

## ESCAPING FROM THE TRADITIONAL CLASSROOM: THE 'ESCAPE ROOM METHODOLOGY' IN THE FOREIGN LANGUAGES CLASSROOM

Apesar de já existirem vários estudos relacionados à implementação da pedagogia da gamificação em ambientes educativos (Cruz & Orange, 2016), a verdade é que estudos relacionados à implementação da abordagem 'Escape Room' (Guigon, 2018) são ainda bastante escassos, no que concerne aos contextos de ensino. No entanto, têm-se realizado algumas experiências pelo que se torna necessário refletir sobre sua relevância na educação, com o fim de aprender sobre o seu desenho e os principais resultados e, ao mesmo tempo, orientar os professores para uma implementação adequada e bem-sucedida.

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### 1. The 'Creactical Skills' and the demand for a Communicative Experiential Approach in Language Teaching

Present-day society in general and education in particular demand a new approach and teachers are invited to seek, create and test new strategies in order to improve the quality of teaching methodologies and pedagogies, favor the development of 21st century skills, attend to appropriate adaptive learning needs, cater for intercultural and plurilingual skills, among other aspects.

We agree with Chickering & Gamson (1987, p. 5) who state that:

"Learning is not a spectator sport. Students do not learn much just sitting in classes listening to teachers, memorising prepackaged assignments, and spitting out answers. They must talk about what they are learning, write about it, relate it to past experiences, and apply it to their daily lives." Today students must be provoked by undertaking activities which allow them to learn essential skills for their success and pro-active integration within our global society. This can be done by developing a critical (hyper)pedagogy, i.e., through an interactive process in which students' learning occurs within the collaborative building of knowledge and inter-comprehension. This means that foreign language learning is more than getting to know grammar rules and how to avoid mistakes in communication (cf. Bérard, 1991), as it implies a focus on the training of "creactical skills" (Figure 1), i.e., critical thinking and creativity into action (cf. Cruz, 2019; Ohler, 2013).

Learning contexts based on mechanical or abstract tasks, with little connection to the real world, are not very effective and fail to establish a true emotional connection between students and learning. Cruz (2018, p. 283) adds that these (hyper)sensory activities "transform the senses into channels of perception that activate, in turn, brain connections (...), giving students the opportunity to experience something, by better retaining the information they receive, through the manipulation and simulation of tasks in the surrounding reality".

In fact, teachers with an innovative vocation have begun stepping forward onto

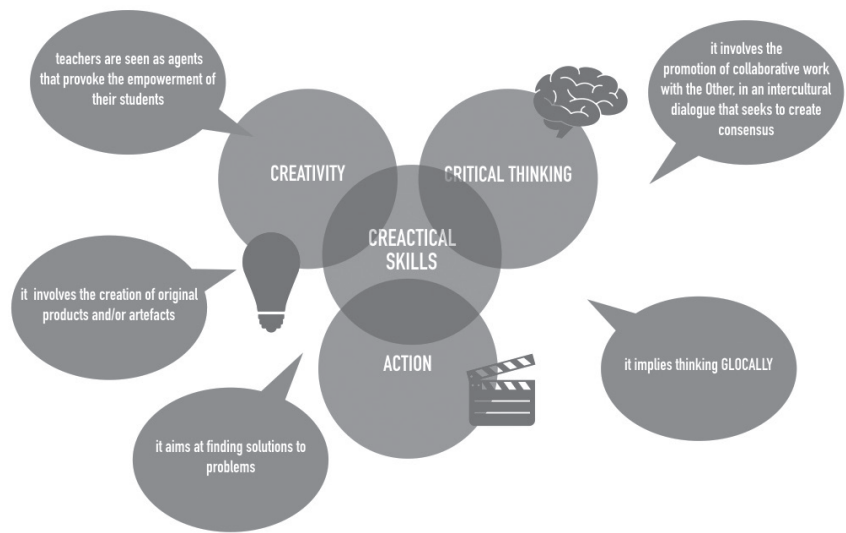


Figure 1: The "Creactical Skills"

playful and experiential approaches, by adapting their lesson format and offering their students true gamified experiences.

## 2. The Didactics of Gamification and The 'Escape Room' Methodology

Due to the fact that the experiential communicative approach seeks to make the teaching of languages proactive, effective, influential and connected to our students' real life, one can easily link it to the concept of gamification.

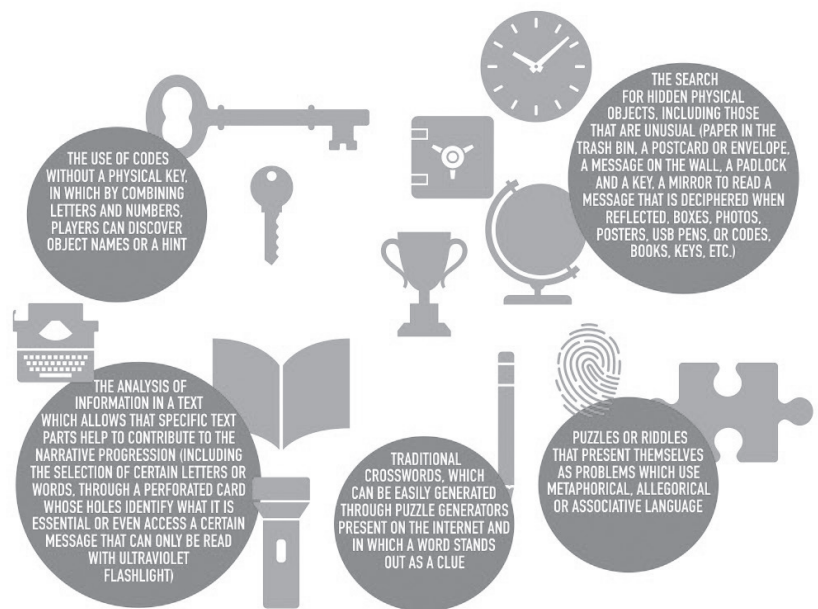
Gamification can be defined as a "technique that the teacher uses in the design of a learning activity (be it analogue or digital) introducing elements of the game (badges, time limit, scores, dice, etc.) and their thinking (challenges, competition, etc.), in order to enrich that learning experience, direct and/or modify the behavior of the students in the classroom" (Foncubierta & Rodríguez, 2015, p. 2).

As Kapp (2012) states, gamification is nothing more than the use of game elements, such as its mechanics, motivation and problem-solving features, in the creation of didactic activities, in order to make them more attractive to the eyes of our students. The main objective of a gamified activity is to give students the opportunity to be encouraged, immersed

and involved in environments that are known to them. The use of dynamics, mechanics and game elements contributes to a state of continuous flow at the time of learning, i.e., an intrinsic motivation as explained by the self-determination theory (cf. Werbach & Hunter, 2012). This can also be felt within escape rooms, which are seen as "live-action team-based games where players discover clues, solve puzzles, and accomplish tasks in one or more rooms in order to accomplish a specific goal. usually escaping from the room) in a limited amount of time" (Nicholson, 2016, p. 1). Indeed, an escape room usually takes place in a room where a group of 3-8 students have the chance to explore and solve problems together in a fixed amount of time. Instructions are given outside the room, then when

the time starts, learners can enter and complete their mission together (e.g. they have to participate in an espionage mission).

As they are collaborative in their essence, these gamified activities invite students to use all their psychosocial skills in order to foster learning, namely cognitive skills (logic, memorization, attention, creativity, problem solving, time management, etc.), social skills (teamwork, cooperation, including leadership), language skills (meaning negotiation, language puzzles, etc.) and psychological skills (management of feelings associated with gain or loss and self-knowledge), so that through collaborative work and permanent adaptation to the context and challenges they are able to "escape" from the room (Burgos Berzosa, 2018).



Today students must be provoked by undertaking activities which allow them to learn essential skills for their success and pro-active integration within our global society.



Figure 3: Glimpse of the aesthetic decoration and puzzles

### 3. The 'Escape 2 Educate' project: An Example of a Primary educational 'Escape Room' within foreign languages learning

The 'Escape 2 Educate' project has been undertaken at the School of Education of the Polytechnic of Porto and it has as main research questions the following:

- 1) Which representations do students have of escape rooms and its use in educational contexts?
- 2) Which skills students do have the chance to develop when participating both in the implementation and creation of educational escape rooms?
- 3) Which sort of escape room design and strategies are more appropriate for educational purposes, especially in foreign languages teaching settings?

We will not present the project thoroughly as the main aim of this article is to highlight the importance of the Escape Room methodology by illustrating it with some examples.

The example we would like to share in this article is related to primary education and has to do with the "Helping Gumball to Escape" escape room which was implemented in a Private Catholic school in Vila Nova de Gaia, Portugal, with a total of 43 pupils aged between 8 and 10 years old. Focusing on this cartoon narrative, students are going to save Gumball, a famous cartoon character<sup>1</sup>, and his family from being locked forever inside the room. In this way the children, while helping Gumball, have to flee from the "Escape Room" that the villain prepared for them, and to do this job they have the help of the challenges' creator (one of the teachers incorporated this character), who has got the role of a spy

who pretends to be the villain's helper, but in fact is only gathering evidence to incriminate him.

As we can see in Figure 3, a lot of different objects were used within this escape room, namely: a safe, a key, bottles of water with hidden plurilingual messages (English, Spanish, Portuguese), a map of Europe with codes, among other items. The main challenges involved the following:

- a) writing the names of all of Gumball's family members, by which they will be permitted to access to the computer (the first letter of each family member name becomes a password they have to decipher);
- b) analyzing a picture and commenting on the colors of the main characters, in which orange, the color of Gumball's brother's face, would call their attention to an image of an orange (which included another challenge on its back);
- c) coloring shapes according to a specific code (if the shapes were colored correctly, the spy would deliver the next challenge);
- d) creating a new type of dish by drawing it and using different words such as milk, chocolate, chips, ice cream, apples, bananas, burgers, sandwiches and cake, etc., and in the end they would have to send the work to a specific mobile phone number by using the mobile phone which was available in the room (if accepted they would get the next challenge);
- e) analyzing two images from two traditional dishes (Portuguese and an Italian dishes) and finding out the page number of a book (by adding two numbers they would find in each country present in the exercise in the map of Europe), in which they would get the next challenge;
- f) listening to a song, answering a ques-

<sup>1</sup> Gumball video:



tion about it, namely 'Which languages do you hear in the song *Échame la culpa?*' and choosing a bottle with the labels of both languages (which contained two halves of a sheet that formed the message "Not everything that looks like garbage is garbage");

g) analyzing a video, which they could access from a QR code they found within a crumpled paper (available in the garbage bin), and answering some questions about words and expressions they could understand within the video (which could give them access to the safe key and let them escape from the room with Gumball).

It was also noteworthy the enthusiasm with which they got involved and the feedback obtained was highly positive, due to a lot of impressions we were able to feel throughout the implementation of the activity, in which mainly the English language was used for instructions and within pupil's communication with their peers. Indeed, this can be felt within the field notes that we collected with some of the pupils' comments and truly account for the following aspects:

a) collaborative work

"I want to come back to the room to solve problems with my friends"

"I could have not solved it alone ..."

b) development of critical thinking

"I had to connect things I never thought of in order to solve the riddles"

"I had to think hard to get it resolved"

c) communication and language skills

"I liked the parts in which we had English mixed with other languages"

"It was cool to recall some words I had almost forgotten"

### Final considerations

In this article we were able to focus on the escape room methodology, its characteristics and design rules, and at the same time to present and analyze some proposals in which students were able to develop their "creactical" skills. Regarding our main findings, we would like to highlight that within escape rooms pupils have the chance to share their own ideas, interpret and assess others' own points of view, work together in an

effective way, show responsibility and make compromises to attain the team's goals. We would like to add that by participating in an escape room, pupils feel motivated, self-directed and reflective, being able to manage their goals and time autonomously and working respectfully within socially and culturally diverse teams. By participating in puzzle tasks in which they have to decipher messages mainly written in English (as Spanish and Portuguese were two other languages which were included in order to foster pupils' plurilingual skill), children were able to undertake an enthusiastic revision activity in the end of their school year. In fact, they were able to revise contents which they learned throughout the whole year in their English as Foreign Language classroom. However, as we can easily point out, the main aim of this kind of gamified activities is the development of the so-called "creactical skills", i.e., the fostering of critical thinking and creativity within collaborative, social and meaning negotiation contexts, in which language plays a double role, being both the means and the target of learning.

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