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## Promoting children's oral language development through story retelling

Kathy M. Meyer  
*University of Northern Iowa*

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## Promoting children's oral language development through story retelling

### Abstract

Meaningful language experiences offered to children at a young age nurture their emerging literacy. These experiences encourage children to be active participants in the language processes (Bredenkamp, 1987). Their involvement in the language processes can be greatly enhanced through a quality literature base (Strickland & Morrow, 1989b). One type of literature-based experience that facilitates children's emerging language abilities is the oral retelling of stories that they have heard or read (Magee & Sutton-Smith, 1983). Retellings resemble a long-established form of behavior called "telling about telling" (Brown & Cambourne, 1987). Telling about something that has happened is a well-established form of linguistic behavior. People are constantly relating their experiences to others.

Promoting Children's Oral Language  
Development Through Story Retelling

A Graduate Project  
Submitted to the  
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Kathy M. Meyer  
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Jeanne McLain Harms  

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Director of Research Paper

5/8/92  
Date Approved

Jeanne McLain Harms  

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Graduate Faculty Adviser

5/10/92  
Date Approved

Ned Ratekin  

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Graduate Faculty Reader

6/23/92  
Date Approved

Peggy Ishler  

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Head, Department of Curriculum  
and Instruction

Meaningful language experiences offered to children at a young age nurture their emerging literacy. These experiences encourage children to be active participants in the language processes (Bredekamp, 1987). Their involvement in the language processes can be greatly enhanced through a quality literature base (Strickland & Morrow, 1989b).

One type of literature-based experience that facilitates children's emerging language abilities is the oral retelling of stories that they have heard or read (Magee & Sutton-Smith, 1983). Retellings resemble a long-established form of behavior called "telling about" (Brown & Cambourne, 1987). Telling about something that has happened is a well-established form of linguistic behavior. People are constantly relating their experiences to others.

Retelling experiences can enhance children's oral language and can encourage their active participation in the language processes. Each child can then actually own his/her learning of language. This control of language aids in the development of literacy (Magee & Sutton-Smith, 1983). Activities that combine a base of quality literature with opportunity for retelling provide powerful experiences for language development.

#### Purpose of the Paper

This paper will review the professional literature concerning the supporting role oral language plays in emerging

literacy and the value of retelling experiences in nurturing this development. Then specific retelling strategies and their implementation into a first-grade instructional program will be examined.

### Review of Professional Literature

#### Importance of Oral Language Development in Acquiring Literacy

Children's ability to express themselves orally is related directly to ultimate success in school. Oral language supports literacy, but it does not need to be fully developed for reading and writing to begin (Strickland & Morrow, 1988). However, it is widely acknowledged that the most important strength that students bring to the task of learning to read is their oral language ability (Kapinus, Gambrell, & Koskinen, 1987; Sheaffer, 1988; Weber & Johnston, 1985). Through oral language, children can access meaning as they discuss stories they have read (Kapinus et al., 1987). Despite this support, oral language development is taken for granted; it is not considered a responsibility of the school to teach oral language (Weber & Johnston, 1985; Karweit, 1989).

From the time children begin school, instructional experiences should extend their oral language development. The basis of these experiences should be children's needs to create meaning and to communicate with others. In many cases, the focus is on teaching isolated skills, rather than on the

integration of oral language with reading and writing instruction (Early Childhood and Literacy Development Committee of the International Reading Association, 1986).

### Value of Story Retelling in Developing Verbal Ability

Story retelling is a language behavior that brings together all the major modes of language: listening, speaking, reading, writing (Brown & Cambourne, 1987). Presenting children with opportunities to retell stories orally can nurture their verbal abilities. Marie Clay (1979) relates that when children enter into a school setting, their opportunities for talking are reduced. Some programs prevent children from using the effective ways of learning language that they have developed before they entered school. Despite these benefits from engaging in story retelling, a survey of nursery schools and kindergartens revealed that children are rarely provided the opportunity to retell stories because teachers view retelling as time consuming and difficult for children (Morrow, 1982).

Oral retelling of stories improves comprehension and helps children develop a sense of story structure while enhancing oral language ability (Gambrell, Pfeiffer, & Wilson, 1985; Morrow, 1984, 1985b, 1986). Understanding story structure allows children to focus on the basic story elements and their contributions to the meaning of the whole. Students' sense of story, or prior knowledge of story elements, serves as a guide

for retrieving story information (Golden, 1984). The reteller, in the process of understanding what is heard or read, learns to use story structure to organize information (Morrow, 1989b). The retelling of stories is a wholistic/natural approach to literacy learning (Brown & Cambourne, 1987).

As children grow throughout the school years, their ability to reconstruct a story becomes more sophisticated. From their study, Pellegrini and Galda (1982) conclude that children are unable to recall stories completely until they are about eight years old. From frequent retelling experiences, children become more aware of book language, or vocabulary and patterns of language, that will extend their ability to create meaning (Morrow, 1989). Retelling also nurtures children's eagerness and confidence in expressing their ideas (Morrow, 1985b).

#### Strategies for Supporting Children's Story Retelling

Retelling without prior experience is not easy for students of any age. With the support of specific instructional strategies, students can develop this ability (Strickland & Morrow, 1989b).

When teachers begin to present retelling experiences, they need to consider the length of the literature work. Stories with limited length and well-constructed plots are easier to follow and therefore to retell (Gambrell et al., 1985). Other features such as repetitive phrases, rhyme, familiar sequences,



character dialogue, and familiarity with the concepts and experiences also make for ease in retelling (Morrow, 1989b).

Koskinen et al., (1988) suggest using guided instruction to teach retelling until students become proficient. They recommend sharing the rationale for retelling so that students understand the purposes. When initiating story retelling, children need to be told before they read or listen to a story that they will be asked to retell it (Morrow, 1985b).

Morrow (1985) found that children having difficulties with retelling experienced more success when they were provided with opportunities to practice. Such practice added to both the quality of the retellings and to the ease with which students approached the task.

Retelling can be introduced through teacher modeling of the complete process--reading, retelling, and responding as a listener on several occasions before the children start participating in the process (Morrow, 1985). In modeling, the teacher should know the story thoroughly so that the retelling can be done without relying on the text (Strickland & Morrow, 1989). The teacher, when modeling retelling, should emphasize the important parts of a story or the story structure (Gambrell et al., 1985). Story structure can include the setting, the theme, plot episodes, or the resolution (Harms & Lettow, unpublished).

After story retelling has been modeled by the teacher, opportunities for student practice can be provided. This practice can be presented in the form of guided group retelling that uses prompts. Prompts for encouraging retelling may involve asking questions. Example questions are: "Who is your story about? Where were they when the story started? What happened at the beginning of your story? Then what happened? How did they solve that problem? What happened at the end?" Questioning will help students use the elements of story structure to recreate their own context (Hough, Nurss, & Wood, 1987). When the children are familiar with the process, opportunities can be provided for them to retell to partners, small groups of peers, and the class as a whole (Strickland & Morrow, 1989b).

#### Implementation into a First-Grade Program

A classroom that supports oral language development is one in which students are allowed to express themselves in a variety of ways (Strickland & Morrow, 1988). Lower elementary children feel especially comfortable retelling stories when they have props to use (Strickland & Morrow, 1989b). These props help children to remember a story and provide a concrete way to develop concepts (Cliatt & Shaw, 1988).

These selections of literature are appropriate for retelling in the first grade. The stories can be retold through various

modes of expression: speaking, writing, acting and art activities (Harms & Lettow, unpublished).

### Retelling Through Speaking

A familiar story can simply be retold in a child's own words or through the use of fun and interesting props.

Feltboard stories. Props such as feltboard characters can be traced on felt or pellon. When cut out, these pieces can be manipulated on a feltboard to help students retell a story.

Aardema, Verna. Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears. New York: Dial, 1975.

Mosquito tells Iguana a tall tale that sets off a chain reaction that ends in jungle disaster.

Characters: mosquito, iguana, python, rabbit, crow, monkey, owlet, Mother owl, king lion, a sun, and a hand.

Bunting, Eve. The Mother's Day Mice. New York: Clarion, 1986.

Each of three little mouse brothers go into the meadow to find a present for their mother but it is the littlest mouse that comes up with the most unusual gift of all.

Flannel pieces: Biggest Mouse, Middle Mouse, Little Mouse, black cat, Mother Mouse, a red strawberry, dandelion fluff ball, a song.

Williams, Linda. The Little Old Lady Who Was Not Afraid of Anything. New York: Crowell, 1985.

A little old lady who is not afraid of anything must deal with parts of an image--a pumpkin head, a tall black hat, and other spooky objects that follow her through the dark woods trying to scare her.

Flannel pieces: 2 shoes, a pair of pants, a shirt, 2 gloves, a hat, a pumpkin head, a little old lady, cottage, toothpicks.

Sound effects. Sound effects such as musical instruments can be used to enhance the retelling of a story.

Stevens, Janet. The Three Billy Goats Gruff. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987.

Three clever billy goats outwit a big, ugly troll that lives under the bridge they must cross on their way up the mountain.

Sound effects: Small Gruff-sandblocks, Medium Gruff-tamborine, and Large Gruff-drum.

Martin Jr., Bill & Archambault, John. Barn Dance! New York: Holt, 1986.

Unable to sleep on the night of a full moon, a young boy follows the sound of music across the fields and finds an unusual barn dance in progress.

Sound effects: fiddle music.

Fox, Mem. Night Noises. San Diego: Harcourt, 1989.

Old Lady Laceby dozes by the fire with her faithful dog at her feet as strange night noises herald a surprising awakening.

Sound effects (tape record): creaky bones, wind and rain rattling windows, car doors (click, clack), feet in garden (crinch, crunch), voices whisper (murmur, mutter, shhhh), eyes peeping through keyholes (squint, peek, peer), turning doorknobs (twist, test, rattle), knuckles drummed on door frames (knick, knock, knock), fist beat on doors & voices shouted (yell, clatter, bang, bang, bang), dog barks, growls, voices--"It's only us! Let us in! Let us in!", "Surprise!", Family "Happy Birthday".

Group storytelling. This activity allows children to divide up the story and thereby experience its sections and characters.

Heine, Helme. The Most Wonderful Egg in the World. New York: Atheneum, 1983.

The king is asked to negotiate a dispute among three hens as to who is the most beautiful. He decrees that whoever lays the most unusual egg he will crown a princess. They all lay unusual eggs and are crowned.

Linear pattern of three: Dotty (perfect egg), Stalky (biggest egg), and Plumy (square egg with color).

Hogrogian, Nonny. One Fine Day. New York: Macmillan, 1975.

An old woman cuts off a fox's tail when he steals her milk. The fox then must go through a long series of transactions before the woman will sew it back on again.

Cumulative: Miller (grain) - hen (egg) - peddler (bead) - maiden (jug) - water - field (grass) - cow (milk) - old woman (sews his tail back).

Numeroff, Laura Joffe. If You Give a Mouse a Cookie. New York: Harper and Row, 1985.

Relating the cycle of requests a mouse is likely to make after you give him a cookie takes the reader through a young boy's day.

Circular plot (retell with objects): cookie, glass of milk, straw, napkin, mirror, nail scissors, broom, mop, nap (box, pillow, blanket), story, pictures, paper and crayons, draw, pen (sign name), tape, cookie.

Nesting dolls. This method of retelling involves using objects as each image is introduced in the story. Students can retell a story by drawing characters or events of a story on tagboard rings.

Brown, Ruth. The Big Sneeze. New York: Lothrop, 1985.

A farmer sneezes a fly off his nose and causes havoc in the barnyard.

Nesting dolls: fly, farmer, spider in web, sparrow, cat, dog, rats, hens, donkey, wife.

Wood, Audrey. The Napping House. New York: Harcourt, 1984.

In this cumulative tale, a wakeful flea on top of a pile of sleeping creatures causes a commotion with just one bite.

Nesting dolls: house, bed, granny, child, dog, cat, mouse, flea.

DeRegniers, Beatrice Schenk. Waiting for Mama. New York: Clarion, 1984.

Amy's wait outside the grocery store for her mother seems interminable, and she spends the time imagining the rest of her life.

Nesting dolls: Amy on a bench with a doll, Mrs. Gordon, Mr. Kasky, John Clark and Mother, marriage, lots of children, dogs and puppies, grandmother, grandchildren, old lady, mother with groceries.

Counting rope. This traditional method of storytelling involves retelling a story using a rope with knots representing each part of the story.

Martin Jr., Bill & Archambault, John. Knots on a Counting Rope. New York: Holt, 1987.

Boy-Strength-of-Blue-Horses and his grandfather reminisce about the young boy's birth, his first horse, and an exciting horse race.

Pieces: Grandfather riding his horse in the wind, baby, two great blue horses, naming ceremony, birth of rainbow, training rainbow, the race, a counting rope.

Polacco, Patricia. Thunder Cake. New York: Philomel Books, 1990. Through baking a cake, the Russian grandmother dispels her grandchild's fear of thunderstorms.

Pieces: eggs, milk, chocolate, sugar, flour, 3 over ripe tomatoes, strawberries, set table, frosted cake, fork.

Hutchins, Pat. The Wind Blew. New York: Macmillan, 1974. A rhymed tale describes the antics of a capricious wind.

Pieces: an inside out umbrella, blue balloon, top hat, kite, shirt, hanky, wig, letters, flag, scarves, newspapers.

### Retelling Through Writing

A story can be retold in written form. This can be successfully accomplished alone or with a partner.

Briggs, Raymond. The Snowman. New York: Random House, 1978. When a snowman comes to life, a little boy invites him home and in return is taken on a flight above beautiful cities and strange lands.

Brown, Craig. The Patchwork Farmer. New York: Greenwillow Books, 1989. After ripping his overalls again and again in the course of his daily work, a farmer ends up with a colorful patchwork pair.

Shaw, Charles G. It Looked Like Spilt Milk. New York: Harper & Row, 1947.

Large white blots in the sky assume many different shapes.

### Retelling Through Illustrating

The elements of a story can be retold visually.

Group illustrating. Children can participate in a group illustration of a story by first identifying the major sections and then each illustrating one of them.

Martin Jr., Bill & Archambault, John. Chicka Chicka Boom Boom. New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 1989.

An alphabet rhyme/chant relates what happens when the whole alphabet tries to climb a coconut tree.

Brown, Ruth. A Dark Dark Tale. New York: Dial Press, 1981.

Journeying through a dark, dark house, a black cat surprises the only inhabitant of the abandoned residence.

Fair, Sylvia. The Bedspread. New York: Morrow, 1982.

Two elderly sisters embroider their childhood home on either end of a white bedspread, as each remembers it with results that surprise them.

Mapmaking. Students can transpose the different scenes of a story into a map. Students then can manipulate pop up characters along this path while retelling the story.

Galdone, Paul. The Gingerbread Boy. New York: Seabury, 1975.

The gingerbread boy eludes the hungry grasp of everyone he meets until he happens upon a fox more clever than he.

Marshall, James. Red Riding Hood. New York: Dial, 1987.

A little girl meets a hungry wolf in the forest on her way to visit her grandmother.

Rosen, Michael. We're Going on a Bear Hunt. New York: Macmillan, 1989.

Brave bear hunters go through many obstacles before they encounter the bear who forces a headlong retreat.

### Retelling Through Acting.

Retelling through creative dramatics helps children recreate the characters and the plot through dialogue and action.

Puppets. Puppets, whether purchased or self-constructed, lend themselves well to story retelling. Students are especially comfortable retelling a story when attention is diverted from themselves to their puppet.

Gag, Wanda. Millions of Cats. New York: Coward-McCann, 1928.  
In selecting a pet cat, an old man and old woman encounter millions and billions and trillions of cats.

Stick puppets: an old lady, an old man, one little cat, and as many other cats as you want.

Marshall, James. Goldilocks and the Three Bears. New York: Dial, 1988.

Three bears return home from a walk to find that a visitor has invaded their home.

Shadow puppets: Goldilocks, Papa Bear, Mama Bear, Baby Bear, 3 bowls, 3 chairs, and 3 beds.

Lobel, Arnold. Frog and Toad All Year. New York: Harper & Row, 1976.

Five enchanting tales about the friendship of Frog and Toad depict the loveable creatures engaging in various activities throughout the seasons of the year.

Sack puppets: Frog and Toad.

Dramatization. Dramatization allows students to become active participants in a retelling. This type of play allows students to take on the roles in the story.

Kimmel, Eric. Anansi and the Moss-Covered Rock. New York: Scholastic Inc., 1988.



Anansi the spider finds a magic rock that helps him trick the animals of the forest out of their food until Little Bush Deer decides it is time for Anansi to learn a lesson.

Characters: Anansi, Lion, Elephant, Rhinoceros, Hippopotamus, Giraffe, Zebra, Little Bush Deer and a moss covered rock.

Hutchins, Pat. The Doorbell Rang. New York: Clarion, 1987.  
Each time the doorbell rings, there are more people who have come to share Ma's wonderful cookies and less for each one to eat until the grandmother comes to the rescue.

Characters and props: Ma, children, table, cookies, Grandma.

Burningham, John. Mr. Gumpy's Outing. New York: Holt, 1971.  
Even though the animal passengers on Mr. Gumpy's boat do not follow directions and tip the boat over, Mr. Gumpy is still their friend and invites them for tea.

Characters: Mr. Gumpy, boy, girl, rabbit, cat, dog, pig, sheep, chickens, calf, goat.

Masks. Masks are a prop that students can make themselves.

They can draw the character's face on poster board, cut it out, and hold it to their face while retelling the story.

Langstaff, John. Oh, A-Hunting We Will Go. New York: Macmillan, 1974.  
This story illustrates the humorous and nonsensical verses of the popular folk song, Oh, A-Hunting We Will Go.

Masks: fox, lamb, goat, bear, whale, snake, mouse, pig, skunk, armadillo, fish, and brontosaurus.

Mayer, Marianna. Beauty and the Beast. New York: Macmillan, 1978.  
Through her great capacity to love, a kind and beautiful maid releases a handsome prince from the spell that has made him an ugly beast.

Masks: Beauty, Beast, Prince, Merchant, 3 brothers, 2 sisters.

Sendak, Maurice. Where the Wild Things Are. New York: Harper and Row, 1963.

A mischievous little boy, sent to bed without his supper, sails to the land of the wild things where he becomes their king.

Masks: Max, monsters.

#### Summary

Retelling stories enhances a child's language abilities. Many enjoyable activities create active participation in the language processes, therefore nurturing emerging literacy. These activities allow each child to actually own and be in control of his/her learning of language.

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