

Boosting University Students' EFL Academic Literacy through Digital and Non-Digital Games

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1. INTRODUCTION

Academic literacy plays a crucial role in higher education, particularly for university students who are required to engage critically with academic texts and produce scholarly work. It is described as “a fundamental pillar” and “an indicator of academic and scientific excellence” (Rachida & Horía, 2024, pp. 2–3).

Academic literacy refers to the set of knowledge, skills, and practices required for effective academic writing. It also encompasses critical thinking, critical reading and writing, argument development, accurate citation, synthesis, paraphrasing, and other relevant skills (Maulidiyah, 2025). Lea & Street (1998, 2006), the leading figures in Academic Literacy, define it as students' ability to read, comprehend, organize, and produce academic texts effectively. Similarly, Moran Hayes & Williams (2016) describe academic literacy as the integration of reading, writing, and critical thinking skills essential to university students' academic achievement. Over time, this concept of academic literacy has expanded beyond conventional reading and writing abilities to also include advanced communication

competencies, critical thinking, digital literacy, and ICT literacy (Rachida & Horía, 2024; Werdiningsih et al., 2025).

However, the students still lack this ability (Rachida & Horía, 2024). Academic literacy can be enhanced through digital (Alqhtani, 2024; Vnucko et al., 2024) and non-digital games (Putri & Sulistyani, 2026; Setiyo Wahyuni & Wahyuni, 2023). Games are not restricted to young learners; they can also be used with university students, particularly those who are novices in learning English as a foreign language. Using games with university students is effective when teachers clearly explain the educational objectives of the learning games and facilitate reflection (Hasbi, 2026; Marfisi-Schottman, 2020). Therefore, this chapter discusses digital and non-digital games that may support university students' EFL academic literacy development, and how these games can enhance their EFL academic literacy development by promoting engagement, critical thinking, academic reading and writing, critical reading and writing, vocabulary development, and collaborative learning, and proposes practical ways for implementing game-based activities in academic literacy instruction. The two selected games for discussion are Talking Stick and Genially Gamification, particularly Escape Room Games.

2. DISCUSSION

The discussion in this section is divided into three sub-chapters: Talking Stick as a Non-Digital Game for Boosting Academic Literacy, Genially Gamification as a Digital Game for Boosting Academic Literacy, and Practical Classroom Implementation of these games. Although various types of games can be used to enhance academic literacy, these two games are selected based on previous studies demonstrating their effectiveness (Cabrera-Solano, 2022; Ferils, 2023; Herawati et al., 2023; Syafitri & Sujannah, 2024), as well as the writer's experience implementing one of them.

2.1 Talking Stick as a Non-Digital Game for Boosting Academic Literacy

The talking stick is an effective game and learning model that can be used to enhance academic literacy, particularly in teaching critical thinking and reading comprehension (Ferils, 2023; Herawati et al., 2023). In this section, the writer will describe this teaching strategy.

The talking stick originates in Native American culture and is used during council meetings to signify the speaker's authority (Lark Editor Team, 2023). Ferils (2023) describes the talking stick game as a learning model where the students use a stick as a turn indicator. The stick contains questions that students must answer. The game used here is a modified Talking Stick, combined with the rules of Hot Potato, involving forming a circle and playing a song or music. The steps of using this game are explained in the practical implementation section.

2.2 Genially Gamification as a Digital Game for Boosting EFL Academic Literacy

Genially gamification provides many game templates that can increase students' reading skills by presenting games that train students to read and encourage problem-solving. Teachers can create several games for students, such as escape rooms and quizzes. As stated by Jimenez (2020, in Rahmanda Syafitri & Sujannah, 2024, p. 339), the use of escape room games increases the learning process and encourages meaningful learning, as well as the students' reading improvement with strong motivation for a fun and playful activity.

Genially allows teachers and lecturers to create digital escape rooms, interactive reading quests, mystery-based academic tasks, and gamified research activities. Students can solve citation puzzles and journal article comprehension quests. Excellent for critical thinking and academic literacy missions. It enhances collaborative learning and higher-order thinking skills. By using this game, students can analyze research abstracts,

identify strong arguments, evaluate sources, solve citation challenges, and complete literature review quests. Genially supports digital escape rooms, interactive academic tasks, and collaborative inquiry. It is especially useful for source evaluation, citation puzzles, and critical reading activities (Cabrera-Solano, 2022; Castillo-Cuesta, 2022; Syafitri & Sujannah, 2024; Raikhel et al., 2025). Another benefit of Genially is that it can be used for both offline and online learning (Rahmanda Syafitri & Sujannah, 2024). Thus, Genially is a valuable online platform for improving students' academic literacy, particularly their critical thinking and reading skills.

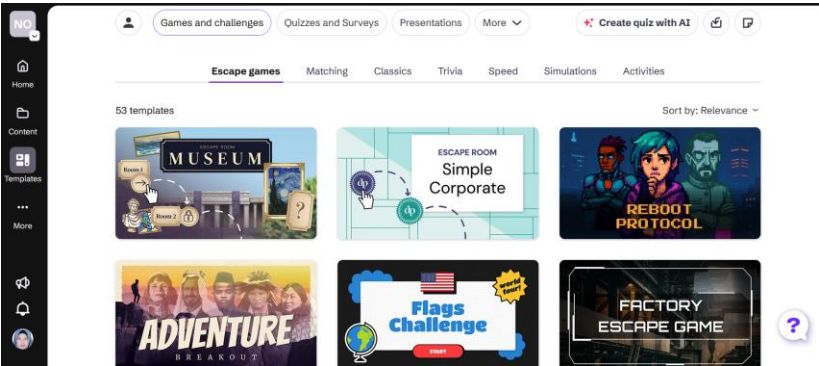


Figure 1. app.genially.com

2.3 Practical Classroom Implementation

Before explaining the practical implementation of the two games, it is necessary to elaborate on the skills involved in academic literacy. Academic literacy includes academic reading, which involves understanding scholarly texts, identifying arguments, evaluating evidence, comparing perspectives, and synthesizing ideas (Sari, 2024). It also includes academic writing, which involves the ability to write essays, research papers, and arguments using academic conventions, as well as to review the literature (Arum & Hasbi, 2017). It also includes coherence, citation, and referencing (Hasbi, 2025). Another skill in academic literacy is critical thinking, which is the ability to analyze ideas,

evaluate claims, and construct logical arguments. Academic vocabulary, such as reporting verbs, is another aspect of academic literacy. Digital Academic literacy includes using online databases, evaluating digital information, ethical AI use, and managing digital references (Fajaria et al., 2026).

However, students encounter common challenges in academic literacy (Rachida & Horía, 2024), including limited vocabulary, difficulty understanding journal articles, plagiarism, and difficulty synthesizing sources. Source evaluation, argumentation, paraphrasing, summarizing, and synthesizing ideas. These challenges encountered by the students can be minimized by implementing the two previously mentioned games.

2.3.1 Steps for Using the Talking Stick

This section is inspired by the Guide on Using the Talking Stick (Lark Editor Team, 2023) and by the guide on the Potato Game, as explained at <https://www.playworks.org/game-library/hot-potato/> and <https://www.scouts.org.uk/activities/play-hot-potato/>. This game is also developed by Spencer Kagan (Kagan & Kagan, 1994). The talking stick implementation involves explaining the game rules, forming a circle, using the stick and music, rotating, and asking comprehension questions (Muliati, 2026).

Preparing for the Session

- Communicate the purpose and guidelines of the talking stick practice to all participants. One of the rules is that if a student is unable to answer within the allotted time, another student can raise their hand to answer.
- Establish a conducive environment for the session, ensuring that all individuals feel comfortable and respected.
- Prepare a sticker or a small ball.
- Prepare a song that is appropriate for university students and creates an energetic and comfortable atmosphere.
- Assign the students to read the academic text.
- Arrange the students in one large circle.

Conducting the Session

- Play the music or song
- The students pass the stick from one student to another clockwise while the music is playing.
- When the music stops, the student who holds the stick is required to answer the teacher's questions related to academic literacy skills, such as reading comprehension questions.
- Proceed with each participant taking their turn to answer the questions provided
- The procedure is repeated several times until most students have the opportunity to respond.

Closing the Session

- Conclude the talking stick session with a debrief or reflective discussion, allowing participants to express feedback and insights on the experience.

2.3.2 Steps for Using Genially Gamification

As stated in section 2.2, Genially provides several game templates. In general, Genially can be implemented through three main stages: preparation, conducting the game activity, and closing reflection. Teachers or lecturers identify specific academic literacy skills, select a suitable Genially format such as a digital escape room, and design interactive challenges related to academic reading, paraphrasing, synthesizing, citation, source evaluation, and argument development. During the lesson, students work collaboratively to solve each challenge while the lecturer facilitates discussion and encourages students to justify their answers. In the closing stage, students reflect on the academic literacy skills practiced through the game.

In this section, the writer will focus on the practical implementation of Escape Room Games adapted from Howell's (2022) YouTube video, Using Genially to Create Escape Games (part 1), and based on West (2024). Escape games designed for educational purposes have attracted the attention of researchers

and educators in recent years, particularly digital escape games. These educational escape games “inspire high levels of motivation and commitment among learners” (ŞAHİN, 2023, p. 927). According to West (2024), digital or virtual escape rooms are “one example of gamification, where students collaborate to answer course-related mission questions to 'escape' a room” (p.17). The digital escape games can be conducted following these guidelines:

Preparing for the Session

- Go to the Genially website at <https://genially.com>
- Create an account in Genially, then log in
- Click on gamification and choose Escape Games
- Choose to create a new one or choose from the available templates
- Edit the template and add the questions and the right and wrong answers. You can also edit the instruction
- You can also make it more interactive by selecting the type of interactivity by adding a link to the text they need to read, for instance
- Download the template and share it with the students
- Communicate the purpose and guidelines of the Genially escape room games practice to all participants.

Conducting the Session

- Students are divided into teams.
- Students use the link shared with them or the QR code provided to sign up and play the escape room as teams.
- Students work collaboratively to solve each challenge while the lecturer facilitates discussion and encourages students to justify their answers. The challenging questions are related to academic literacy skills.
- Teachers or lecturers monitor the rooms to keep the students on task and to help with any technical problems.

Closing the Session

- Students reflect on the academic literacy skills practiced through the game.
- The students provide feedback.

3. RECOMMENDATION

In EFL contexts, university students are expected not only to understand academic text but also to think critically, evaluate information, communicate ideas effectively, and participate actively in academic discourse. However, these students lack the skills of academic literacy (Rachida & Horía, 2024). In response to these challenges, games-based learning has emerged as a promising pedagogical approach that can transform academic literacy learning into a more interactive, collaborative, and motivating experience. Both non-digital and digital games provide opportunities for students to engage actively with academic content while developing essential literacy skills through meaningful participation, problem-solving, and communication.

Both digital and non-digital games can transform academic literacy learning from passive text-based instruction into interactive, collaborative, and meaningful academic engagement. Non-digital games provide meaningful, collaborative opportunities for university students to engage critically with academic content, thereby transforming academic literacy learning into a more interactive, student-centered process. Non-digital games enhanced students' engagement, confidence, and motivation to learn English (Putri & Sulistyani, 2026). Similarly, using gamification technology for language learning and teaching in the classroom will increase student motivation and achievement (Ibad et al., 2023).

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