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WORDLESS PICTURE BOOKS

by Marilyn Decker

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Wordless picture books are one of the major trends in children's literature today. The story in these books is told exclusively by means of pictures. These wordless books can fulfill a very important purpose in the classroom and the home. Perhaps the most important is using the wordless books to stimulate language development in our children. Through the wordless books children take an active part in the storytelling. It is the teacher's responsibility to provide many varied experiences to foster the development of oral language in each of her children.

Wordless books are an excellent means to fulfill that purpose. The children tell in their own words what is happening in each picture. In this way they are learning to follow the story line, to interpret pictures and attach meaning to the pictures. Nancy Larrick says about wordless picture books, "Oral language pours forth easily and naturally."¹ Even the shy child forgets his shyness in the telling of the story. Wordless books help the child who has a limited experiential background by providing him with pictures and a story that he too can tell. Wordless books provide an opportunity for all children to express themselves verbally. The teacher must guide the children by means of questions and comments to help them notice more, think more and expand more on their ideas. Wordless picture books give teachers and parents insight into their children's language abilities.

In the small wordless book by Mercer Mayer, *One Frog Too Many*, the teacher could introduce the book to a small group of children rather than the whole class. Then all children in the small group could see the pictures and the story. Then this small group could "read" the story to another small group and a chain reaction sets in. In this method there is more student participation. The easy-to-follow plot in *One Frog Too Many* would make it an excellent book for storytelling in small groups. The story line is clearly seen throughout the series of comical drawings showing the family of the frog, a boy, a dog, and a turtle being invaded by a small frog.

In Tana Hoban's book *Look Again!* children's observation is sharpened and conversation stimulated. The format of this book is unique. On the first page a window is cut out and you see only black and white stripes but as you turn the page, you look again and see that the black and white stripes were just a small part of a zebra's head. On the next page the whole zebra is shown. This pattern of proceeding from the part to the whole is repeated throughout the book in a succession of beautiful black and white photographs. Children's curiosity is aroused by the small pictures leading to the larger pictures. This format makes this book an excellent conversation starter. A follow-up activity providing more oral language experience may have the children making their own surprise books similar to *Look Again!* Then they can surprise their own classmates with their pictures. In Tana Hoban's first book of color photographs *Is It Red? Is It Yellow? Is It Blue?* the concepts of color, size, shape, and relationships are introduced in a delightful manner without words. Each full-page color photograph is an excellent conversation starter as well as a new learning experience.

Wordless books also encourage the imagination. Children and teachers are not limited by words on the page but can create their own words, invent their own details to tell the story. Each book can be an

adventure in imagination. Linda Heller in *Lily at the Table* has created a wordless fantasy book about Lily who could not finish her food at the table and lets her imagination run away into fantasyland. The chicken leg becomes a violin, the fried potatoes become spectacles, a bean becomes a cigarette. She even fishes in a bowl of cheerios. Children can readily identify with Lily and let their own imaginations run away into fantasy world. This new book by Linda Heller is an excellent wordless book to stimulate children's imagination. Children can easily use this book as a take-off to their own food fantasies.

Wordless books help children understand the sequential nature of plots. They see the plot developing in the sequence of the pictures. As they tell the story from the pictures, they become aware of the sequence of events. Sequence is a basic skill in storytelling but also in creative writing. *Frog Goes to Dinner* by Mercer Mayer is an effective tool in teaching sequence. This book tells the amusing story of a frog who went to dinner at a fancy restaurant by slipping into his boy's suit pocket. In the restaurant he creates havoc by jumping on tables and even into the orchestra. The pictures in the book easily show the sequence of action. It is the teacher's responsibility to see that the pictures in the wordless books she uses show the action and sequence clearly so that the children are not confused in their tellings. Simple, easy to follow action is best suited for young children.

Wordless books can be used to expand children's vocabulary.

There can be little doubt that wide experience with books increases a child's vocabulary. Those who plan kindergarten and primary programs advise teachers to use many books and to read and tell many stories to help children learn new words and acquire new meanings for words they already know.²

In working with wordless books a child learns new words, new concepts, and ideas and has the opportunity to use these words as he relates the words and the pictures. Children need to be exposed to many varied kinds of literature daily in order to increase their vocabulary. Giving children exposure to wordless books helps build their vocabularies.

Using wordless books in the classroom teaches the young child how to handle books correctly by moving from the front to the back of the book and from the left to the right. Especially the wordless books by Mercer Mayer and John S. Goodall are good for small hands to handle.

One of the most important uses of wordless books in the early elementary grades is as a reading readiness material. Books without words can be used to develop skills and attitudes that will be important in beginning reading. As the children see the pictures and respond to the story line, they need to comprehend pictures. They may read for the literal message in the book or be encouraged to make inferences.

In this way they are bringing their own self to the book. They may be encouraged to evaluate a character's action or to empathize with some aspect of the story. In this way we are developing the critical thinking abilities they must use later when they read.

How can wordless books be used as an aid to reading readiness? First the story should be read and enjoyed by teacher and students. We must never forget that the primary goal of reading is to create a growing desire to read. We must fill the child with a zest and joy for reading. The beginning of a positive attitude toward books must be cultivated. In wordless books young children are not frustrated by not being able to read the words on the page. Thus their first attempts at reading are successful. They are no-fail encounters. Dr. Pat Cianciolo of Michigan State University "sees wordless books as an aid to reading instruction especially in a language experience approach."³ Wordless books should first be read and enjoyed as a class. The teacher should guide the children and relate it to their own experience. Then the children tell the story of the book as the teacher writes their words on an experience chart. These children-dictated-stories are putting words in wordless books and become the children's own reading instruction. Important reading skills emerge from this group writing experience. Concepts such as word, sentence, capital and small letter, punctuation are naturally taught in this language experience approach using a wordless book as the base. Children first see the story presented in pictures only and then in written form that they can read. Connie Bridges shows us the importance of the language experience approach. "The easiest and most predictable type of reading material are those dictated by the children themselves. When reading materials originate from the children's own experiences and when the language of these materials match the children's personal language they are better able to predict what the materials are going to say."⁴ Mercer Mayer's *Frog On His Own* tells the story of a frog having an adventure on his own. The plot is simple and the action moves fast. This book would make an excellent experience chart for beginning readers. Eric Carle's *Do You Want to Be My Friend?* is good material for an experience chart. Children enjoy the fun of guessing what animal comes next in this book.

There are many excellent wordless books available today. These books can help stimulate language development and can be used as an aid to reading readiness. Every teacher must select the best in wordless books for her class. These books must be selected on the basis of the needs and interests of her class.

An update on wordless picture books written by Richard Abrahamson in the January, 1981 *Reading Teacher* says, "Three artists dominate the field in numbers of books (wordless) published and in earning

excellent reviews. Mercer Mayer, Fernando Krahn, and John S. Goodall set the standard."⁵ This bibliography followed:

Mercer Mayer *Frog Goes to Dinner*, 1975; *Frog On His Own*, 1973; *The Great Cat Chase*, 1975; *One Frog Too Many*, 1975.

John S. Goodall *Creepy Castle*, 1975; *An Edwardian Summer*, 1979; *Jacko*, 1972; *Naughty Nancy*, 1975; *Paddy's Evening Out*, 1973.

Fernando Krahn *Catch the Cat*, 1978; *A Funny Friend From Heaven*, 1977; *The Mystery of the Giant Footprints*, 1977; *Who's Seen the Scissors?* 1975.

FOOTNOTES

1 Nancy Larrick, "Wordless Picture Books and the Teaching of Reading," *Reading Teacher*, 29 (May, 1976), 743.

2 Walter T. Petty and others, *Experiences in Language*, 3rd Ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1981), p. 362.

3 Richard Abrahamson, "An Update on Wordless Picture Books," *Reading Teacher*, 34 (January, 1981), p. 417.

4 Connie Bridge, "Predictable Materials for Beginning Readers," *Language Arts*, 56 (May, 1979), p. 503.

5 Richard Abrahamson, "An Update on Wordless Picture Books," *Reading Teacher*, 34 (January, 1981), p. 503.

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