Retelling experiences to strengthen comprehension abilities in a Chapter I reading program

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Abstract
Language arts programs in the elementary school are moving toward holistic strategies. Goodman (1986) explains "Language is easily learned when it is whole, real and relevant, when it makes sense and is functional, when it is encountered in the context of its uses, when the learner chooses it" (p. 26). Retelling of stories, or whole units of meaning, used as a teaching strategy, is in keeping with the holistic approach to teaching the language arts.

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Retelling Experiences to Strengthen Comprehension Abilities in a Chapter I Reading Program

A Graduate Project
Submitted to the
Department of Curriculum and Instruction
In Partial Fulfillment
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Master of Arts in Education
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

by
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Rationale of the Project

Language arts programs in the elementary school are moving toward holistic strategies. Goodman (1986) explains "Language is easily learned when it is whole, real and relevant, when it makes sense and is functional, when it is encountered in the context of its uses, when the learner chooses it" (p. 26). Retelling of stories, or whole units of meaning, used as a teaching strategy, is in keeping with the holistic approach to teaching the language arts.

Understanding, or comprehension of the ideas of a text, is reading. Reading comprehension takes place when readers bring meaning to the text through their prior knowledge. Smith (1994) says that comprehension takes place when readers can relate the text to their theory of the world. Reading activities that encourage children to talk about or respond in other ways to what they have read enhances comprehension. The retelling of stories can foster comprehension abilities (Ulmer, 1992).

Morrow (1986) relates that the retelling of stories helps readers to become familiar with language structure and to develop a sense of the story. Readers through retelling experiences learn to tell a story with its characters, setting, theme, and plot (beginning, middle and ending), thus demonstrating their comprehension of story (Morrow, 1986).
Purpose of the Project

The purpose of this project is to study oral retelling as a strategy to nurture and to assess young children's emerging comprehension abilities in a Chapter I reading program. This strategy can assist beginning readers in focusing on language experiences as a process to create meaning.

For the project, first grade children who are literacy delayed were chosen. These children placed in a Chapter I reading setting will benefit from supplemental instruction in reading. Through guided retellings, they were supported in becoming more actively involved with stories. They will be encouraged to express the ideas they have constructed from literature experiences through oral retellings as well as drama and illustrations. The project was conducted over a twelve-week time period.

Although the emphasis of this project was on retellings as a comprehension strategy, assessment was an integral part of the program. The oral retellings of stories provided a record of individual student progress that can be used by teachers to improve comprehension instruction as well as report to parents at conferences.

Terms Pertinent to the Project
Holistic approach to the language arts focuses on the meaning in whole units of language.
Prior knowledge is the reader's knowledge base that influences the meanings created in the reading process.

Story structure refers to the essential elements of a story.

Comprehension strategy is a means by which meaning is associated with text.

Supplemental instruction in this paper refers to a program for children who are not achieving in accordance with their estimated ability.

Basal reading series is a set of published materials for instruction organized by grade levels.

Episodic structure contains the elements of characterization and the evolving action of the story.

Reading workshop is an assigned, small group of students who work together on a regular basis to share the meanings they have created through the reading process.

Review of Professional Literature

The retelling of a story is a process that involves readers in a verbal reconstruction of a text influenced by prior knowledge (Morrow, 1986). Retelling is a generative task that requires readers to construct a personal rendition of the text by making inferences based on the original text and prior knowledge (Gambrell, Koskinen, & Kapinus, 1991). Readers have to connect various story components while actively retelling the story. Retelling a story demands that readers use an organized structure
to retrieve and recall information acquired through the reading process (Johnson, 1988). Well-organized retellings can show what decisions readers have made about the importance of the ideas in the text (Hernandez & Mirtha, 1991).

**Retelling to Foster Comprehension**

Studies of the effects of retelling experiences on children’s comprehension abilities indicate that practice in retelling significantly improves children’s reading comprehension at various age levels. Morrow (1986) concludes from her study of kindergarten children that oral retelling improves story comprehension, sense of story structure, and complexity of oral language when used as a follow-up to listening. The children participated in retelling once a week for eight weeks. After a story was read, the control groups drew pictures about it and the experimental group retold the story individually to student teachers. In listening to the children’s retellings, the student teachers used the same guide sheet that provided prompts if necessary.

Story dictation pretests and post tests were administered by research assistants. The pretests were given before the treatment during the first week of the study, and the post tests were administered during the eighth week of the study. The results indicated that the treatment experienced by the experimental group, frequent practice and guidance from adults
while retelling stories, did improve children's oral recounting of stories. This improvement was demonstrated by the increased use of structural elements and the expanded length of T-units length, or clauses, in the children's oral language. The most improvement in recalling elements of story structure was shown in setting and plot, and only minor improvements were evidenced in recalling theme, resolution, and sequence.

In the Morrow study, the children from the experimental group had more opportunity to become involved with student teachers and research assistants in early childhood programs. This attention from adults was at times on a one-to-one basis. Regardless of the treatment, this supportive interaction appeared to reinforce expectations and performance among the children. Such individual attention may have affected the results.

Glenn (1978) studied the effects of oral story retelling on second graders' recall of simple stories. The specific elements examined were story length and episodic structure. A story episode is the organization of the reader's recall of a text: character response, attempt, consequence and reaction. The study involved twenty-four second grade students from a school in an upper middle neighborhood. Four different versions of four stories varying in complexity of episodic structure were presented. The children were directed to listen carefully to the story as it was read aloud because they would be asked to retell
it. All recall versions were tape recorded and later analyzed for the amount of details and the organization of recall. The analysis indicated that children added more inferences and organization in recalling short simple stories. In recalling these simple stories, children inferred more ideas to create coherent retellings. The conclusions supported the use of story structure as an aid to nurture comprehension abilities.

Gambrell et al. (1991) conducted a study of the effect of oral story retelling on fourth graders' comprehension. The fourth graders in the study had different levels of reading proficiency. Eight stories were selected from basal readers, four at the second grade level for the less proficient readers and four at the fourth grade level for the proficient readers. Both groups of readers who engaged in retelling as a comprehension activity improved on free recall measures and responded with more text-based propositions, or elaborations on the ideas of the text, and story structure elements. Text-based propositions that were consistent with the story line were scored as positive elaborations, and those that were inconsistent were scored as negative intrusions. The story structure elements scored were setting, theme, plot, and resolution. After four practice sessions, the students gave more complete retellings.

According to the conclusions of this study, both the proficient and less proficient readers showed improvement in
comprehension after retelling experiences. Retelling as a verbal rehearsal strategy allows readers to construct their own meaning from the text and to engage in repetition of text information. Repetition adds more information to the memory, thus extending readers' understanding of the story.

Johnson (1988) assumed in his study the value of oral retelling as a comprehension strategy and then went on to question the influence of the video recorder on the comprehension of young children's retelling. The results revealed that children exposed to the video recorder scored significantly higher on recall of story events and inferential responses as well as understanding of story events. Johnson also stressed the importance of an adult mediator in a young child's retelling experience. Mediators are significant others, parents and teachers, in the adult-child learning context. He says that it is critical for parents as well as teachers to provide rich language experiences for young children, such as opportunities to retell stories.

Retelling as an Assessment Technique

Retelling experiences can also provide for an ongoing assessment of student progress. Kalmbach (1986) describes three current methods for assessment of retellings: Recall of the original text, retellings as text in their own right, and retellings as whole readings. Assessment of recall of text
compares the retelling to the original story for details and organization. Assessment of the retelling as a text in itself focuses on the students' language and organization of retelling. Assessment of retellings as whole readings moves beyond story recall and structure to focus on how retelling relates to students' prior knowledge. These three assessment methods of retellings have their strengths and weaknesses. Kalmbach suggests that teachers use all three methods for the assessment of retellings.

Retelling as an assessment technique has become more widely used because of the move toward holistic instruction. Tidwell and Ulmer (1993) studied five classroom teachers in primary and intermediate grade levels who used oral and written retellings as an assessment tool. They chose holistic assessment instruments that assessed recall of text, literary awareness to text, and language use, or quality of retelling, as well as story structure analysis. The classroom teachers also developed their own assessment of retellings. Although these teachers focused mainly on text-based issues and text assessment, they also saw retellings as a way of learning more about their students in a personal-social sense and of encouraging their students to interact with text to create meaningful connections. From their assessment project, they suggested that other areas, such as music and puppetry, could be used as a form of retelling.
In their study, Hernandez and Mirtha (1991) focused on written retelling as a tool to assess the reading workshop, comprehension, and attitude toward reading. Retellings can indicate what readers recall from the text as well as what they regard as important and how they chose to reorganize the story. In the study, pretest and post test retellings were scored with the Reader Retelling Profile, developed by Irwin and Mitchell (1983). This profile measures readers' involvement with the text and their ability to connect background knowledge with text and to apply text to the real world. The results of the study indicated that the reading workshop nurtured children's attitude toward reading and text-based comprehension. The opportunity for students to reflect, discuss, and write about books as part of the reading workshop had a positive impact.

In their conclusions Hernandez and Mirtha stressed the importance of using an appropriate and sensitive measuring instrument. Assessments instruments must be compatible with instructional methods. The reading workshop reflected a holistic instructional approach that views reading as a process, thus retelling as an assessment tool was an integral part of such instruction.

In her study of children's recall of story grammar elements, Marshall used a checklist of retelling behaviors as a criteria for analyzing completeness of recall and organization of
information. The performance checklist assessed students’ reading while emphasizing comprehension as an integrated process rather than an isolated skill. After reading a story, one of the students retold it orally while the teacher recorded the performance on the checklist. After the retelling, other students were encouraged to add information or ask questions. Marshall concluded that there are many advantages in using a checklist to assess reading comprehension through oral retelling. The checklists were used to substantiate student growth and instructional needs when conferring with parents and administrators.

Project: Retelling as a Strategy to Improve Comprehension Among Literacy-Delayed Young Readers

In exploring retelling as an instructional method and assessment tool in a Chapter I reading program, six literacy-delayed first grade students were selected for study over a twelve-week period. They were in the lower third of the first grade class in reading achievement and had been referred for supplemental help in reading on the basis of standardized test scores or teacher referral. They left their classroom for this extra instruction in reading. Although these students were identified as literacy delayed, they were excited about school and learning to read. They were enthused about books and wanted to listen to stories.
Instruction in Comprehension Through Oral Retelling

For the first week of instruction in the Chapter I reading program, the children explored the books in the classroom. They looked at picture books and big books and selected stories for the teacher to read aloud to them. They frequently asked if they could draw pictures of ideas found in the stories.

The second week was structured into a group retelling activity. The children listened to the story Blueberries for Sal (by Robert McCloskey). They briefly discussed their favorite parts and related their own experiences to the story. The teacher modeled retelling the story while the group listened. During the week, the group participated in related activities, such as making lists of fruits that are picked, talking about how food is preserved for winter, discussing animals and their habits, and making blueberry muffins. Then, they were asked to retell the story orally as a group. The group retelling was written on chart paper and displayed in the room so the students could read and reread it.

During the week, the group also did an activity with the lyrical folk story Over in the Meadow (by Philpott), retold in a big book (published by Modern Curriculum Press). From this activity, students could become aware of the element of setting and how it is related to characterization. The children discussed the setting as the meadow and described other animals
that could be found in a meadow setting. They were presented with the challenge of choosing a different setting. As the students suggested other settings, the teacher listed them on the chalkboard. The children chose the farm as the setting for their poem. Then, animals that would fit into the setting were listed. Each child chose an animal to put in the setting. With the guidance of the teacher, each child orally retold a verse with a farm setting and animals and illustrated it. The verses were collected into a big book. The children were proud of their big book and took it back to share in their classroom.

Then, the children became involved in individual oral retelling activities after they listened to the story, The Biggest Bear (by Ward), which was read aloud by the teacher to the group and then discussed. Students individually retold the story to the teacher who transcribed their accounts. While the teacher was recording the individual retellings, the other children were looking at books or drawing pictures about the story read by the teacher.

The children had difficulty retelling stories at the beginning of the project. Sometimes, the children needed to be prompted with questions or guided to continue their retelling. They were encouraged to include their own experiences as they discussed the story. One of the most supportive elements of this instruction in retelling to foster comprehension was teacher
interaction with the children individually. The children had an opportunity to tell what they remembered and what was important to them in the story.

As the project continued, the group listened to more stories read aloud by the teacher and then responded with oral retellings, as individual and group experiences. For example, the fable *The Lion and the Mouse* (by Aesop) was read to them. (Fables are simple stories that present a problem and resolution to teach a lesson.) While retelling the story, each child was guided by the teacher to focus on the story's problem and its resolution. In the story, *Amy's Goose* (by E. Holmes), the main character faces a conflict that is resolved so the children in a group retelling had an opportunity to focus on characterization. From some of the group retellings, big books were constructed.

At Thanksgiving time, children listened to *The First Thanksgiving*, (by Lou Rogers). They were eager to retell the story as a group activity. The story was transcribed by the teacher. The group started to take charge of the activity and question what it would be like to be a pilgrim or an Indian. The students pretended they were the characters from the story and then engaged in a short impromptu drama. The next day after the teacher read the group retelling to the children, they decided to draw pictures to support the story. They divided it into parts for illustrating. In dividing the story, they discovered that
they had omitted an important part. It was added to the retelling so the story was complete. Although the children had retold the story in a group, they individually told the teacher about their illustration and dictated their own sentences to be printed on the page.

The Russian folk tale *Peter and the Wolf* (by Disney) was another group retelling project that developed into a big book. Some of their vocabulary crept into the retelling such as "buds" instead of "friends" and "Yippi." The group took ownership of their project and proudly shared their big book with their first grade class.

This group of children became excited about illustrating their retellings and frequently drew pictures after retelling the stories. The illustrations were displayed on bulletin boards in the Chapter I reading room so the children could enjoy them and retell the stories to each other and also were shared with their classmates in the first grade classroom. The illustrations supported the children's retelling of their retellings.

Although it was not the purpose of this project to make books, bookmaking resulted from the children's retellings. The students listened to the teacher read their retellings and then decided how much of the story they wanted on a page and what illustration would support the text. Through making these choices, students learned about character, setting and plot.
Assessment of Comprehension Through Oral Retelling

After studying several instruments used to assess children's retellings, the teacher used her own criteria modeled after Story Retelling Analysis, developed by L. M. Morrow (1983). This instrument assessed the basis elements of character and setting as well as the main idea, problem or goal, and resolution.

Throughout the project, each child's progress in retelling was noted on the check sheet. An "x" is recorded to show the presence of an element in the child's retelling. An "o" indicates the element was not part of the retelling. A plus indicates strength and a minus weakness. An example of one child's retelling is as follows:

Criteria for Assessment of Retellings

Child A

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Lion and the Bear</th>
<th>Biggest Pumpkin Mouse</th>
<th>Amy's Ever Goose</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oct. 11</td>
<td>Oct. 18</td>
<td>Oct. 31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. Has a beginning  
2. Has a middle  
3. Has an ending  
4. Tells the main character  
5. Tells other character
6. Tells the setting o o o x
7. Tells main idea
   problem or goal o x x x
8. Resolution of problem
   or attains goal o x x- x

Child A was excited about telling his favorite part of the first story. He identified the main character only as "he." He gave some details from the middle of the story but did not tell the beginning or ending. He hinted at the main idea but did not tell how the problem was solved.

In the second retelling, the child's retelling of the fable was disconnected but did include recall of the story elements. He showed that he had an understanding of the lesson in the fable. On the third retelling, the child started in the middle of the story as he retold *The Biggest Pumpkin Ever* (by Kroll). He identified the two main characters referring to them as "he." The child relayed the main idea and hinted at the problem solution. He added that the story was not real and gave his reasons for making that judgment. Child A particularly enjoyed the story *Amy's Goose*. He referred to the setting of the story in the beginning of his retelling. His retelling was short and included all story elements. He repeatedly identified the main character only as "she" and the goose as "it." With concern, the child related the problem and resolution in the retelling. He
said, "She let it go . . . the mate was waiting for it to come back so she let it go cause she thought it was nicer to let it go." During the first assessment, Child A focused mainly on one story element--the character. On his last retelling, he was able to demonstrate that he was aware of all the basic story elements.

Child B progressed from including beginning, middle, ending and character in the first retelling to including all the elements but setting in the last retelling. Child B did not include setting in any of her retellings.

In the first retelling session, Child C had difficulty getting started and needed prompting. She included most of the elements in all four of her retellings. Character identification was weak in all the retellings except the fable.

Child D needed a great deal of prompting throughout the oral retelling sessions. He continued saying, "That's all" and "I don't know anymore" after every reply. He elaborated on details in his retellings but did not have a sense of story structure.

Child E, a Spanish American who comes from a Spanish speaking home, had difficulty retelling stories and needed much prompting. She can speak conversational English fluently but did not understand the elements of story structure.

In her first retelling, Child F used scattered ideas that included parts of beginning, middle and ending and identified
characters as "persons" or "they." She hinted at main idea and resolution. In her last retelling, Child F retold the story with beginning, middle, and ending. She identified setting, plot, main idea, and resolution of problem but referred to the main character as "she" and "they."

Conclusions

Retelling is an effective strategy for fostering reading comprehension among young children who have been identified as needing supplemental instruction to be successful in a school program. It also can be used as an assessment tool to ascertain student progress and specific reading instructional needs.

Retellings can reveal students' involvement with text, their constructions of the work, and their difficulties communicating these understandings. Retelling instruction to improve comprehension can involve oral retellings of stories in other forms, such as illustrating and dramatizing.

The data gathered from retellings can be of value to classroom teachers. The value, however depends on the teacher's understanding of the elements of a story and ways to support children during the retelling process. If the teacher accepts only simple recall without encouraging further interpretation of the story, the students will produce narrow retellings. Also, if the teacher is looking for only ideas from the stories in isolation, then this approach will have little more value than a
teacher question, student answer discussion. If the child’s illustrations are looked on as busy work, they, too are of little value. When the illustrations become part of the retelling of the whole story, they can amplify the retelling experience and thus extend the comprehension of the story. Drama also has value as a rehearsal for impromptu retelling of the whole story.

The retelling project allowed these first grade students to be recognized as individuals and encouraged them to create their own meaning from listening to stories by engaging in retelling. Thus, their comprehension abilities were strengthened. The children became aware of the elements of story structure that are common tasks in reading.
References

Professional Sources


**Children’s Literature**


