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Recreational Linguistics: Labyrinths and Mazes

Young children and adults enjoy solving mazes. Why not introduce them in the language classroom as an activity?

A *labyrinth* is a network of paths or passages from which it is difficult to find your way out. It is an irregular network of passages arranged in bewildering complexity from which there is only one exit, often impossible to find. The word comes from the Latin *labyr0nthu,* which, in turn, comes from the Greek *labyrinthos.* Rossi (2002: 226) suggests that it could also derive from *Labaris,* a pharaoh who had his tomb protected by an intricate network of corridors. A *maze* is a puzzle in the form of a complex branching passage through which the solver must find a route. The *Oxford International Dictionary of the English Language* (1957) identifies *labyrinth* and *maze* as synonyms.

The most famous structure of a labyrinth goes back to ancient Crete. According to Greek mythology, Minos, the king of Crete, had refused to sacrifice a white bull coming from the sea in honour of Poseidon, god of the sea. This lack of action angered Poseidon who decided to punish Minos by having Pasiphaë, Minos' wife, fall in love with the animal. Pasiphaë enlisted the assistance of Daedalus, a famous architect, inventor, and master craftsman, to build a hollow wooden cow in which she hid. The bull found her attractive and from this unnatural union was born the Minotaur, a monster half man and half bull.

The same Daedalus was ordered by King Minos to construct in Knossos a labyrinth which was to house the Minotaur to whom Athens sent a tribute of seven girls and seven youths to be sacrificed every year. The tribute was part of an agreement between Crete and Athens. The latter agreed to pay the tribute to feed the Minotaur on condition that Crete not attack Athens. This practice continued until Theseus came from Athens as one of the sacrificial victims offered to the Minotaur. Ariad-ne, the daughter of Minos, fell in love with him and gave him a ball of thread which, after he had slain the Minotaur, enabled him to find his way out of the labyrinth (Figure 1). Theseus' success allowed him to escape Crete with Ariadne.

Minos became so enraged both at the loss of his daughter and at the killing of the Minotaur that he shut Daedalus and his son Icarus into the labyrinth. Since he was familiar with the structure, however, Daedalus managed to get out of the labyrinth and decided to leave Crete with his son Icarus before Minos brought them harm. But Daedalus soon realized that the only escape route was by air since Minos controlled the sea around Crete.

Daedalus then built for himself and Icarus wings fashioned with feathers held together with wax. Daedalus warned his son not to fly too close to the sun, as the heat would melt his wings, and not too close to the sea, as it would dampen them and make it hard to fly. Unfortunately, Icarus did not heed his father's warning and plunged to his death when he flew too near the Sun and the wax melted.

According to Danesi (2002: 4), labyrinths were an

> architectural intelligence test. Finding one's way through their intricate, intertwining passages was considered not only a test of astuteness but also a way of

Figure 1
Theseus fights the Minotaur.
A bronze statue in the Louvre, Paris, sculpted in 1843 by ntoine-Louis Barye (1796-1875), a French sculptor most famous for his work as an *animalier,* a sculptor of animals.

metaphorically finding the path to enlightment and true knowledge.

Pedagogical Applications

Why labyrinths in the language classroom?

Although labyrinths are fun as a pencil-and-paper activity, their educational value is important in the process of learning. The solving of labyrinths

- sharpens the learner's visual acuity,
- is useful for eye and hand coordination,
- sharpens the student's logical skills.

But we would like to "expand" the traditional definition of a labyrinth for use in the language classroom in order to have several students participate in the same activity. We suggest that teachers provide labyrinths or mazes in which more than one solution is possible. The purpose is to have students repeat lexical items as they provide the various solutions.

1. True labyrinths (*i.e.*, labyrinths with the "traditional" definition) are useful to teach/review numbers. In this activity, students are asked to find "their way" by adding from 1 to 20 in order to exit sucessfully from the labyrinth. At a lower grade, the activity also teaches mathematical skills (Figure 2).

   At an advanced stage,teachers may give a labyrinth with both single and double digit numbers and ask students to find a higher total (Figure 3).

2. Labyrinths are also useful to review/recall vocabulary using a thematic approach (Figure 4). While for Figures 2 and 3, there is only one possible answer, and the activity follows the traditional definition of the labyrinth, there are several possibilities for the answer in Figure 4. The purpose, here is to deviate from the original aim of the labyrinth and to involve the student in the repetition of the members of the family.

   Students are encouraged to repeat the names of the members of the family as they solve the puzzle.

   During the summer months, I visited all the following members of my family only once.Work your way through the maze from start to finish and indicate in what order I visited these relatives.

3. Labyrinths may also be used in association with images to teach vocabulary (Figure 5). Again, as in Figure 4, there are several possible answers. This activity is most useful at the early stages of language learning particulary, since it involves direct association between word and image.

4. Most mazes, however, do not have any illustrations, and the solver is simply asked to find the correct path which leads to the solution or the exit of from the labyrinth. In this case, there is only one possible answer (Figure 6).

Teachers may decide to introduce the competitive aspect in this activity and, in this case, reward the student who is able to reach the solution first.

Work your way through the maze from start to finish adding the numbers as you go to make up the final total of 20. You may go from right to left, from left to right, from bottom to top or from top to bottom always in a straight line.

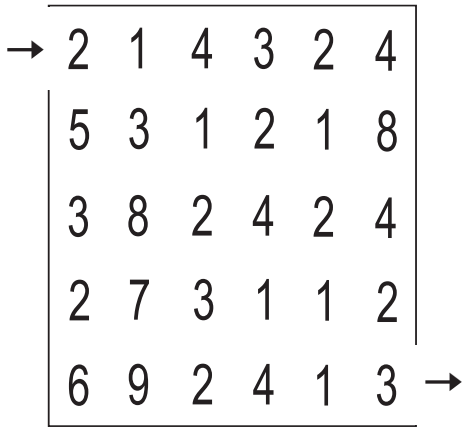

Figure 2
From : Anthony Mollica, *Jouons avec les chiffres !* Welland, ON: éditions Soleil publishing inc., 2001.

Work your way through the maze from start to finish adding the numbers as you go to make up the final total of 70. You may go from right to left, from left to right, from bottom to top or from top to bottom, always in a straight line.

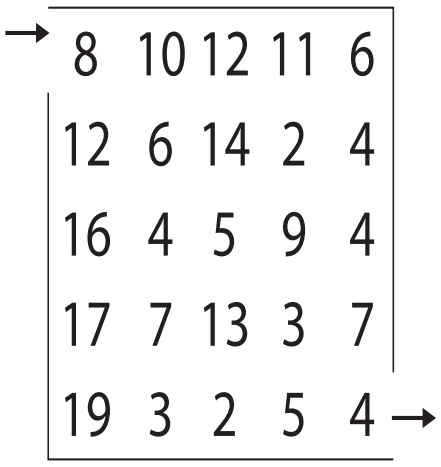

Figure 3
From : Anthony Mollica, *Jouons avec les chiffres !* Welland, ON: éditions Soleil publishing inc., 2001.

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The Oxford International Dictionbary of the English Language. 1957. Unabridged. Prepared by William Little, HW. Fowler and J. Coulson. Revised and Edited by

During the summer months, I visited all the following members of my family only once.Work your way through the maze from start to finish and indicate in what order I visited these relatives.

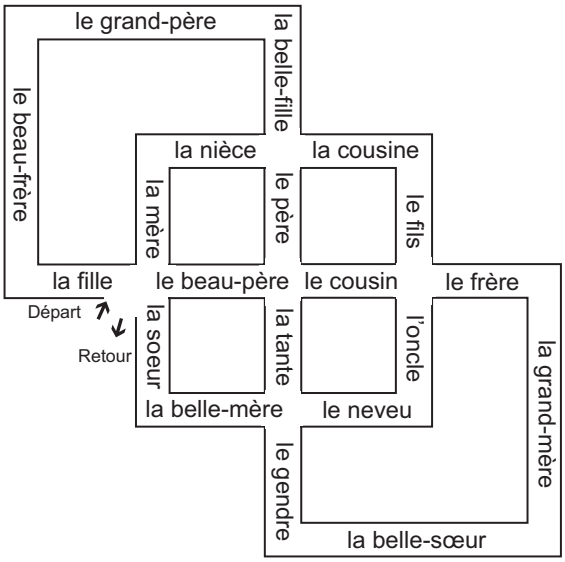

Figure 4
From: Roch Carrier raconte... Textes choisis par Anthony Mollica. Welland, ON: éditions Soleil publishing inc., 2007. Reproduced with permission.

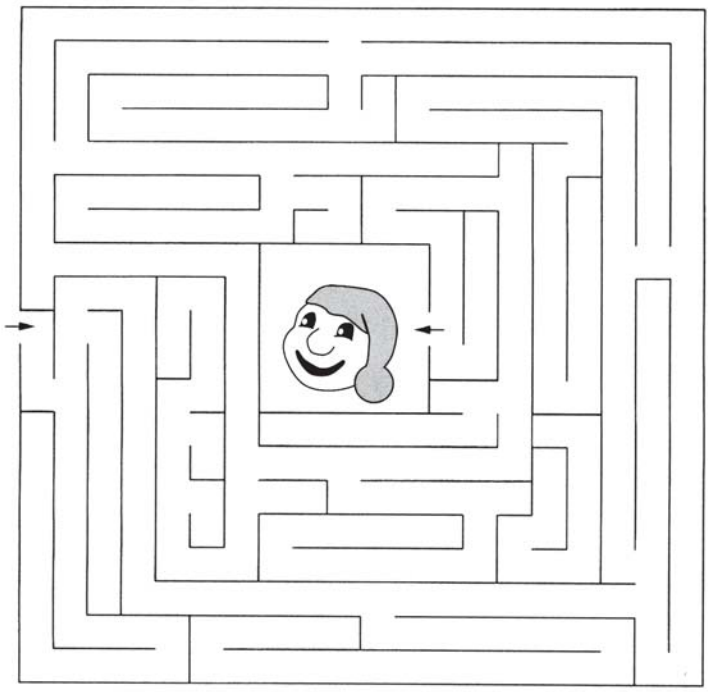

Figure 6
From: Canadian Parents for French, *CPF Early Childhood Activity Book*. Ottawa: CPF, 2007. Reproduced with permission of CPF.

My children and I visited the City Zoo and saw these animals only once. Find out the order in which my children saw these animals. You may enter and exit from any of the entrances/exits indicated by the arrows.

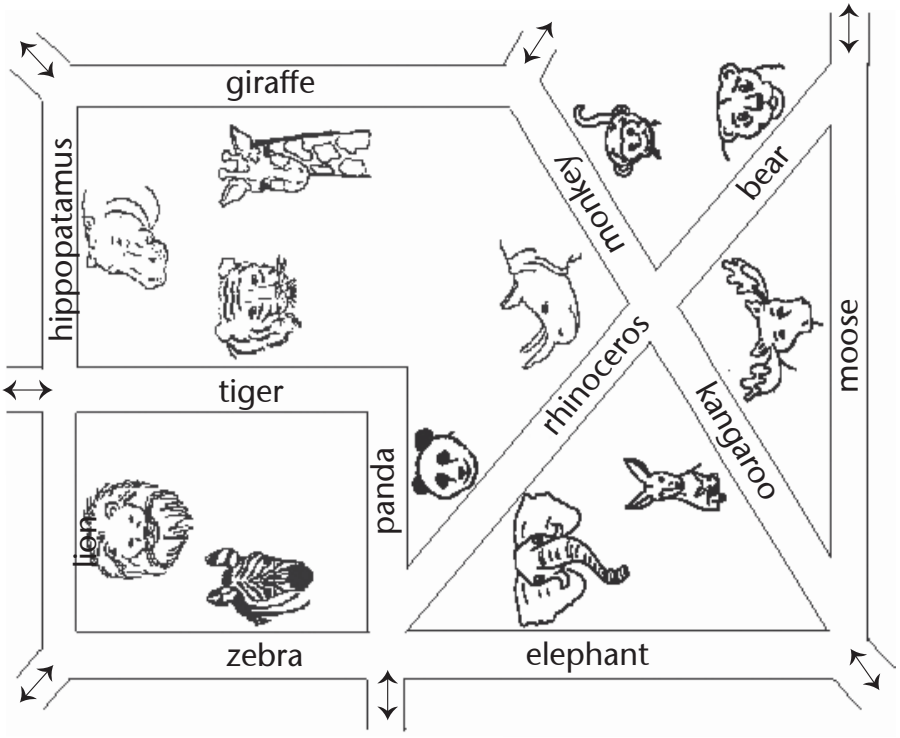

Figure 5
Adapted from: Anthony Mollica, *Attività lessicali 1. Elementare pre-intermedio*. Recanati, Italy: ELI, 2004.

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Solutions

Figure 2: two + one + three + one + two+ four+ one + one + two + three = twenty.

Figure 3: eight + twelve + six + fourteen + five + thirteen + three + five + four = seventy

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