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## Assessing children's emerging literacy through retelling

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## Assessing children's emerging literacy through retelling

### Abstract

The whole language concept is being implemented into many language arts instructional programs. This concept focuses on nurturing children's emerging literacy through their involvement in the language processes. In creating meaning while engaged in whole units of language, children extend their thinking-language abilities.

Assessing Children's Emerging Literacy  
Through Retelling

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by

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has been approved as meeting the research paper requirement for  
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The whole language concept is being implemented into many language arts instructional programs. This concept focuses on nurturing children's emerging literacy through their involvement in the language processes. In creating meaning while engaged in whole units of language, children extend their thinking-language abilities.

In light of this view of emerging literacy, traditional assessment methods are inadequate because they do not provide the necessary information to ascertain students' growth in creating their own meaning. More qualitative techniques are needed to describe children's emerging language abilities, for children's language growth as it occurs within the processes can only be assessed in this manner. One means of describing children's language growth is through oral and written retelling of a whole unit of language. Through retelling, children can be observed creating their own construct from literature experiences (Goodman, 1982).

#### Purpose of the Paper

This paper will present the value of retelling stories as one means of assessing children's emerging language abilities at the primary level. It will examine ways this type of holistic assessment can be implemented in the classroom.

### Value of Retelling for Assessment

Retellings are a postreading or postlistening activity in which children recall either orally or in writing what they have heard or read (Morrow, 1985). Retelling requires students to reconstruct a personal text, based on a story they have read or heard. Students bring their prior knowledge to the retelling experience. Retelling experiences support students in gaining control over their own reading and writing. Retelling activities encourage children to discuss what they have heard or read, enhancing reading comprehension. By reconstructing story events, children arrange images and build a representation of the story internally (Morrow, Gambrell, Kapinus, Koskinen, Marshall, & Mitchell, 1986). This active participation can improve memory of text (Koskinen, Gambrell, Kapinus, & Heathington, 1988).

Through retelling, children's sense of story can be assessed. Golden (1984) found that as children develop their concept of story, they include more of the plot structure, the setting, attributes, and the motivations and reactions of the characters. These elements of story can be observed: recapping main points, recalling major events, identifying cause-effect relationships while including the sequence of events (Weaver, 1988; Morrow et al., 1986; Golden, 1984).

Many researchers suggest offering story retelling as a qualitative approach for evaluating children's language.

Kapinus, Gambrell, and Koskinen (1987) found that the majority of readers who participated in a retelling indicated that they enjoyed the experience. This suggests that retelling can be an appealing assessment strategy as well as a comprehension activity.

Retelling as an assessment activity reflects a holistic concept of reading comprehension as opposed to traditional teacher-posed questions after hearing or reading the text that require students to respond with fragmented bits of information (Morrow, 1989; Koskinen et al., 1988; Gambrell, Pfeiffer & Wilson, 1985). Marshall (1983) concludes in her study that having students retell stories after reading solves the problem of asking questions that might give clues to the answer.

Story retelling can assess students' ability to comprehend, organize, and express themselves under the guidance of the teacher (Pickert & Chase, 1978). By retelling, students have to organize the information they think is important. Then teachers can evaluate the completeness of the recall (Marshall, 1983). Retellings of a wide variety of experiences are useful for understanding children's emerging language abilities (Weaver, 1988; Brown & Cambourne, 1987).

Children's responses in a retelling activity can be observed and recorded to provide a wealth of information. It is straightforward assessment that can reveal a student's

reconstruction of text information and the extent of a reader's comprehension (Kalmbach, 1986b).

### Holistic Assessment of Language Abilities Through Retelling

Several evaluative approaches to assessing children's language development through the retelling experience, either orally or in writing, have been developed (Kalmbach, 1986a). These distinct approaches--assessment of recall, analysis of organizing strategies, and whole readings--will be discussed.

#### Assessment of Recall

This approach compares retellings to the original text. It is also called a point system (Irwin & Mitchell, 1983). Recall assessment begins by analyzing the original story selected by the student, and then the actual retelling is scored against the original text analysis to see what is recalled. Points are assigned to sum up the recall of the retelling.

Several recall assessment methods have been developed. Weaver (1988) found that the holistic evaluation procedure that was developed by Yetta Goodman and Carolyn Burke produced consistent and comparable results. Students were compared with others at different times throughout the year using different texts.



The Goodman-Burke rating system for comparing students' recall to the original text is comprised of five subcategories that reflect an analysis of literary elements of the story:

Character analysis-recall -- listing of the story characters from the text (15 pts.)

Character analysis-development -- providing information concerning a character's physical appearance, behavior, attitudes and feelings, and relationship to other characters (15 pts.)

Events -- relating actual happenings as they occur in the story (30 pts.)

Plot -- providing the central question or problem of the story and the sequence of events (20 pts.)

Theme -- giving generalization, perspective, viewpoint, or truism (20 pts.).

The points allotted for a complete recall are totaled. A score of 100 points indicates a perfect score (Goodman & Burke, 1972; Sadoski, 1982).

Marshall (1983, p. 619) designed a checklist of retelling behaviors to evaluate the completeness of individuals' retellings. As students orally retell the story, the elements of story grammar are scored with a plus, checkmark, or minus sign:

- + Mentioned on own, no prompting
- ✓ Mentioned after questioning or prompting
- Failed to mention after questioning or prompting

### Checklist of Retelling Behaviors

Student names	Retelling contains													
	theme		setting		character		goal/ problem		attempts		resolution		reactions	

Marshall's checklist can be used for all grade levels and with any text. The text can vary in length and complexity. The checklist is designed for observation of students during four different assessment periods throughout the year. A comparison of several retellings over a year will illustrate whether children have progressed in their reading development (Morrow, 1985).

### Organizing Strategies

This type of assessment is an alternative to comparing original stories to retellings. Organizing strategies analyze

the retelling as an independent text with its own unique structure.

Rosenblatt (1978) notes that text and reader are both involved as critical elements of the story. Transactions occur between text and reader. Kalmbach (1986a) suggests that students' organization of the story and recall of the elements in retelling are closely related. The structure of students' retellings can often reveal more about their understanding of the story than the elements they can recall.

The organizing strategy assesses students' ability to comprehend, organize, and express themselves in a retelling and asks them to tell the story in their own words. Their version is taped and transposed or is offered in writing. This approach assesses several different language abilities particularly those related to the task of reading (Pickert, 1980; Pickert & Chase, 1978).

Careful analysis of the retelling must occur because children's story retelling attempts will often be inaccurate or incomplete. Children must be reminded that even though the teacher knows the story a complete and accurate retelling should be given (Pickert, 1980).

Morrow (1989, p. 153) developed a guide sheet to record what children include or omit in a retelling of an original story. This guide sheet also records how well children sequence

events in a story. Children's story retellings can then be assessed throughout the year to reflect growth.

### Story Retelling Evaluation Guide Sheet

Child's Name \_\_\_\_\_ Age \_\_\_\_\_  
 Title of Story \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

General directions: Give 1 point for each element included as well as for "gist". Give 1 point for each character named as well as for such words as boy, girl, or dog. Credit plurals (friends, for instance) with 2 points under characters.

Sense of story structure

Setting

- a. Begins story with an introduction \_\_\_\_\_
- b. Names main character \_\_\_\_\_
- c. Number of other characters named \_\_\_\_\_
- d. Actual number of other characters \_\_\_\_\_
- e. Score for "other characters" (c/d): \_\_\_\_\_
- f. Includes statement about time or place \_\_\_\_\_

Theme

Refers to main character's primary goal or problem to be solved \_\_\_\_\_

Plot Episodes

- a. Number of episodes recalled \_\_\_\_\_
- b. Number of episodes in story \_\_\_\_\_
- c. Score for "plot episodes" (a/b): \_\_\_\_\_

Resolution

- a. Names problem solution/goal attainment \_\_\_\_\_
- b. Ends story \_\_\_\_\_

Sequence

Retells story in structural order: setting, theme, plot episodes, resolution. (Score 2 for proper, 1 for partial, 0 for no sequence evident.) \_\_\_\_\_

Highest score possible: 10 \_\_\_\_\_

Checks can be used instead of numbers to get a general sense of elements children include and progress over time. A quantitative analysis as shown above is optional. Retellings can be evaluated for interpretive critical comments as well.

Kalmbach (1986a) discusses using the sociolinguistic theory of narration developed by William Labov to analyze retellings of stories. This theory is concerned with why retellers structure

stories the way they do to present certain points of a story. This type of evaluation provides clues about what the student believes are the important elements of the original story.

Assessment of recall and organizing strategies are complimentary forms of assessment. These two approaches used together can provide educators with better information than if they were used separately. Both of these assessments are concerned with analyzing the created retellings of the student (Kalmbach, 1986a).

#### Whole Readings

Whole readings is a holistic approach to interpreting retellings that is different from the previously mentioned approaches. Holistic approaches are concerned with everything that children have to say in a retelling experience rather than focusing on story recall and structure. Neither assessment of recall nor analysis of organizing strategies can evaluate the inference ability and prior knowledge that children use in interacting with the text. A more holistic approach is needed to evaluate these areas (Kalmbach, 1986a).

Kalmbach (1986a) lists the advantages of a holistic approach, or a whole reading, over recall assessment and organizing strategies: (1) Whole readings allow the interpreter to look at the whole retelling rather than at the minute details of the recall and organization. (2) Whole readings give the

teacher the freedom to move beyond the narration to incorporate other elements, such as evaluative statements, character analysis, and efforts to relate stories to the reader's life.

(3) Whole readings provide a way to compare large groups of retellings.

This form of retelling can reveal children's ability to make inferences when they organize, integrate, and classify information that is not directly stated in the text (Morrow, 1989; Koskinen et al., 1988). Children can generalize and interpret their feelings through a retelling by relating events to their own experiences (Morrow, 1989).

Holistic scoring is used in a whole reading approach. Weaver used a scale to rate readers' comprehension processes (Kalmbach, 1986a). This assessment rated retellings using a scale from 1 to 7, with 1 poor, 3 adequate, 5 good, and 7 excellent (Weaver, 1980).

Irwin and Mitchell (1983, p. 394) believe that the principles of holistic grading can be used to evaluate retellings by capturing the richness or essence of readers' comprehension. They also relate that retellings are best viewed in their totality rather than in their isolated parts. They went on to develop their own scale to identify characteristics of five distinct levels of richness: 1 - 5; 5 representing the highest level and 1 standing for the lowest level of richness.

## Judging Richness of Retellings

Level	Criteria for Establishing Level
5	Student generalizes beyond text, includes thesis (summarizing statement), all major points, and appropriate supporting details; includes relevant supplementations; shows high degree of coherence, completeness, comprehensibility.
4	Student includes thesis (summarizing statement); all major points, and appropriate supporting details; includes relevant supplementations; shows high degree of coherence, completeness, comprehensibility.
3	Student relates major ideas; includes appropriate supporting details and relevant supplementations; shows adequate coherence, completeness, comprehensibility.
2	Student relates a few major ideas and some supporting details; includes irrelevant supplementations; shows some degree of coherence; some completeness; the whole is somewhat comprehensible.
1	Student relates details only; irrelevant supplementations or none; low degree of coherence; incomplete; incomprehensible.

Irwin and Mitchell (1983) suggest that caution should be taken when using the checklist to evaluate the richness of retellings. Age, the form of the retelling, and the text structure and content are factors that vary with each individual's retelling. Teachers need to be sensitive to the effects these factors have on the retelling.

Assessing whole reading can provide better results for interpretation if the evaluative methods used combine both quantitative and qualitative scoring systems (Kalmbach, 1986a).

Research indicates a holistic approach to analyzing retellings renders a truer picture of the comprehension process (Irwin & Mitchell, 1983).

### Summary

Assessment of children's emerging language abilities is an important issue in education today. Educators are looking for ways to better assess children's emerging language abilities. Retelling whole units of language is just one means to assess children's ability to engage in the language processes to create meaning.

Classroom teachers should provide children with a wide variety of literature experiences as a base for retelling. To ensure a successful retelling experience, teachers need to give children frequent opportunities to engage in the process. Teachers can support children's retelling by guiding them through the process as well as modeling retelling for them. Also, children need to know the rationale for retelling stories.

Retelling experiences provide a fresh exciting way to look at literacy development. This assessment technique should be part of every classroom teacher's assessment strategies when evaluating children's emerging language development.



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