ARTICLE

ENGAGING STUDENTS THROUGH WORDLESS PICTURE BOOKS DURING STORY TIME

Kelly McGuire
KMcguire@westgenesee.org

Stories. Librarians love stories, and libraries are among the few forums that can offer exposure to collections of stories in various formats as well as encourage independent exploration and group discussion. While in the school library, students also experience opportunities to soak in a story, take time to see the characters from varying points of view, and practice storytelling skills.

Storytelling or retelling helps students develop the ability to describe and organize details and events. Strong retelling skills can potentially lead to positive outcomes such as increased comprehension. These are ideas and pedagogical methods we are familiar with.

We read, encourage talking, writing about, and searching for stories, but this is text-based. What of the students new to the English language, so text and language are inaccessible to them? What if the books are without words? How should we implement the ideas and pedagogy we know so well? In fact, the library experience for an English Language Learner (ELL) can be different from their classroom experience if we as school librarians can reduce the pressure to perform. Dual-language students that are newer to the English language can be hesitate to comment or participate in group discussions. Many students fear mispronouncing or incorrectly reading a word, making a mistake in front of their peers. To do so is upsetting and embarrassing. Students I have taught have become authority figures while at home. Parents working, lack of childcare, and many other reasons saddle these children with adult responsibilities outside of school. At nine years old, it is difficult to continue to perceive oneself as an authority figure after publicly making a mistake. Regularly scheduled class visits to the library or other times in the library can provide opportunities that allow all students—including ELLs—to explore both oral and text-based language without fear of making mistakes.

Could a wordless picture book be an opportunity to encourage students new to the English language to approach books and to experiment with English?

A wordless picture book offers a different experience than hearing or attempting to read a picture book with text. When a wordless picture book is presented, every reader has the opportunity to tell the story in their own voice, effectively integrating the reader into the storytelling process (Wiesner 1992). Could a wordless picture book be an opportunity to encourage students new to the English language to approach books and to experiment with English?

Even though students in my library are encouraged to speak and write in either their native language or in English, fear of publicly making a mistake can prevent many from participating in a discussion. To all but eliminate the pressure to perform, students with a range of fluencies are partnered to work together to decide which words would be best as they collaborate on how to communicate what they see. Yet, many students struggling with language will still not volunteer or participate. It is those students sitting quietly, hoping no one calls on them to answer because their basic English language skills may not be strong enough to answer an academic question, who may benefit from a chance to become the storyteller in either language.

Students created a shared experience, one that differed slightly with each class or group—a shared experience they could recall with excitement and without fear of being "wrong." The story offered an opportunity to explore language in unique way they may not otherwise have had.

Taking a Fresh Look

One day, as I was checking out materials for a class, I heard two boys laughing and giggling. Handing a book back to a student after it had been checked out, I set down the scanner and walked over to the boys, watching them as they were pointing and falling over on each other, laughing out loud as they talked through the story. Shocked, I stood quietly listening as two boys who usually say next to nothing while in the library shared the experience of a story. As soon as they noticed I was there, each boy asked for a copy of David Wiesner's nearly wordless *Tuesday* (Clarion 1991). From that point on, during each weekly class visit to the library, they asked for "one more."

An important piece of this story is that the boys were both ELLs. They spoke very limited English, but in Wiesner's *Tuesday*, they discovered the story together and became the storytellers in their first language. Scouring my library for other wordless picture books, I found works by Chris Van Allsburg, Lois Ellert, Aaron Becker, Mitsumasa Anno, and many others. I gathered them up and made them available to anyone who wanted to look through these books at the end of class while we checked out books. The boys who enjoyed *Tuesday* loved the books! So did other students. As I watched them pour over the stories I wondered, could a wordless picture book be used during story time?

I thought about the boys again, this time through the lens of someone learning a new language. They came to the library every week with their class. They listened to a story but may have understood only small amounts of it, were not fluent enough to participate in a discussion in English, and had an almost palpable fear of making a mistake. But with *Tuesday*, not only did they tell the story, but they retold it to their classmates (and anyone who would listen). Even though they were mostly speaking in their native language, this shared experience lead to a greater willingness to explore and use their new language. It was *their* version of the story. They could use any words they chose without fear of making a mistake.

Integrating a Wordless Book into Story Time

But how could a wordless picture book work for a story time? Initially when I introduced a wordless picture book, the students looked at me in disbelief. It must have been a trick or test of some kind, and so they began pointing out all the places they saw words—generally not reading the words, just pointing out their position on the front or back covers. Students were confused. How could they tell me what the story was about if there were no words printed on the pages? One student more fluent in English suggested the book was probably cheaper without the words. The rest of the students conferred with each other in English and Spanish, then nodded in agreement.

To begin "reading" the story the students were asked to describe what they saw, but the responses were slow—painfully slow. Again, they thought it was some sort of trick or test. Gradually, slowly, we talked about the characters we saw in the illustrations. Who were they? What were they doing? What were we learning about them? What did we see in the pictures that told us about the setting and what was happening?

As we moved deeper into the story, and the students got to know the characters and the adventure, the excitement grew. The students became part of the story and became the tellers of the story. They were creating the words for the picture book. This act alone filled them with

immense pride. They "wrote" this story.

During story time with wordless picture books the opportunity to become the storyteller allowed the students to explore language without fear. Students with varying levels of fluency in English enjoyed expressing themselves and, interestingly, would often use more-academic language as the storyteller than they did during a more-structured class discussion. The level of engagement demanded by wordless picture books is comparable to the process of language learning and general communication. Opportunities to experience wordless picture books—to become storytellers—can have a significant impact on language learning.

As we explored other wordless or nearly wordless picture books, we began writing about some of what we saw. Using the smart board and a Word document, I followed the "I do, we do, you do" model and would type in some of the words the group collaborated on. At first, the focus was on their weekly words or challenge words in both English and Spanish. But as we grew comfortable with the process we stretched to small sentences. Gradually, I would leave our creations up on the board, while they worked in groups to describe what they saw on the next page, or what the characters were doing, or (one of our standards) what was the main idea of the story.

To place the students in groups, I worked carefully with the teachers to make sure each student would have the opportunity to become part of the conversation and outcome. The rules were that they could speak and write in English or Spanish—or both—and spelling did not count. Initially, they were hesitant. Once they discovered they really could speak and write in either language or both, and spelling would not be corrected, their output increased. When copies of their weekly words were made available in the library, the output began to surprise their teachers.

Additional Benefits

Wordless picture books can elicit a deeper level of engagement as well. The lack of words requires students to dive into the images to pull out the story and then use their words to create the story. During this process, a beautiful cultural component emerges as well. Students tell the story through their experiences and backgrounds. Using the boys as an example, they brought a perspective to *Tuesday* different from mine and some of their classmates because in some Spanish-language-based cultures, frogs are considered good luck, bringers of good fortune and much more. Therefore, the story created by the boys when they looked at Wiesner's illustrations had a very different focus for them than it might for other students. These cultural elements the boys discovered in the book allowed them to connect to each other and to the story.

The wordless and nearly wordless books open doors to reading for all readers, including reluctant readers.

As when the boys read *Tuesday* together, when the wordless picture books were "read" together during story time, students interacted with the story elements in a deeply personal way. Students created a shared experience, one that differed slightly with each class or group—a shared experience they could recall with excitement and without fear of being "wrong." The story offered an opportunity to explore language in unique way they may not otherwise have had.

Wordless picture books can help to build a culturally responsive classroom, and help to eliminate potential language barriers and many other challenges faced when learners read or talk about text-based books. Wordless—and almost wordless—picture books can be included in library classrooms in many ways. The books can simply be available for the students to enjoy and create their own stories. Wordless picture books can be used in small groups to encourage writing or sequencing. Also, well-constructed visual narratives provide students with opportunities to develop their understanding of words and images, use their imaginations and context clues to derive meaning, develop retelling skills, and discuss story elements. We can model the process, guide the process, or just sit back and let the learners explore.

I have learned more about my students and their experiences while listening to them describe a page from Aaron Becker's *Journey* than I ever thought possible. Students also learn about each other: where they have come from, what they've experienced, and how they view the world. Learners develop a much deeper understanding of and appreciation for their classmates and themselves. This was true for native English speakers as well. Native English speakers were excited to create the story together, enjoyed working together and were patient with each other. The wordless and nearly wordless books open doors to reading for all readers, including reluctant readers.

Additionally, students were more eager to explore texts they had previously passed by. I witnessed an

Here is a short list of authors who have created wordless—or nearly wordless—picture books. This is list just a starting point. Many other authors have created books that will let your learners create their own stories.

Aaron Becker
Alexandra Day
Amy Nielander
Anne Belov
Anno (Mitsumasa Anno)
Barbara Lehman
Beatrice Blue
Bill Thomson
Chris Van Allsburg
Daniel Miyares
David Wiesner
Elisha Cooper
Eric Rohmann
Guojing
Henry Cole
Issa Watanabe
Istvan Bonyai
Jeannie Baker
JiHyeon Lee
JonArno Lawson
Juan Felipe Herrera
Liam Francis Walsh
Lizi Boyd
Lois Ellert
Mark Teague
Matthew Cordell
Mercer Mayer
Molly Idle
Peggy Rathmann
Peter Spier
Raúl Colón
Shaun Tan
Shutta Crum
Stephanie Graegin
Suzy Lee
Thao Lam
Tomie dePaola

Reluctant readers who either do not wish to read or are willing to read only lower-level text can benefit from the unique features of the wordless picture book, resulting in increased comprehension and greater love of reading.

increased willingness to take risks and be seen publicly taking risks. Students who were in the process of learning English exhibited a greater level of confidence than they had in the past, even though they were still learning a new language. Those same two boys who so enjoyed experiencing Wiesner's *Tuesday* began reading and sharing books by Eric Carle, early readers, and then early chapter books and graphic novels in both languages.

More Reasons to Offer Wordless Picture Books

Research suggests that—particularly for ELL students—the extent of reader engagement is different for picture books with and without words. It is the level of engagement that enables the reader to become a co-constructer of meaning in the transaction with these texts (Arizpe, Colomer, and Roldan 2015). This difference in engagement was evident when my students, instead of listening to a story they only partially understood, enthusiastically collaborated to create their own story using words they felt were best, and then retelling that story in both languages to others.

According to Belinda Louie and Jarek Sierschynski, when "reading" wordless picture books, individuals generally experience higher concentration, leading to increased comprehension, a crucial step in using text to gain knowledge (2015). Students who struggle with language are not the only ones to benefit from experiences with wordless picture books. Reluctant readers who either do not wish to read or are willing to read only lower-level text can benefit from the unique features of the wordless picture book, resulting in increased comprehension and greater love of reading.

Other aspects of reading, literacy, and learning can benefit from the use of wordless picture books. Consider that traditional text has had a privileged position within classrooms, but we construct meaning in our world through images, symbols, colors, signs, body language (in person and in videos), gaps and margins, *and* printed text. Our engagement with the world has changed. The idea of using wordless picture books in the library should be a natural extension of our interaction with stories in all their forms. Additionally, multiple literacies needed to interact with our world could be considered multimodal: visual, oral, written, and tactile. Because wordless picture books remove the language input, all students can share critical retelling and storytelling experiences through engaging with visual elements. In the process, readers also can reflect on and describe what they are thinking and feeling as they examine the images.

Wordless picture books provide many opportunities to connect students to reading in unique ways. When exploring stories such as David Wiesner's *Tuesday* (and a host of others; see sidebar for more authors), students are engaged in telling and retelling their stories, cultural connections are made and shared, and stories take on more-personal meanings. In the process, language and reading skills develop and strengthen. Wordless picture books open the doors to worlds of reading for all our students, while especially encouraging our ELL students to take more steps forward in their adventure of learning English.

Kelly McGuire *is librarian at West Genesee Middle School in Camillus, New York. She has been a librarian for more than twenty years and is passionate about creating the library as a safe place and building understanding of the role and significance of the school librarian. She is the incoming Region VI coordinator for New York Library Association Section of School Librarians. When not in the library, Kelly is hiking and exploring with her family.*

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