

# Lived Experiences of Grade 9 Learners in a Gamified Critique Escape Room for Literary Critique Writing

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**Abstract:** This qualitative study explored the lived experiences of Grade 9 learners in a gamified critique escape room for literary critique writing. Anchored in constructivist learning theory and experiential learning theory, the study examined how immersive instructional design influences learners' engagement, cognitive processing, collaboration, and writing development in English instruction. A phenomenological research design was employed to capture the essence of learners' lived classroom experiences. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, reflective sheets, and field notes involving selected Grade 9 learners at Langlangca Integrated School, Schools Division of Candon City, Philippines. Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring patterns and experiential themes. Findings revealed that the gamified critique escape room enhanced learners' engagement and motivation by transforming literary critique writing into an interactive, problem-based, and collaborative learning experience. It supported critical thinking through interpretation, analysis, and shared meaning-making, leading to improved understanding of critique structure, idea organization, and the use of textual evidence. However, learners also experienced challenges such as time pressure, cognitive load, and group coordination issues that occasionally limited deeper analysis. The study concludes that the gamified critique escape room is a promising experiential instructional strategy for enhancing engagement, collaboration, and foundational literary critique writing competence among Grade 9 learners. Its effectiveness depends on appropriate scaffolding, instructional pacing, and teacher facilitation to balance motivation and cognitive demands.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Developing learners' higher-order thinking and academic writing skills remains a central concern in English language education. Among these skills, literary critique writing is particularly complex, as it requires learners to interpret, analyze, and evaluate literary texts while constructing coherent, evidence-based arguments. This process involves not only comprehension but also critical reasoning, textual interpretation, and structured written expression. However, many secondary learners continue to struggle with these demands due to the abstract nature of literary analysis and limited exposure to guided analytical writing experiences.

In many educational contexts, including the Philippines, traditional teacher-centered approaches remain dominant in English instruction. Such approaches often emphasize content transmission and individual written tasks, with limited opportunities for active engagement, collaboration, and experiential learning. As a result, learners frequently develop surface-level understanding of literary texts without fully acquiring the skills needed for critical evaluation and structured critique writing (David, 2019). This instructional

gap highlights the need for innovative pedagogical approaches that promote deeper cognitive engagement and meaningful participation in writing tasks.

In response, gamification has emerged as a promising instructional approach. It integrates game elements such as challenges, feedback, goals, and time constraints into learning activities to enhance motivation and engagement. Within this framework, gamified educational escape rooms have gained attention as immersive, problem-based environments where learners collaboratively solve academic tasks under structured constraints. These environments transform traditional instruction into interactive learning experiences that encourage active participation and knowledge construction.

Nicholson (2018) conceptualizes escape rooms as experiential learning systems that combine narrative, problem-solving, and collaboration to promote deep engagement. Supporting this, Veldkamp et al. (2020) found that escape room-based instruction consistently enhances learner motivation, teamwork, and cognitive engagement. Similarly, Fotaris and Mastoras (2019) and Makri et al. (2021) emphasize that escape rooms promote inquiry-based

learning by requiring learners to analyze, interpret, and synthesize information collaboratively, skills essential for academic writing tasks such as literary critique writing.

The effectiveness of escape rooms can be further explained through experiential learning theory. Kolb (1984) posits that meaningful learning occurs through a cycle of experience, reflection, conceptualization, and experimentation. Kolb and Kolb (2005) extend this by emphasizing that authentic, problem-based environments strengthen cognitive processing and knowledge retention. In parallel, engagement theory suggests that learning engagement includes behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions (Fredricks et al., 2004). From this perspective, escape rooms simultaneously stimulate emotional interest, active participation, and cognitive challenge.

In writing instruction, particularly literary critique writing, learners must engage in interpretation, evaluation, and argumentation. Graham and Perin (2007) highlight that effective writing instruction requires explicit teaching, collaboration, and process-based strategies. Hyland (2019) further emphasizes that writing is a socially situated cognitive activity shaped by interaction with texts, peers, and instructional contexts. Applebee and Langer (2013) also stress the importance of authentic writing tasks that allow learners to construct meaning rather than simply reproduce information.

Recent studies indicate that gamification enhances writing instruction by improving engagement and cognitive performance. Grande-de-Prado et al. (2021) found that escape room–based learning improves higher-order thinking skills such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Similarly, Dugnol-Menéndez et al. (2021) reported that escape room activities strengthen collaboration and problem-solving abilities, supporting deeper conceptual understanding. These findings align with constructivist learning theory, which emphasizes knowledge construction through active experience.

In the Philippine context, curriculum reforms emphasize 21st-century skills such as critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity (Department of Education, 2016). However, classroom practices often remain traditional and teacher-centered, limiting opportunities for experiential learning (David, 2019). Corpuz and Salandanan (2015) further emphasize the need for learner-centered instructional strategies that actively engage students in meaningful learning experiences. This gap between curriculum goals and classroom practice underscores the need for innovative pedagogical approaches in English instruction.

Despite growing international evidence supporting escape rooms in education, limited research has focused on their application in literary critique writing, particularly at the secondary level. Furthermore, existing studies have largely emphasized cognitive outcomes, with minimal attention to learners' lived experiences in gamified learning environments. This represents a significant gap in

understanding how learners actually experience, interpret, and make meaning from such instructional strategies.

In response to this gap, this study explores the lived experiences of Grade 9 learners in a gamified critique escape room for literary critique writing. It seeks to understand how gamified experiential learning influences engagement, collaboration, cognitive processing, and writing development. By focusing on learners' lived experiences, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how innovative instructional strategies function in real classroom contexts and how they shape learning in English education

## II. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

### ➤ *Gamification and Escape Rooms in Education*

Gamification has emerged as a significant instructional approach in contemporary education due to its capacity to enhance learner engagement, motivation, and cognitive involvement. Rather than serving as a superficial teaching enhancement, gamification integrates game mechanics such as challenge, feedback, goal orientation, and time constraints into structured learning environments to promote active knowledge construction and sustained participation.

Within this framework, gamified educational escape rooms have gained prominence as immersive, problem-based learning environments where learners collaboratively solve academic tasks under structured constraints. Nicholson (2018) conceptualizes escape rooms as experiential learning systems that combine narrative, problem-solving, and collaboration to facilitate deep engagement. This design positions learners not as passive recipients but as active participants in constructing meaning through interaction and problem resolution.

Empirical evidence supports these claims. Veldkamp et al. (2020), in a systematic review, found consistent positive effects of escape room–based instruction on learner motivation, teamwork, and cognitive engagement across multiple disciplines. Similarly, Fotaris and Mastoras (2019) and Makri et al. (2021) emphasize that escape rooms function as inquiry-driven environments that require learners to analyze, interpret, and synthesize information collaboratively. These cognitive demands align with higher-order thinking processes essential for academic tasks such as literary critique writing, which requires interpretation, evaluation, and evidence-based reasoning.

Collectively, these studies suggest that escape rooms are not merely motivational tools but structured pedagogical interventions grounded in constructivist learning principles, where knowledge is actively constructed through meaningful interaction and problem-solving.

### ➤ *Experiential Learning and Engagement Theory*

The pedagogical foundation of gamified escape rooms is strongly anchored in experiential learning theory. Kolb (1984) proposes that learning occurs through a cyclical process involving concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active

experimentation. This cycle emphasizes that knowledge is constructed through direct engagement with meaningful experiences rather than passive reception of information.

Kolb and Kolb (2005) further argue that learning environments that simulate authentic problem-solving contexts enhance cognitive processing, retention, and transfer of knowledge. In escape rooms, learners engage in immediate problem-solving, reflection on strategies, and iterative decision-making, aligning closely with this experiential cycle.

Complementing this perspective, Fredricks et al. (2004) conceptualize student engagement as a multidimensional construct consisting of behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions.

Behavioral engagement refers to participation in learning tasks, emotional engagement involves interest and affective response, and cognitive engagement reflects mental effort and strategic thinking. Gamified escape rooms integrate all three dimensions by creating emotionally engaging narratives, requiring active participation, and demanding sustained cognitive effort.

Thus, escape rooms operationalize engagement theory by creating environments where learners are simultaneously emotionally invested, behaviorally active, and cognitively challenged, leading to deeper and more meaningful learning experiences.

#### ➤ *Writing Development and Literary Critique Competence*

Writing is widely recognized as a complex cognitive and social process that involves the integration of linguistic knowledge, critical thinking, and discourse organization. Graham and Perin (2007) identify several effective instructional strategies for adolescent writing development, including explicit instruction, collaborative writing, and process-oriented approaches. These strategies are particularly relevant for literary critique writing, which requires learners to interpret texts, evaluate meaning, and construct coherent arguments supported by textual evidence.

From a sociocognitive perspective, Hyland (2019) emphasizes that writing is not an isolated cognitive act but a socially situated practice shaped by interaction with texts, peers, and instructional contexts. Applebee and Langer (2013) further argue that authentic writing tasks are essential for meaningful learning, as they allow learners to construct knowledge through engagement with real communicative purposes rather than mechanical exercises.

In literary critique writing, learners must engage in interpretation, evaluation, and argumentation simultaneously. These processes require higher-order thinking skills and structured expression, making it one of the most cognitively demanding writing forms at the secondary level. Therefore, instructional approaches that integrate collaboration, scaffolding, and experiential engagement such as gamified critique escape rooms are particularly valuable in supporting learner development in this area.

#### ➤ *Gamification in Writing Instruction*

Recent studies suggest that gamification has significant potential in improving writing instruction by increasing engagement and supporting cognitive development. Grande-de-Prado et al. (2021) found that escape room-based cooperative learning enhances higher-order thinking skills such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation, all of which are essential in academic writing tasks including literary critique composition.

Similarly, Dugdol-Menéndez et al. (2021) report that escape room activities foster problem-solving abilities and collaborative interaction, contributing to improved conceptual understanding and learner engagement. These findings suggest that gamified learning environments can create conditions conducive to deeper cognitive processing and more meaningful engagement with writing tasks.

However, while these studies demonstrate positive cognitive and motivational outcomes, they also highlight the importance of instructional design. Without appropriate scaffolding, gamified environments may impose excessive cognitive load, limiting learners' ability to fully process complex tasks. This indicates that gamification must be carefully structured to align with learners' developmental writing capacities.

#### ➤ *Philippine Educational Context*

In the Philippine education system, curriculum reforms emphasize the development of 21st-century skills, including critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity (Department of Education, 2016). However, despite these policy goals, classroom practices in many schools remain largely traditional and teacher-centered.

David (2019) notes that such instructional approaches often limit learner engagement and restrict opportunities for critical thinking and meaningful writing practice. Similarly, Corpuz and Salandanan (2015) emphasize the need for learner-centered instructional strategies that actively involve students in the learning process and promote deeper cognitive engagement.

This persistent gap between curriculum expectations and classroom implementation highlights the need for innovative instructional approaches that integrate experiential and interactive learning strategies. Gamified critique escape room environments present a potential solution by aligning instructional practice with 21st-century learning competencies.

#### ➤ *Synthesis and Research Gap*

The reviewed literature consistently demonstrates that gamification and escape room-based learning enhance learner engagement, collaboration, and higher-order thinking skills. Theoretical frameworks such as constructivism, experiential learning theory, and engagement theory collectively support the effectiveness of these instructional approaches in promoting active learning.

However, most existing studies focus on cognitive outcomes such as motivation, teamwork, and problem-solving performance. There is limited research examining learners' subjective and lived experiences within gamified learning environments, particularly in relation to language-based tasks such as literary critique writing.

Furthermore, while escape rooms have been widely studied in science, health, and general education contexts, their application in English language instruction especially in literary critique writing at the secondary level remains underexplored. This gap is particularly evident in developing educational contexts such as the Philippines, where classroom implementation of innovative pedagogies is still emerging.

Therefore, there is a need for phenomenological research that explores how learners experience, interpret, and make meaning from gamified critique escape room instruction for literary critique writing. Such an inquiry is essential for understanding not only learning outcomes but also the experiential processes that shape engagement, cognition, and writing development.

### III. METHODOLOGY

#### ➤ *Research Design*

This study employed a qualitative research design using a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of Grade 9 learners in a gamified critique escape room for literary critique writing. Phenomenology is appropriate for this inquiry as it seeks to describe and interpret the essence of a phenomenon as experienced by individuals, focusing on meaning-making rather than measurement (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

In this study, the phenomenon refers to learners' participation in a gamified critique escape room designed for literary critique writing. The approach enables an in-depth understanding of how learners perceive, experience, and make sense of immersive, game-based instructional design within an authentic classroom setting.

#### ➤ *Research Locale*

The study was conducted at Langlangca Integrated School, a public secondary school under the Schools Division of Candon City, Philippines. The site was selected due to its relevance to the Grade 9 English curriculum, accessibility, and suitability for implementing experiential and gamified instructional strategies.

The school context provides an appropriate environment where learners regularly engage in reading comprehension, literary analysis, and writing tasks. This made it suitable for examining the integration of a gamified critique escape room as an instructional intervention in English education.

#### ➤ *Participants of the Study*

The participants were Grade 9 learners enrolled in English who directly experienced the gamified critique escape room activity. A purposive sampling technique was

used to ensure that only individuals with relevant lived experiences were included.

A sample of 10–15 participants was selected, consistent with phenomenological research requirements, where depth of experience is prioritized over generalizability. This sample size is considered sufficient to achieve data saturation in qualitative inquiry.

#### • *Participants Met the Following Inclusion Criteria:*

- ✓ Enrolled in Grade 9 English
- ✓ Actively participated in the gamified critique escape room activity
- ✓ Willing to share detailed experiential accounts
- ✓ Able to express reflections and insights clearly

#### ➤ *Research Instruments*

Data were collected using a semi-structured interview guide, reflective sheets, and field notes.

The semi-structured interview guide consisted of open-ended questions designed to elicit rich descriptions of learners' experiences, perceptions, challenges, and meanings derived from the gamified critique escape room. Follow-up probing questions were used to clarify responses and deepen insights. To ensure validity, the interview guide underwent expert validation in English education and research methodology. Revisions were made based on feedback to improve clarity, relevance, and alignment with research objectives.

Reflective sheets were used to capture learners' immediate post-activity reflections, while field notes documented classroom interactions, engagement behaviors, and observable responses during the implementation of the gamified escape room activity.

#### ➤ *Data Gathering Procedure*

Permission to conduct the study was secured from school authorities and coordinated with the Grade 9 English teacher. Participants were oriented about the purpose, procedures, and ethical considerations of the study. Informed consent was obtained from learners and, when necessary, from parents or guardians.

The gamified critique escape room was implemented in a classroom setting, where learners engaged in collaborative literary analysis tasks structured as problem-solving challenges aligned with literary critique writing competencies. The researcher documented learner behavior and interaction patterns through field notes during the activity.

After the intervention, semi-structured interviews and/or focus group discussions were conducted. These were audio-recorded with permission and transcribed verbatim. Reflective sheets were collected immediately after participation to capture initial reactions and insights.

All data were systematically organized, coded, and securely stored for analysis.

#### ➤ *Data Analysis*

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. The process began with familiarization through repeated reading of transcripts, reflective sheets, and field notes.

Initial codes were generated by identifying meaningful units of data relevant to the research questions. These codes were then grouped into categories based on similarity and conceptual connection. Categories were further refined into overarching themes that captured the essence of learners' experiences.

Themes were reviewed to ensure coherence, distinctiveness, and alignment with the research objectives. Final themes were defined and supported with direct participant quotations to preserve authenticity and richness of lived experiences.

To ensure rigor, the study applied Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Triangulation was achieved through the use of multiple data sources (interviews, reflective sheets, and field notes). Member checking was also conducted to validate interpretations with participants.

#### ➤ *Ethical Considerations*

Ethical approval was obtained prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was secured from all participants and their parents or guardians when applicable.

Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained through the use of pseudonyms and coded identifiers. All collected data were securely stored and used solely for academic purposes.

The study adhered to ethical principles of respect for persons, beneficence, and nonmaleficence, ensuring that participants were not exposed to harm and that their rights and welfare were protected throughout the research process.

## IV. RESULTS

The thematic analysis of the qualitative data revealed four interrelated essential themes that capture the lived experiences of Grade 9 learners in a gamified critique escape room for literary critique writing: (1) heightened engagement and motivational transformation, (2) development of critical thinking and collaborative meaning-making, (3) experiential constraints in time-bound analytical performance, and (4) perceived enhancement of literary critique writing competence. These themes collectively illustrate how gamified experiential learning influenced learners' cognitive, affective, and social engagement in literary critique writing.

#### ➤ *Heightened Engagement and Motivational Transformation*

A dominant finding of the study is the significant transformation in learners' engagement and motivation during the gamified critique escape room activity. Participants consistently described the experience as enjoyable, interactive, and game-like, indicating a shift from passive learning to active participation.

The gamified structure featuring puzzles, clues, and time-based challenges created an immersive learning environment that sustained attention and emotional involvement. Learners reported that literary critique writing, previously perceived as difficult, repetitive, and abstract, became an engaging and meaningful task.

This shift reflects an affective transformation in learners' orientation toward writing. Engagement was not limited to participation but extended to emotional investment and willingness to persist in cognitively demanding tasks. The gamified critique escape room thus functioned as a motivational catalyst that redefined learners' perception of academic writing.

#### ➤ *Development of Critical Thinking and Collaborative Meaning-Making*

The second theme highlights the role of the gamified critique escape room in enhancing critical thinking and promoting collaborative meaning-making. Learners described actively analyzing literary texts, interpreting meanings, and justifying answers through group discussion.

This process required higher-order thinking skills, particularly analysis and evaluation, as learners negotiated interpretations and defended their ideas within groups. Rather than working individually, learners co-constructed understanding through dialogue and shared reasoning.

Collaboration emerged as a central mechanism of learning, where knowledge was distributed among group members. Learners relied on peer input to refine interpretations, correct misunderstandings, and strengthen arguments. This indicates that literary critique writing was experienced as a social and interactive process rather than an individual task.

From a phenomenological perspective, learners' lived experiences reflect a shift toward collective meaning-making, where understanding emerged through interaction rather than isolation.

#### ➤ *Experiential Constraints in Time-Bound Analytical Performance*

Despite its positive effects, learners also experienced challenges during the gamified critique escape room activity. The most prominent constraint was time pressure, which limited their ability to engage in deeper literary analysis.

Participants described feeling rushed when interpreting complex texts, which sometimes led to incomplete reasoning or surface-level responses. The competitive and time-bound

structure, while motivating, introduced cognitive pressure that affected analytical depth.

Additionally, group coordination challenges were observed. Some learners reported uneven participation within groups, with certain members dominating decision-making while others contributed less actively. Occasional disagreements in interpreting literary elements also slowed group progress.

These findings suggest that while gamified environments increase engagement, they may simultaneously introduce cognitive load and performance stress. The balance between challenge and cognitive capacity is therefore critical in designing effective gamified critique escape room activities for writing instruction.

#### ➤ *Perceived Enhancement of Literary Critique Writing Competence*

The final theme reflects learners' perceived improvement in their understanding of literary critique writing. Participants reported increased awareness of how critiques are structured, particularly the importance of organizing ideas logically and supporting interpretations with textual evidence.

Learners expressed greater confidence in analyzing literary texts and constructing written responses after participating in the activity. The experiential nature of the gamified critique escape room allowed them to internalize writing concepts through practice rather than direct instruction alone.

This suggests that the gamified critique escape room functioned as an experiential scaffolding mechanism, bridging the gap between abstract writing concepts and actual performance. While learners did not claim full mastery, they demonstrated clearer understanding of critique writing processes, particularly in terms of structure and evidence-based reasoning.

## V. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Overall, the findings reveal that the gamified critique escape room created a transformative learning experience characterized by heightened engagement, collaborative meaning-making, and improved awareness of literary critique writing processes. Learners experienced writing as an interactive, social, and meaningful activity rather than a purely individual academic task.

However, the presence of time constraints, cognitive load, and group coordination issues highlights the need for careful instructional design. These challenges suggest that while gamified learning enhances motivation and participation, it must be supported by appropriate scaffolding to ensure deeper cognitive processing and equitable collaboration.

## VI. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that the gamified critique escape room functions as a meaningful experiential learning strategy that reshapes learners' engagement, cognitive processing, and writing development in literary critique writing. The results provide strong support for integrating gamified and constructivist learning environments in English language instruction, particularly in developing higher-order thinking and academic writing competencies among secondary learners.

#### ➤ *Gamified Learning as a Driver of Engagement and Motivation*

The heightened engagement and motivational transformation observed among learners affirm the strong affective potential of gamified instructional design. The gamified critique escape room shifted learners' perception of literary critique writing from a difficult and abstract task to an engaging and meaningful experience.

This finding aligns with Nicholson (2018), who conceptualizes escape rooms as immersive learning environments that promote engagement through narrative, challenge, and collaboration. Similarly, Veldkamp et al. (2020) found that escape room-based learning consistently enhances motivation, teamwork, and cognitive involvement across disciplines.

In this study, gamification elements such as time pressure, puzzles, and structured challenges functioned as motivational triggers that sustained attention and participation. This suggests that engagement is not merely a by-product of gamification but a central mechanism through which learning is activated and maintained. The emotional investment reported by learners indicates that affective engagement plays a critical role in sustaining cognitive effort in complex writing tasks.

#### ➤ *Constructivist Learning and Collaborative Knowledge Construction*

The development of critical thinking and collaborative meaning-making supports constructivist assumptions that knowledge is actively constructed through social interaction. Learners engaged in negotiation, interpretation, and shared reasoning, which facilitated deeper understanding of literary texts.

This is consistent with Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory, which emphasizes learning through cycles of experience, reflection, conceptualization, and experimentation. The gamified critique escape room provided a structured experiential environment where learners could test interpretations, receive peer feedback, and refine their understanding in real time.

Kolb and Kolb (2005) further argue that authentic problem-solving environments enhance cognitive processing and knowledge retention. In this study, literary critique writing became a socially mediated process where meaning emerged through collaboration rather than isolated cognition.

These findings also align with Fredricks et al. (2004), who describe engagement as behavioral, emotional, and cognitive. The gamified critique escape room simultaneously activated all three dimensions, reinforcing the argument that meaningful learning requires integrated engagement rather than isolated instructional strategies.

#### ➤ *Cognitive Load and Instructional Constraints in Gamified Learning*

Despite its benefits, the study reveals important pedagogical limitations. The presence of time constraints and cognitive pressure introduced challenges that affected learners' ability to engage in deep literary analysis.

This finding is consistent with cognitive load theory, which suggests that excessive task demands can reduce the quality of cognitive processing. While time pressure increased engagement and urgency, it also led to rushed decisions and incomplete analysis in some cases.

Group coordination difficulties further highlight the complexity of collaborative gamified environments. Uneven participation and differing interpretations occasionally hindered group performance, suggesting that collaboration does not automatically guarantee effective learning outcomes.

These results indicate a pedagogical tension in gamified instruction: while it increases motivation and participation, it may also risk reducing cognitive depth if not carefully scaffolded. Therefore, instructional design must ensure that challenge levels align with learners' cognitive capacities, particularly in complex writing tasks such as literary critique writing.

#### ➤ *Experiential Scaffolding and Writing Development*

The perceived improvement in literary critique writing competence suggests that the gamified critique escape room functioned as an experiential scaffolding mechanism. Learners developed a clearer understanding of critique structure, particularly in organizing ideas and supporting interpretations with textual evidence.

This aligns with Hyland (2019), who emphasizes that writing is a socially situated cognitive process shaped by interaction with texts and peers. The escape room enabled learners to experience writing as an active process of interpretation and construction rather than passive reproduction.

Graham and Perin (2007) further highlight the importance of explicit instruction, collaboration, and process-oriented writing strategies. The findings suggest that the gamified critique escape room operationalized these principles in an interactive format, allowing learners to internalize writing structures through practice and collaboration.

However, the improvement observed remains developmental rather than mastery-level. This indicates that gamified experiential learning is effective in building

foundational competence but requires continued instructional reinforcement to achieve advanced writing proficiency.

#### ➤ *Integration with Gamification Literature*

The findings extend Grande-de-Prado et al. (2021), who report that escape rooms enhance higher-order thinking skills such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. In this study, these cognitive processes were evident in learners' interpretation of literary texts and justification of responses.

Similarly, Dugnot-Menéndez et al. (2021) found that escape rooms improve problem-solving and collaboration. The present study supports these findings but further highlights the role of learner experience, showing that cognitive gains are closely tied to emotional engagement and social interaction.

Unlike previous studies that focus primarily on performance outcomes, this research emphasizes the experiential dimension of learning. It demonstrates that how learners experience gamified critique escape room instruction is as important as the outcomes it produces.

#### ➤ *Philippine Educational Context*

In the Philippine context, the findings highlight a persistent gap between curriculum expectations and classroom practice. While the Department of Education (2016) emphasizes 21st-century skills such as critical thinking, collaboration, and creativity, traditional instructional approaches remain dominant in many classrooms (David, 2019).

Corpuz and Salandanan (2015) emphasize the need for learner-centered instructional strategies that promote active engagement. The gamified critique escape room addresses this need by providing an interactive and experiential learning environment aligned with curriculum goals.

However, the study also shows that successful implementation requires careful instructional design. Without appropriate scaffolding and pacing, gamified strategies may increase cognitive load and limit learning effectiveness. This underscores the importance of teacher facilitation in ensuring that innovative instructional approaches achieve their intended outcomes.

#### ➤ *Synthesis of the Discussion*

Overall, the findings confirm that the gamified critique escape room is a pedagogically valuable approach for enhancing engagement, collaboration, and foundational literary critique writing skills. It integrates experiential learning, constructivist principles, and gamified design into a coherent instructional strategy that supports both cognitive and affective dimensions of learning.

However, its effectiveness depends on careful balance between engagement and cognitive demand. The study demonstrates that while gamification enhances motivation and participation, it must be supported by structured scaffolding to ensure deep learning and equitable collaboration.

This research contributes to existing literature by extending escape room pedagogy into literary critique writing, a domain that remains underexplored in gamification research. It also highlights the importance of examining learners' lived experiences to better understand how gamified critique escape room instruction functions in real classroom contexts.

## VII. CONCLUSION

This study explored the lived experiences of Grade 9 learners in a gamified critique escape room for literary critique writing, grounded in constructivist and experiential learning theories. The findings demonstrate that the gamified critique escape room serves as a meaningful instructional strategy that enhances engagement, collaboration, cognitive processing, and foundational writing competence in literary critique tasks. The results show that gamification significantly transforms learners' affective orientation toward writing. Literary critique writing, previously perceived as difficult and abstract, became an engaging and interactive learning experience. This shift suggests that well-designed gamified instruction can positively influence learners' motivation and willingness to engage in cognitively demanding academic tasks.

In addition, the study highlights the importance of collaborative learning in developing critical thinking and interpretive skills. Learners constructed meaning through group discussion, negotiation, and shared analysis of literary texts. This confirms that literary critique writing is not solely an individual cognitive activity but a socially mediated process that benefits from experiential and interactive instructional environments.

However, the study also identified instructional limitations. Time constraints, cognitive load, and group coordination challenges occasionally restricted deeper analytical engagement. These findings emphasize that while gamified learning enhances participation and motivation, it must be carefully scaffolded and structured to ensure cognitive balance and equitable learner participation.

Despite these challenges, learners demonstrated improved understanding of literary critique writing, particularly in organizing ideas, interpreting texts, and supporting arguments with evidence. This indicates that the gamified critique escape room functions as an effective experiential scaffolding tool for developing foundational academic writing skills.

Overall, the study concludes that the gamified critique escape room is a promising constructivist and experiential learning strategy for enhancing engagement, collaboration, and writing development in literary critique writing among Grade 9 learners. Its effectiveness depends on thoughtful instructional design, appropriate pacing, and strong teacher facilitation to balance engagement with cognitive demands.

Finally, this study contributes to the growing body of gamification and escape room literature by extending its

application to literary critique writing in a secondary school context. It also underscores the importance of examining learners' lived experiences to better understand how innovative instructional strategies function in real classroom environments, particularly in developing writing competence and critical thinking skills.

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