Bringing Real Language into the Classroom: The Re-tell Activity

Adrianne Levine Sklar and Lili Ullmann

A re-tell is an activity designed to involve ESL learners in a dynamic interactive process. Using authentic reading and listening passages as core input, its aim is to create a context which encourages negotiating for meaning through an exchange of information. It is a flexible activity, easily adaptable for a variety of levels and teaching situations. A re-tell meets the criteria for a student-centered classroom, real language use and the fostering of acquisition by exposure to challenging material.

Current interest in ESL teaching is shifting to communicative methodology. As well, teachers are recognizing the necessity to equip students with strategies to deal with the real world, a world in which they will not understand everything they hear nor everything they read. Rather, they will have to negotiate for meaning and use interaction skills to extract important information from the environment. Developing these skills, furthermore, will encourage the student to take advantage of other language learning situations (Krashen, 1982).

Within this context we would like to share with you an activity focussing on strategies, negotiation and interaction developed by teachers at the Continuing Education Language Institute of Concordia University. This interaction activity fits into any curriculum and can be structured from readily available materials. The activity, which we call a "re-tell," integrates the four skills of reading, listening, speaking and writing in a challenging format which can be manipulated to suit classes at different levels, or indeed students of different abilities within the same class.

Basic to the activity is the premise that for interaction to be sustained in the classroom, students must have something to speak about beyond "What I did last weekend." For this reason, the re-tell activity always includes at its core, interesting material with a challenging level of difficulty. This core material can take the form of readings or taped listening passages as input to provide a pool of information, vocabulary and syntax which in turn stimulates interaction. It is felt that language development is most effectively fostered in a classroom context which can provide a rich and abundant exposure to language and where maximum occasions are

provided for interaction among learners. Long (1983), concerned that "impoverished input" in the classroom may actually hinder the acquisition process, recommends both qualitative and quantitative improvements in the input made available to students. Schachter (1983) writes of a "critical minimum amount of input needed during a specified time period" for learning to take place at all.

NEGOTIATING FOR MEANING

The input, of course, needs to be made comprehensible to the students. Traditionally, textbook writers have taken this to mean that input should be severely limited as to lexis, syntax and even ideas. However, research into natural interaction now shows that L_2 learners do not need such simplification. Rather, the second language learner makes the input comprehensible to himself by negotiating for meaning (Long, 1983; Varonis & Gass, Note 1). This may involve asking for repetition and clarification, paraphrasing information and expanding the context (Schachter, 1983).

Our re-tell materials are drawn from a thematic unit. As students become familiar with the issues and build an information base, they are unconsciously acquiring the lexical field and syntax necessary to discuss those issues. Each additional piece of material encountered is a blend of known and unknown vocabulary and content. As well, students are encouraged students to develop strategies of guessing from context, predicting, and testing hypotheses about language. Vocabulary lists and "teacher-dependent" input are thus not necessary.

To increase comprehensibility, immediately before the re-tell, a pre-activity is structured; students are encouraged to share their experiences and knowledge on the subject either with the class or, more typically, in small groups to encourage greater participation. Pre-activities might include a prepared worksheet based on the text itself or on the topic (see Figure 1). They might equally include predicting what information is likely to be found in a text by having students develop their own questions which they hope will be answered by the text. Interaction is thus built into the warm-up. Occasionally students could be assigned a focussed free writing task on "what you know about X." Participating in pre-activities which awaken prior knowledge and encourage sharing stimulates interest and curiosity, while exposing the students unobtrusively to relevant language. We have found that, when placed in the context of a thematic unit and pre-activity, the challenging reading or listening input of the re-tell is more readily understood.

Inside Archambault: Inmates decorate their own cells.

Use the information in the accompanying pictures and captions to answer in pairs or in groups the following questions:

1. What kind of furniture do you see in the inmate's cell?
2. Describe the cell in the picture. (Describe everything you see).
3. How many inmates probably live in this cell?
4. What drawings do you see on the wall of the inmate's cell? Why do you think the inmate drew them? What was he probably thinking of?
5. How long do you think the cell is? How wide is it?

Figure 1. Pre-activity using newspaper photo as preparation for retells on conditions in a Montreal prison. (Permission to reprint photo courtesy *Allo Police.*)

For an example of a re-tell activity, four short texts (A) "Food," (B) "Work," (C) "Recreation" and (D) "Privileges" (see Appendix A), taken from a newspaper article on Archambault Prison, are given to students. Students in each group are then instructed to read their passage and complete a variety of tasks. These culminate in the sharing of the information with a student who does not have that information but needs it to finish the activity. A requirement that re-tell passages be information-bearing is thus critical to the success of the activity.

METHODOLOGY

The basic reading re-tell activity is simple. For the first stage, the class is divided into two or three groups, each group having one of the related texts. After reading their text, either quickly in class or for more complex texts outside class, students work in pairs or groups of three to complete one of several comprehension tasks set according to the level of the students and/or the difficulty of the text. Because different groups work with different texts, length and difficulty can be varied as a function of reading proficiency. Variations in the accompanying tasks are another important way of modifying the level of difficulty of a text. For example, in an elementary level class or for the weaker students in a class, questions could be set by the teacher to focus on important information in the text. The questions should be of sufficient difficulty that students are required to pool the information they get from the reading and discuss possible answers with other members of their group. The following is an example of a worksheet prepared by the teacher to help students focus on important information in the text on *Work at Archambault:*

TEXT B

WORK AT ARCHAMBAULT

1. List the 3 industries at Archambault.

   1) _____

   2) _____

   3) _____

2. What do the steelworkers do? _____
3. What do the woodworkers do? _____
4. What do the shoemakers do? _____

5. TRUE/FALSE The shoes which the shoemakers at the prison make are sold in stores.
6. TRUE/FALSE All workers earn $4.25 a day.
7. The administration deducts money from the inmates' pay for 3 reasons. List these reasons.

   First deduction _____

   Second deduction _____

   Third deduction _____

Alternatively, students could be asked to make their own questions. The question-making task involves deciding what is important and what is less important, while also making students aware of question form. For the text on recreation, elementary students prepared these questions:

1. Why recreation is important in the prison?
2. Can inmates play sports? If they can what kind of sports?
3. What other inmates do?
4. How much privilege can one inmate have?

Students then verify comprehension of the text by asking each other their questions.

Students could also be asked to fill in a guided outline such as the following to sensitize them to the English rhetorical structure of main ideas and supporting details, an important strategy in extracting meaning from a text:

TEXT A

FOOD AT ARCHAMBAULT

Main Ideas	Details
Where they eat	
Breakfast	
Lunch	
Supper	
What did they eat with?	

As students become more practiced at working within this framework, they can be asked to take their own notes. Examples from two students with the same text show the range of proficiency in note-taking that may exist in one group (see Figure 2). Despite different levels of notes, however, each set will contain information which can serve as the basis for sharing information and building up a better understanding of the text. Tasks such as these can help the student "build the repertoire of skills and strategies needed to manage challenging input and to meet the real world criteria of authentic communication" (Vogel et al., 1983).

A similar progression of tasks can be used to aid comprehension of listening passages. For the listening re-tell activity, two or three passages are recorded on separate cassettes and given to groups of students in separate parts of the room or other rooms, physical factors permitting. Because each group has a different listening passage, the recordings, like the readings, can be varied in length and complexity.

What is important in listening is that each group be told to listen to the passage all the way through in order to discover its central or controlling idea. Students should be discouraged from following their natural inclination to stop the tape at every sentence in order to understand everything. After listening once, the group, through discussion, tries to reach a consensus on the central idea of the passage (Hatch, 1978).

For the second step in the listening re-tell, students are instructed to replay the tape all the way through, this time listening for and noting down main ideas and supporting details. Even isolated words noted down will help in reconstructing the information. It is crucial that students be encouraged to focus on what they do understand and not on what they don't understand (Vogel, Note 2).

Again, the original passage should be of sufficient challenge that no one student will comprehend all of it. Consequently, the group, through the medium of comprehension tasks, will have to pool their information and negotiate for meaning.

Most classroom activities developed around core input are completed at the point of comprehension. Indeed, the main focus of the activity is frequently only passive understanding. The re-tell activity, on the other hand, uses the student's interest in the text content to produce further interaction and recycling of thematic material—language, ideas and vocabulary.

After completing the comprehension tasks, therefore, students are asked to regroup into pairs, each partner having read or listened to a different passage. The partners take turns explaining the information in their texts to each other, using the comprehension questions or notes they have taken as an aid to memory and as an organizational framework for

TEXT B

WORK AT ARCHAMBAULT

Student A

Main Ideas	Details
Three industries	- steel working, woodworking, shoemaking
School—primary, secondary or CEGEP	
Five trades	- cabinet-making, hair-styling, machinery welding and technical
12:45	Inmates resume work
Earnings exist on paper only	

Student B

Main Ideas	Details
Work conditions	- begins 8:15 A.M. - 7 hours - day - 5 days - week
Three industries	- steel working, woodworking, shoemaking
Steel workers	- size and cut steel and ship to medium security Leclerc Inst. Laval
Woodworkers	- cut wood and ship in to other institution
Shoemakers	- make military - civilian footwear
School - study	- primary-secondary-CEGEP level
Paid	- between $1.60 and $5.90 a day - Job classification - two weeks — $42.50
Deduction	- 25% - $4.00 (activities)
Canteen	- 50% lower than market - e.g. 20 cig. — 65 cents coke costs 35 cents

Figure 2. Notes taken by two different students exposed to the same input.

their presentation. Within this structure, confidence in speaking gradually develops. The listener, whose interest has been stimulated by thematic material, pre-activity and most importantly, complementary information which s/he is eager to share, is an active listener. The listener is expected to ask for clarification and additional information, to agree or disagree, and to note down the main points of the partner's presentations. Note-taking here serves to focus the listener's attention and to further the processing of vocabulary and syntax as well as ideas. After the presentations are completed, students may check each other's listening comprehension by asking questions prepared in the previous activities.

Because the students have been working in pairs and groups on different texts, there is a need in the final step to synthesize the information, thus consolidating the vocabulary and syntax exploited during the activity. This allows the students to perceive just how much they have really achieved and is an important factor in building confidence. One way to accomplish this would be to have a short "wrap-up" class discussion. Students could also be given copies of all texts, with or without worksheets, to read in class or at home. As a final reprocessing of language, students may also be asked to reconstruct in writing the information they have read or heard from the original passages and/or from classmates' presentations. The teacher then collects notes, questions and written re-constructions (summaries) in order to verify students' work.

Thus within the re-tell activity the student has:

1) read or listened to a challenging passage;
2) completed a comprehension task focussing on the important information through interaction with students who have the same text;
3) presented new information to people who have some information in the thematic area;
4) listened actively to new information making brief notes;
5) practiced the functions of asking for clarification and additional information, of agreeing and disagreeing;
6) practiced taking notes within the English rhetorical pattern of main ideas and supporting details;
7) perhaps reconstructed in writing some or all of the information received during this activity.

To serve as the basis for such an intensive interactive learning experience for the students, the text for input must be selected with great care to be stimulating, interesting and challenging. The subject matter can be keyed to the age group and interests of the particular class being taught: different engine types for vocational students, prison problems for general learners, theories of brain functions for academic students.

The sources of material which best fit these criteria of interest and challenge are authentic texts written for native-speaking adults, adolescents or children, or indeed texts written for native speaker remedial reading programs (see Appendix B for suggestions). Some newspaper articles can be utilized as well. Working with authentic materials sensitizes the student to the inner organization of ideas in English, a sensitivity which carries over into other reading comprehension and writing tasks (Smith,1982).

While it has traditionally been thought that authentic texts are too difficult for learners, especially at lower levels, we have found that the recycling nature of the re-tell activity gives students the opportunity to experiment with and refine new concepts, structures and vocabulary, using them in a meaningful way as they interact to exchange information. In using authentic texts for elementary students, it is useful to note that the introduction, which is generally a device for attracting attention in the rhetorical structure of English, uses cultural allusions and descriptive language which are particularly difficult for an elementary learner to grasp. In such cases it is useful to simplify or eliminate the introduction, retaining only the thesis statement. The student can then focus on the information-bearing portions of the text.

The role of the teacher in the re-tell activity is complex but low-key. Much is expected of the teacher in terms of knowing the students' interests and proficiency so that appropriate texts can be chosen. Moreover, pre-activities, comprehension tasks and follow-up need to be developed. Once these organizational priorities are completed and work in the class has begun, the teacher remains in the background, moving between the groups of students, available for advice and guiding students (e.g. in note-taking) as they learn new skills. The teacher should point out to the students that, with the help of their existing knowledge and ability to reason, they can understand and talk about new information even with a limited knowledge of language. Crucial in this learning process is the necessity for the teacher to be tolerant of student error as a natural and even helpful stage for the testing of new ideas and language.

CONCLUSION

The re-tell activity offers a viable, flexible technique for use in the second language classroom. It creates the opportunity within the class for the students to develop the strategies, interaction skills and confidence to function in the outside world. By presenting material which is challenging in syntax and vocabulary as well as information and ideas, tasks can be

structured which encourage students to interact to share information and to negotiate meaning. This combination of a rich and abundant input together with the opportunity to "predict, question, clarify, incorporate and restructure information" (Hatch, 1978) meets the criteria for comprehensible input discussed by current researchers as a basic element of language acquisition.

NOTES

1. Varonis, E. & Gass, S. *Target language input from non-native speakers.* Pre-publication version of paper presented at TESOL '83, Toronto.
2. Vogel, P. The integration of learning labs into the curriculum: The language lab, the video lab and the modular lab. Workshop presentation at Concordia University Colloquium on Language Laboratories, Montreal, 1981.

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Hatch, E. Discourse analysis and second language acquisition. In E. Hatch (Ed.), *Second language acquisition: A book of readings.* Rowley, Ma.: Newbury House, 1978.

Krashen, S. *Principles and practice in second language acquisition.* Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1982.

Long, M. Native speaker/non-native speaker conversation in the second language classroom. In M.A. Clarke & J. Handscombe (Eds.), *On TESOL '82: Pacific perspectives on language learning and teaching.* Washington, D.C.: TESOL, 1983.

Schachter, J. Nutritional needs of language learners. In M.A. Clarke & J. Handscombe (Eds.), *On TESOL '82: Pacific perspectives on language learning and teaching.* Washington, D.C.: TESOL, 1983.

Smith, F. *Writing and the writer.* New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1982.

Vogel, P., Brassard, M.L., Parks, S., Thibaudeau, S. & White, J. The communicative classroom: Tasks, materials and methodology. In M.A. Clarke & J. Handscombe (Eds.), *On TESOL '82: Pacific perspectives on language learning and teaching.* Washington, D.C.: TESOL, 1983.

THE AUTHORS

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APPENDIX A

TEXT A WORK AT ARCHAMBAULT

8:15 a.m: The work — or school — day begins. There are three industries at Archambault — steelworking, woodworking and shoemaking. Inmates work seven hours a day, five days a week. They do not work weekends or every second Friday afternoon. Some inmates attend school rather than work.

Whether they work or study is decided by authorities, following consultation with inmates.

Steelworkers size and cut steel and ship it to medium-security Leclerc Institution, in Laval, where mail boxes are made. Woodworkers cut wood and ship it to other institutions where furniture is made for federal government offices. Shoemakers make military and civilian footwear.

Inmates who study take primary, secondary or CEGEP-level courses. Archambault is affiliated with College Marie-Victorin, a Montreal CEGEP. Five trades are taught at the school — cabinet-making, hairstyling, machinery, welding and technical design.

11:55 a.m: A siren, whistle or bell instructs workers to break for lunch.

12:45 p.m. Work and school resume. Archambault workers are paid between $1.60 and $5.90 a day. Pay rates are determined by job classification. Inmates may suffer a pay cut if they misbehave.

The average inmate earns $4.25 a day, up from the average $1.55 earned last year before the Correctional Service of Canada implemented a new inmate pay program.

Earnings exist on paper only: Inmates never have any money in their pockets. Cash is considered contraband.

Every second Friday, inmates are issued a financial statement. This statement tells an inmate who earns the average $4.25 a day that he has grossed $42.50 over the two previous weeks.

Of this amount, authorities immediately deduct 25 per cent, or $10.62, and put it into the inmate's savings account. The inmates' committee deducts a $4.00 activities fee, to buy color TV sets for community rooms and arrange for entertainers to visit on statutory holidays — if the administration approves such visits.

A third deduction is made from the $27.88 balance. The deduction is equal to the value of goods purchased in the two previous weeks at the penitentiary canteen, run by inmates. The remaining amount is the inmate's 'cash balance'.

Prices at the canteen are very low, roughly 50 per cent lower than market prices outside prison walls.

A pack of 20 cigarettes costs 65 cents. A box of five Whiteowl Corona cigars costs $1.30. A package of German-imported Borkum Riff pipe tobacco costs $1.10. A Coke costs 35 cents. A pack of gum costs 20 cents. A stick of Old Spice deodorant costs

$1.65. A bottle of Aqua Velva after-shave costs $1.55. A bar of Irish Spring soap costs 45 cents. Inmates do not pay for their meals.

4:00 p.m: School ends for the day.

4:05 p.m. The work day is finished. All inmates pass their Control Centre N and return to their cells for a head count.

TEXT B FOOD AT ARCHAMBAULT

7:40 a.m.: Breakfast time. Inmates leave their cells and walk down a 200- by 40-foot corridor to what's known as the community room, 100 by 50 feet in size. Each cell block has a community room where inmates eat and socialize in the evenings.

Just off from the community room is a shower room that accommodates up to six inmates. There are no baths in Archambault.

The corridors outside the cells are painted blue, yellow or brown. The community rooms are painted blue, white, pink, yellow or green. Nothing in Archambault is painted red.

The breakfast menu is varied — pancakes, bacon and eggs, French toast. All food is prepared by inmates who work shifts in the penitentiary's kitchen. The pancakes are not very good. Each inmate is entitled to two eggs. Juice, cereal, milk and coffee is available upon request. Inmates are seated 12 to 15 to a table. Each has a designated seat.

There are no pictures on the walls of the community room. This is forbidden by the administration.

12:00 a.m.: Lunch, in cell-block community rooms, consists of meat, vegetables and potatoes. Potatoes — and to a lesser extent, vegetables — are in great supply. So is bologna. The meat is usually ground beef or hamburger. Special menus are provided for vegetarians, diabetics and inmates on cholesterol-controlled diets.

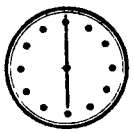
4:30 p.m: Supper-time. The supper menu is like the lunch menu. A wide range of foods and never any shortage of potatoes. There is always cake and jello for dessert. Ice cream is a once-a-week treat.

Inmates eat with plastic forks and spoons; knives are either steel or plastic. The Archambault administration considers steel forks more dangerous as potential weapons than steel knives.

Inmates in solitary confinement are never given steel knives, always plastic ones.

Supper — like lunch and breakfast — is of adequate quality. Inmates say they would prefer the food a bit warmer.

TEXT C RECREATION AND PRIVILEGES



6:00 p.m: Recreation time. Inmates exercise in one of three areas: A large exercise yard that can accommodate Archambault's 435 inmates, small yards adjacent to each cell block, or an athletic complex situated in Control Centre N.

At the athletic complex, inmates can play basketball or volleyball in the gym, weighlift, jog, play racquetball, tennis or ping pong. Baseball and football are the two most commonly played sports in the main exercise yard.

Inmates play touch football only; the administration forbids tackle football. There is also a mini-putt facility in the exercise yard.

Inmates who do not wish to exercise either stay in their cells, to read or write letters, or socialize in their community room. They watch TV, play chess, checkers or backgammon, or talk. There are some good backgammon players in Archambault.

Inmate privileges: Inmates can purchase goods from the canteen between 12:00 p.m. and 1:00 p.m., and between 6:00 p.m. and 8:00 p.m.

Married inmates are allowed three telephone calls a week, single inmates two. Telephone privileges apply between 4:05 p.m. and 9:00 p.m.

All inmates are allowed one personal visit a week, any time between 9:00 a.m. and 9:30 p.m. The visits take place in a room where the visitor and inmate are separated by a glass partition. Conversations are by telephone.

One conjugal visit is permitted every six months. However, only inmates serving sentences of 12 years or more are eligible. Some exceptions are made, however. Conjugal visits provide inmates with an opportunity to spend 60 or 72 hours in a house trailer in the pentitentiary grounds with their wives, parents or children.

(Permission to publish courtesy of *The Gazette*, Montreal Quebec.)

APPENDIX B

SUGGESTED SOURCES

BEGINNERS - ELEMENTARY LEVELS

Evans Graded Readings, R. Ridout (Ed.)
London: Evans Brothers Limited, 1975.

Grade 1	*Who? How? When?*
Grade 2	*The Long and the Short of It*
	How Sports and Games Began
	What's New?
	Islands

Reading for Comprehension (Books A and B)
Elizabethtown, N.J.: Continental Press, 1981.

Etc. Press (newspaper for ESL students)
Write to: 234 East Limberlost, Tucson, Arizona 85705.

ELEMENTARY - INTERMEDIATE LEVELS

Reading for Content and Speed (Books 1-6), C. Einstein
Cambridge, Mass.: Educators Publishing House, Inc., 1978.

Reading for Comprehension (Books C-H)
Elizabethtown, N.J.: Continental Press, 1981.

Reader's Digest Reading Skill Builder (Pegasus Edition)
Reader's Digest Services, Inc., 1977.
N.B. Contains some Canadian content.

Reading Book 1: 92 Gripping Tales, K. Marshall
Toronto: Educators Publishing Service, Inc., 1981.

Reading Book 2: 94 Gripping Tales, K. Marshall
Toronto: Educators Publishing Service, Inc., 1981.

National Geographic World (children's magazine)
Write to: Dept. 00978, 17th and M Sts. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

INTERMEDIATE - ADVANCED

Reader's Digest Reading Skill Builder (Silver Edition)
Pleasantville, N.Y.: Reader's Digest Services Inc., 1980.

Scholastic Science World (magazine for L1 high school students)
Richmond Hill, Ont.: Scholastic-TAB Publication, Ltd.

Reader's Digest

Time (magazine)

Newsweek (magazine)

Science Digest (magazine)

N.B. The long cover stories in *Time, Newsweek* and *Science Digest* can be divided in several parts for reading-retells.