The Power of Read and Retell

Tanya Mowbray

Background
Early in 2009, at a meeting with fellow year level teachers, we discussed the read and retell process. We questioned how effectively students were completing retells, as the results saw did not always demonstrate the students’ abilities. We then questioned the retell process as an effective assessment tool. Following this meeting I decided to research the read and retell strategy to answer those questions and discover how to use it effectively within the classroom to maximise its potential with all students.

Retells are used from Kindergarten through to Year 6 at my school. Twice a year teachers are asked to do a deep analysis of a child’s retelling as part of their assessments. The information gathered is used to support mapping indicators on First Steps Reading and Writing Maps, which in turn informs planning for individual needs. It seems to be the practice that narrative texts, in particular, are used for this purpose. My research involved reading Hazel Brown and Brian Cambourne’s book titled ‘Read and Retell’, trialing retells with different text forms, presenting the findings to my staff and having discussions with my principal. This article shows the process I went through and am continuing to go through as I discover the rich world of retells.

Language use
Brown and Cambourne (1987) argue that Read and Retell is an excellent strategy to use in order to allow children to transform a text into their own words, taking only what is really understood. They observe further that the value for children lies in the fact that not only are they retelling information, they are learning to write in a particular genre.

Retells use a broad range of literacy skills. I always believed that retells were a useful tool, but after reading the following list of comprehensive benefits (Brown & Cambourne, 1987) I am surprised that I wasn’t making greater use of this strategy. So, read on and be ready for an overwhelming sense of urgency to start using retells more effectively today.

Retells involve participants in …

- Intensive reading, writing, talking and listening around a central theme, involving collaborative use of the language components
- Active engagement with the text through multiple readings and re-readings of at least three different texts: the original text, the participant’s and then peer retellings
- Predicting the meaning of the text and then concentrating on the meaning and comprehension of the text when it is read to check if their prediction was accurate
- Literal recall of events, characters, main points, stylistic devices and text structure
- Different cognitive activities including paraphrasing, selecting, organising and summarising information and using stylistic devices
- Conventional spelling and punctuation
- Sharing and comparing their work with a peer and by doing this, continually shifting their focus, from meaning at the whole story level, to the individual word and interpretation of phrases
- Evaluation of other people’s use of language and interpretation of meaning
- Giving and receiving responses through reflection and discussion
- Learning the language and the skills for talking about written language …on a range of text forms such as: fairy tales, fables, myths, mysteries, poetry, procedural text, expository text, diagrams and maps.

My challenge in Year 3 was to use retells to teach different text forms as well as assess student knowledge of them. I also wanted to present my research to other teachers to encourage them to make the most of this strategy.

The procedure
Our school gives teachers a clear guideline of the steps involved in a Read and Retell session.
1. Immerse students in the genre to be used in the Read and Retell activity (this could happen in days/weeks ahead)
2. Teacher selects text (not too long)
3. Show students title of new text (maybe with illustrations on cover too). Ask students to predict (in writing if able) what they think the text will be about and list some vocabulary they would expect to encounter in this new text.
4. Working in pairs or small table groups they share predictions and comment on another person’s predictions.
5. Teacher reads text/story. Students again share in pairs or small groups discussing their predictions in light of what the teacher has just read. They make observations in regard to similarities and differences, and discuss anything that puzzles them or reminds them of connections to their own lives or with other texts/stories they have read.
6. Teacher may reread text and or students can read the text themselves as often as they wish.
7. Students now set aside the text and write a retelling of it in their own words. Encourage them to tell the story/text as if they are telling someone who has not heard it before. They do not need to memorise it or cover every detail but to tell it in their own language as they remember it.
8. They will finish this at different times so have some quiet reading or something similar for some to go on with while others complete their retell.
9. Students share their retellings in pairs. They discuss similarities and differences. Then they pick something they like in their partner’s retelling that they could ‘borrow’ and use in their own writing.
10. A few students may like to share their retelling with the whole class in a Writers’ Circle.
   When retells are used as an assessment tool (and they give so much valuable information), the next three steps are added to the process.
11. Collect the retells and analyse the data (my school uses the headings in the table below).
12. Use data collected to plan for individuals, small groups and whole class (our teacher action part).
13. We also add what we have learnt about each student’s reading and writing to our ongoing First Steps Maps of Development.

### Read and Retell in Year 3

Our inquiry unit was about space so I chose a factual text, ‘Space: the New Frontier’, a report about the first person on the moon. When retelling the report genre it was important to immerse the students in factual texts before the retelling. My classroom was full of non-fiction books related to space, many of which had been brought in by the students themselves.

Students need to be involved in lots of discussion where they are using the vocabulary associated with the topic so they can develop their understandings, which in turn will build their confidence. Prior to this retelling the students had been involved in an astronomy night, oral language group sharing, research (using books, newspapers and the internet), technology projects, art and craft designs, home learning tasks and whole group discussions. These varied activities had supported students in using the vocabulary and understanding concepts related to the inquiry unit. Their confidence and enthusiasm was evident in the classroom and I was informed by many parents that they saw this at home in their eagerness to share their newly acquired knowledge with ‘Did you know?’ lead-ins.

### Analysis of student responses

Factual retells gave my students the opportunity to demonstrate their understanding of the text. Analysis of the retell data provided evidence of the students’ clear understanding of the meaning of the report; correct sequencing of text and most including the vital information. The spelling and punctuation used were adequate and their ability to generalise was developing. These retells demonstrated that the students needed to improve skills in using conventions and developing metacognitive thinking. Therefore, I followed this up with specific teaching focused on these aspects. The full success of this retell wasn’t fully realised until weeks after the event when the students were still recalling and sharing facts they had discovered in the report.

Deep understanding enabled them to confidently articulate the report in their own words while still maintaining the report genre. For example, the time and effort put into discussions with and between the students is vital to develop this deep understanding. There was a great deal of rich talk occurring during the retelling process as the students shared, commented, questioned, made connections, compared and discussed. Excerpts of student responses:

- ‘They landed on the moon perfectly.’
- ‘Neil Armstrong opened the hatch and slowly went down the ladder.’

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<tr>
<th>Analysis of Response</th>
<th>Teacher Action</th>
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<td>Meaning</td>
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<td>Structure</td>
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<td>- organisation</td>
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<td>- sequence</td>
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<td>Conventions</td>
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<td>- infer/generalise</td>
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<td>- predict</td>
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<td>Specific teaching/ follow up required</td>
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They were two clever scientists and they collected samples and set science equipment up. 'From then on space was the place for exploring.' 'And so that brings more excitement and adventure to the world.'

The sharing and comparing of retells is a powerful tool that enables students to use language in complex ways. I believe students need opportunities to share their writing so they see its purpose. Questioning and giving feedback to each other is extremely valuable and assisted the students in developing deeper understandings of the information, the report genre and writing skills.

**First Steps**
As a First Steps facilitator, I was drawn to look at the First Steps resources to see what information they could shed on my research into Retells. They provide a variety of approaches to the way teachers can incorporate retells into daily teaching and learning activities. These approaches are listed below under the phase names.

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<th>Experimental/Early</th>
<th>Transitional/Conventional</th>
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<td>* Written to Written</td>
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<td>* Oral to Drawing</td>
<td>* Diagram to Written</td>
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<td>* Oral to Drama</td>
<td>* Drama to Written</td>
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<td>* Written to Oral</td>
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<td>* Written to Drawing</td>
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**Conclusion**
I have learnt that read and retells need to be:

- Taught and used as an ongoing strategy in the classroom to enhance literacy skills
- Utilised as a tool for teaching different text forms

When using read and retells with students I will:

- Consider what the purpose is for each retell
- Use the retelling procedure with a variety of text forms
- Plan a balance between fiction and non-fiction texts
- Plan a balance between the more predictable and the less predictable texts
- Give each text form sufficient time and exposure by looking at a particular form for a few weeks
- Tell the students what you are looking for so they are aware and it is not a test or a teacher’s secret
- Take time to analyse and evaluate the retells appropriately

Remember that students need to learn the actual process of the read and retell strategy but the main objective is to give them the opportunity to demonstrate their understanding of the text (both comprehension and form) and develop their writing proficiency.

I wish everyone many ‘wow’ moments as you have fun exploring the power of the humble Read and Retell.

**References**


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purposes, to problem solve, make inferences and imagine. The children had opportunities to talk like a teacher, or talk like a baby and understand the social uses of language in context. The play boxes addressed the functional uses of language for a range of purposes, language for thinking and learning as well as phonology, vocabulary and syntax. The success of the play boxes with books depended on the teacher modelling and extending the children’s oral language.

**References**


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Susan Hill is an Associate Professor at the University of South Australia. She teaches courses on early literacy and early childhood curriculum. Her research interests are language and literacy prior to school, the development of reading and writing and social inclusion.