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Climbing Grammar Mountain: An Interactive Learning Experience

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Authors	Gunn, Cindy;McCallum, Ann
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Climbing Grammar Mountain

AN INTERACTIVE LEARNING
EXPERIENCE

AS TEACHERS, WE ASKED OURSELVES OUR IMMEDIATE REACTION TO THE WORD *grammar*, and we came up with words such as *challenging*, *important*, and *necessary*. Our students, however, when asked the same question on an informal survey, responded with comments such as “suffering,” “boring,” and “No – not grammar!” When asked to reflect on how grammar was taught to them, most students replied that teachers used direct teaching, worksheets, or editing exercises to help students improve their grammar proficiency.

We believe in the importance of teaching and learning grammar but have discovered that, although there is a place for direct teaching of rules, students are more responsive to alternate methods of learning English grammar skills. For example, we limit any direct teaching of grammar to pertinent mini lessons that empower students to make personal grammar connections. Games are another way to help students learn, review, and internalize various grammar structures.

Shameem and Tickoo (1999, ix) point out that: “Research shows that new language items can be learned incidentally and effectively when students participate in communication activities.” Further, Rinvoluceri (2002) outlines four benefits of using a game format to teach grammar: games encourage personal involvement in the learning process; they provide diagnostic data about individual student skill levels; they foster enthusiasm for a subject traditionally viewed as uninteresting; and they typically are structured so that they involve everyone in the class. We feel that by presenting students with a game setting that incorporates strategy, skill, an element of chance, and enjoyment, “suffering” through boring, lengthy grammar lessons need no longer be the case.

In this article we discuss a game we have developed called *Climbing Grammar Mountain*. As practicing teachers, we understand the power of a game that is easy to prepare, practical for the classroom, and enjoyable as well as educational for students. We encourage educators to use sentences from their own students’ work, or ones that relate to a particular gram-

mar point or weakness currently being worked on in class. This game, as presented, is appropriate for university level composition courses, intermediate to advanced English as a second language (ESL) classes, and high school English classes. With some adaptation, younger or lower level students can benefit from this game as well.

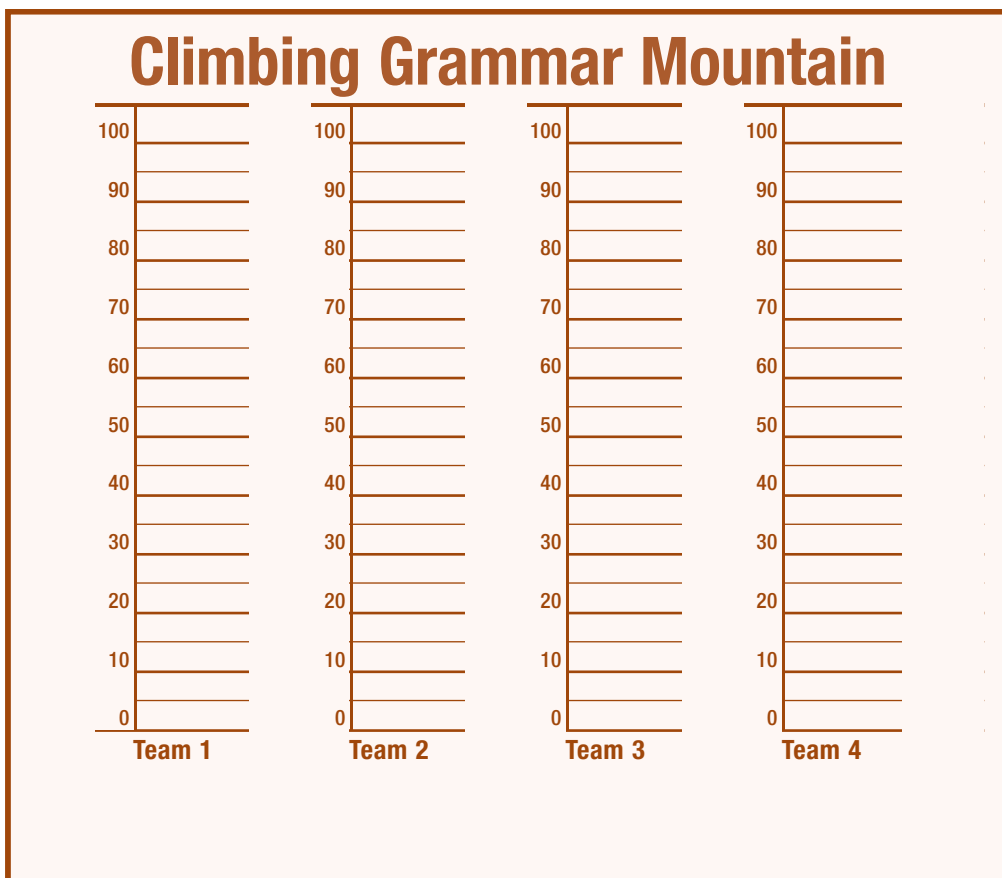
Climbing Grammar Mountain:

How does it work?

Climbing Grammar Mountain is easy to prepare and can be adapted to the unique needs of different classrooms.

Preparation

1. Draw 4 vertical climbing lines (for a class size of approximately 20 students) on the board or on an overhead transparency. Leave space on the bottom of the transparency to show one sentence at a time.
2. Divide each line into 10 segments to represent vertical feet.
3. As in the example below, mark the segments 10, 20, 30, 40, etc.



4. Prepare a series of sentences. Some should be correct, and about three quarters should contain one grammatical error per sentence. Choose these sentences from the students' work, or develop sentences to correspond to the particular grammar point or points the class is currently working on. Conversely, the game could be a culminating or review activity and could include one error each from a wide variety of grammatical issues. (See the Appendix for sample sentences you can use as models.)
5. Run off the sentences on a transparency and cut them apart. Place them in a paper bag or envelope ready to draw from during the game.
6. Divide students into 4 teams of 4 or 5 students each. (Organize the number of mountain climbing tracks and teams accordingly.)

Instructions to students

Today you are going to race to the top of *Grammar Mountain*. In this activity, you are going to compete against other mountaineering groups to get to the highest point on the mountain before our class time is up. In order to climb the mountain, you will need energy and equipment. These things are available in the form of sentences.

When it is your team's turn, you will be given a sentence. You will need to determine if the sentence is grammatically correct or not. If you believe the sentence is correct, you can assign 0, 5, 10, or up to 20 vertical feet to the sentence. If it is indeed correct, you will advance that far up the mountain. If the sentence is incorrect, your team will fall down the mountain the number of feet you assigned to the flawed sentence.

Teams can win 5 bonus feet for correcting a flawed sentence. The team whose turn it is gets the first chance to correct the sentence; then other teams may try to earn the five bonus feet.

Have a great climb, and we'll see you at the top!

For the teacher

Before you start the game, ask the students to get into teams of four or five people depending on how many students are in the class. Have the students choose a name for their team. Start by playing a practice round of the game.

Provide the whole class with a correct sentence that is fairly easy to identify as correct.

Ask each team how many vertical feet (up to a maximum of 20) they are willing to award to it. Show how you would move a player up the mountain by that many vertical feet.

Next, provide a sentence that is incorrect. If students award any vertical distance to it, they must go back down the mountain that many feet. If students recognize the sentence as incorrect and do not wager any vertical feet on it, they can stay where they are. Allow them a chance to correct the sentence for five bonus points.

After the practice round, begin the actual play, using the sentences you prepared. Draw one sentence at a time. Show the first team one sentence and have them make their play. If the sentence is incorrect, give the playing team the first chance to correct the sentence for 5 bonus feet. If that team cannot correct the sentence, open it up to the rest of the class and give the answering team an extra 5 bonus feet. Then, move on to the next team, drawing a new sentence.

The game continues until you have used all the sentences.

How did it go in the classroom?

While developing this game, we asked our students to give us written anonymous feedback. These students were the same students who said that grammar is "boring" and related to "suffering." Most students commented about the aspects of fun and participation, things that were lacking in their previous grammar experiences. For example, one student wrote: "It's a cool way of learning grammar alright. Makes boring grammar fun! Studying grammar in high school was boring." Another student commented, "Yes, it was fun. It's better than just memorizing the rules."

When asked what they learned from the game, some students focused on the grammar target of our lesson, but others commented on the importance of paying attention to detail. For example, one student wrote, "I have to read everything more carefully." And another wrote that he/she learned "how to search for mistakes."

Students also commented that they hoped we would play the game again in class. The overall feedback from the students was positive reinforcement for our belief that students can learn and have fun at the same time.

Assessment

We found that using *Climbing Grammar Mountain* in our Freshman Composition classes worked well. In addition to the learning opportunity and enthusiasm fostered by the game setting, this activity specifically helped us meet two of the course objectives listed below:

1. To improve students' understanding of the fundamentals of effective written communication, especially grammatical usage, sentence construction, paragraphing, and essay development.
2. To help students learn from others through such activities as peer review, team work, and group discussions.

Looking at the first objective, *Climbing Grammar Mountain* focuses the students' attention on grammatical usage and sentence construction. The game provides a way to address these two areas in such a way that the target structures are being reviewed and reinforced in an interesting, engaging manner. The game also meets the second objective by allowing the students to work and discuss together as a team to judge the validity of the sentences. If you use sentences taken from the students' own written work, the students would also be engaging in a peer review session.

Adaptability to different student populations

The beauty of *Climbing Grammar Mountain* is in its adaptability. The target grammar points can be from beginner levels through advanced levels. The important thing to remember is to have sentences that the students should be capable of recognizing as correct or incorrect. This is a game to review grammar, not to introduce new structures to the students. The sense of satisfaction for the students comes from the fact that they can work together and climb the mountain. Like real mountain climbing, the students must put in effort, so you do not want the sentences to be too easy for the students.

For younger students, we recommend not drawing the mountain on the board or using an overhead projector but rather creating a gentle, actual slope from one end of the classroom to the other so students can visualize moving "up" the mountain as they play the game. For example, the floor could be the

starting point, a pillow several steps away from the starting point could represent 10 feet, a stool another several steps away could be 20 feet, and other classroom furniture or equipment could build up to the top of the mountain, which could be represented by a chair with several books on top. As the game progresses, the students would move to each level and stand beside (not on!) the height they reach on the mountain. The physical movement helps to engage the younger learners by providing tangible reference to the distances referred to in the game.

Conclusion

In the end, a teacher can only encourage a student to partake in a particular learning opportunity and perhaps instill some rationale for the necessity of it. It is ultimately up to the individual to connect with the learning and make it personally relevant. The word *grammar*, along with perhaps *homework* and *alarm clock*, has negative connotations in the minds of many. We hope to overcome some measure of this resistance to learning grammar, a skill most will agree is necessary and important. Through the use of an interactive, student-centered game activity, students may internalize the structures of grammar so critical for effective written and spoken communication. We believe that *Climbing Grammar Mountain* provides students with one means of accessing grammatical information.

References

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- Shameem, N., and M. Tickoo, eds. 1999. *New ways in using communicative games in language teaching*. Alexandria, VA: TESOL.

CINDY GUNN is an Assistant Professor in the department of Language and Literature at the American University of Sharjah, in the United Arab Emirates.

ANN MCCALLUM, formerly an Instructor of English at the American University of Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates, is a children's book author and currently teaches math in Maryland, U.S.A.



APPENDIX | SAMPLE SENTENCES

Climbing Grammar Mountain: An Interactive Learning Experience • Gunn and McCallum

We were real sorry to hear that Danny had not been accepted by his first choice of colleges.

[Incorrect—The word *real* should be the adverb *really*.]

All the candidates' speeches sounded much the same as what we heard last year.

[Sentence is correct.]

It's wonderful to see the university honor it's graduates in the local newspaper.

[Incorrect—The second *its* is a possessive pronoun and does not require an apostrophe.]

According to the introduction, the author of this book is from a neighborhood not two miles from here.

[Sentence is correct.]

In the summer of 2003, two of my friend's spent a week with me at my uncle's house in England.

[Incorrect—*friends* is plural, not possessive, and requires no apostrophe.]

Everyone signed their name to the card for the professor who was in the hospital.

[Incorrect—The indefinite pronoun *everyone* is singular, so the singular pronoun form *his/her* must be used instead of *their*.]

Sami and Chris were in the parking lot when he noticed that he had a flat tire.

[Incorrect—Vague pronoun reference. Who has the flat tire?]

They worked for several hours handing out leaflets staggering with exhaustion.

[Incorrect—misplaced modifier. Should read "Staggering with exhaustion, they worked for several hours handing out leaflets."]