Evaluation tests engagement outcomes with tests and reflections for updating the next cycle. The approach is systematic and engaging as it makes use of active learning with literary analysis.

3.2. Sample and Data Collection

The participants in this innovative practice were thirty seventeen-year-old Form 5 students of an English literature class in a Malaysian secondary school. To achieve a representative portion of the student body, the participants were purposefully selected and included students of all levels of ESL, including beginner, intermediate, and advanced ESL students. This purposive sampling technique enabled a thorough investigation of the *LitEscape Challenge* experience across a range of student abilities in the English language.

The research process was conducted in two stages. The first phase involved administering a pre-test to measure the students' prior knowledge related to six essential elements of literature (plot, character, setting, theme, conflict, values). The examination consisted of multiple-choice and short answer questions based on the recommended national literature syllabus. This preliminary assessment then offered a baseline to compare learning levels observed after the intervention.

After the pre-test, the students participated in the *LitEscape Challenge*, a game-based, escape room-based learning experience created to help students practice and enhance their knowledge of various elements of literature. The game was based on a literary text, and students had to decipher clues, solve riddles and complete tasks in groups within a limited period of time. The use of all literary items was deliberately encouraged for problem-solving, critical reasoning, collaboration, and intense participation in each case.

After completing the *LitEscape Challenge*, students participated in the same test that was given as the pre-test to identify potential differences in literary knowledge. Pre- and post-test results were used to calculate learning gains due to the gamified intervention. Data from the tests were analysed using paired-sample *t*-tests to check the statistical significance of the differences observed, as well as Cohen's *d* to obtain the effect size and corroborate the magnitude of the intervention.

The qualitative part of the study aimed to complement the quantitative data and was related to students' written reflections collected after the implementation of the *LitEscape Challenge*. Students were invited to share what they had learned, what they thought of that day's activity, and what the challenge made them realize they thought they knew about literary elements. Thematic analysis of these reflective statements revealed overlapping themes including engagement, collaboration, motivation, and cognitive development. This qualitative evidence contributed to forming a more balanced perspective of the effect of game-based learning on students' attitudes and dynamics of learning than one based solely on test scores.

3.3. Data Analysis

3.3.1. Quantitative Analysis

Paired-sample *t*-tests were used to analyse quantitative data to compare pre- and post-test scores, assisted by a calculation of effect size (Cohen's *d*) to ascertain the magnitude of the intervention's effect. All quantitative analyses were conducted using SPSS software, which generated descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations) and inferential test results.

3.3.2. Qualitative Analysis

To gain a deeper understanding of students' learning processes, qualitative data from written reflections were examined through thematic analysis. Following Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework [24], the analysis proceeded in several steps. First, the researchers familiarised themselves with the data by reading and re-reading the reflective statements. Second, initial codes were generated inductively to capture recurring patterns related to engagement, collaboration, and motivation. Third, these codes were collated and organised into candidate themes that reflected broader conceptual categories. Fourth, the themes were reviewed against the data set to ensure internal consistency and accurate representation of student voices. Fifth, the themes were refined, named, and clearly defined. Finally, illustrative excerpts were selected to represent each theme in the reporting of results.

3.3.3. Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Data

The study employed a mixed-methods approach, allowing for triangulation of findings. Qualitative themes provided contextual depth, helping to explain patterns observed in the quantitative data. This integration offered a richer understanding of students' emotional and cognitive experiences during the *LitEscape Challenge*, complementing the numerical results and providing insights into both learning outcomes and engagement.

4. Results

To determine the effectiveness of the *LitEscape Challenge* in improving students' knowledge of literary elements, pre-test and post-test were given to 30 Form 5 students based on the six essential elements of literature, namely, plot, char-acter, setting, theme, conflict, and values.

As shown in **Table 1**, the mean pre-test score was 42.53 (SD = 4.43), while the post-test mean increased to 54.07 (SD = 5.73). A paired-sample *t*-test confirmed a statistically significant improvement in students' performance after the intervention, $t(29) = -24.85$, $p < 0.001$, with a very large effect size (Cohen's $d = 2.25$). The bar chart (**Figure 3**) visually illustrates this marked improvement, suggesting that the gamified approach effectively enhanced students' retention and application of literary knowledge. These findings are consistent with previous studies, which reported that escape-room-based and game-based learning strategies can significantly boost students' engagement, cognitive involvement, and learning outcomes in literature classes.

Alongside test scores, students' written reflections were examined for themes, which were divided into three main themes: motivation, collaboration and enjoyment. The students rated the *LitEscape Challenge* as fun because it was "*not something we'd normally get to have in our lessons.*" One participant noted:

> "*I usually get bored in literature class, but this game made me want to finish and learn more.*"

Another reflection highlighted deeper cognitive engagement:

> "*The puzzles helped me think harder and remember the story better.*"

These findings are consistent with Self-Determination Theory, which states that a sense of autonomy, competence and relatedness fosters intrinsic motivation in a gamified learning context [25]. Students had access to the *LitEscape Challenge* as a tool to work together with one another, which gave them agency in solving puzzles, included additional games, and created a sense of achievement. In line with the above, a few similar findings have been reported, arguing that escape-the-room-like adventures enhance active involvement and motivation among learners in puzzle-solving activities [11]. Similarly, another study showed that cooperative activities in language classrooms encourage peer cooperation and interaction, and this is in line with the social advantages identified in the present study [9].

Students' reflections highlighted the fun aspect of the activity that boosted classroom morale and sustained engagement. This aligns with previous research, which argues that

intrinsic motivation, fun, and challenge in a gamified learning environment promote sustained engagement and stimulate greater cognitive investment [14,25]. The cognitive challenge, social interaction, and playful nature of the *LitEscape Challenge* contributed to a learning context that catered to both the affective and cognitive aspects of literature learning. The results integrate both quantitative statistics and qualitative responses, drawing attention to the role of game-based instruction in livening up literature studies, engaging students and making teaching more effective.

Table 1. Paired-Sample *t*-Test Results Comparing Pre-Test and Post-Test Scores.

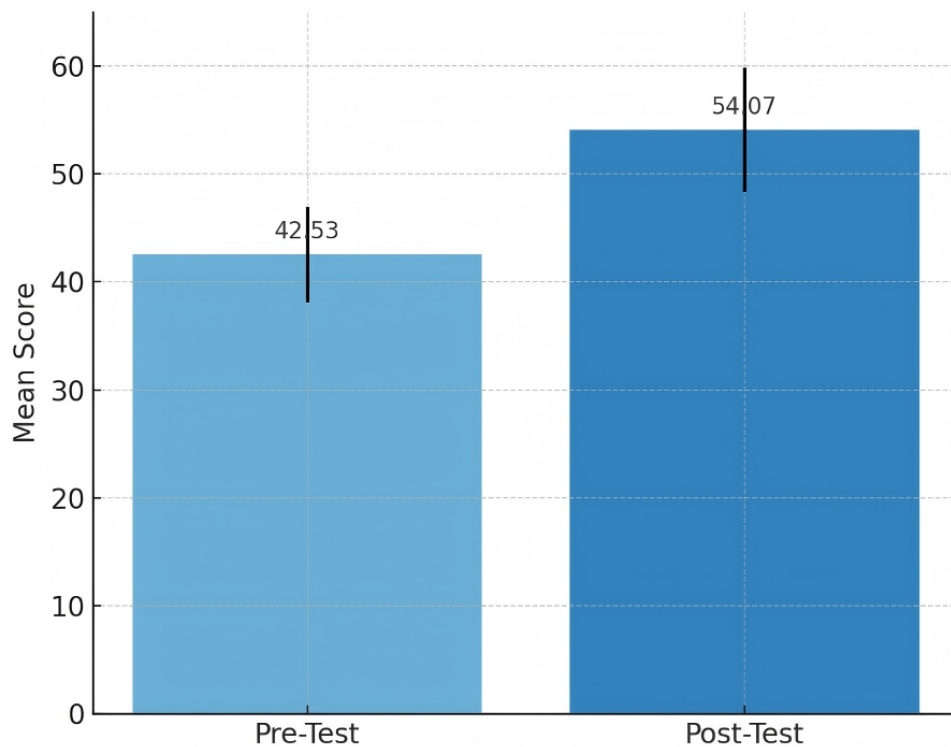| TEST	M	SD	*t*	df	*p*	Cohen's *d*
Pre-test	42.53	4.43				
Post-test	54.07	5.73	−24.85	29	<0.001	2.25 (Very large)

Figure 3. Comparison of Pre-Test and Post-Test Mean Scores.

Despite these promising outcomes, several limitations should be acknowledged. The relatively small sample size of 30 students limits the generalisability of the findings, and the short intervention period of four weeks may not fully capture the long-term impact of the *LitEscape Challenge* on students' literary development. Furthermore, implementing this gamified approach may present challenges for teachers, such as the time required to design and prepare puzzle materials, manage group dynamics, and facilitate debriefing sessions, particularly in large or mixed-ability classrooms. Future studies could address these limitations by involving larger cohorts, extending the intervention duration, and of-fering teachers structured training or ready-made resources to support implementation.

5. Discussion

5.1. Impact of the *LitEscape Challenge* on Students' Acquisition of Literary Elements

The findings indicate that the *LitEscape Challenge* had a significant impact on students' understanding of story elements, supported by the statistically significant increase in the post-test ($p < 0.001$). This is in line with Kapp's argument that gamification allows for knowledge retention at a deeper

level by situating learning in active, problem-based environments[26]. Unlike traditional lectures, the escape room required students to apply literary knowledge on the spot, promoting higher-order thinking and authentic cognitive engagement.

The recorded learning gains can be explained by constructivist theory, which emphasizes the social and cooperative aspects that influence knowledge production[27]. In the course of the challenge, students collectively interpreted clues, scaffolded peers' interpretations, and transitioned from literal comprehension to in-depth literary interpretation, mirroring ZPD processes. The collaborative aspect of the challenge demonstrates that knowledge can be co-created when learners are given a common, interactive task.

In addition, the substantial improvement in post-test aligns with Self-Determination Theory in that the need satisfaction of autonomy, competence, and relatedness is associated with intrinsic motivation[25]. The *LitEscape Challenge* provided autonomy (choice of strategies for problem solving), competence (puzzle solution success), and relatedness (working together) —all of which facilitate enduring academic motivation. This is in line with the results of Rivera and Garden, who conclude that gamification designs catering to these needs are more effective in resulting in long-term engagement and success[22]. For instance, Fotaris and Mastoras conclude that learning with an escape-room model can lead to higher knowledge retention when students are immersed in active, time-constrained problem-solving environments[11]. So, the *LitEscape Challenge* not only reinforced learning but also offered a motivational structure for continued learning.

To enable other ESL teachers and curriculum developers to replicate or adapt this approach, several practical recommendations can be considered. First, teachers should design gamified escape-room tasks centered on key literary elements, such as plot, setting, character, conflict, and theme, ensuring that each puzzle requires students to apply their understanding of these elements rather than recalling definitions. For example, a puzzle could require students to arrange story events in chronological order or match character traits to actions within the text. Second, puzzle materials can be created using low-cost, classroom-ready resources (e.g., printed clue cards, locked envelopes, ciphers, story maps) to make the activity feasible without technological dependence. Third, it is crucial to scaffold the activity by providing stu-

dents with brief refreshers on literary elements before the challenge, and assigning students to mixed-ability teams to foster collaborative problem-solving. Teachers should act as facilitators by monitoring progress, offering strategic hints when groups are stuck, and managing the time limit to maintain a sense of urgency. Assessment can be integrated through observation checklists, team reflections, or short post-challenge quizzes to evaluate comprehension and engagement. Curriculum developers can incorporate these escape-room modules as supplementary lessons within literature units to reinforce comprehension in an engaging way. By following these recommendations, educators can tailor the *LitEscape Challenge* model to different classroom sizes, student proficiency levels, and curricular objectives.

5.2. Student Engagement in the Literature Lesson

The qualitative findings indicated that enhanced engagement and motivation were key factors in the effectiveness of the *LitEscape Challenge*. These insights emerged from a thematic analysis, in which interview and observation data were systematically coded and grouped into broader themes, such as "engagement," "motivation," and "social interaction" (**Table 2**). Teachers and students reported that the activity was more interesting, less threatening, and more socially interactive than traditional literature lessons. Triangulation across data sources and peer review of coding ensured the validity of these findings. This aligns with previous studies that highlight how gamification creates a supportive and interactive learning environment[28].

It was noted in students' reflections that the escape-room format brought a sense of urgency to the activity, generating curiosity. In this, the task became both purposeful and engaging, where the story-driven, deadline-based nature of educational escape rooms boosted learners' motivation and engagement[10]. Gamification decreases learner anxiety and builds resilience, especially for students who may not otherwise engage with more theoretical curriculum like literature[7].

Teamwork was a key topic that stood out within all student responses as a driver of problem solving, but more importantly, increased self-efficacy. This is also in line with Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) model[27],

which views interaction among peers as a source of cognitive development, and with Chandran and Ismail's findings that collaborative gamification strategies in Malaysian literature classrooms enhanced both social and cognitive outcomes[15]. Thus, the *LitEscape Challenge* was an opportunity for peer instruction, allowing the weaker students to learn from the stronger while ensuring equitable participation.

The interactive and playful aspect of the challenge brought a welcome change from the humdrum textbook-based learning. The frequent recurrence of the words "fun", "different", and "interesting" reflects Omar and Yunus's findings that gamified literature lessons redefine students' perception of the literature subject from boring to interesting[18].

Similarly, Armie et al. found that escape rooms contribute to long-lasting learning experiences by introducing narratives, tension, and problem-solving elements[9]. Such emotional involvement in the story not only increased the level of fun, but also facilitated better understanding of the story, indicating the dual cognitive and affective impact of the gamification of literature education. Such affective engagement is especially important in ESL contexts, where anxiety and disengagement often hinder performance. By fostering positive emotions, peer collaboration, and curiosity-driven learning, the *LitEscape Challenge* not only enhanced comprehension but also redefined students' attitudes toward literature as a meaningful and enjoyable subject.

Table 2. The written reflections from Form 5 students regarding the use of *LitEscape Challenge* as a learning tool.

Theme	Responses (Written Reflections)
Motivation	*"Usually, I don't feel like paying attention in literature class, but this time I was really focused because I wanted to solve the puzzle."*
	"The challenge made me excited to read and understand the story so I could unlock the next clue."
	"I wanted to win, but to win, I had to understand the story properly. That pushed me to try harder."
Collaboration/Teamwork	*"My group helped me understand the part I didn't get. We discussed the theme before choosing the answer."*
	"We divided the work, and when someone got stuck, others helped. It felt like a real team."
	"Working in groups made me feel more confident because we shared ideas."
Enjoyment	*"This is the first time I had fun in literature class. It felt like playing, not studying."*
	"I didn't expect to enjoy literature, but this was exciting."
	"I hope we can do this again. I understand the story more when I enjoy the lesson."

The novelty and interactive nature of the *LitEscape Challenge* made the lesson more enjoyable for students, breaking the monotony of traditional textbook-based instruction. Students repeatedly used words like "fun," "interesting," and "different" to describe the experience. The game's playful design, freedom of exploration, and collaborative spirit made learning meaningful and emotionally fulfilling for students.

6. Conclusions

The innovation's uniqueness stems from its gamified design, which seamlessly combines physical puzzle-solving with digital platform interaction to impart literary elements in an engaging, student-centred manner. The *LitEscape Challenge* unfolds over four stages, during which students retrieve clues online and collaboratively solve tasks. This innovative approach is adaptable to both low- and high-tech environments, ensuring inclusivity and engagement across diverse classroom settings.

This study explored the effects of the *LitEscape Challenge*, a game-based format inspired by the escape room concept, on secondary ESL students' understanding of literary elements, language skills, and overall engagement in literature lessons. A pre-post analysis using a paired-sample *t*-test demonstrated a significant improvement in students' comprehension of key literary elements following the intervention ($p < 0.001$, $d = 2.31$), which aligns with findings from

previous studies on gamified literature instruction. Qualitative reflections further suggested that the activity bolstered motivation, fostered cooperative behavior, enhanced vocabulary acquisition, improved understanding of sentence structures, and refined text analysis skills. These advancements can be interpreted through the lens of Self-Determination Theory, Sociocultural Theory, and Vygotsky and Krashen's Input Hypothesis, as the scaffolded and interactive nature of the tasks provided meaningful, comprehensible input and opportunities for collaborative knowledge construction.

Theoretically, these advancements can be interpreted through Self-Determination Theory, Sociocultural Theory, and Krashen's Input Hypothesis, as the scaffolded and interactive nature of the tasks provided meaningful, comprehensible input and opportunities for collaborative knowledge construction. By incorporating curriculum-aligned content into an interactive, problem-solving framework, the *LitEscape Challenge* demonstrated that literature lessons, and more broadly, text-based learning in ESL contexts, can be both enjoyable and pedagogically effective[26]. This approach allows students to grasp abstract literary concepts while simultaneously enhancing their linguistic competence through context-rich tasks that foster critical thinking and promote teamwork[19]. The positive learning outcomes and enthusiastic feedback from students indicate that gamified strategies of this nature have strong potential for transferability, making them applicable not only in literature classes but also across broader ESL and language instruction, especially in contexts where learners may find the subject matter challenging or inaccessible[4].

Future studies should use larger designs to enhance generalisation. Longitudinal studies will be required to ascertain whether the advances in literary comprehension and motivation remain stable across time. Second, multi-element studies in urban and rural schools could explore how context moderates the impact of gamification interventions. Third, future research should employ RCTs to experimentally establish the causal relationships between gamification and learning outcomes as an improvement over quasi-experimental designs. Fourth, there is potential to examine digital escape-room platforms in comparison with low-tech class-based models to inform the blended-learning approaches. Lastly, teacher-centred research could investigate the professional development needed for effective implementation of gamified pedagogy to address both opportunities and challenges in scaling up. Conducting larger, multi-site investigations would enhance generalizability and direct comparisons with traditional pedagogies could help isolate the specific impact of gamification. There is also an opportunity to explore digital or hybrid escape room formats, especially for blended learning environments. Additional research avenues include assessing gamification's influence on exam preparation attitudes and identifying the challenges teachers encounter during implementation.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, F.U.A. and K.N.; methodology, F.U.A.; formal analysis, F.U.A.; investigation, F.U.A. and K.N.; resources, F.U.A.; data curation, F.U.A.; writing—original draft preparation, F.U.A. and K.N.; writing—review and editing, F.U.A. and S.M.M.A.; supervision, H.H.I.; project administration, F.U.A. and K.N.; funding acquisition, F.U.A. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

Permission to conduct this study was obtained from the participating school, where one of the researchers is currently teaching. The school administration granted consent on behalf of the students, ensuring that all ethical considerations and institutional guidelines were adhered to throughout the research process.

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement

The data presented in this study are not publicly available due to privacy and ethical considerations involving student participants.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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