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## **The Effect of Props on Story Retells in the Classroom**

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### **Abstract**

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The purpose of this investigation was to determine the effect of props on children's narrative retells. Forty-two children in two comparable K/1 classrooms heard and practiced the same stories over eight weeks. This study found that the props had a positive effect on the children's use of descriptive language, but there was no effect on the number of story grammar elements or cohesive devices used, nor for the length and complexity of the stories. Results support a balanced literacy program where children practice retelling stories with and without props.

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### **Introduction**

The power of narrative is derived from its ability to mirror our life space and in so doing to create meaningful connections. Our stories celebrate our uniqueness and link us to diverse cultures within the global community (Bruner, 1990; , 1984). Researchers studying children as young as 4 have found that narrative provides a purposeful and engaging context for supporting the development of oral language, literacy, and concept formation as well as cultural understanding (Applebee, 1978; Heath, 1982; Hedberg & Westby, 1993; Morrow, 1985; Vygotsky, 1962).

Narratives can take different forms, ranging from recounting one's personal experiences to retelling stories written by others. When studying a child's abilities to retell a story, one must first choose a way to present the story to the child. While this could be done orally and/or visually using pictures or objects, no one presentation method has been found to produce the best retell. The purpose of this

study was to determine the effect of one presentation method, the use of props, on children's story retells.

## Literature Review

Narrative language is different from conversational oral language as it requires the story teller to use explicit vocabulary and more complex sentence structures. Listening to and telling narratives provide an authentic context for the development of these constructions – both contextual and decontextual. Children exposed to re-readings of favorite stories will often incorporate some of the story language in their retells or story adaptations. Working with preschoolers in a previous study (Stadler & Ward, 2005), the authors were treated to retells incorporating such story language as “once upon a time” and “happily ever after,” and also to new vocabulary expressed by the children after hearing the stories, such as “perched,” “charming,” and “kingdom.” Stories allow learners to hear and practice the rhythms and patterns of language, including the imagery expressed through similes and metaphors (Jalongo, 2003; Malo & Bullard, 2000; Palmer, Harshbarger, & Koch, 2001). The syntactic conventions of present, past and future tenses (Fox, 1993) and a variety of temporal connectives such as “when,” “so,” and “while” have also been noted in the retells of children indicating that retelling is a strategy for language exploration and application (Isbell, Sobol, Lindauer, & Lowrance, 2004).

Researchers in education have found that narratives are often bridges to literacy by helping students develop skills for reading (Catts, Hogan, & Fey, 2003; Griffin, Hemphill, Camp, & Wolf, 2004; Hedberg & Westby, 1993; Malo and Bullard, 2000). Stories also actively engage learners in the literacy process. Roney (1996) notes that story telling builds on oral language learning by linking language to the structure, vocabulary, and comprehension required for literacy. Based on research with at-risk 4-year-olds, Paul and Smith (1993) found that narrative skill is one of the best predictors of later school success and Abbott and McCarthey (2001) correlated well-formed oral narratives with literary achievement in the first grade.

Oral narratives also provide a meaningful context for concept development. Using the structure of narrative, we perform the cognitive process of sequencing in the temporal order of beginning, middle, and end to show connectiveness while at the same time prioritizing significant events (Applebee, 1978; Gergen & Gergen, 1986; Jalongo, 2003; Malo & Bullard, 2000; Westby, 1999). In addition, narrative retells are a forum for exploring cause and effect. A well-formed story is not a recounted list of activities, but a reflection of actions and reactions implying that planning and implementation leads to results and that these results can be predicted. Also, retelling a narrative provides an avenue for learners to understand characterization by

developing theory of mind, the awareness that there are other perspectives besides our own (Hutto, as cited in Herman, 2008; Premack & Woodruff, 1978). Exposure to story can support the concept that changes occur in characters and that they will handle situations in different ways depending on their personalities and motives (Malo & Bullard, 2000; Palmer et al., 2001).

Moreover, narrative offers an authentic context for learners to explore their own culture by introducing possible characters and their interweaving roles as they experience conflicts and find appropriate ways to problem solve. Cultural morals and values are introduced as characters cope with human dilemmas (McIntyre, 1984). Oral narratives also open windows to other cultures and support cross-cultural understanding as stories are shared (Palmer et al., 2001).

Different forms of narrative can be used to support the development of oral language, literacy, concept formation, and cultural understanding. Narratives range from the earliest recounts children co-construct with communication partners about shared experiences (Hughes, McGillivray, & Schmidek, 1997) to elaborate stories told by professional storytellers. Some stories, such as personal narratives, are based on one's own experiences and occur frequently in the everyday conversations of young children (McCabe, Bliss, Barra, & Bennett, 2008; Preece, 1987). These personal narratives are thought to be easiest for younger children to tell because they are integral to their social interactions while stories in the fictional narrative form are more challenging and encourage the use of decontextualized language. Some fictional narratives are original, meaning that one creates a story from one's imagination, whereas other fictional narratives are retells. Retells require hearing or reading someone else's story and then telling it. Fictional retells require memory skills and knowledge of story schema, most typically story grammar components. Fictional story retells are frequently used in the study of children's narrative skills as they allow the researcher to standardize the task by using the same story – something not possible with either personal narratives or original fictional narratives.

Retells also allow one to standardize the analysis by using story grammar components. Research has found that retells result in longer stories that contain more story grammar elements than original stories (Merritt & Lyles, 1989). Retells are also useful as they are predictive of oral language development (Liles, 1993) and literacy success (Paul & Smith, 1993). This may be due to the presence of literate language features (Greenhalgh & Strong, 2001; Snow, Scarborough, & Burns, 1999) and the same episodic structure as found in fictional literature (Duke & Pearson, 2002).

In evaluating retells, many researchers first determine their length in terms of number of words and sentences and complexity in terms of dependent clauses. Analyses then often focus on the story grammar elements including setting, theme or problem, plot episodes, character plans, attempts and consequences, and resolution

and ending (Irwin & Mitchell, 1983; Morrow, 2005; Stein & Glenn, 1979). Some of these elements are considered optional, with problem, attempts, consequences and resolutions obligatory (Glenn & Stein, 1980). Researchers also use holistic scoring procedures to judge the quality of stories. Moss (1997) adapted Irwin and Mitchell's (1983) retell scale to a spectrum of 1-5 with the richest retells being ones in which the "student includes all main ideas and supporting details; sequences properly; infers beyond the text; relates text to own life; understands text organization; summarizes; gives opinion and justifies it; may ask additional questions; very cohesive and complete retelling" (p. 4). In other words, the reteller has identified with the character showing a grasp of theory of mind, can explain cause and effect, and goes beyond the text to draw on life experiences. The use of the term "cohesive" implies that the storyteller uses devices to hold the text together, although this is not detailed on either Moss's (1997) or Morrow's (2005) retell assessment or in the work of Isbell et al. (2004) who value retells for the story conventions and comprehension they reveal. Goodman (1982) used retells to both promote and assess comprehension; she suggests that through retells, the reader "can try out ideas, suggest events, regroup, self-correct, and keep presenting" (p. 306).

Hughes et al. (1997) suggest that once one has analyzed an oral narrative globally or on a macro level to determine the narrative level and story grammar knowledge, it is useful to examine the organization of the narrative on a micro level to assess how the narrator uses language to present his/her story. They also suggest that the microstructure can be viewed in terms of cohesion analysis, grammatical unit analysis, and lexical diversity. A specific type of lexical diversity has been documented in the narratives of children, the use of literate language features such as conjunctions, elaborated noun phrases, mental and linguistic verbs, and adverbs (Greenhalgh & Strong, 2001; Westby, 1999). Thus, one can conclude that well-told fictional narratives are syntactically complex, include obligatory story grammar elements, are cohesive, and contain literate language.

The method by which a story is presented to the child can affect how the story is retold and which of the above components will be included. Researchers have presented stories orally or orally paired with visual stimuli such as pictures, movies, videotapes, or with tangible props such as puppets, costumes, or dolls. Soundy (1993) recommends toy props as an effective tool for actively involving preschool and kindergarten students in retelling story events. Her findings lend support to the work of Cavaletti (1983) and Berryman (1991) who pioneered Sunday school curricula for preschool and kindergarten ages where children used play with objects to find meaning in Biblical narratives. Stories were introduced with miniature items and then children were invited to play with the items, draw memorable

parts of the story, and retell the story to each other. This technique has become widely adopted by many religious educators (Hyde, 2004).

Research has not consistently supported any one narrative presentation modality as resulting in better retells. Some studies described better results with audio and videotaped story presentation (Hayes, Kelly, & Mandel, 1986), whereas other studies have supported an auditory-only condition (Pratt & Mackenzie-Keating, 1985; Schneider & Dube, 2005) and still others found no differences (Gazella & Stockman, 2003; Goldman, Varma, & Sharp, 1999; Schneider, 1996) or mixed results by age. For example Schneider and Dube (1997) found that kindergarteners recalled more content with an oral-only presentation, but second graders did equally well when oral story telling was accompanied by pictures. Crowe, Haar, and Agne (2003), in a limited sample of preschoolers, found that costume props resulted in several students telling longer stories with more detail and greater vocabulary diversity, but acknowledged that other children did not show any apparent benefit from having the props. All children in the sample, however, showed improved results in length of story and comprehension when they were allowed to practice retelling.

These varied results may be due, in part, to the fact that these researchers chose different methods of analysis (e.g., length of story, amount of content recalled, number of story grammar units, sequencing and/or reference errors, lexical diversity or semantic roles, syntactic complexity). It is likely that some presentations result in the children's incorporation of certain narrative components and other presentations lend themselves to others. For example, one might expect that children would recall more story content when provided with pictures as prompts. Schneider and Dube (2005) supported that supposition, however only for kindergarteners; second graders recalled the same amount of content in the oral-only condition. One might also expect that if children are given numerous scaffolded practice opportunities that incorporate playing with realistic toys they might include more content, specifically story grammar elements, and descriptive language in their retells.

Two studies made use of toy props with story retells, but neither analyzed the results for story grammar elements, cohesion, and literate language. Newton (1994) engaged 4-to-6-year-olds in retells with half of them hearing a taped story and the other half hearing the tape accompanied by a single picture. This second group of children was also given four objects after hearing the story and asked to arrange them to depict the final situation of the story. He interpreted his results to suggest that the designated picture assisted the children in including a specific story grammar element, character goal, in their retells. Newton (1994) did not, however, speculate on the advantage of the objects. Kim (1999) found that 4- and 5-year-olds told more elaborate stories when they retold a story with dolls compared to pictures,

both immediately after the story had been read to them and again a week later. However, a three-day follow up retell revealed no significant differences between the conditions. It should be noted that the stories were rated on a scale of 1 to 4 based on sequencing and were not analyzed for the presence of story grammar elements, cohesion, nor literate language.

This study was primarily interested in determining whether or not the use of props affected children's story retells. Specific research questions were:

1. Will children who practice retells with miniature props tell longer and more complex stories?
2. Will children who practice retells with miniature props tell stories that include more different story grammar elements?
3. Will children who practice retells with miniature props tell more cohesive stories?
4. Will children who practice retells with miniature props tell stories that include more literate language features?

## Method

### Participants

Forty-two children in two comparable K/1 classrooms in Wisconsin, in the United States, participated in this study. Children were from middle to low socioeconomic homes, all were Caucasian, and all spoke English as their first language. No child was identified with a disability. The teachers for these classrooms also co-taught a kindergarten methods course at the university. In their K/1 classes, they used the same curriculum and support materials and shared a similar teaching pedagogy as noted in frequent in-class observations over a 7-year period by one of the authors.

One classroom was used as the experimental and the other as the control. Each classroom consisted of 12 kindergarteners and 9 first graders. The ratio of males to females in the experimental class was 14 to 7, with a ratio of 12 to 9 in the control class. Children ranged in age from 65 to 88 months in the experimental class and 64 to 90 months in the control class.

### Procedures

#### *Pre-testing*

All children were tested with two vocabulary tests to establish language baselines. The *Expressive One-Word Picture Vocabulary Test (EOWPVT-3)* (Brownell,

2000) required students to label single line drawn pictures. The *Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT-III)* (Dunn & Dunn, 1997) presented four pictures and children were asked to point to the one named by the examiner. Standard scores for each class are listed in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Mean Vocabulary Scores

Group	PPVT-III	EOWPVT
Experimental	108.62 (12.9)	107.14 (14.1)
Control	109.52 (11.0)	109.38 (14.5)

Note: *PPVT-III* = *Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test-III* (Dunn & Dunn, 1997); *EOWPVT* = *Expressive One-Word Picture Vocabulary Test, 3rd edition* (Brownell, 2000).

Standard deviations are noted with parentheses

All children scored within the normal range (within one standard deviation of the mean) on the *EOWPVT* (Brownell, 2000). However, two experimental children and one control child scored in the range of one standard deviation below the mean on the *PPVT*. Analysis of variance revealed no significant differences between groups for the *PPVT* ( $F=.015$ ) or the *EOWPVT* ( $F=.175$ ).

### Intervention

For each of 8 weeks, the same procedures were used in both classrooms with the exception of the use of props. Every Monday both teachers presented the same story to her students. The stories were determined to include all of the targeted features and were developmentally appropriate according to both teachers. The experimental teacher used miniature toy props while reading the story, whereas the control teacher did not. The props were chosen to represent key elements of each story (e.g., main character, problem, events). Several times the children in the experimental classroom created more props to add to the ones collected by the authors. A list of the props used for each book is included in Appendix A. Children in both classrooms drew a simple story map that included characters, setting, problem, and resolution for each story, which was an established practice in both classrooms.

Every Tuesday, a university undergraduate student and one of the authors visited each classroom and invited the children to do a practice retell of Monday's story. The ten or eleven children who were randomly chosen to be videotaped on the preceding Friday all practiced in two separate groups according to their classroom. Other children in the classes were also invited to practice retelling the story, but were not required to do so. The props were used in the experimental



classroom practice sessions, but not in the control classroom practice sessions. The university student and one of the authors used an established protocol (Appendix B) which included re-reading the story, modeling a retelling using the structures desired and facilitating the child's retells with recasting, questions, and probes for missing elements. Story grammar cue cards were also used to provide visual clues for the story grammar elements of characters, setting, goals, conflicts, and resolution. These procedures were used as they are considered best practice by many who provide narrative intervention to young children (Hoggan & Strong, 1994; Kaderavek & Justice, 2004). The same protocol was used for both classrooms, except for the use of the miniature props. The university student and the second author alternated facilitating practice with students from the experimental and control groups during these Tuesday sessions. Procedural reliability checks were performed by the second author, an experienced early childhood professor. During the rest of the week, story retells were an option during free choice time in both classrooms. Props were available with the book and story grammar cue cards in the experimental classroom; the control classroom had the book in a featured location with the story grammar cue cards.

Fridays were spent videotaping randomly chosen individual children retelling Monday's story. A classmate who did not tell a story that day was present as a listener, along with one author and an undergraduate university student video recorder. All retells were video and audio taped at a table just outside the classroom door. Children in the experimental group could see the props, but not handle them during their retells. This procedure of only viewing the props was adopted because in a pilot study, it was found that several students engaged in labeling and describing props rather than retelling the story. The props were not present when the control group was being videotaped. Kindergarteners (both groups) were videotaped on weeks 1, 3, 5, and 7. First graders (both groups) were videotaped on weeks 2, 4, 6, and 8. Each child told two stories and was videotaped once for each story, except for three students who were each absent one day. A total of 81 stories were collected using eight different texts.

### *Analysis*

A communication disorders graduate student who was blind to the research questions and the group assignments transcribed each story from video and audio tapes. The first author also listened to the tapes and checked every transcription for accuracy. Errors were corrected and stories were parsed into C-units using Loban's (1963, 1976) rules. Each story was analyzed for number of words and clauses and story grammar elements (Stein & Glenn, 1979). In addition, correct and incorrect

pronoun references and conjunctions (Halliday & Hasan, 1976) and literate language features (elaborated noun phrases, mental and linguistic verbs, and adverbs) were counted. The authors each first analyzed half of the stories then exchanged transcripts for reliability. All conflicting analyses were discussed until agreement was reached. The authors then chose the four stories that represented all 42 children having told a story. Stories in which a child was absent for the retelling were not included. Appendix A lists all of the stories with the four chosen stories indicated with asterisks.

## Results

The authors were primarily interested in whether or not the use of props affected children's story retells across a variety of measures; thus, data was analyzed for differences between the experimental and control groups. However, the data was also analyzed for potential differences for gender and grade. Analyses included length of retell and complexity, story grammar, cohesion, and literate language features.

### Length of Retell and Complexity

An analysis of length of story retell was accomplished by counting words (see Table 2). Stories averaged 201 words, but ranged from 76 to 326. Differences between the experimental and control groups were not significant ( $F=.08$ ). In contrast, differences between genders ( $F=4.99^*$ ) and grades ( $F=12.18^{***}$ ) were significant with girls and first graders telling longer stories. One measure of syntactic complexity, number of clauses, revealed the same outcomes. Differences between groups were not significant ( $F=.14$ ), but differences between genders ( $F=4.27^*$ ) and grades ( $F=12.83^{***}$ ) were, with girls and first graders using more clauses per story.

**Table 2.** Mean Total Number of Words and Clauses Per Story

	Group		Gender		Grade	
	Experimental	Control	Boys	Girls	Kindergarten	First
Words	202.9 (118.9)	199.1 (134.7)	168.2 (111.6)	254.4* (131.9)	145.4 (84.5)	268.4*** (135.7)
Clauses	31.5 (18.5)	30.9 (20.2)	26.5 (17.1)	38.8* (20.4)	22.5 (12.5)	41.7*** (20.7)

Note: Standard deviations are noted with parentheses.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

### Story Grammar Elements

The number of different story grammar elements was calculated for each retell. Eight common elements, setting, initiating event or problem, internal response, internal plan, attempt, consequence, resolution, and ending were used based on Stein and Glenn's (1979) definitions (see Appendix C). Data revealed an average of five different elements used in each story with a range of three to seven (see Table 3). No significant differences were found for group ( $F=.755$ ) or gender ( $F=1.726$ ), but the difference for grade reached significance ( $F=6.504^*$ ), with the inclusion of one additional element in the stories of first graders. Most stories told by young children do not include all of the eight elements, but they are still considered to be good stories if the elements combine to form a complete episode. Therefore, the stories were then inspected for the presence of complete episodes that included an initiating event or problem, attempt, and consequence. This analysis revealed no significant differences for group ( $F=1.36$ ), gender ( $F=.865$ ), or grade ( $F=.027$ ). The number of complete episodes ranged from zero to six with a mean of 1.35.

**Table 3.** Mean Number of Different Story Grammar Elements and Episodes Per Story

	Group		Gender		Grade	
	Experimental	Control	Boys	Girls	Kindergarten	First
Elements	4.8 (1.9)	5.4 (1.7)	4.8 (1.9)	5.6 (1.5)	4.4 (1.8)	5.9(1.5)*
Episodes	1.1 (1.4)	1.6 (1.5)	1.2 (1.4)	1.6 (1.6)	1.4 (1.5)	1.3 (1.5)

Note: Standard deviations are noted with parentheses.

\* $p < .05$ .

### Cohesion

Cohesion was measured by counting the number of correct pronoun references, the total number of conjunctions, and the number of different conjunctions (excluding "and" and "then") (see Table 4). It is interesting to note that the control group used more correct pronoun references than the experimental group, although the difference was not significant ( $F=.852$ ). The control group used more conjunctions and more different conjunctions with the former not being significant ( $F=3.836$ ) and latter being significant ( $F=4.129^*$ ). It should be noted, however, that there were very large standard deviations for each of these measures. This amount of variability makes accurate interpretation of these findings difficult. The first graders used a larger number of correct pronoun references ( $F=10.738^{**}$ ) as did the girls, with that difference not reaching statistical significance ( $F=3.854$ ). Differences for gender and grade were not significant for use of conjunctions.

**Table 4.** Mean Number of Cohesive Devices

	Group		Gender		Grade	
	Experimental	Control	Boys	Girls	Kindergarten	First
Correct number of pronoun references	11.2 (13.9)	14.3 (12.6)	9.7 (12.6)	17.7 (12.9)	7.3 (8.8)	19.4** (14.8)
Total number of conjunctions	3.3 (2.4)	5.2 (4.7)	3.3 (2.2)	5.8 (5.2)	3.5 (2.6)	5.2 (4.7)
Number of different conjunctions	2.0 (1.1)	2.7* (1.6)	2.2 (1.3)	2.8 (1.5)	2.3 (1.5)	2.5 (1.4)

Note: Standard deviations are noted with parentheses.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

### Literate Language Features

The literate language features were coded using the conventions of Greenhalgh and Strong (2001) which included elaborated noun phrases (ENP) and mental/linguistic (ML) verbs and adverbs. One of these categories, ENPs, revealed significant differences between the experimental and control groups (see Table 5). ENPs were defined as any noun phrase that had more than two modifiers preceding a noun or prepositional phrases and relative clauses following the noun. The children in the experimental group used significantly more ENPs than those in the control group ( $F=4.282^*$ ). Grade and gender differences were not significant.

Mental/linguistic (ML) verbs were those that denoted cognitive and linguistic processes. Examples included “said,” “thought,” and “asked.” The authors counted the total number of different ML verbs used in each story. Differences between groups and genders were not significant, whereas, there was a significant effect for grade for total ML verbs ( $F=5.022^*$ ) as the first graders used an average of three more ML verbs per story than the younger children.

Two adverb analyses were completed; number of different adverbs and number of different “ly” adverbs. The only significant finding was for grade and only for the number of different adverbs ( $F=4.294^*$ ). There were no significant differences found between groups and genders for either number of different adverbs or “ly” adverbs. In fact, the number of “ly” adverbs was very low for all children, averaging fewer than one per story. Variability was high as evidenced by standard deviations larger than means.

**Table 5.** Mean number of literate language features

	Group		Gender		Grade	
	Experimental	Control	Boys	Girls	Kindergarten	First grade
Total number of ENPs	2.6 (2.5)*	1.5 (1.2)	1.8 (2.2)	2.5 (1.8)	1.6 (1.3)	2.6 (2.6)
Total number of MLVs	4.6 (3.9)	5.1 (4.5)	3.8 (3.3)	6.5 (5.0)	3.5 (3.7)	6.5 (4.3)*
Number of different adverbs	10.0(6.4)	9.7(5.4)	8.8(5.1)	11.5(6.7)	8.1(4.5)	11.9 (6.6)*
Number of different "ly" adverbs	.33 (.65)	.38 (.50)	.27 (.53)	.50 (.73)	.22 (.52)	.53 (.70)

Note: ENPs = Elaborated noun phrases; MLVs = Mental/linguistic verbs  
Standard deviations are noted with parentheses.

\* $p < .05$ .

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to determine the usefulness of props in the narrative retells of 42 kindergarten and first grade students in two comparable classrooms. The findings can be discussed within four categories; length and complexity of story, story grammar elements used, cohesion employed, and types of literate language features found in the narratives of the two groups of students, those who practiced story retells with props and those who did not.

### Length and complexity

The presence of props had no effect, either positive or negative, on the length or complexity of the stories. For example, a retell of the story, *John Patrick Norman McHennessy* (Burningham, 1987) by an experimental group child (practiced with props) included the sentence: "And then I had climb up into a tree and wait until he was gone." A child from the control group (no props) used the sentence: "And so he had to climb up to the tree until the lion went away." The sentences are equally complex in that both contain two clauses.

Gummersal & Strong (1999) have suggested that the amount of exposure to the stimulus has a critical effect on the length and complexity of retells. Perhaps if the children had experienced a greater number of practice opportunities to become more familiar with the props, we might have acquired different results.

The constraints of using the natural context of classrooms and working within the schedules of all participants prevented us from providing more exposure before the stories were video taped each Friday. On the other hand, similar to other studies, we did find that older students and girls told longer stories and ones that included more clauses (Fey, Catts, Proctor-Williams, Tomblin, & Zhang, 2004; Johnson, 1995; Moyano & McGillivry (1988) as cited in Hughes et al., 1997). When retelling, *Jennie's Hat* (Keats, 1966), a first-grade boy commented, "She wanted a real fancy hat." In contrast, a female classmate noted that "When she was going back home, she said out loud, 'I wish my hat were just a little bit fancier.'" The children expressed a similar understanding in their retells, but the boy did so in one clause and the girl elaborated with three.

### **Story Grammar Elements**

Our study revealed no effect on the number of different story grammar elements expressed with the use of props. This may be because both groups used story grammar cue cards during practice sessions to remind them to include each element. Perhaps the cue cards were a more powerful variable that positively affected the addition of story grammar elements in the stories of both groups of children, and thus diluted the effect of the presence of props. In addition, the props may have been stronger reminders of concrete components of each story (characters, important items characters used) rather than representations of discrete story grammar elements. Our findings did, however, mirror that of others who found an effect for age, with older students using more story grammar elements than younger students (Hudson & Shapiro, 1991; Scott, Wetherby, Ouimette, & Spears, 2005). Regardless of whether they used props in practice or not, students used very few internal responses (how a character feels) or internal plans (character's idea(s) that might fix the problem). Then again we did find that first graders used more internal responses such as the experimental group boy who remarked, "Jennie forgot about her new hat for awhile." First graders also included more of the character's internal plans as is seen in a first-grade control group boy's retelling of *Stellaluna* (Cannon, 1993), "Then, Stellaluna said, 'I'll fly all day tomorrow.'"

### **Cohesion**

A visual inspection of the data revealed a larger number of correct pronoun references and conjunctions used by the control group students who practiced narratives without the use of props. For example, when retelling *Stellaluna* (Cannon, 1993), an experimental group child noted, "And she has to eat one" (referring to the incident where the mother bird makes the baby bat eat a grasshopper). The referent for the pronoun "she" is absent. In contrast, a child in the control group

said, "And Stellaluna didn't want to eat the bugs, but then she was so starving that she just had to." The referent for the pronoun, "she," is clear and the child employs the conjunction, "but" to tie her ideas together. Although this difference was not significant, it does merit further exploration. Children who practice with props may be so focused on including all characters and events that they put less priority on tying the story together. Older students also used more correct pronoun referents, matching the findings of Pratt and MacKenzie-Keating (1985) with 4- and 6-year-olds, but at odds with those of Ukrainetz, Justice, Kaderavek, Eisenberg, Gillam, and Harm (2005) with 4- and 5-year-olds, perhaps due to the younger ages of the children used by the latter researchers.

### **Literate Language Features**

The presence of props had a significant effect on the use of elaborated noun phrases (ENPs), with the experimental group using an average of more than 2.5 compared to an average of 1.5 for the control group. Some of the elaborated noun phrases used by the experimental group were: "a giant hairy gorilla," "a big tidal wave," and "a little flower pot." This finding suggests that the manipulation of physical props assisted the children in including more descriptors in their narrative retells. The added sensory experiences of touching and seeing the items may have built a more enhanced cognitive schema that allowed these children to recall more specific details with which to enrich their stories. This study provides evidence that, in addition to being engaging, the use of props supports the use of descriptors in students' language and could thus be used by teachers to enhance the skill of labeling (nouns) and describing (adjectives).

The props did not have an effect on the use of mental/linguistic (ML) verbs or adverbs, although the older children used more of each. Both control and experimental group children used ML verbs such as "thought," "wonder," "said," "decided," "knew," "forgot," and "promised." Although adverbial prepositional phrases were frequently used such as "all around the park," "on the hat," and "by her feet," individual adverbs, particularly those ending in "ly," were infrequent. Some of the individual adverbs employed were "finally," "together," "already," "suddenly," "forever," and "softly." It is likely that verbs and adverbs, being less concrete than adjectives, are not as easily incorporated into one's cognitive schema of narrative content. Another explanation for the infrequent use of adverbs is the finding that adverbs are acquired as children gain experience with literate language (Larsen & Nippold, 2007) and that these young children may not yet be at this point of development.

Our results suggest that the addition of props in the presentation of stories and practice opportunities of story retells with 5-, 6-, and 7-year-olds results in more descriptive stories than when props are not used. However, props did not result in

longer or more semantically complex narratives. They also did not result in narratives that contained more story grammar elements, cohesive devices, mental/linguistic verbs, or adverbs. This could, in part, be explained by Crystal's (1987) "bucket theory," which proposes that as the demands of the linguistic task increases, decreases are typically seen in other co-occurring linguistic parameters. Given the short period of time of one week in which the children were first exposed to each story, practiced it, and were then expected to retell it, it is likely that the children were not yet familiar enough with each story to expect that they could demonstrate all of the components of story we were measuring at equally high levels of competence.

Our results also suggest that there are advantages in practicing story retells without props. Retells of our control group students included more correct pronoun referents and more conjunctions which contribute to more cohesive stories that are clearer for the listener. When watching the children practice, the researchers observed that the children practicing with props were intent upon describing and including each prop in the retell with less focus on the cohesion of the story as they attended more closely to the objects than to the listener. The researchers found that the control group students were more focused on connecting the events, identifying the central conflict and resolution, portraying the emotions of the main character, and performing for the listener. These results and observations have important implications for classroom teachers.

## **Implications**

Oral narratives have an important place in classrooms, given their connection to literacy acquisition (Abbot & McCarthey, 2001) and language development (Morrow, 1985). Unfortunately, it is not clear how narratives should be used to achieve the best learning outcomes. One implication of this study is that a balanced literacy program would include different formats for retelling, including some with props and some without.

This research suggests that props can support the use of descriptors in students' language and thus could be used by teachers to enhance the skills of labeling and describing. Knowing that adverbs are, in part, dependent on literacy experiences, suggests that the use of adverbs may require additional focused strategies in reading and writing instruction.

Another implication suggests that teachers wishing to support the development of cohesion of stories could employ strategies other than the use of props. These could include multiple opportunities to listen to stories told by a variety of storytellers and opportunities for students to tell stories to varied audiences. Enacting the stories with the students playing the roles of characters could extend



the use of props in a way that might help children be more aware of the audience. When observing practice sessions of children not using props, we noted that participants paid more attention to the listener suggesting that being aware of the audience contributes to students' ability to more clearly communicate a story. It is likely that the use of story grammar cue cards, the story question prompts (see Appendix B), and the rereading of the book before practice facilitated recall for both groups of students. It thus seems appropriate to use oral and visual stimuli other than props to help students tell more cohesive stories.

The study also supported our understanding that narrative is an indicator of cognitive development and gender differences with older children and females telling longer, more grammatically complex stories (Fey et al. 2004). Classroom teachers can support boys in telling longer and more complex stories by choosing topics that are more interesting to them, providing more opportunity for physical presentation of the stories through drama, encouraging artistic presentation through storyboards, and ensuring that literacy activities are purposeful with real life connections (King & Gurian, 2006; Taylor, 2004/5). We also believe that we can help boys to expand their experience with multiple female and male roles and describing feelings through careful selection of literature and use of analytic questions. For example, we encourage teachers not to make the assumption that boys will only be engaged in stories with male protagonists. The boys in our study found *Jennie's Hat* (Keats, 1966) to be a favorite which may have been because they were particularly engaged in the creative building of her hat by the birds. This explanation would support the view of Coles and Hall described by Taylor (2004/5) that boys give greater emphasis to taking information from the text in contrast to girls' preference for analyzing and making connections to characters. Selecting texts that invite both efferent and aesthetic responses within the same text or through providing multiple genres on a topic will help to ensure engaged learning by both boys and girls (Gebhard, 2006; Rosenblatt, 1978).

## Conclusion

In further studies, we would like to observe the narrative development of boys and girls to determine if differences in length and complexity continue. We would also like to explore what types of props facilitate and support different aspects of retells. It would also seem important to separate story mapping from prop practice, which was difficult to do when story mapping was part of the normal classroom routine for both groups. We would also like to further explore the indication that students who do not use props might tell more cohesive stories by having students practice fewer stories over a longer period of time. Finally, we would like

to explore retelling with different genres including nonfiction (e.g. informational texts, biographies).

Narrative is an effective teaching tool because it readily engages students in both language structure and content. Retells of presented narratives reveal both a child's understanding of the elements and sequence of the story, but also his/her ability to use language purposefully for description and cohesion. We believe our research supports the idea that children's literacy and language development can be supported by presenting narratives and practicing retells in different formats both with and without props.



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## Appendix A

### List of Stories and Props Used for Each Book

(Stories used in the analyses for this study are indicated with an asterisk)

#### Kindergarten Stories

- \*Burningham, J. (1987). *John Patrick Norman McHennessy, the boy who was always late*. NY: Random House.

Pair of gloves, stick puppet figure of boy, stick puppet figure of teacher, crocodile, lion, tree, wave, satchel, blackboard with sums, pencil and card with "I must not tell lies about crocodiles and I must not lose my gloves," and a pair of torn trousers.

Cowley, J. (2003). *Mrs. Wishy-Washy's farm*. NY: Scholastic, Inc.

Mrs. Wishy-Washy doll, toy barn, tractor, bucket, cow, pig, duck, city postcard, restaurant postcard, chef stick puppet, four sealed paint containers in red, green, yellow and blue, and truck.

\*Lionni, L. (1975). *A color of his own*. NY: Alfred A. Knopf

Two yellow, two green, two polka-dotted, two purple, one striped, one black, and one red chameleon, lemon, purple heather flower, lion, polka dotted mushroom, and green, yellow, and red leaves.

Wood, D., & Wood, A. (1994). *The little mouse, the red ripe strawberry and the big hungry bear*. Auburn, ME: Child's Play.

Mouse, whole strawberry, strawberry in halves, chained strawberry, ladder, scarf, spoon, and knife.

### **First grade stories**

\*Cannon, J. (1993). *Stellaluna*. NY: Scholastic.

Two bats, owl, nest with birds in it, branch, and pear.

Cronin, D. (2000). *Click, clack, moo: Cows that type*. NY: Simon and Schuster, Inc.

A small typewriter, seven typed signs on foam core, two cows, two blankets, a hen, a duck, and a horse.

\*Keats, E.J. (1966). *Jennie's hat*. NY: Puffin Books.

Hat, basket, lampshade, flower pot, a TV antenna, a shiny pan, and assorted birds and flowers.

Stevens, J. (1995). *Tops & bottoms*. NY: Harcourt, Inc.

Beige front runner strip (Velcro sticks to this) and commercial kit by Lakeshore that includes the following items with Velcro sewn on back - sleeping bear, awake bear, male rabbit, female rabbit, rabbit children, carrot, radish, beet, lettuce, broccoli, celery, and corn.

## **Appendix B**

### **Protocol for Retell Practice**

Re-read the story using gestures, vocal inflection, and enthusiasm.

2. Model retelling the story and include:

At least one of each different type of conjunction (see below)

Description of characters & settings with adjectives

Description of character feelings with adverbs

Use of mental verbs (describing how characters think or talk, e.g., told, shout, thought, knew, remember)

Each story grammar element (see below)

Correct sequencing of story events (see Appendix C)

3. Invite each child to retell story and facilitate it by occasionally doing some of these things (examples):
  - Recasting simple sentences to complex ones  
Child says: “They went home. They ate dinner.”  
You say: “So, they ate dinner after they went home.”
  - Asking questions to clarify referents  
Child says: “She went to the store” before giving “she” a name.  
You say: “Who went to the store?”
  - Probing to add missing story grammar elements  
Child misses including character goals  
You say: “Why did he go to the store?”
  - Asking open questions more often than closed  
(Closed questions limit child talk to short responses.)  
You say “Tell me about the party.” Rather than “Who was at the party?” or “Did they have fun?”
4. It’s MOST important for storytelling to be enjoyable. Let the child lead and use his/her own style. Your most important role is to be an excellent listener, so keep them going with “wow, really?” or “tell me more,” rather than asking too many questions.



## Appendix C

### Story Grammar Components and Definitions

Story grammar components	Definitions
Setting	Reference to time, place, and characters.
Initiating event/problem	Something that sets the events of the story in motion. It functions to make the main character want to achieve a goal or change of state.
Internal response	How the character feels in response to the initiating event; usually contains an emotion word and includes the goals of the protagonist.
Internal plan	Statement of an idea that might fix the problem.
Attempt	Action taken by the main character that is meant to solve the problem.
Consequence	Events following the attempt and causally linked to it.
Resolution	Final state or situation triggered by the initiating event.
Ending	Sentence or phrase that clearly states that the story is over.

Stein and Glenn (1979)

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