

タイトル	Reading Mazes for Amazing Discussions
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引用	北海学園大学人文論集(77): 31-46
発行日	2024-08-31

Reading Mazes for Amazing Discussions

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Introduction

This paper aims to describe a foreign language learning activity for intermediate to advanced-level learners involving the use of reading mazes. A reading maze is an interactive, game-like, problem-solving activity that begins with a situation described in a short text usually consisting of 30–100 words. Beneath this introductory text, two, three, or four numbered choices of action are listed in shorter texts typically ranging from 3–30 words. Participants must then hold a discussion to decide which course of action to take among the options presented. These numbered pathways normally lead to outcomes on new cards, with further options, discussions, and decisions to make until the exit is reached. However, as in real-life mazes, or physical garden labyrinths surrounded by tall hedges, some options lead to dead-end or cul-de-sac situations where participants are not given any choices. Instead, they are given instructions to return to a card and a situation they have encountered before together with a short message explaining why progress is no longer possible. This results in participants being forced to back-track and, on occasion, return to the very beginning of the maze and to make a fresh start with a new choice that will hopefully finally result in successful emergence at the exit. In this paper, I will: (i) assess the potential benefits of reading mazes as foreign or second language learning activities, (ii) provide sources for reading maze materials, (iii) give guidance for activity implementation, and (iv) include

results of a student attitude survey regarding the activity.

The potential benefits of reading mazes as language learning activities

Most ESL or EFL textbooks that focus on reading skills development aim to integrate reading and speaking skills by using reading texts as springboards to discussion tasks. These pre- or post-reading speaking activities often include open-ended discussion prompts which, lacking a clear goal, may fall flat. Schallert and Martin (2003) observe that: “Learners can be caught up in the excitement and enjoyment of an activity, or they may suffer from boredom and ennui as a learning task unfolds” (p. 34). With the potential for classroom boredom in mind, reading mazes can provide excitement and enjoyment in the classroom and offer numerous potential benefits to the language learner from several theoretical perspectives. To begin with, Thornbury (2006) recommends that tasks for language learning should “reflect the kind of language tasks that learners would meet in the real world” (p. 119). Indeed, while reading mazes for the foreign language classroom were first developed by Rinvolucris, Farthing & Hart-Davis in the early 1980s, they drew their inspiration from Zoll (1966) who created problem-solving tasks for business management training using the maze format. Similar workplace-centered maze activities are published in *Business Mazes* (Farthing, 1981). For example, in a maze entitled “The Salesman”, the entrance to the maze, or the problem to be solved is as follows:

“Your company employs sales representatives who visit customers personally, and there is also a team of salesmen who work over the phone, selling on a commission basis. You have recently been put in charge of the

telephone sales staff. You have heard that the company has suffered from staff problems, especially in the telephone sales department. One day you are surprised when Richard Morgan, one of your top earners, refuses to go to a departmental meeting. He gives no reason for this.”

The four choices provided are:

- 3** Insist that he goes.
- 10** Ask his friends in the sales team why he has refused to go.
- 18** Ask your immediate superior what the normal practice is in such situations.
- 6** Leave him to make his own decision.

In a standard reading comprehension activity, following or during reading, learners are typically presented with reading comprehension questions to check how well learners have understood a text. Note that in the case of the reading maze task, to make a decision on which course of action to take, learners also need to understand the text and employ reading strategies. The key difference is that with a maze a need for language is created, and the focus is not solely on language input and text comprehension but on collaboration, active engagement, and task completion. According to Vygotsky (1978), learning is best-served and best-achieved by collaboration, which involves a participatory approach. As Larsen-Freeman (2004) points out “The goal of the participatory approach is to help students understand the social, historical, or cultural forces that affect their lives, and then to help empower students to take action and make decisions in order to gain control over their lives” (p. 150).

If the teacher’s goal is to empower students by bringing the outside world into the classroom, learning activities should involve decision-

making, action-taking, and problem-solving. Indeed, Venezky (1983), in commenting on the poor teaching of problem-solving skills in American secondary education, claims that: “Since a large component of adult literacy demands require problem-solving skills, adults with low reading skills and poor problem-solving abilities suffer a double disadvantage” (p.410). By extension, foreign language educators should consider developing problem-solving abilities in the second or foreign language reading classroom alongside reading comprehension ability.

A journey through a reading maze resembles an experience of real life in the form of an adventure. This adventure may involve success and failure and experiences of both are connected to the decision-making process. While knowledge of the world, intelligence, and careful thinking play a role in determining success and successful decision-making in life, as they do in language learning, we may often find ourselves at the mercy of fortune. Note here that reading mazes are best used to supplement a course based on an EFL textbook, perhaps to respond to a need for a change from a regular textbook-based lesson when ennui develops, rather than as the basis for a course. An additional point to mention here is that supplementary lessons and activities are often the most effective and most enjoyable from the point of view of both learner and teacher.

Sources of maze materials

For teachers wishing to locate and prepare reading maze materials for their classrooms, one immediate problem is that the three original books: *Mazes, a problem-solving reader* (Berer & Rinvulcri, 1981), *Business Mazes* (Farthing, 1981) and *More Mazes* (Farthing, 1983), which contain six mazes in each book, are all out of print. However, used copies can be obtained on

Amazon or eBay. Thankfully, *Mazes for Discussion* (n.d.) adapted from *Business Mazes* (1981) has been uploaded to the internet and the link to this invaluable resource has been provided in the reference list. By accessing this link, five mazes can be downloaded and printed out. In addition, a link to an HTML web page containing a scan of *Mazes, a problem-solving reader* (Berer & Rinvulcri, 1981) has been included in the reference section, together with a QR code for access through a mobile device.

An additional online source of reading mazes comes courtesy of the British Council website. Here, two mazes entitled *The Spending Maze* and *The Holiday Maze* by Pathare (n.d) are not only exceptionally well-written but also extremely well-crafted pieces of EFL materials writing. Links to these activities are provided in the reference section. Under the banner of the British Council they serve both as outstanding examples of the quality and potential of mazes as learning materials and as testimony to the fact that the writing and use of mazes in the classroom is alive and well, despite some evidence to the contrary.

Finally, teachers of English who are attracted by the maze format and are interested in locating materials for interactive learning should inquire into the Atama-ii Multi-path series of graded readers (2022), described by the publishers as “a series of beginner level easy-English graded readers for all ages 11 and up. The series follows an interactive gamebook format, in which the reader takes on the role of the main character and makes plot choices at set points in the story. These choices lead to one of eight different endings.” Although designed for the promotion of reading skills rather than discussion skills, the stories aim to foster learner development and literacy through the same principles mentioned in the preceding section, notably problem-solving, decision-making, and action-taking. They

also reinforce the notion that the multi-path format remains popular among some ELT authors and classroom practitioners.

Implementation: guidelines for use

Guidelines for introducing a maze and preparing participants for a maze activity will depend on numerous factors, but principally the number of participants will govern the optimal procedures to be adopted. Bearing in mind that the materials can be used with individuals (groups of one), small groups of 6–12, or large groups of 30 students, in this section I describe the three main stages of a maze-based sequence of learning activities: introduction to the activity, implementing the activity, and the follow-up activity. I also include advice on how to get the most out of the activities while avoiding some potential pitfalls.

Reading mazes were originally developed in the 1980s for use with small group classes of six to twelve students, a teaching situation common in English language programs for EFL learners at private language schools in the UK such as Pilgrims in Canterbury where one author, Mario Rinvoluceri, was based, and where the materials were originally trialed. To maximize student practice time in communication skills, Berer and Rinvoluceri recommend dividing the class into groups of two to four. In this classroom situation, groups of students need to be seated as far apart as possible so as to avoid inter-group interference.

The most important initial step in preparing students for a maze is to explain the object of the activity. The best way to do this is to ensure that they understand the concept of a real-life maze. It may be helpful to provide a translation of the word “maze” in the students’ first language

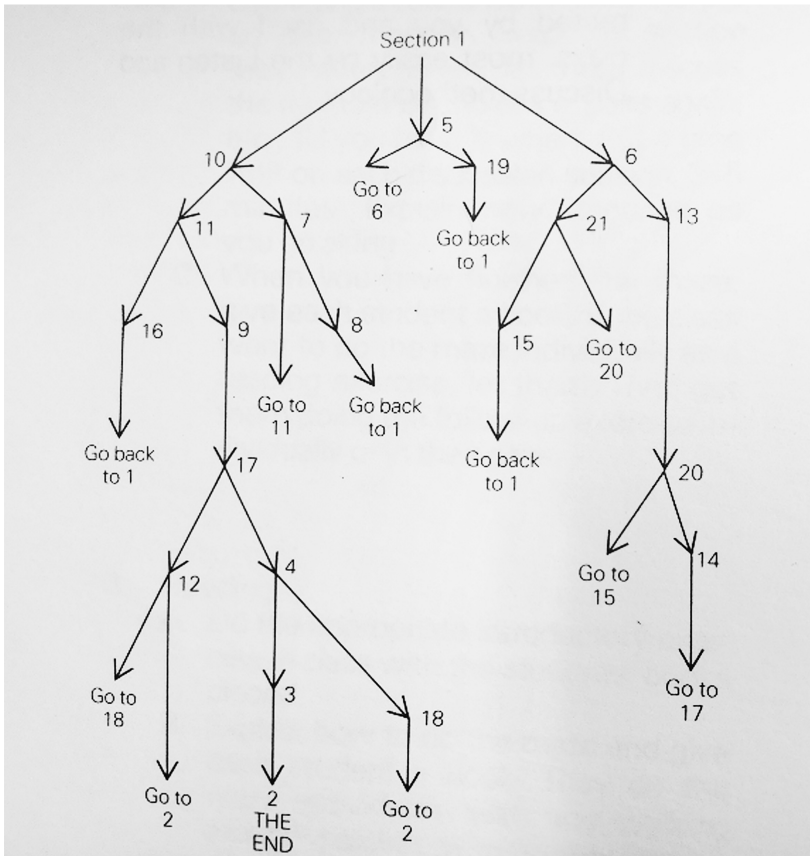


Figure 1 Tree diagram: Hitchhiking Maze (Berer and Rivoluceri, 1981, p. 6)

(迷路, めいろ in Japanese, for example) and to ask if they have ever entered one in a recreational area such as an amusement park. Additionally, it may be beneficial to show the students the tree diagram of the maze in Figure 1.

Once the concept of a real-life maze has been established, the most important task is to explain how the labyrinth is applied to a discussion task with situations and choices to be made.

The next step recommended by Berer and Rinvulcri is to pre-teach potentially unknown items of vocabulary which occur in the texts that the students are about to encounter. As with reading comprehension activities, the purpose is to enable smoother text comprehension and to reinforce pre-learning of the lexical items through exposure to the target vocabulary in context. However, this step can be omitted since students can teach each other unknown lexical items during the activity or they can simply resort to dictionary use. Also, if groups of students are each given different mazes, pre-teaching of vocabulary would of course not as useful or practical.

A further introductory step recommended by Pathare (n.d.) is to pre-teach functional language which students could use for presenting and negotiating ideas during their discussions. For example:

- “I think we should...”
- “That’s a good idea but...”
- “What about...”
- “Let’s...”
- “I don’t agree with...”
- “I’ve changed my mind.”

However, as with the pre-teaching of vocabulary, this is an optional step in the activity preparation stage. Note that Berer and Rinvulcri (1981) also provide exercises for introducing each maze activity (pages 6–8).

Once the introductory process has been completed, the teacher may choose from the following approaches to implementation. To begin with, the simplest of all approaches is to access the adaptation of *Business Mazes* (1981) through the link provided in the reference section. Participants can then proceed through a maze by clicking on the numbered options on their screens until the exit is reached. Indeed, in this way, a learner may

complete the task independently or as independent study. Note that, if the task is completed for independent study, not only is there no role for the teacher, but also there is no opportunity for discussion concerning the choices made. Although it may be possible to project the texts onto a screen, the text is not laid out appropriately, or large enough, in its current online format to allow for large groups of participants to read them from distance. However, with a small group of students, an interesting alternative would be to copy and paste the situations and options onto presentation slides so that the text can be rearranged and resized for all participants to see easily from anywhere in the classroom. This approach allows a teacher to highlight parts of the text on a screen, to have students read the text aloud, and to save paper. For ease of use, numbered options in the maze can be made to correspond to slide numbers so that a teacher can navigate to the next situation as participants make their choices. This small group situation, with participants in lockstep, also has the advantage of allowing the teacher to ask their students to explain their choices in front of the class. Note also that teachers have the more challenging option of not showing the written texts to their students and reading aloud the situations and options instead. In this way, the focus is on listening skills development rather than reading skills development.

However, with a larger class of students that has been divided into small groups, perhaps each with a different maze, a different approach is required (see Figure 2 for task instructions). Berer and Rinvulcri recommend giving each group one copy of a mazes book and passing the book around to read out each new situation and set of options. Since they are out of print, it is recommended that each maze story should be downloaded from the internet using the links provided, printed out, and cut into individual strips of paper with one situation on each card (or paper) and

Instructions

1. Make groups of 3-4 and choose a group leader.
2. Group leaders receive a situation card (the entrance to the maze) from the teacher.
3. Group leaders read aloud the text on the situation card to other group members without showing them the card.
4. Group members listen then discuss and decide the best option to take while making notes.
5. The group leader passes the card to the group member on his left who becomes group leader.
6. This new group leader explains the group choice to the teacher, returns the card, and requests another card.
7. The group leader role is rotated continually until the exit is reached.

Figure 2 Task instructions for classes of more than 6 divided into two or more groups.

laid on a flat surface in numerical order, preferably at the front of the class on the teacher's desk. While it is possible to entrust all the cards of one maze story to each group, there is a risk that students may simply thumb through the cards in search of the exit.

Furthermore, there are two advantages to keeping all the cards on the teacher's desk. The first is that when a group has arrived at a decision, one group member should rise to his or her feet, return the card to the teacher and ask for a new one after explaining the reason for the choice the group has made. This allows for communication practice between individual students and the teacher while other group discussions are ongoing in the classroom. Preferably, with a large class of 30 for example, the task of returning a card, reading options to other group members, and obtaining new cards can be continually rotated among members of each group throughout the activity thereby enabling the teacher to hold brief conversations with all class members during the course of the activity. Second, the act of rising to one's feet and walking in the classroom is good for the cognitive processes of participants since it promotes increased oxygen flow to the brain and reduces drowsiness (Bailey & Locke, 2015).

It is also recommended to advise students to keep a record of their progress through the maze, making notes of the key events in the narrative as it develops and keeping a list of the option numbers they have chosen. The former may be useful in follow-up activities and the latter may help prevent participants from accidentally retracing routes with no exit. One potential pitfall which may arise when having several groups take part in maze activities simultaneously is that groups will almost certainly reach the exits to the maze at different times during the lesson. In this situation, the teacher is faced with a choice on how to proceed to keep all class members on task and actively engaged in learning. The simplest solution is to have a group which finishes early immediately embark on a second maze activity while other groups are still engaged in the first. With this approach, participants remain engaged, but the end of the lesson is very likely to interrupt a group's final maze activity. This situation is both unavoidable and unsatisfactory. One way to offset this inconvenience, or potential frustration, is to allow a group that has not finished a maze to keep the whole set of maze cards to complete in their own time for independent study. An alternative solution is to encourage students to make pairs with members of another group which has finished early and retell the complete story of the maze they have just completed, be it the same maze or a different one, creating opportunities for further language practice and fluency development.

Groups which have finished early may also begin a follow-up writing activity. This is similar to the oral retelling of a story but has the advantage of leaving the teacher with concrete feedback of learner performance. This task can be completed in class, started in class and completed for homework, or simply completed for homework. The writing task can also be made into a collaborative task by having each group retell the story

using Google Docs which, through sharing of email addresses, allows students to work together on the same document at different times in different places. Alternatively, or additionally, students can complete follow-up exercises of the kind written by Berer and Rinvoluceri (1981, p. 76–78). Finally, students can be asked to write alternative, or preferred endings to their stories, or describe personal reactions to the stories.

Student Attitude Survey Results

To shed light on learner attitudes to mazes for reading and discussion, following completion of a variety of mazes from Berer and Rinvoluceri (1981), a Lichert survey was conducted with three intact intermediate level classes (CEFR levels B1 and B2) of about thirty first- and second-year Japanese university students in each. The results from 93 completed surveys are included in Table 1.

Table 1 Results of a Lichert scale survey of student attitude (n=93)

This activity...	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
1. ... is useful for improving my English reading skills.	0	5	75	13
2. ... is useful for improving my English speaking skills.	0	19	58	17
3. ... is interesting and fun.	1	6	46	40
4. ... is more interesting than the class textbook.	0	16	33	44
5. I would like to try this activity again.	1	12	38	42

The results broadly support the use of mazes with these young adult learners, with a high level of agreement with all five statements. With regard to survey items 1 and 2, most participants responded that mazes are useful for improving English reading and speaking skills. Responses to

items 3 and 5 match the author's view that the activity is fun and engaging. However, there is no point of comparison from which to compare it with other activities apart from the class textbook (*Touchstone 3*, McCarthy et al., 2006) which the students generally claim is less interesting (item 4), also in line with the author's expectations. A further consideration is that, as Dörnyei (2010) reminds us, we should remember that even in anonymous surveys, our students may respond in the way their teacher wants them to, which is usually positively. Also, as Cohen et al. (2000) suggest "one respondent's 'agree' may be another's 'strongly agree'" (p. 253). A final limitation to bear in mind is that no qualitative data, in the form of student comments, was collected, meaning that it is not possible to draw any conclusions as to why the activity was viewed positively by the majority, or why not by the minority.

Conclusion

Considering the author's enthusiasm for the activity, readers may be curious as to why reading mazes have not gained much traction in the world of EFL publishing since inception more than fifty years ago. Added to this, one may also point out that, if they are to be so strongly recommended, why is it that references to mazes in the literature concerning the teaching and learning of reading and speaking skills are almost non-existent?

While an answer to this last question remains elusive, there are three main reasons that could explain their lack of uptake in the field of ELT materials writing. First, the three main collections of mazes mentioned in the previous paragraph (Rinvolutri, 1981; Farthing, 1981; and Farthing, 1983) were published as teaching resource books. These books are not

suited to large scale publication and the generation of substantial profit for authors. As mentioned earlier, the situation cards for each maze are distributed randomly throughout each section. Although the aim is to prevent participants “peeking over the hedge” in search of easy and early exits from the labyrinth, the process of flipping from page to page back and forth throughout the textbook may be annoying for both teachers and students. As such, books containing mazes are not suitable for use as class sets. As explained in a previous section concerning activity implementation, the best way to use the mazes is to make photocopies and cut each situation into individual cards, a time-consuming operation. A second reason is that they are extremely difficult to construct. In addition to the demands of writing a good story with vocabulary carefully graded to the needs of learners of different levels, authors need to map the situations to a tree of pathways. A third and final reason for lack of uptake in the field, in my view at least, is a failure among the main publishing houses such as Oxford and Cambridge to either notice their potential or agree on a satisfactory format for presenting them either in printed form or online.

As a final word, reading mazes are designed to practice language common in a variety of situations and may do so effectively even though most of the materials referenced in this paper were written so long ago. If handled thoughtfully, it is possible for teachers to use them to integrate listening, speaking, reading and writing skills development and to foster problem-solving ability. They also provide multiple opportunities for language practice through lively, task-based, and goal-oriented discussion together with useful vocabulary input. Teachers who wish to use mazes with their students may access the texts through the links provided in the reference list, or write their own, perhaps using ChatGPT to assist in the process.

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QR code link to a pdf version of Berer and Rinvolutri (1981)

