

---

---

# Reflective Retelling: Perceptions of Preservice Teachers and Implications for Instruction

*Marie F. Doan Holbein, Jane Brady Matanzo*

---

Melinda: The children wanted to see if the teacher slept in school. The teacher's name was Mrs. Marsh and the kids were Molly and Gary.

Carl: Were there any more children?

Melinda: Yes, but I can't remember their names.

This exchange between Carl and Melinda represents a number of retelling episodes which occurred during a reading methods course field experience for preservice teachers. Two university professors developed and incorporated a model into their reading methods course for training preservice teachers in the use of retelling as an assessment tool and a teaching strategy. The preservice teachers used guided responses to explore the children's comprehension of elements of story structure. Questions such as "Were there any more children?", "What happened?", and "Is that the end?" helped the children to focus upon time, plot, setting, characters, problems, resolutions, story beginning, and story ending (Gipe, 1995; Graves, Watts, & Graves, 1994; Ollia & Mayfield, 1992; Searfoss & Readence, 1994).

## **Theoretical Framework for the Model**

Research suggests that retelling is an effective teaching and assessment tool for improving comprehension of story structure (Gambrell,

Pfeiffer, & Wilson, 1985; Morrow, 1985b). Retelling facilitates general comprehension, literal and interpretive reasoning, and listening skills (Graves et al., 1994; Gunning, 1996; Mason & Au, 1990; May, 1990). As a teaching strategy, retelling enhances retention by allowing children to translate into their own words and experiences the meaning they derive from text (Mason & Au, 1990; Tierney, Readence, & Dishner, 1995; Valencia, Hiebert & Afflerbach, 1994). As an assessment technique, retelling offers valuable insight into children's language development, their use of decoding strategies, and their interest in reading, (Brown & Cambourne, 1987; Gunning, 1996; May, 1990; Ollila & Mayfield, 1992; Searfoss & Readence, 1994; Valencia et al., 1994).

Children select, organize, summarize, and paraphrase information when they retell from narrative or expository text. As the level of their comfort with the text grows, children develop confidence in both their reading and speaking abilities (Brown & Cambourne, 1987). Morrow (1985b) noted in her study of kindergartners that children had difficulty recalling beginnings, endings, and sequences of events during retelling. Many children did not even appear to know how to engage in a retelling. She suggests that children be given opportunities to practice with guided retellings which focus upon elements of story structure (Morrow, 1985a).

Responses to both guided and unguided retellings may be documented and analyzed with verbatim transcriptions, checklists, point systems, or rubrics (Gipe, 1995; Gunning, 1996; Miller, 1995; Tierney et al., 1995; Valencia et al., 1994). Tierney et al suggest that rubrics can be constructed to elicit the following information: (a) generalizations beyond text; (b) summarizing statements; (c) major ideas and supporting details; (d) supplementations; and (e) coherence, completeness, and comprehensibility (p. 518).

Given the opportunity to practice retelling regularly with guided prompting, children appear to grow in their ability to develop and retain information related to a sense of story structure. The apparent transfer of the cognitive strategies used for comprehension during a retelling to the "reading of subsequent text" is an added benefit (Gambrell et al., 1985, p. 219).

### **Description of the Reading Methods Course Retelling Model**

The initial phase of the model occurred in the university classroom where preservice teachers developed their skills in administering and interpreting an informal reading inventory. They viewed a video of an inventory session and engaged in trial administrations using taped recordings of children reading from the *Basic Reading Inventory* (Johns,

1994). Preservice teachers supported each other by sharing and discussing their experiences as they explored the various techniques for the effective administration of reading inventories. Using retelling for measuring comprehension was one such technique.

The second phase of the model focused upon an actual case study of one particular child who was assigned to each of the preservice teachers. The basis for the case study consisted of administering the *John's Informal Reading Inventory* where retelling was used to measure oral and silent comprehension and developing retelling strategy lessons.

Throughout the term, preservice teachers and the university professors held information conferences to discuss the retelling experiences with the children. In phase three of the course, the preservice teachers responded in writing to a questionnaire that posed questions regarding the importance of retelling. They shared their perceptions of levels of comfort for themselves and their children during retelling. The preservice teachers also offered suggestions for preparing children for retelling, and proposed methods for assessing comprehension from retelling.

**A case study example.** Carl and Melinda are fictional names for actual participants who represented 36 preservice teachers and their assigned children in the project. Their interaction typifies that of most of the pairs of preservice teachers and their assigned children and serves as a model for discussion. All of the children who participated were in grades 3 to 5.

Melinda's instructional reading level as derived from the Informal Reading Inventory was determined to be between first and second grade. Carl further assessed Melinda's comprehension of the passages in the inventory by having her retell passages as suggested in the inventory. Carl asked Melinda to read and retell the story, *My Teacher Sleeps at School*, (Weiss, 1984) and he recorded Melinda's retelling with a verbatim transcript. The *Story (Book) Retelling Ability Checklist* (Miller, 1995) was used to record the elements of story structure derived from the session. Information recorded using this checklist highlighted the following elements of narrative: setting, theme, plot episodes, resolution, and sequence (copies of the transcript and the checklist are available upon request).

The checklist included instructions for calculating a numerical index in order to compare Melinda's earned score to a best possible score of 10 points. The points were assigned for each element included

in the retelling. For example, one point was allocated when the student began the story which implied or stated the setting, and one point also was given for each plot episode recalled. Ratios were used to describe the relationship between earned points and possible points for recalling the number of plot episodes and characters in the story. Total scores, therefore, sometimes included decimals.

After recording Melinda's retelling, Carl determined that Melinda had not recalled all of the characters in the story nor the total number of plot episodes.

She also had difficulty retelling the story in proper sequence, thus reducing her score from a total possible of 10 to 8.1 points. Carl's subjective observations regarding Melinda's demeanor during the retelling were favorable and indicated that she enjoyed the activity. He remarked that Melinda gained proficiency in relating details and sequencing events as the story unfolded.

Carl commented in a conference with his university professor that it was difficult to avoid giving sequence clues during prompting when he asked questions such as "What happened next?" Melinda's imprecise reporting of sequences led to inaccurate perceptions regarding cause and effect. Carl was concerned that his prompting was providing Melinda with clues which may have distorted his analysis of her ability to recall events in sequence. He found that Melinda remembered introductory and ending elements of the story with greater facility than those which occurred in the middle of the story. Carl remarked that as Melinda became more familiar with retelling she gained confidence and accuracy. He also reflected that his own experience with the text contributed to his level of comfort with retelling as he worked with Melinda.

Carl suggested practicing retelling with children to help them develop a level of comfort and confidence (Morrow, 1985b). His discomfort with prompting implies that teachers need to be familiar with the content of the passages they ask children to read. More important, teachers need to practice asking thoughtful and probing questions.

**Preservice teachers' responses to the questionnaire.** Preservice teachers were asked to complete a questionnaire at the conclusion of the methods course. A major purpose of the reflective questionnaire was to enable the professors to discern the preservice teachers' acceptance of retelling as an effective strategy.

The first question asked the preservice teachers to describe the level of comfort exhibited by the children during retelling. Preservice teachers noted that the children's comfort increased as they experienced retelling several selections. Seventy-eight percent of the preservice teachers remarked that their case study children gradually became comfortable, and frequently eager, to retell passages read. The preservice teachers felt that the children were helped if they knew before the selection was read that they would need to retell it. Positive feedback by the listener seemed to be beneficial once the children finished retelling a selection.

The second question addressed the preservice teachers' level of comfort with retelling. The comfort of the preservice teachers increased proportionally to the children's comfort with repeated exposure to the retelling process. Seventy-eight percent of the preservice teachers noted that the children became comfortable and looked forward to retelling. Eighty-eight percent claimed that by the conclusion of their diagnostic assignments in the schools, they had become comfortable with recording and evaluating children's retellings. Six percent expressed a need for additional experiences with retelling. They were apprehensive and uncomfortable because they felt that the children did not like the activity, and they felt the process was too subjective as their findings were not reinforced by any other evaluators. The preservice teachers were insecure with their ability to make prompting decisions.

The third question solicited the preservice teachers' opinions regarding the importance of retelling. Seventy-five percent of the preservice teachers responded that retelling aided comprehension. They supported retelling as an assessment tool and perceived it as a measure that empowered children and respected their thinking and interpretations. The preservice teachers observed that retelling required children to organize main ideas and recall details of the story. They also noted that retelling promoted retention because children had to think about what they read in order to paraphrase the text.

Twenty-five percent of the preservice teachers indicated that "sometimes" retelling is important. They noted that children should only be asked to retell a story if they feel comfortable, regardless of the fact that retelling may aid comprehension. Other "sometimes" responses suggested that retelling be used only if the children's ability to comprehend is in question and the decision to use retelling should depend ultimately on a teacher's decision about each individual child.

The fourth question asked preservice teachers to describe how they would prepare children in their own classrooms for retelling. A

majority of the preservice teachers suggested modeling by the classroom teacher. The second most noted preparation technique was for teachers to practice prompting and questioning with the children.

The fifth question requested preservice teachers to describe how they would evaluate retelling. They suggested checklists with clearly stated expectations and rubrics with a variety of stated criteria which document a range of retelling abilities. Preservice teachers strongly felt that children would be increasingly at ease and successful in their retelling if it could become a daily expectation in the elementary classroom.

**Discussion of questionnaire responses.** Comfort for both teachers and children seems to be related to practice. One way to ensure practice is for professors to provide opportunities for retelling after assigned readings in methods courses so the preservice teachers can more fully understand the retelling task. Indicating at the beginning of the methods class that retelling will be required might also be helpful. Preservice teachers need to practice giving instructions and evaluating the retelling of several children before they are asked to conduct an entire case study.

Preservice teachers should have the opportunity to practice retelling with at least two peers who will critique the retelling according to a given checklist or rubric. By having two or more preservice teachers listen to a retelling, those evaluating will have the opportunity to compare and discuss ratings. Such cross comparisons should be helpful when the teacher must decide whether the retelling was excellent, satisfactory, or unsatisfactory.

Preservice teachers should be encouraged to read research findings and other professional literature on the impact that retelling has on comprehension, especially as retelling influences retention. Knowledge about retelling research and recommended strategies needs to be emphasized in previous reading and language arts courses.

Preservice teachers should discuss and decide what information should be related in a retelling. Modeling by professors using evaluative tools such as checklists and rubrics for setting expectations in their own courses would expose preservice teachers to the practical applications of these forms of assessment.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

In general, the perceptions of the preservice teachers in this project indicated that retelling was well accepted and seen as a helpful diagnos-

tic tool to gain specific information on exactly how children comprehended and interpreted a story. On the basis of the preservice teachers' experiences with their case studies, their personal reflections, and their responses to the questionnaire, the following recommendations for refining the use of retelling as an assessment tool and teaching strategy are offered:

1. Model retelling for preservice teachers'
2. Provide opportunities in methods courses for preservice teachers to practice retelling and to evaluate the quality of both their own and peer retellings;
3. Encourage preservice teachers to practice retelling with several children;
4. Make professional literature and research findings pertaining to retelling available to preservice teachers;
5. Encourage the use of retelling across the curriculum for both instructional and diagnostic purposes; and
6. Collaborate with inservice teachers on ways that might use retelling with their children first so preservice teachers might observe the implementation of retelling in actual classrooms.

As cited in the literature, retelling can serve as a window for obtaining a more accurate view of comprehension. Retelling can be used both as an instructional and an assessment tool and should be a component of a preservice teacher's training. An early introduction and a repeated use of retelling in methods courses would help preservice teachers attain an ease with retelling that may encourage them to use this technique on a regular basis in their future classrooms, and also ultimately benefit their children.

## References

- Brown, H., & Cambourne, B. (1987). *Read and retell*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Gambrell, L. B., Pfeiffer, W. R., & Wilson, R. M. (1985). The effects of retelling upon reading comprehension and recall of text information. *The Reading Teacher*, 41, 892-896.

- Gipe, J. P. (1995). *Corrective reading techniques for classroom teachers* (3rd ed.). Scottsdale, AZ: Gorsuch Scarisbrick.
- Graves, M. F., Watts, S. M., & Graves, B. B. (1994). *Essentials of classroom teaching elementary reading methods*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Gunning, T. G. (1996). *Creating reading instruction for all children* (2nd ed.). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Johns, J. L. (1994). *Basic reading inventory* (6th ed.). Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt.
- Mason, J. M., & Au, K. H. (1990). *Reading instruction for today* (2nd ed.). Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman/Little, Brown Higher Education.
- May, F. B. (1990). *Reading as communication* (4th ed.). New York: Macmillan.
- Miller, W. H. (1995). *Alternative assessment techniques for reading and writing*. West Nyack, New York: The Center for Applied Research in Education.
- Morrow, L. M. (1985a). Reading and retelling stories: Strategies for emergent readers. *The Reading Teacher*, 38 871-875.
- Morrow, L. M. (1985b). Retelling stories: A strategy for improving young children's comprehension, concept of story structure, and oral language complexity. *The Elementary School Journal*, 85(5). 647-660.
- Ollila, L. O., & Mayfield, M. I. (1992). *Emerging literacy: Preschool, kindergarten, and primary grades*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Searfoss, L. W., & Readence, J. E. (1994). *Helping children learn to read* (3rd ed.). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Tierney, R. J., Readence, J. E., & Dishner, E. K. (1995). *Reading strategies and practices* (4th ed.). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Valencia, S. W., Hiebert, E. H., & Afflerbach, P. P. (1994). *Authentic reading assessment: Practices and possibilities*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Weiss, L. (1984). *My teacher sleeps at school*. New York: Viking Press.