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The Younger Learners column provides language teachers of children and teenagers with advice and guidance for making the most of their classes. Teachers with an interest in this field are also encouraged to submit articles and ideas to the editors at the address below. We also welcome questions about teaching, and will endeavour to answer them in this column.

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Escaping the Classroom: Building an Immersive Escape Room Experience for Young Language Learners

Fiona Wall Minami

An escape room is an immersive game experience, locking a small team of players inside a room that they must break out of by finding clues, solving puzzles, cracking codes, and opening locks. While it may not sound like something that would work in a language classroom, with a little creativity an escape room activity can be a rewarding experience for both teachers and students.

Some teachers may start out with a language objective and build a narrative and puzzles around it. In my case, I came to escape rooms first as a player/enthusiast, then as a writer aiming to produce an escape room themed textbook for English language learners. During the writing process, I decided that I would have a go at building an actual escape room for friends, family, and fellow game enthusiasts to play. Not having space in my house, or the budget to rent a room, I set about building it in the classroom of my *eikaiwa* school.

My students noticed more and more mysterious objects filling up the room as they came for weekly classes—a black briefcase suspended from the ceiling, a padlocked wooden chest, an empty wine bottle inside the post-box—and were instantly intrigued. When I explained that I was making a game, and that sadly it might be a bit too difficult for them, they were all desperate to have a chance to play, and so I promised I would create an escape game especially for them before the end of the school year. I followed through on this promise, going on to create a total of four escape rooms in my classroom as well as finishing the textbook I had initially set out to write.

In this article, based purely on my own experiences, I will attempt to touch on some of the practicalities and props required to build a pop-up/homemade escape room that I hope will be of use to any teachers considering building one of their own. While not detailing every single aspect of the puzzles and challenges I made for my game, I hope to give enough useful information that some teachers may be inspired to create an original children's escape room from scratch as I did.

First Steps

The Room

The space you have available will determine what kind of game you can make. Do you have a whole room at your disposal, or just an area of your room? Do you have time in the room before and after students are there to set up and take down your game? Would it be more practical to make your game one that does not require many physical objects? A simple alternative could be a series of paper-based puzzles that lead up to a final locked treasure box, or a set of boxes within boxes that can only be opened by breaking codes and finding keys.

The Goal

Before you start planning a theme for your game, it might be wise to start at the end. While a 'real' escape room usually has the end goal of exiting the locked room, this is most likely not a realistic option for an English class. Some simpler, child-friendly objectives could include solving a mystery, finding hidden treasures, opening a mysterious box, or freeing a trapped soft toy from a locked cage.

The Story

Once you have an end goal in mind you can set about creating a story that works in the space you have. Fortunately, children have rich imaginations, so they may be more willing than adults to make a leap into believing that the room they are in is now a spaceship or a castle, with the aid of just a few props. However, you could also create a narrative to fit the space you are in without having to go

overboard on decorations. I never attempted an ambitious transformation of my classroom, deciding instead to incorporate it into my story – the classroom has been placed under a curse, a wizard has hidden powerful treasures in the room, the classroom is being used as the base of a spy operation and players are detectives solving a mystery. These themes enabled me to make minimal changes to the actual layout of the room while still immersing players in an imaginary world. Christmas and Halloween also lend themselves very easily to building a game (see Figures 1 & 2), and you are likely to have a variety of seasonal items on hand that can double up as props or puzzle components without the need to spend a lot of money.

Figure 1

Christmas Game Bulletin Board

Figure 2

Christmas Game Table

The Players

Before you start working on your game, consider who will be playing it. The class size and age of students will be important factors, as will their English ability. For a small class of up to six students, working together in one team is optimal. For larger classes you would be better splitting the class into competing teams, either working simultaneously in different corners of the room, or each given their own set of puzzles to solve. Age and reading ability will determine what kind of puzzles will work, and you might want to spend a few classes teaching the language they need to know before playing the game. It is crucial that every member of the team feels involved and important, and no-one is left out. One way to ensure this is to assign roles: a leader, a timekeeper, someone in charge of reading clues, one person to open locks, and so on. I decided against designating roles, allowing students to find their positions in the team more organically. I did set one important rule, however: that any decisions, such as requesting a hint, had to be agreed on by everyone. More about the importance of hints later.

The Budget

If you have funds at your disposal, a great amount of money could be spent purchasing props, ready-made puzzles, and high-quality locks and treasure chests. If on the other hand, if, like me, you do not have access to any kind of expense budget, you can still make a decent escape room spending between five and ten thousand yen. In fact, the limitation of not having a blank cheque or blank canvas to work with leads to more creativity, in my opinion.

When I set about building my first escape room, I gave myself a maximum of ¥10,000 to spend, and fortunately, many of the items I bought could be reused in subsequent games. But before spending any money I sat in my classroom and had a good look around at what was already there: tables and chairs; a large whiteboard; shelves filled with board games and picture books; posters and a map of the world; items used for arts and crafts; Lego; flashcards; and stickers (see Figure 3). With imagination, all of these can be used in a variety of ways, so consider what you have at hand before hitting the shops.

Figure 3

Stickers and Scrabble Tiles

Props and Puzzles

Purchased Items

- **A variety of locks:** three-digit locks from the ¥100 shop along with four-digit bicycle locks with the combination already set (you would need a puzzle to lead to this particular number). More expensive alphabet locks and heavy padlocks with keys purchased from hardware stores (see Figure 4).
- **Things that can have locks attached:** plastic storage boxes and zippered pouches from the ¥100 shop shop. I also bought a small antique wooden chest of drawers from a recycle shop. Items could be hidden inside or behind the drawers, and the drawers themselves could be locked. I used this in each of my escape room games.
- **Mini whiteboards with markers and erasers:** A simple trick I learned in a Bulgarian escape room is to write the actual clue on a whiteboard in permanent ink and surround it with words, letters, or numbers written with a whiteboard marker. When erased, only the clue remains. Afterwards, you can erase the permanent ink by writing over it with a whiteboard marker and erasing it (it may take a few tries). A small whiteboard can also be used by players to jot down codes or other information they find in the game (see Figure 5).
- **Blank jigsaw puzzles:** around ¥400 from Flying Tiger, and it is best to buy a few as back-ups in case pieces go missing (see Figure 6). Children love hunting for jigsaw pieces and then assembling the puzzle. I copied an illustration from *Where's Spot*, which signalled that students needed to look under the flaps in that book for numbered stickers to help open a lock.
- **Random objects from the ¥100 shop:** Just wandering around a shop can trigger ideas for simple puzzles. Some items I bought without an initial plan include pet food bowls, colourful plastic ice cubes, pipe cleaners, glass jars and wire baskets (see Figure 7). I attached alphabet stickers to the underside of the pet food bowls and wrote symbols on the cubes which I enclosed in a wire basket. Shaking or manipulating with chopsticks enabled players to find all the hidden symbols. Once you get into the puzzle-making zone, you will start to see possibilities all around you.

Figure 4

Photo of Locks

Figure 5

Whiteboard and Eraser

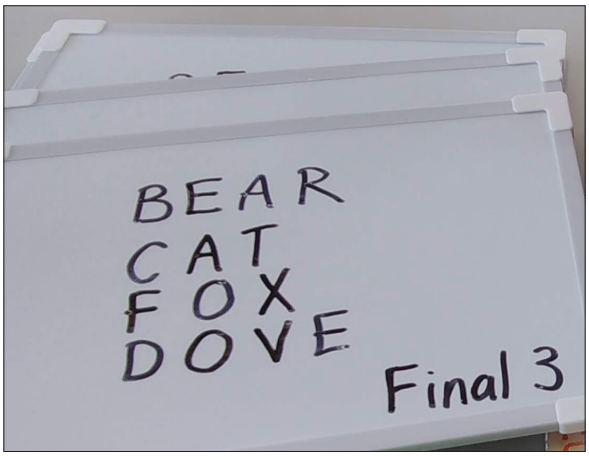

Figure 6

Blank Jigsaw Puzzle

Figure 7

Mesh Basket With Coloured Cubes

Props Already in my Classroom

- **books:** In my games for adults, I have always included literary references, and once went overboard paying homage to George Orwell when none of the players had ever read *1984*. I also used a cutter knife to gouge out part of an old paperback to hide a key inside and made another puzzle by redacting letters on a certain page of a book hidden in my shelves. For my children's game, I stuck to familiar picture books such as *Where's Spot* and Eric Carle's books, making simple puzzles related to the animals within them. If you have a large collection of books, it is better to signal the relevant shelf players should limit their searching, saving wasted time. I did this via a map of the bookshelves with "Xs" on all but one of the shelves.
- **board games:** Deciding on a treasure hunt theme for my game, I used accessories in a game called *Forbidden Island* as my treasures. I took a piece of felt and cut out spaces where each treasure had to be laid to win the game before time ran out. Then, the object of the game became to solve puzzles leading to the discovery of each hidden treasure. I also used Scrabble letters hidden in drawers to spell out important words, and Monopoly money for purchasing hints.
- **voice recorder:** I used this to record messages and songs adding audio puzzles into the mix of challenges players faced. With older students the batteries could also be hidden in separate locations. As an example, a recording of Old Macdonald could play, revealing the order toy farm animals with numbered stickers should be assembled to find a lock combination. Without a voice recorder, a certain song or message could be played on a phone at a certain moment in the game.
- **maps:** Students located stickers on a globe and had to match these to destinations on a world map (see Figure 8). A world atlas could also be used to add some geography related puzzles. The Scrabble letters could also signal where on the map to look for tiny-numbered stickers.
- **realia:** Any other items lying around (e.g., Christmas decorations, soft toys, wooden or plastic foods, dice, miniature animals, unused flashcards) all have puzzle potential and can be used in multiple ways (see Figures 9, 10, & 11).

Figure 8

Students Looking at World Map

Figure 9

Table With Various Objects

Figure 10

"Erase the Animals" Poster

Figure 11

Assorted Props

About Hints

As with any successful English class, pace is very important. If players are stuck on a puzzle, the whole exercise can quickly become frustrating, and time is wasted. Therefore, having a strategy for giving players hints is vital, as is their understanding that using a hint is not a failure but a smart, strategic move. To my mind, a good escape room involves dilemmas and decisions, so putting a limit on the number of hints makes students communicate together. To access a hint, you could have all the players jump simultaneously, perform a dance, or say a phrase in unison. In my game, I hid Monopoly money around the room, and this could be spent to purchase clues, solutions, or five more minutes in the game—very useful when time is running out!

Final Considerations

Time

Think about how many times your game can be replayed, and how long you will need for setting up and resetting after each play. If the combination of a lock has accidentally been changed, the whole game could fall apart so you need to be very attentive to small details. If you have little time between classes, it might only be realistic to run the game once a day or as a special event outside of class time.

Effort

Is it worth the time, energy, and expense needed to build an escape room from scratch? For me, yes. I gave my students a unique experience which they talked about for a long time afterwards, and some even started creating their own puzzles to bring to class. In terms of language objectives, perhaps the time could have been better spent, but my intention was to create an enrichment experience rather than a strictly educational activity.

Compromise

If a whole escape room project is unrealistic, can you make something similar but less ambitious, such as trying out one or two puzzle activities in a class? It is also possible to purchase ready-made escape room kits online, although they may not be aimed specifically at language learners.

Before and After

Prepare well by testing out your game to check if everything flows correctly and that it can be completed within your desired time limit. A simple linear game, in which one puzzle must be solved before moving

onto the next, is ideal for young learners. Make sure your players know the rules—that they must not force locks or break objects, that they have a time limit, and that everyone must agree on getting a hint. Spend a little time demonstrating how to open locks or use equipment they will find in the game. Above all, be sure to follow up, having students write, talk, or draw about their experience, and possibly even build some escape room puzzles of their own.

Conclusion

Building an escape room from scratch is an ambitious project, requiring a lot of time and energy. It is also incredibly rewarding, providing a memorable experience and one that has multiple benefits in terms of the positive feelings that come from being absorbed in the flow of an immersive task, as well as important life skills such as collaboration, problem solving, creativity and communication. Even if you decide that a full escape room project is not viable, incorporating puzzle-based learning into your classes provides a fulfilling challenge for the open-minded teacher, while enriching your students' language learning journeys.

Fiona Wall Minami combines running her language school, Britz, with teaching at Kumamoto University and four other colleges. She is the author of several textbooks including *In the Driver's Seat* and the 2021 ELTons finalist *Escape the Classroom*, an escape room themed course for university and high school students. She has broken out of over fifty escape rooms and created four of her own. Her love of boardgames, puzzles, and quizzes has led her to competing in online reality game shows, as well as creating and hosting an international YouTube Mastermind quiz. firowami@gmail.com

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This month's column features James Taylor's review of Reading Lessons: The Books We Read at School, the Conversations They Spark, and Why They Matter.

Reading Lessons: The Books We Read at School, the Conversations They Spark, and Why They Matter

[Carol Atherton. Fig Tree (Penguin Random House), 2024. pp. viii + 392. ISBN: 978-0-241-62948-2.]

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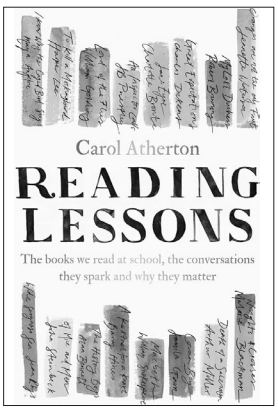

Reading Lessons: The Books We Read at School, the Conversations They Spark, and Why They Matter is an exploration of the importance of English literature. Although *Reading Lessons* is aimed at a general readership rather than only teachers, English as a foreign or second language (L2) teachers can nevertheless gain ideas for the classroom. The texts and activities in the book would be most suitable for L2 learners of at least an intermediate level. The premise of *Reading Lessons* is that English literature as a school subject may be undervalued. Although Teranishi et al. (2015) note that the use of literature in English language teaching has increased in recent years, Takahashi (2015) shows that in Japan the use of