



Reading from the Wordless: A Case Study on the Use of Wordless Picture Books

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Abstract

For centuries people have conveyed meaning through the use of visual images, without the aid of written text. Consequently, wordless picture books have become a distinct genre within the world of literature. The wordless book is unique in that its content must be communicated solely through the use of illustrations. The reading of wordless picture book is an open-ended process in which viewers read stories by bringing their background experiences and personal histories to bear on the visual images they encounter within the text. This study looks at the use of wordless picture books on a seven-year old male nonreader. The investigation focuses on the exploration of the child's responses to a selection of narrative wordless picture books. This study suggests that wordless picture books are a good source for analyzing a child's early and emergent literacy. Acknowledging the importance of wordless picture books may deepen the definitions of emergent literacy and broaden our approaches to the teaching of reading.

Keywords: Wordless picture books, Early literacy, Reading

1. Background of the study

The use of visual images without the aid of written text as means of communicating and conveying messages has been part of people's lives for centuries (Considine, 1987; Heins, 1987; Whalen, 1994). In fact, our day to day survival depends on our understanding of the meaning that visual images convey. For instance, it would be impossible to drive on the road without the ability to interpret the road signs, and it would even be more difficult to get your way around places if you cannot comprehend the common public signs. "Children born into the first years of the twenty-first century are more likely to possess richer and better understanding of visual imagery and its modes of deployment than any other generation in the history of humankind. This is because their world is filled with images" (Lewis, 2001, p.59). These images could be moving or still, and they could be in combination with texts and sounds. This is the world in which they must function. Competence with images is now considered as a necessity in life (Lewis, 2001). "Increasingly such competence will be part of the context that young children bring to their readings of picture books, and however incomplete and partial those readings may be, they frequently differ in interesting ways from those made by parents, teachers, critics and academics. They sometimes see more and they often see differently" (Lewis, 2001, p. 60)

In light of this, "from the 1970s onwards, the speech and thought bubbles characteristic of the comic strip style disappeared altogether in some books giving rise to the wordless picture books. In thirty years or so this rather peculiar formal mutation has thrived and propagated itself as illustrators have tested out its possibilities upon an increasingly visually literate population" (Lewis, 2001, p.61). Consequently, wordless picture books have become a distinct genre within the world of literature (Degler, 1979; Lindauer, 1988; Stewig, 1988).

As the content of wordless picture books must be communicated solely through the use of illustrations, it is considered as a unique genre of text. The reading of wordless picture books is an open-ended process in which viewers read stories by bringing their background experiences and personal histories to bear on the visual images they encounter

within the text (Crawford & Hade, 2000). “Wordless picture books provide a basis on which storytakers and storymakers can construct meaning and build their own narratives” (Crawford & Hade, 2000, p.66).

In reading wordless picture books, readers are faced with a variety of visual signs. They then assign meaning to these visual signs based on their own experiences, perspectives, and the particular context of the reading event. These sign systems help readers form a type of framework that informs their interpretation of the text and helps them shape their construction of the story (Nodelman, 1988). Similarly, Elster’s (1998) study of influences on children’s emergent readings of picture books showed that visual cues had a significant impact on their readings and that readers’ understanding of text was greatly supported by illustrations. Studies such as these supported the belief that reading is a meaning-making experience and that this meaning-making process is supported and facilitated by children’s ability to respond to visual cues within the text.

Since these studies investigated readings of books that contained a conventional printed text, as well as illustrations, it is assumed that the effects of visual cues would even be more profound in the construction of meaning based on a wordless text. As Nodelman (1988) notes, “The words and the pictures in picture books both define and amplify each other, neither is an open ended as either would be on its own”(p.viii). Thus, wordless books, “which do not have this type of print story line to amplify or clarify the message of the illustrations, are by nature less corrective” (Crawford & Hade, 2000, p.69). Wordless picture books then could lead to more divergent types of readings and may be more open to a range of interpretations than books that are accompanied by text.

2. Purpose of the study

This study was conducted in the effort to better understand the sense-making process that takes place when a child transacts with wordless picture books. In this study, a seven-year old nonreader was asked to share his reading of wordless picture books with the researchers. The researchers wanted to better understand the strategies that the child uses to make sense of wordless texts. Specifically, the study seeks to find out:

- i. how the child responds to the characters and visual features in wordless picture books.
- ii. the narratives the child is able to produce from wordless picture books.

3. Participant and the context

The participant of the study is Amir*, a seven-year old nonreader. In January, Amir started Year 1 in an urban public school (*Sekolah Rendah Kebangsaan*) and a diagnostic test conducted by the school revealed that Amir, after three weeks of school, does not have the ability to read in his first language which is Bahasa Melayu. A diagnostic test at a learning centre for English, reported that Amir’s reading ability in English is not strong although he recognizes many single words and was able to provide lots of English words when shown with pictures. For example, Amir was able to fill in letters that were missing in an alphabet exercise. Semi-formal exercises requiring sentence reading (joining lines from sentences to pictures) and sentence completion (filling in missing words to pictures) were difficult for him. However, he knew the answers orally. (Kumon English Diagnostic Test Information, 2007).

In school, his class teacher noted that he did not have any problem understanding verbal questions and responding to these questions, and he also did not have problems understanding verbal instructions. For instance, when he was asked to name the colour of the grass, he was able to give the answer ‘green’ without any hesitation. General instructions given in class were not a problem for Amir to understand, he was able to understand the instructions given to him by the teacher and was also able to convey these instructions to his mother. For instance, when he was asked to wear sports attire on Thursday for sports practice, he was able to understand this instruction and conveyed it to his mother. Amir is at the moment placed in an intensive class for reading and writing (*Kelas Intensif Membaca dan Menulis – KIA2M*) and will go through this class until June at the end of which, the same diagnostic test will be administered on him again.

In preschool, the teachers noticed that he was very good at drawing and would put in a lot of effort and concentration when he was engaged in drawing-related activities. He was also very detailed in his drawing. He would draw elements where most children would not have even noticed or would not have even thought of drawing. For instance, when he was drawing the flag of a pirate ship, he would try to reflect the weather-torn image of the flag in his drawing. Nevertheless, Amir was reluctant with literacy tasks especially those that did not come easily for him, and he preferred to discuss the pictures than struggle to decode the text. At home (according to his mother), a way to motivate him to engage in text-related activities is to allow him to draw once he finishes the text-related activities or in between those activities.

4. Data collection and analysis

The data collection and data analysis procedures of this study were adapted from Crawford & Hade (2000). Data collection was done in four sessions involving the researchers and the child in the child’s room, with each complete session lasting approximately 30 minutes. The child was presented with a selection of six different wordless picture books. They are:

- i. *Just Open a Book* by P.K Hallinan
- ii. *Ernestine's Upset* by Jane Wallace-Mitchell
- iii. *A Walk in The Park* by Anthony Browne
- iv. *Dogger* by Shirley Hughes
- v. *The Visitors Who Came to Stay* by Annalena McAfee and Anthony Browne
- vi. *Come Away From the Water, Shirley* by John Burningham

These books were all written by foreign writers and illustrators. The child was invited to explore the books and choose one that he would like to read aloud. The child was asked to look through the book, read the story aloud, and share his understanding of the text based on the visual elements in the texts. This process was repeated four times, with the child reading a total number of 4 books. These four books are:

Choice 1 *Just Open a Book*

Choice 2 *A Walk in The Park*

Choice 3 *Dogger*

Choice 4 *The Visitors Who Came to Stay*

During the sessions, the researchers asked questions and responded to the child's questions and comments during the readings. The child's reading and corresponding discussions of the texts were videotaped. Verbatim transcripts, supplemented with researcher observations related to the child's intonations, facial expressions, and physical responses, were developed. For instance, the child's change of intonation in narrating the story and commenting on some of the characters in the story; the child's facial expressions when he was trying to comprehend and to make connections with some of the visual elements in the story; and the child's physical movements in narrating the story (hand movement, body movement) were noted. Additional data were derived through document analyses of the wordless picture books used within the study.

The data were then analyzed according to the principles of qualitative content analysis which involve a systematic review of the data, coding, category constructions, and analysis (Merriam, 1991). The transcripts and notes for the child's readings were first reviewed alongside the accompanying pages of the wordless book, in order to see which visual cues had captured the child's attention and elicited a response. Then, each transcript was coded based on the five categories developed by Crawford & Hade (2000). These five broad categories of sense-making are:

- i. Applying knowledge and experience to the reading
- ii. Bringing many different texts to bear on the reading transaction
- iii. Assuming multiple perspectives in the telling of the stories
- iv. Incorporating story language and story rituals in each reading

Including active physical movement and play-like responses as part of the reading event.

5. Findings

The premise of this study is to learn how a seven-year old nonreader would respond to visual cues in wordless picture books. The child made sense of the stories by transacting with the visual texts in the books and assigning potential meanings to different signs encountered within the texts' frameworks. This sense-making process is categorized into five types and the findings of this study will be discussed in accordance with these categories.

5.1 Sense-Making Through Prior Knowledge and Experiences

Good readers do not read in a vacuum rather they bring their prior knowledge and experiences to bear on their reading (Rosenblatt, 1987). In the case of Amir, it was evident that he brought his prior knowledge about a wide range of subject matter to bear on the reading of each story. In reading the four books, Amir drew upon his prior knowledge in order to contextualize the signs that he encountered within the illustrations. For example, in reading *Just Open a Book* by P.K Hallinan, when Amir came across the picture of a pyramid, he said "It's a triangle" and he later asked the researchers, "What's the name of this thing?" and when told it's a pyramid, he went "Ahhh, yes, pyramid". He said he had heard the word before but could not associate the word with the picture when asked, instead triangle was the first thing that came to his mind when he saw the picture of a pyramid. Another example of Amir bringing in his prior knowledge to understand the context of the illustration in *Just Open a Book* by P.K Hallinan is when he saw the picture of a giant carrying an axe. He was able to say it was a picture of a giant but he had trouble finding the word 'axe'. He started by making the actions and sounds of a person swinging an axe and later told the researchers that he had seen the object behind his grandmother's house. When asked if he knew the name of the object, he said no.

Sometimes the lack of prior knowledge also caused Amir great difficulty in interpreting or at times he misinterpreted

the visual cues in the illustrations. For example, when he was asked to describe the picture of a man on the moon in *Just Open a Book* by P.K Hallinan, he was able to say that the man went to space and was wearing a space suit but when asked where the man was, he said he was in 'cheese planet' and when asked why he thought so, he said "Because the planet is yellow like cheese". When Amir was faced with a concept that he was not familiar with, he also had difficulty interpreting the visual cues in the book. When reading *Dogger* by Shirley Hughes, he kept on referring to the sister character in the book as brother. The concept of sister is a bit foreign to Amir as he does not have female siblings and because the sister character in this book has short hair and is always dressed in shirts and shorts, he associated that character with a boy (brother).

Amir's choice of words in describing the illustrations is also very much influenced by his prior knowledge. He used the term 'belt of the neck' to describe 'dog collar' in *A Walk in The Park* by Anthony Browne. Amir does not own a dog and was not around people who own dogs, thus the term 'dog collar' was not a term that he was familiar with. Since the dog collar looked like a belt to him and was placed at a dog's neck, he came up with the term 'belt of the neck' which consists of words which he is more familiar with.

5.2 Sense-Making Through Intertextuality

Most texts make references, either explicitly or implicitly, to other texts in our lives. Consequently, reading becomes a sense-making process that involves a layering of texts and meanings. Good readers are able to read new texts by applying their memories of other texts, and by determining the interrelationships among these texts (Meek, 1998; Stephens, 1990).

In several instances of Amir's storytelling, he referred to other texts in his attempt to make sense of the text that he was reading. For instance, in trying to explain the boy and the girl's action of playing at the park in *A Walk in The Park* by Anthony Browne, he associated the action with the 'Tarzan' character in *Just Open a Book* by P.K Hallinan, "They swing like tarzan". When he later came across a picture of a gorilla at a beach in *The Visitors Who Came to Stay* by Annalena McAfee and Anthony Browne, he said "Gorilla should not be at a beach, should be in a jungle like that story"(pointing to the book *Just Open a Book* by P.K Hallinan)

In addition to relating the wordless books to other texts, references to television and the media were also prominent in Amir's storytelling. For example, when he was describing a picture of a dinosaur, he was asked by the researchers how he knew it was a picture of a dinosaur, he said he saw a dinosaur in the movie 'Ice Age'. When he saw a character in *Just Open A Book* holding a sword, he acted a fighting scene which he likened to the sword fighting scenes in the movie "Pirates of the Carribean". In describing the character of Robin Hood, Amir said he did not know the name of the character but the character's hat looked like Peter Pan's hat (Amir saw Peter Pan's movie on television).

By making connections among books, television and other media, the children transformed what could have been a simple, linear storybook reading into a more complex, richly layered intertextual experience (Crawford & Hade, 2000)

5.3 Sense-Making Through Multiple Perspective-Taking

Children's understanding of a book can be enhanced by being able to look at the plot of the stories from the perspective of different characters within the same story (Crawford & Hade, 2000).

Although Amir consistently reported his stories from a third-person point of view, he did show his ability to take different perspectives by supplying dialogues for some of the characters. For instance, in reading *Dogger* by Shirley Hughes, he created a dialogue for the scene where the boy was asking his mother to buy him his lost dog, "Mom, I need 5p, please, I don't have dog", then, mom said "I don't have money". In *A Walk in The Park* by Anthony Browne, Amir in describing the father calling for her daughter to go home, supplied a dialogue for the father, "Then dad says 'Girl, let's go home'"

In many instances during the storytelling the boy tried to be the character of the story. Though this was not evident by the use of first-person perspectives in describing the story, it was prominent in his facial expressions and physical movements in his effort to narrate the stories. Amir tried to curl the front part of his hair to make it similar to the letter 'S' and would do the flying movements (hands straight and body slightly slanting to the front) to describe the movements of Superman in *Just Open A Book* by P.K Hallinan. In this instance he was no longer just trying to describe the character from a third-person point of view, he was actually trying to be the character.

5.4 Sense-Making Through Story Language and Story Rituals

When children hear stories and are exposed to read-alouds on a regular basis, they tend to internalize both the rituals and the language of story time (Holdaway, 1979; Morrow, 1989; Snow, 1983). The child in this study brought story experiences to the reading of wordless texts. The language and the rituals embedded in his storytelling were greatly influenced by his previous experiences with books.

The boy's experience in storytelling was one where his mother would read to him before he goes to sleep. He has brought this experience to his reading as he initially wanted to sit on his bed and read the books but later decided to read

at the table in his room as the researcher was seated at the table. Nevertheless, it was observed as the researchers were about to leave the room, he took one of the books again and read it sitting on his bed.

He also used the storytelling intonation when reading the books, he had rising and falling intonations and the exaggerated facial expressions which are typical in storytelling. He also incorporated the typical storytelling register in which he had the phrase ‘the end’ every time he came to the end of the storybook.

5.5 Sense-Making Through Active, Playful Behaviours

Lewis (2001) states that young children, either with or without adults present, almost always play with what they are learning. He added that “when children are able to play with language and with text we can be sure that they are in no danger of mistaking nonsense for sense, have understood the rules and are in possession of a competence that they can apply creatively in their own use of language” (Lewis, 2001, p.79). Many children approach literate activities in unconventional ways, developing literacy processes and sense-making strategies that are more playful and less verbocentric (Fueyo, 1991). Children are also able to spontaneously respond to certain texts in playful manners (Hade, 1991)

Amir playfully responded when sharing his stories. He used many playful body movements and hand gestures in order to describe different scenes. For instance, he made the swinging action with his hands in his effort to describe Tarzan’s action in *Just Open a Book* by P.K Hallinan. Amir literally ran in his room to describe the running scene in *Dogger* by Shirley Hughes. Verbally, he used voice intonation, repetition, and sound effects in playful ways. Amir made ‘swishing’ sounds when describing the scene of Zorro riding on the horse with his sword. He acted and made sound effects (the sound of shooting of a gun and the famous ‘Yeehah’ cowboy yell) in describing scenes in *Just Open a Book* by P.K Hallinan.

In trying to comprehend the presence of a gorilla, a mermaid, and a shark at the beach and a bus in the sea in *The Visitors Who Came to Stay* by Annalena McAfee and Anthony Browne, he lifted his hands and shook his head and laughed. Although initially he asked the researchers the reasons for those things to be there, eventually he did not really want the answers and was just amused at what Lewis (2001) termed as ‘rule-breaking form of activity’. The same play-like reactions could also be seen when Amir was looking at the house scene in *A Walk in The Park* by Anthony Browne. He kept on referring to some of the things in the scene as funny and silly before breaking into laughter.

Lewis (2001) explained that “the breaking of rules and the flouting of conventions do not necessarily imply obscurity or complexity, but they do suggest a strong connection with forms of play. Play is what children do, not because they are in a state of innocence, but because they are perpetually learning” (Lewis, 2001, p.81).

6. Conclusions

This study has clearly shown that reading does not start with words. In this case, a child who is termed as nonreader has managed to comprehend stories without decoding texts. Although his narratives may not be considered grammatically sound and at times they were a mixture of English and Bahasa Melayu (Amir’s first language), they were rich with references to the written word, visual images and his other experiences that made up his everyday life.

The findings of this study are in keeping with the study conducted by Crawford and Hade (2000) on children’s reading of wordless picture books. Findings of this study also confirm other research that have investigated children’s reading of picture books (Golden & Gerber, 1990; Meek, 1998; Stephens, 1990, Lewis 2001; Fueyo, 1991). Both studies on wordless picture books and picture books indicate children rely on many of the same strategies for reading wordless, visual texts, as they do when reading texts that offer a combination of print and visual texts (Crawford & Hade, 2000). Words can turn pictures into rich narrative resources – but only because they change the meaning of pictures. For the same reason also, pictures can change the narrative thrust of words (Nodelman, 1988). This is an important thing to note for it alerts us to the fact that although pictures and words in close proximity in the picture book influence each other, the relationship is never entirely symmetrical (Lewis, 2001)

Children’s reading of wordless picture books may provide a glimpse into their understanding of literacy-related activities, as well as insights into the sense-making processes they use when navigating texts. In general, wordless picture books give the opportunity for children to read books with multilevels and multiperspectives of understanding. Most importantly, these books allow children to navigate the story on their own and to bring in their own understanding of the world to the texts. What can be more motivating to children than having the sense of freedom and confidence to navigate ‘their own ship’?

* Name has been changed to protect the privacy of the participant.

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