

Using Story Retelling Wheels with Young Learners

“What was the book about?” “Can you tell me what happened in the story?” These are questions that I often asked my seven-year-old English learners who were on the cusp of reading and writing in their new language. Occasionally, a student would respond with a detailed account of the events in the story, but more often than not, my questions were met with a shoulder shrug or a blank stare. My students were astute listeners to storybooks—and a few were even capable of reading the books themselves—but nearly all of them struggled to talk about the stories we read.

As a novice English teacher, I was initially perplexed by my students’ challenge to retell stories. In many cases, the story that my students failed to retell was one I had read aloud to them just minutes before. Did they forget the events in the story? Did they not understand the words they had heard or read? Or did they not have the oral English vocabulary to describe the story? Perhaps they were too nervous to speak? I came to realize that the answers to these questions depended on the learner—and on the story we read. I also discovered that with a little scaffolding, my previously silent students transformed into masterful and confident story (re)tellers.

In this article, I present a scaffolding device that I found helpful for my young learners: a *story retelling wheel*, or simply a *story wheel*. This tool can be adapted to meet young learners at different English language and literacy levels. It requires only paper and pencil, making it an ideal resource for classrooms with limited materials. Not only did I use the story wheel with success in my U.S. elementary-school English as a second language (ESL) classroom, but I also shared it with Thai English teachers

who taught young learners in Thailand. The story wheel helped their shy students who rarely uttered an English word in class to string together short phrases. Even more exciting was that the students *enjoyed* the process of retelling. A lesson we learned was that we do not need to wait until learners acquire enough English to produce flawless retellings. Instead, imperfect retellings with the support of scaffolding instruments can push learners to develop English and have fun at the same time.

In the next section, I briefly outline the research on the importance of oral story retelling and the benefits of scaffolding for English learners. I then explain procedures for preparing and using the story retelling wheel, offering adaptations for different contexts. I emphasize how the story wheel can be used to expand learners’ retelling capacities, as well as to hone critical-thinking skills and to provide oral language practice. I conclude with a summary of practical recommendations for implementing this tool, based on my experiences as a teacher and teacher educator.

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ORAL RETELLING OF STORIES

Oral retelling is a staple instructional activity in early-grade reading classes. And for good reason, too. When eliciting a retelling, a teacher “gains insight into the text [students] have constructed in their mind” (Jennings, Caldwell, and Lerner 2013, 280). Research has long indicated that reading comprehension improves when young learners are asked to retell the stories they read (Dunst, Simkus, and Hamby 2012; Isbell 2002; Morrow 1989). When retelling, learners do not simply repeat the story verbatim, but develop their own version, using original language (Spiro 2007). They revisit the story structure and integrate language from the text into their own speech. Through this process, learners come to a deeper understanding of a story while developing a more robust and expressive vocabulary. For English learners, retelling stories helps connect spoken language to print while boosting oral language development. And strong oral English proficiency has been shown to support English reading and writing skills (August and Shanahan 2006; Shin and Crandall 2014).

Underneath a learner’s oral description of a story is a complex process that involves multiple skills (Spiro 2007). To generate a holistic retelling, learners first recall the story from their working memory. They then select the salient parts to tell, while omitting details that they remember but deem nonessential to the plot. Learners integrate key vocabulary and language structures from the story into new phrases and sentences

they create in their retelling. They signal the sequence of events to the listener using transition words and phrases (e.g., *first, then, next, at the end*) that may or may not have been present in the story. These cognitive demands grow as the texts gradually increase in complexity and length. And teachers often ask learners to make all of these language choices almost instantaneously, shortly after they close the cover of the book.

Retelling is no small feat when reading in the native language; it is even more challenging in a new language. Because receptive language skills often develop ahead of productive ones, English learners’ retelling may not reflect their understanding of the text. That is to say, learners may understand more of the story than they produce in their retelling. They may fixate on a memorable part of the story rather than telling the full story, or they may skip parts that require use of vocabulary that is difficult to pronounce. The retelling that learners produce therefore may not match their internal story reconstruction. These learners may benefit from support to enhance their story retelling capacity.

Scaffolding techniques are temporary, targeted support mechanisms for learners to help them succeed in activities that they cannot yet complete independently (Bruner 1983). Scaffolding can bring complex academic tasks within reach for English learners (Gibbons 2015). Retelling is no exception (Hansen 2004; Shin and Crandall 2014). In their review of literature on retelling strategies, Dunst, Simkus,

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and Hamby (2012) note three forms of scaffolding for retelling: (1) verbal prompting (e.g., “What happens next?”), (2) visual aids (e.g., sequencing cards), and (3) manipulatives (e.g., props related to the story). The scaffolding tool I describe in this article—a story retelling wheel—most closely fits the form of a visual aid. This tool is versatile and can be used both to provide support and to extend the challenge of retelling.

STORY RETELLING WHEEL

A story retelling wheel is a circle divided evenly into segments, each of which features an image to represent an event in a story. The wheel is a visual scaffold for students as they retell a story that they heard or one that they read themselves. As students retell a story, they manipulate the wheel, physically rotating it as they talk about each part. Figure 1 illustrates possible templates for a story wheel.

A story wheel is an after-reading instructional strategy, which means the wheel supports tasks that students complete *after* listening to or reading a story. To ensure students understand the story, you might read the story aloud multiple times. Alternatively, students can listen to an audio recording. If possible, engage students in the story by pausing to ask questions throughout the reading (e.g., “What do you predict will come next?” or “Have you

ever broken something?” or “Raise your hands if you eat something like porridge at home.”). The final section, on implementation tips, offers more advice about read-aloud stories.

The following steps explain the basic procedures for preparing and implementing story wheels for young learners. In subsequent sections, I provide more explanation about ways to implement these steps and adaptations for different contexts.

Prepare the story wheel

1. Create a story wheel template for your students. Cut a piece of paper into a large circle. Divide the large circle into three to eight equal segments, depending on how many events you want to include. You can create the sections by using a basic compass or simply by folding the circle to form creases. The template should resemble a pie graph, as in Figure 1.
2. Write the title and author of the story on one side of the story wheel. Students can draw and color their own “cover” on this side later. Another option is to draw a small circle in the center of the wheel and write the title in that circle.
3. Identify three to eight important events in the story. In my experience, about six events is generally a good number, but

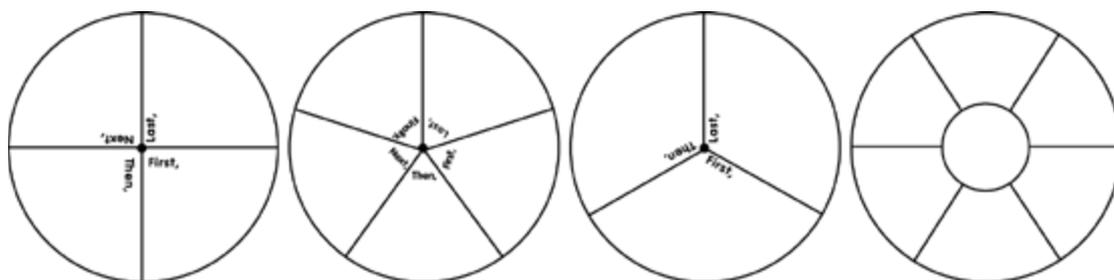


Figure 1. Possible templates for a story wheel

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learners who are new to this technique or who are beginning speakers may benefit from a simple story with fewer events. More than eight events are too overwhelming for young learners and require too much time to retell; fewer than three events do not capture the arc of a story, which at a minimum consists of a beginning, middle, and end. Indicate the beginning segment with a symbol (e.g., an asterisk or the number 1), or write sequencing words such as *first*, *then*, and *finally* in each section. You might also draw an arrow on the edge to indicate the direction of the events. Figure 1 displays examples of story wheel templates with various events.

4. Draw an image representing the event in each segment, sequenced in chronological order. Consider including key vocabulary, labels for images, or names of characters in the segments. See Figure 2 for an example of a story wheel I used for the story *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*. I indicated an asterisk next



Figure 2. Example of a story wheel for *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*

to the number 1 to make sure students knew where to start retelling.

5. If a photocopier is available, make a copy of the story wheel for each student. If a photocopier is not available, then students can take turns using the story wheel in small groups. Other adaptations, described below, are for students to create their own story wheels or for teachers to apply the sequencing concept of the story wheel to separate images hung around the classroom.

Implement the story wheel

6. After students listen to the story read aloud at least once, model how to use the story wheel. Demonstrate what you would like students to do: retell the story themselves by pointing to each segment as they describe the events in the story. Make sure students understand how each image corresponds to a part in the story. You might revisit the pages in the book and explicitly show students how each part matches with the image. You can also use a *think-aloud* technique in which you verbalize your thoughts before speaking. I provide more details about modeling the process in the next section.
7. Students retell the story using their story wheel. They can retell independently (whispering the story to themselves), together with a partner or small group, or to their family at home. You can also listen to students retell stories individually as a means of assessing their oral language use and listening comprehension.

These basic procedures can be adapted to meet the needs of different student levels. I next provide more information on how to

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create and use the story wheel, and I offer some additional recommendations.

CREATING THE STORY WHEEL

For beginning-level learners who are new to retelling stories, create the story wheel by drawing an image or multiple images in each segment. No artistic skill is necessary; drawings can be basic images or even symbols that remind students of the events in the story. Young learners often enjoy coloring in the drawings later, which allows them to personalize their own wheels. If a photocopier or computer is available, you might consider copying or printing images from the story or locating open-source images or photographs online. But hand-drawn images are as valid as printed ones.

As an adaptation to expand students' engagement with the story, involve students in creating the wheel. Their participation in making the tool will deepen their understanding of the story and increase their cognitive challenge. There are many ways to involve students. The following are three examples of ways students can help create the story wheel, listed in order from less to more student independence.

- 1.** *Students sequence events.* Identify important events and then create each image on small pieces of paper. You might create images on a story wheel, then cut each segment so that they are separate triangles. Students then sequence the images in the correct order. They either attach each image to the corresponding segment on a blank story wheel or piece together the segments like a jigsaw puzzle. This adaptation will help students focus on details as they sequence the events.
- 2.** *Students draw events.* Identify the important events and talk about each one with students. Make sure that students understand which events are important. Then, students create an image for each event. For students new to story wheels, I recommend that you first model this process with the whole class. Consider drawing some of the events yourself as examples to get students started. Then, move through the events one by one to prevent overwhelming students with all the events at once. Older students with computer skills can create digital images using online resources. Transforming a text to a visual representation will help students come to a deeper understanding of the text and allow them to think creatively.
- 3.** *Students identify and draw events.* Students both identify and draw images for the events in the story. This option works best if students are familiar with the concept of the story wheel (e.g., they have already used a story wheel that the teacher created). To introduce this process, conduct a whole-group discussion with students to agree on the most important events. The conversation will engage students in higher-order thinking skills and push them to use academic language. They analyze the text and then justify their opinions for the events they think count as the most important for the story wheel. Once the class has agreed on the important events, students work independently or in small groups to draw an image that represents each event inside the blank segments. As learners grow more proficient at retelling stories, they can identify the events in small groups or independently.

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These adaptations can be combined as well. Students can draw the events, and then later cut them out and practice sequencing them in chronological order. In all cases, it is important that the teacher review students' work before they use the wheel to ensure it accurately represents the story. If students are involved in creating the story wheel, they will have more ownership in the process because the finished product will be their own creation. Further, students who are familiar with creating story wheels can transfer the concept to their own writing. When planning their narrative stories, they can use a story wheel as a prewriting graphic organizer.

USING THE STORY WHEEL

The real power of the story wheel comes in its use. As with any good instructional scaffold, the wheel enables students to expand their language and move towards independence. The images on the wheel remind students of important events that take place in the story, and the sequential segments provide a tangible structure that helps focus young learners on the task of retelling. Students can create multiple retelling wheels for different stories, and they can use them repeatedly over time to remember their favorite stories. Retelling wheels are most effective, however, if teachers provide students with clear, explicit instructions about *how* to use the tool.

When first introducing a story retelling wheel to students, model how to use the tool. You can do this through a think-aloud technique in which you verbally describe your mental decisions. For instance, you might point to the first segment of the story wheel and say:

I am going to start on this part because there is a number 1. I see a picture of the three bears all together. This reminds me

of the beginning when they decided to leave their house and take a walk.

Young learners may benefit from chorally repeating phrases or vocabulary from the story that you model. By repeating the phrases together as a whole group, students build confidence to say the new phrases independently.

As you introduce the retelling wheel, gradually release responsibility to your students. After demonstrating how to retell the first two or three events on the wheel, call on different students to try retelling the next segments. As students retell the events, offer immediate support and feedback. You might point to images in the story wheel and prompt students with questions such as, "Why is this chair broken? What happened?" You can also use the story wheel to elicit specific language from students, as in the following example:

"You said Goldilocks took the soup. I understand what you mean, but remember how the author used the word sipped because Goldilocks ate just a little bit? Can you tell me how Goldilocks sipped the soup?"

Once students understand how to use the story wheel, they can practice retelling with each other. To encourage collaboration, teachers can form groups of three or four students. Each group retells the story together, with students taking turns telling the different parts or representing different characters. More beginning-level students can benefit from their peers who jump in with needed vocabulary or guide new learners through the process. Small groups work well for large class sizes because all students can speak simultaneously. The teacher moves from group to group in order to monitor, give

feedback, and make informal assessments on how students are using the wheel. As students become more familiar with the story, they can add movement and even transform the retelling into a dramatic performance.

In my classroom, we created a growing collection of story retelling wheels after reading books out loud. Using the story wheels became an optional anchor activity; if students completed their work and needed a task to “anchor” them to English literacy, they could choose to retell one of their favorite stories. I taught my learners to whisper to themselves to avoid disrupting other students. If you have space in your classroom, you can dedicate a small corner to reading and retelling. You can keep the retelling wheels there, along with books and other scaffolding devices you may use for retelling stories.

The story wheel can also extend English language use beyond the classroom. In places where English is not widely spoken, ensuring young learners practice English outside school is difficult. Even in communities where English is spoken, learners rarely encounter the kind of academic language they hear in books read aloud at home. For young learners, this academic language consists of the stories they hear in books at school. Story wheels encourage students to retell stories to their families using the same vocabulary and language structures in the book. I sometimes give the story wheel as a homework assignment and ask students to retell the story to at least one person in their family. They then report the next day to whom they retold the story. The story wheel is a way for students to share their new language with their family members. Many of my students’ families did not understand English, but the images on the wheel allowed students to “teach” their families new words. Through this process, my students made connections between English and their home language.

A question I have received from teachers in the past is, “How can I monitor all the students at once?” Another is, “What if the students aren’t using correct English?”

A small class size or a one-on-one tutoring setting allows you to observe students individually and provide immediate feedback. However, this is not possible with large classes, which is often the norm when teaching English. The goal of the retelling wheel is *not* to produce perfect, error-free retellings. Rather, the wheel is a guide that helps students focus on the story language by supporting them in recalling the basic structure and plot. Imperfect oral language use is beneficial and leads to increased confidence and fluency. In fact, by practicing with the retelling wheel away from a teacher’s watchful eye, students may feel less self-conscious and more willing to try out new words or phrases in speech.

ADAPTATIONS

The concept of the story wheel is easily transferred to other after-reading instructional strategies that help learners retell stories. In the hands of a creative, resourceful teacher, the number of adaptations for a story retelling wheel is immense. Here, I offer a few examples of adaptations specifically for beginners and older learners, as well as for learners in classrooms with limited resources.

Adaptations for beginners. Story wheels can be used as a scaffold to help beginners retell a story using isolated words or phrases. As with other oral language activities, you would not expect beginner speakers to match the language ability of their more-advanced peers. As the teacher, select target words for students to practice. Strategically draw (or print) images that represent these words. Beginners could be challenged simply to name images in each segment using one- or two-word utterances (e.g., “chair” or “broken chair”). They can also develop fluency using idiomatic phrases from the story (e.g., “just right” and “fast asleep”) or language unique to storytelling, such as, “Once upon a time” You can teach students to use transitional terms such as *and then* and *next* as they move between the story wheel segments. Some teachers may want to allow beginners to use their first language to supplement their story

retelling while pushing them to use English for key words or phrases. As students develop English, their story retellings consist of more English.

Adaptations for older learners. An adaptation for older students who can read and write independently entails swapping images for key words or phrases. The brief text serves as a mnemonic, or memory device, for students as they retell the story. As with the pictures on the story wheel, the words can be selected by the teacher or the students. Students can be challenged to first identify the main events in the text and then create symbols or phrases that are meaningful to them. This process also helps students hone the learning strategy of creating and using mnemonics, which can be generalized to other content areas. Alternatively, students can write a phrase or sentence to describe each image. I found this strategy to be a helpful first step for students learning to write summaries of narrative texts.

Another adaptation of the story wheel for older students is the graphic organizer “Somebody–Wanted–But–So–Then,” developed by Macon, Bewell, and Vogt (1991). This graphic organizer continues to be widely used in English reading classrooms. Unlike the story wheel, this graphic organizer does not require drawing images. Instead, simply write each of the five words on a segment on the story wheel. Students name the main character (*somebody*), his or her motivation (*wanted*), the problem (*but*), the attempt to solve the problem (*so*), and the final resolution (*then*). These words provide students with the language to narrate a story structure. They could be accompanied by basic images associated with the story, created either by you, the teacher, or by students. As students become more independent in their language skills, they will need fewer images and may simply use the five words to help them structure their retelling. This organizer works best for stories that explicitly follow a “Somebody–Wanted–But–So–Then” story structure. Narratives that are more complex may have multiple characters, motivations,

and problems, which might result in multiple “somebodies” or “buts,” for example.

Adaptations for limited supplies. Not all teachers have easy access to scissors. Fortunately, the concept of the story wheel does not depend on the circular shape! While the distinctive wheel shape helped my learners locate their story wheels among papers, the circle was not necessary to support the retelling. The scaffolding function of a retelling wheel can also be effective on a standard-sized 8.5-inch x 11-inch piece of paper, which is necessary if scissors are not available. Instead of dividing a circle into pie pieces, students can fold a piece of paper into segments of equal size—fold the paper in thirds, as if fitting a letter in an envelope, and then fold once more to create six rectangular segments. Students then draw an image of the story sequence in each segment, beginning with the top segment. When retelling, students can refold the piece of paper and then gradually unfold after describing each event of the story. There are numerous other ways to fold paper to support student learning. Educators have developed creative applications called *foldables* that can be applied to retelling scaffolds (see Dinah.com 2021).

Another barrier is lack of access to a photocopier. Drawing separate story wheels for each student is a time-consuming task that is not reasonable for most teachers, particularly for teachers with large classes. A variation is to transform the story wheel to a class-wide story walk. Create one image of each event on a separate piece of paper. If you identify six main events, use six pieces of paper. Each piece would feature a distinct image that represents an event in the story. Then, attach the images to the walls of the classroom, establishing a station for each picture. Students retell the story by walking around the room. When they reach an image, they describe the part of the story represented on the image. Students can do this process either individually or in groups. To manage this activity, set a time limit for each station, for example, three minutes. When time is called, students rotate to another station. If

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students have extra time at their station, they can talk about their response to the event by answering questions like, “How did you feel when you read this part?” and “How is this part the same as something in your life?”

An advantage to this adaptation is that teachers can include any number of story events without having to cut or fold paper. If the classroom space is large enough, this adaptation also allows multiple story retellings simultaneously, which can help students review stories they have read recently. To do this, create events for three different stories. Hang each group of events in different parts of the classroom. Assign student groups to different stories and instruct them to retell the events in the story to each other. Make sure students use quiet voices and that they have enough space to move around. An additional benefit to the story-walk adaptation is that this technique gets students out of their seats and moving.

PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS

The following practical recommendations for using the story retelling wheel reflect successes and problems that I encountered, either as a teacher for young learners or as a teacher educator for new teachers.

1. *Read the story interactively with students.* The first step in the retelling procedure is for young learners to listen to a story read aloud, either by the teacher or on an audio recording. Student interaction during the read-aloud will facilitate students' comprehension of the story, which is necessary for a successful retelling. Before beginning a read-aloud of a new book, preview the text to students to identify parts that may be unclear. If you are reading the story aloud, you might also practice reading

the text aloud to be sure that you are confident with the language in the book. Engage students in the story as you read: ask questions throughout the book (e.g., “What do you think will happen next?”); draw students' attention to illustrations (e.g., “Look at this illustration. What do you think is happening?”); clarify new vocabulary (e.g., “This is a new word for us. It means”); and connect the story to topics that are familiar to students (e.g., “Can you tell me about a time when you felt like this?”). When I was reading new books, I wrote questions on sticky notes that I placed on the edges of the pages. As I read aloud in the classroom, these sticky notes reminded me to pause and engage my students. It can be helpful for students to listen to the story multiple times.

2. *Select the right texts to retell.* The retelling wheel is designed to graphically show events in a sequence. Fiction genres and narrative nonfiction genres work best for retelling wheels. Texts should have a clear chronology with one or more main characters. Summarizing informational texts requires different language forms because these texts are organized differently. For instance, students might describe the main idea of a text rather than explain events that occurred at the beginning, later, and at the end.

An additional consideration when selecting texts is the sophistication of the storyline. Most young learners are emergent or beginning readers, which means they cannot decode texts beyond those with controlled vocabulary, short phrases, and simple storylines. These texts usually do not have a robust story

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structure with a problem and solution. However, because young learners can usually comprehend more English than they can read, they are able to understand more-complex picture books that they hear read aloud, particularly when they ask and answer questions throughout the reading.

A final consideration is to ensure that students have enough background knowledge to understand the story. Consider pre-teaching the main concepts or vocabulary in the story if students do not encounter them in their everyday life. Make connections between the story plot and students' experiences. Avoid stories that are not culturally appropriate for your students. The sample story I showed from my U.S. classroom, for example, may not be a good fit for your classroom.

- 3.** *Model the process of using the story wheel.* In scaffolding frameworks, teachers gradually release responsibility to students. That is to say, classroom activities move from teacher-directed to student-centered. When introducing the story wheel for the first time, show students exactly the language and behavior you expect. If you ask students to create their own wheels by listing the important events, then you should demonstrate to students how to select events that are important. If you ask students to retell for the first time, then give an example of retelling using the wheel. As much as possible, after modeling, observe students closely as they use the wheel. This will allow you to clarify major inaccuracies. However, as with all English language activities, do not expect perfection in language use.
- 4.** *Use the wheel to retell.* I have witnessed primary teachers who limit the use of retelling wheels to a coloring exercise. While coloring can be a creative and enjoyable task for young learners, it does not tap into the potential power the retelling wheel holds in supporting students' oral language. Similarly, I have seen teachers who ask their students to sequence events in the wheel and then submit the wheel to the teacher. Students in these classes never had the opportunity to use the wheel for retelling. Provide time or space for students to retell using the wheel. Students may benefit from an explanation of the purpose of the story wheel. Tell them why you want them to use the story wheel and how it will help them improve. For the retelling wheel to have maximum benefits, students need to use the wheel to guide the retelling process.
- 5.** *Teach transition language.* One of the benefits of the story retelling wheel is that students have an opportunity to practice academic language associated with narrative and fiction. While each story will have specific vocabulary and language structures, general terms will cross stories and enable students to string together sequences. Examples are *in the beginning*, *first*, *next*, *so then*, and *finally*. Teach these terms explicitly and remind students to use them in their retelling.
- 6.** *Remove the story wheel . . . eventually.* Removing the story wheel may seem counterintuitive, particularly after I just highlighted all the benefits of using a story wheel. However, at its crux, the story wheel is a scaffolding tool.

As with brick-and-mortar buildings, all successful learners eventually shed the scaffolds that helped develop their skills. If you notice that students can retell a story confidently and clearly without an organizer, then they may not need the support of a story wheel *for that book*. However, they may benefit from a story wheel, or a similar retelling graphic organizer, when retelling a more complex story. As students develop English literacy skills, they will move from relying on detailed images to using words and phrases. The variations of story retelling wheels are numerous; the key is to be flexible in how and when students use them.

CONCLUSION

I originally designed and used the story retelling wheel for young English learners who were just beginning to develop reading skills. But the underlying concept of the story wheel is relevant to anyone who retells stories, which is all of us! I recently had a conversation that reminded me of the value of the story wheel. A friend was planning a weekend trip to a city that I had visited in the previous year. She asked me a question similar to the ones I asked my young learners: “Tell me about your trip. What happened there?” My initial response was something like, “It was so great. I loved it!”; however, that was not an accurate response to her question. Then, I opened my camera to show her photos I had taken. I found that the photos reminded me of chronological details in the trip that I missed in my first retelling from memory. Telling about a trip is certainly not the same as retelling a written story; it lacks the story structure that is commonly found in narrative genres. However, my photos worked as a helpful scaffold similar to the way a story wheel works as a scaffold for students.

This anecdote is a good reminder of how much we are asking of our students when we request for them to “tell what happened” in a book. For our students, not only are we asking them to retell a story, but we are also asking

them to do so in English, a language that is not their first. The story wheel is one way to help them find success in retelling, while enhancing their oral language and critical-thinking skills at the same time.

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