

# ENHANCING ENGLISH LEARNERS' LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT USING WORDLESS PICTURE BOOKS

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*Wordless picture books contain literary elements and structures in their visuals. We can teach English learners to engage in discussion, analysis, and production of their own texts through close viewing.*

Many states in the U.S. have adopted the English Language Proficiency (ELP) Standards, which consist of 10 standards and 5 proficiency levels within each standard (Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO], 2014). The standards call for teachers to provide scaffolding for English learners (ELs) at all levels of the ELP as learners engage in cognitively complex tasks. Regardless of their proficiency levels, ELs need to create linguistic output as a result of close reading or close viewing of literary and informational texts. In order to accomplish this

goal, teachers should structure activities and provide appropriate classroom support to motivate readers to bring who they are to the reading tasks.

Reading closely or deeply is hard for many native speakers. Where can we begin to teach ELs to read closely and critically in a language when many of

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them may still be struggling to identify all the words? Many educators are looking for ways to help ELs who have limited English proficiency to engage in close and critical reading (Bunch, Walqui, & Pearson, 2014). Can we develop the thinking skills and habits through close viewing before we add the language demand of close reading? Lukens (2004) pointed to the essence of literature lying within the visual and the verbal text as well as in its embedded literary elements and structures. Although Beck and McKeown (2001) raised concerns about readers' reliance on illustrations because the illustrations might be incongruent with the text, this does not apply to wordless picture books because the illustrations are the only source of information. Can we start ELs' close reading journey with an initial focus on close viewing of visual texts, pictures without words—wordless picture books? These books contain all the literary elements and narrative structures that written texts possess because the illustrations have to deliver a complete story.

The purpose of this article is to discuss how we can use wordless picture books to engage ELs in close viewing, creating linguistic output as oral

language during discussion and written language in self-authored texts. We will present an approach to teaching close viewing with K–5 ELs across language proficiency levels using wordless picture books.

### Best Practices for ELs

The close viewing approach of wordless picture books is grounded in best practices for ELs. Oral language is the foundation of literacy. Literacy instruction should build on and expand ELs' oral language skills in English. Literacy activities at school should start with oral discussion, which is necessary for the completion of meaningful tasks (Cloud, Genesee, & Hamayan, 2009; Gibbons, 2015).

### Ensure Comprehensible Input and Output

Krashen (1982) established the claim that ELs' understanding of what they listen to and what they read is fundamental to their success in language learning. Echevarria and Graves (2007) asserted that speech used should be appropriate for students' proficiency levels. In addition, teachers should find ways to help ELs to understand abstract and complex language, for example, by using practical demonstrations, pictures, and graphs. Swain (2005) proposed promoting comprehensible output in addition to comprehensible input to create the conditions for language growth. ELs need to participate in instructional contexts wherein they use the English language themselves. Children need to have extended opportunities to get their ideas across to the listeners, even if their grammar has errors or their vocabulary is limited. Making their perspectives comprehensible to others encourages ELs to process their language more deeply, finding the linguistic forms to best match their

intended messages. For example, when ELs are placed in a small group or in pairs to solve a problem or to complete a task, the collaboration creates a context for meaningful extended language use.

### Focus on Meaning

Wong-Fillmore (1985) described effective teachers of young ELs as "effective communicators" (p. 40). In a teacher-led discussion, all the participants should pay close attention to what students say, rather than anticipating their answers to the teacher's question. Gibbons (2015) observed that effective teachers also slow down the pace of classroom conversation to allow sufficient time for learners to formulate what they are going to say. Teachers can also allow students more turns before they intervene to evaluate or to reword a student's statement. ELs who have opportunities to reflect and to self-correct will "receive more long-term benefits for language learning than those who constantly have communication problems solved for them by the teacher" (Gibbons, 2015, p. 41). Instead of taking the lead, teachers can help students to construct meaning by taking cues from a student's initial response to extend the discussion (Beck & McKeown, 2001). As a result, the dialogue transforms into learning moments as ELs use the English language to explore, express, and make connections.

### Teach Speaking and Writing as a Continuum

Classroom talk builds the foundation of literacy. Britton (Britton & Pradl, 1982) strongly believed that "reading and writing float in a sea of talk" (p. 11). In order to achieve academic literacy, ELs must spend substantial time in academic talk in content areas and time in meaningful conversation, not just responding to a teacher's questions (Fisher, Frey, & Rothenberg, 2008). In

## Pause and Ponder

- What role can wordless picture books play in literacy instruction with English learners?
- Can we develop the thinking skills and habits through close viewing before we add the language demand of close reading?
- Can we start ELs' close reading journey with an initial focus on close viewing of visual texts and wordless picture books?

*“Encouraging children to focus on important ideas by giving them opportunities to reflect.”*

literature discussion groups, children with different English proficiency levels and diverse linguistic backgrounds have found space to practice their voices. DeNicolò (2010) found that when ELs “continued to work with one another it appeared that struggling to understand one another became a meaningful, purposeful, and necessary task” (p. 236). Heath (1983) suggested that in order for children in a minority group to acquire mainstream, school-based literacy practices, with all the oral and written language skills involved, they must reiterate at an appropriate level the sorts of literacy experiences the mainstream child has had at home. The oral and written modes of discourse share common linguistic skills: breaking down essay-text literacy into its component skills and allowing the student to practice them repeatedly. Such skills involve the ability to give explanations; the ability to break down verbal information into small bits of information; the ability to notice the analytic features of items and events and recombine them in new contexts; eventually, the ability to offer reasoned explanations; and finally, the ability to take meaning from books, including wordless picture books, and talk about the meaning (Gee, 1986).

While spoken and written language have distinctive characteristics, Gibbons (2015) has advocated teaching ELs speaking and writing as a continuum. Similar to Heath (1983) and Gee (1986),

who articulated the common underlying discourse structure and features, Gibbons (2015) focused on the shift of register or context of communication by asking teachers to use “literate talk” (p. 83) to bridge activity-related discussion and the more formal written register of the learning at hand. After participating in an initial small-group discussion of a shared experience, such as sharing a book or conducting an experiment, students would then be supported by the teacher to report their observations to the whole group and to record their ideas in writing. Teale and Martinez (1996) concluded that the most effective talk involves encouraging children to focus on important ideas by giving them opportunities to reflect, rather than expecting a quickly retrieved answer followed by writing.

### ***Identify and Use Text Structure***

To enhance the literacy development of ELs, Grabe (2009) advocated the importance of attention to text structure as “metalinguistic awareness at the text level” (p. 243). He argued that ELs who recognize hierarchical text structure will comprehend better and recall more. Shanahan et al. (2010) recommended teaching students to identify and use the text’s organizational structure to comprehend, learn, and remember content. For narrative texts, students need to identify and connect the parts of the story. For informational texts, students should focus on common structures, such as cause and effect, compare and

contrast, and problem and solution. They argued that ELs who recognize hierarchical text structure will comprehend better and recall more. Graphic organizers are equally helpful tools for narrative and informational texts. Teaching structure with tools—such as story maps or compare/contrast Venn diagrams—should be accompanied by modeling and explicit instruction in what the tool is, how to use it, and why it is useful. At the same time as students are taught to use graphic organizers, focus should be given to the academic language indicating each structure; that is, vocabulary, syntax, and discourse.

But what happens to the notion of text structure in the absence of textual information? Students may not “view graphics as having a main idea, or they struggle to identify that idea” (Duke et al., 2013, p. 196). What role can wordless picture books play in literacy instruction with ELs? Even though there is no text in wordless picture books, narratives and informational books can be comprehended differently because the story or the information is organized in meaning-based structures. Serafini (2014a) suggested that wordless picture books might be the best medium for introducing narrative conventions and reading processes to all readers. At the same time, this can only be accomplished with explicit instruction and guidance in how to make meaning from visual narratives that rely on composition and spatial layout to communicate a message and information.

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## Wordless Picture Books

Dowhower (1997) defined wordless picture books as “books that tell a story through a series of illustrations without written text” (p. 63). Wordless picture books may also be informational, historical, and/or biographical among their genres. By name, wordless picture books are defined from a deficit point of view (Serafini, 2014a). They do not have the words that traditionally denote textual structure and that are assumed to encode meaning. However, wordless picture books are far from simple. Wordless picture books showcase the art of visual storytelling (Salisbury & Styles, 2012). Though wordless picture books may be independent from text, they are not independent from language as a means of comprehending

their meanings and structures. Recent work suggested that readers use linguistic processes to read sequences of images to construct meaning (Cohn, Jackendoff, Holcomb, & Kuperberg, 2014). Wordless picture books also provide opportunities for students to use the English language to explore meaning through discussion and elaboration.

### Using Wordless Picture Books with ELs

Wordless picture books showcase the art of visual storytelling (Salisbury & Styles, 2012). They are visually rendered narratives that can vary from one another in plot and structure, image composition, level of abstraction or realism, narrator-character-reader relationships, graphic layout, and genre (Bosch, 2014; Serafini,

2014a). They allow ELs to engage with complex content as they discuss meaning and work toward oral language proficiency. What makes wordless picture books well-suited to ELs is that visual texts display the literary conventions and complexity found in picture books with words (for a discussion of the four dimensions and picture books, see Sierschynski, Louie, & Pughe, 2014). Similar to picture books with accompanying text, wordless picture books may display multiple levels of meaning and unique structures, use symbols, express tone, and require cultural, literary, and content knowledge for comprehension. (We offer examples of wordless picture books on a continuum from simple to complex based on qualitative dimensions of complexity in Table.)

Table Adapted Qualitative Measures of Complexity and Wordless Picture Books

Adapted Qualitative Measures of Complexity	Title	Synopsis
<p><b>SIMPLE</b></p> <p><b>Levels of Meaning or Purpose:</b> Singular level: “what you see is what you get”</p> <p><b>Structure:</b> Simple chronological sequence of events Panels or images are clearly laid out chronologically</p> <p><b>Visual Language, Conventionality, &amp; Clarity:</b> Clear and literal depiction of events Conventional visual perspectives</p> <p><b>Knowledge Demands:</b> Single theme Clear, singular perspective Everyday knowledge; basic familiarity with genre conventions</p>	<i>In My Garden</i>	Animals and small wild creatures share the garden in this informational book.
	<i>The Girl and the Bicycle</i>	A girl has a plan to get enough money to buy a shiny green bicycle.
	<i>The Farmer and the Clown</i>	A farmer takes care of a baby clown for one day when he accidentally bounces off their circus train.
	<i>Inside Outside</i>	This book includes many details on a child’s daily activities inside and outside during the changing seasons.
	<i>A Ball for Daisy</i>	It is a delightful day when a puppy takes her ball to the park.
	<i>The Adventures of Polo</i>	The Polo series portrays a little dog who lives in a tree in the middle of a body of water.
	<i>Sidewalk Circus</i>	Readers are invited to interpret the activities of the city as the circus.
<p><b>COMPLEX</b></p> <p><b>Levels of Meaning or Purpose:</b> Multiple levels of meaning</p> <p><b>Structure:</b> Unconventional structure, including flashbacks, foreshadowing, or scenes within scenes</p> <p><b>Visual Language, Conventionality, &amp; Clarity:</b> Figurative, ironic, ambiguous, abstract, fantastical Shifting perspectives and settings</p> <p><b>Knowledge Demands:</b> Rely on cultural, literary, historical knowledge; discipline-specific knowledge; visual literacy</p>	<i>Flood</i>	A family prepares for a storm and faces their home being wiped out by the storm.
	<i>Journey</i>	A girl finds a red magic marker that opens a door to a fantastical world.
	<i>Unspoken</i>	A young girl discovers a runaway slave in her family’s barn.
	<i>Here I Am</i>	A boy tries to adjust to the U.S. after emigrating from a foreign country.
	<i>Mr. Wuffles!</i>	Mr. Wuffles, a cat, finds and breaks a little spaceship that turns out to be occupied by aliens.
<i>Flotsam</i>	After finding a camera on the beach, a boy develops and views the film inside of it and the lives shown in the photos.	
<i>The Arrival</i>	Shaun Tan tells the familiar story of immigration in an unfamiliar setting.	

*“Complex picture books make the viewer stand back and examine the images, negotiating and juxtaposing the relationship between images and knowledge.”*

There is increasing evidence that the comprehension of visual narratives is structurally similar to that of language relying on a narrative grammar. In particular, wordless picture books have a sequential order engaging the viewer in the storyline or in the information presented; they also have hierarchical relationships within the images, with some details being more important than others. Thus, ELs can move from basic sequential retelling into other forms of meaning construction through repeated viewing and discussion (Cohn, 2014). Complex picture books make the viewer stand back and examine the images, negotiating and juxtaposing the relationship between images and knowledge; that is, between portrayed events and personal experience. “For those children who arrive in a new country with little or no knowledge of its language and culture, the visual image becomes a powerful source of information” (Arizpe, 2009, p. 134). These immigrant children’s interpretation of the images will depend on their home culture, personal experiences, and previous encounters with text and pictures (Coulthard, 2003). Children whose language skills are not at their grade level can develop literacy and oral language skills through careful looking and interactive discussion using wordless picture books (Arizpe, 2014).

Without written words, viewers can serve as co-authors to construct meaning and narrative from the images (Serafini, 2014b). Wordless picture books

can be used to differentiate language instruction as well. Beginners can learn to label actions and objects in the pictures, emerging ELs can tell the story using sentence stems, and higher proficiency ELs can retell stories using story maps or structural frames. More advanced learners can take a stance and tell the story from that stance (Cloud, Genesee, & Hamayan, 2009). Because they remove the language input, wordless picture books allow ELs to share the critical experience of engaging with a visual text. The perceived freedom to participate in shared viewing of wordless picture books leads to a deeper engagement and guides the ELs to access more layers of meaning. Teachers need to allow plenty of time for looking at and talking about the pictures (Gibbons, 2015) as well as inviting connections to home-culture images and experiences.

### ***Close Viewing of Wordless Picture Books***

When viewing a narrative closely, the viewer expects a coherent whole to emerge. Heath (2009) considered the picture-looking and meaning-making processes to consist of selection, connection, and projection: “We view a visual item, select those properties or features that further mental work, connect what we see with memory, and cast ahead from the visual artifact into our own ability to create narrative and analogy” (p. 49). This process of selection, connection, and projection helps ELs and others to navigate the world. We use

a similar process when entering a new culture or creating new meanings.

Many wordless picture books make viewers work hard at filling in the gaps among images to create meaning (Salisbury & Styles, 2012). Bosch (2014) explained the complexity of wordless picture books by identifying the demands that these books make of viewers:

- Understand that there is a sequence in the pictures.
- Understand the choices of media and color that communicate mood and atmosphere; the conventional meanings of gestures and facial expressions and also of dress and furniture; the various uses of color, line, and shape that point to important figures in pictures (Nodelman, 1988, p. 187).
- Search for clues and connections among images while developing a narrative.
- Retain many images in short-term memory because viewers do not know which images are significant or what could happen next.
- Recognize actions and/or interpret the characters’ thinking and feelings.
- Revisit the pages because there are multiple interpretive possibilities.
- Tolerate ambiguity and accept that not all the images are relevant in the narrative.

*“Viewers can serve as co-authors to construct meaning and narrative from the images.”*

*“Stories’ in them  
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By using wordless picture books, teachers can accommodate a wider range of readers in their meaning making. Because these books have no text to restrict readers’ attention, the “stories” in them can be told in many different ways by many different viewers at their levels of language proficiency (Nodelman, 1988). Wordless picture books have different complexity levels, depending on (1) levels of meaning or purpose, (2) structure, visual language, conventionality, and clarity, and (3) knowledge. Sierschynski, Louie, & Pughe (2014) expanded the four Common Core State Standards dimensions to assess the complexity of picture books. In this article, we further these dimensions to assess the complexity of wordless picture books by analyzing visual images and illustrations (see Table). Teachers can select books with the complexity that is appropriate for the cognitive level of the learners.

**Instructional Strategy:  
Viewing, Speaking, and  
Writing**

Can we use wordless picture books to develop reading habits, to stimulate oral language, and to facilitate literacy development? As Rowe suggested (cited in Salisbury & Styles, 2012), the events in a wordless picture book may seem to tell themselves, but the viewers are the ones who provide voice to the narrative. The author/illustrator is the invisible storyteller,

who collaborates with the viewer to re-create the implied text. The wordless picture book is an ideal medium to stimulate ELs’ oral and written linguistic output, which is a key requirement of the ELP Standards (CCSSO, 2014). In order to teach ELs to view closely, we propose using the following instructional guidelines:

1. Help readers identify the plot and structure, the characters, and the setting of the book.
2. Help readers support their decisions using details from the book.
3. Help readers orally retell the story, using details of the illustrations to construct a text.

Moreover, we propose an instructional sequence to guide ELs to talk and to write about wordless picture books. The interaction between a teacher and a pair of students will serve as an illustration of the strategy. Classroom teachers can have the discussion in a small group of three to six students, following the best practices to provide ELs time and wait time to discuss and to express ideas that emerged through close viewing of wordless picture books.

**Step 1: Preview the Peritextual Features**

Instead of providing background information before reading, teachers can guide students to preview the peritextual features of the texts—such as the cover, title page, end pages, dedication, and author’s note—to help set expectations for reading (Youngs

& Serafini, 2011). Belinda (second author) read Lizi Boyd’s *Inside Outside* (2013) with two ELs just starting first grade. Andy had come to the U.S. nine months before, when he was adopted from a mainland China orphanage. He responds to commands and can name about 100 items in his surroundings. He has learned the alphabet and recognizes about 10 words. Emily was born in the U.S. but speaks mostly Spanish at home. She can communicate on daily life matters. Although her speaking proficiency is higher than Andy’s, Emily recognizes about the same number of words. Emily and Andy’s teacher considers them nonreaders.

Teacher	Let’s see what we can find on the book cover.
Andy	A boy. His dog.
Emily	A kite got stuck in the trees...and birds.
Teacher	Where are they?
Andy	Boy and dog are inside the house. Kite, trees, birds... outside.

Andy and Emily also identified the flowers on the wallpaper inside the front cover of the book, as well as the snow and paw prints on the wallpaper inside the back cover of the book. Emily suggested that the book might be about different seasons. By looking at the peritext, the two ELs successfully predicted the content of the book: the characters’ seasonal activities.

*“Can we use wordless picture books to develop reading habits, to stimulate oral language, and to facilitate literacy development?”*

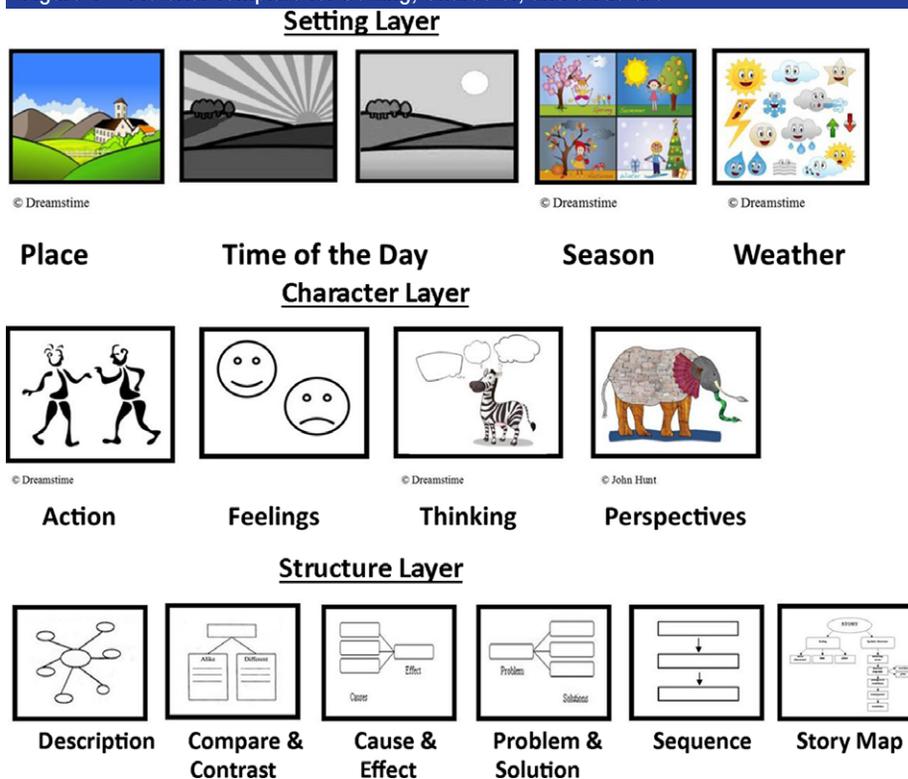
## Step 2: Use Repeated Viewing to Identify Details in Layers

When students open a wordless picture book, they encounter a deluge of visual details. It is always more fun to read with a friend or in a small group so that students can share their discoveries with others. Instead of asking students to share the random details that catch their eyes, teachers can guide students through repeated reading, exploring one layer of meaning in each viewing. The layers can focus on setting, character, and textual structure (see Figure 1). The layers provide the academic language, including vocabulary for literary elements and text structures for literary and informational texts.

First, for the setting layer, students identify all the visual details that inform them of the place, the time of the day, the season, and the weather. Second, for the character layer, students can identify details that will inform them of the characters' actions, feelings, thinking, and perspectives. There is no need for students to study only the main character. They can select any character to focus on. Third, students can use structural organizers to capture details about the plot or information. Teachers can use guiding questions to facilitate discussion: "What do you notice in the pictures? What does it mean? How does it help you understand the story?" After identifying the details, teachers can help students to think about the meaning of the details students need to consider how the new details add depth to the book.

Belinda provided cognitive scaffolding through two repeated viewings as she viewed the book with Andy and Emily. The first layer focused on the season as a setting element (see Figure 1). Jarek (first author) showed them the setting layer strip. Andy and Emily decided to focus on season.

Figure 1 Pictorial Template for Setting, Character, and Structure



Teacher	What is the season, winter, spring, summer, or fall?	Emily	There's too much going on. Let's just follow the mice.
Andy and Emily	Winter.	Andy	Mice in the car. [points at the mice]
Teacher	How do we know that it is winter?	Emily	No mice outside. [turns the page to see whether the mice went outside]
Andy	Snow here, here, and here. [points at details in the picture depicting the outside]	Andy	Too cold to go outside.
Emily	Look at the mittens, coats, and boots. [turns the page and points at items on the corresponding page depicting the inside]	Emily	I know... They like to stay inside to drive their cars. It is warmer.

We went through the whole book, identifying pictorial evidence for the four seasons. Both students were delighted to point out how objects changed across the seasons.

During the second reading, which focused on characters, Emily suggested following the mice.

Page by page, the children looked for the mice and talked about what their activities were.

## Step 3: Analysis

Throughout the book viewing time, the teacher can also provide cognitive scaffolding by encouraging students to analyze the author's purpose, how the ideas from the book connect to

other texts, and ways the viewer can consolidate this information to formulate opinions (Fisher & Frey, 2012). Teachers may ask, "Why do you think the authors/illustrators did that? Does this book or the pictures remind you of something that you have seen?" Jarek provided cognitive scaffolding all through the viewing to facilitate the discussion; for example, providing season names at the beginning for students to pick, encouraging them to look at details in the pictures for clues about seasons, and guiding students to track and to analyze the mice's actions, seeing what they did in different seasons and why they went outside only during the fall.

Andy No mice outside.

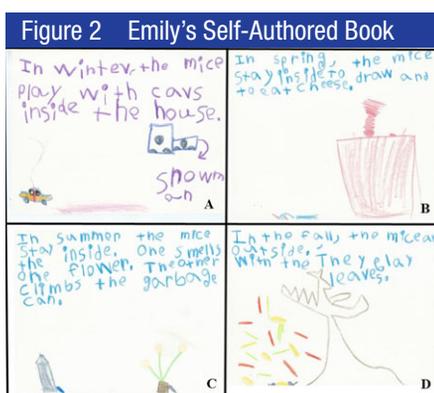
Teacher Why?

Emily They like to take shelter inside.

Andy It is raining. The furry stuff...will get wet... Mice don't like it.

Emily They don't come outside when it snows. They don't like the rain, either.

The tracing of the plot and scenes for the mice allowed the students to create clear



A: In winter, the mice play with cars inside the house. (Emily drew a window and labeled the snowman that she could see through the window.)

B: In spring, the mice stay inside to draw and to eat cheese.

C: In summer, the mice stay inside. One smells the flower. The other climbs the garbage can.

D: In the fall, the mice are outside. They play with the leaves.

and coherent grade-appropriate speech, which led nicely into the following step.

#### Step 4: Synthesis Using Student-Authored Text

Teachers can help students to put all the pieces they have discussed into writing. The student-authored text is based on the student's oral input; henceforth, it is highly comprehensible to the student author. Students can read their self-authored texts again and again to improve their reading fluency. Teachers can also use student-authored texts to teach various language features such as word order and rhyming words, helping ELs to acquire the language forms. Belinda wrote down Emily's sentences when she made a book on what the mice did during different seasons. Emily copied each sentence one word at a time. After providing an illustration for that page, she read the sentence to herself and Jarek (see Figure 2). Andy drew one picture about the book. Belinda provided him the words to label the items in the picture.

#### Conclusion

Being a reader means reading closely and learning to detect the possible layers of meaning embedded in a text

(Goodwin, 2009). Reading a wordless picture book in a small group engages ELs in the meaning-making processes to construct a written text. Purposeful discussion on the visual images deepens students' understanding and increases their enjoyment. Such academic discussions also stimulate book-based oral language, enabling ELs to acquire the knowledge and language of literary elements and structure. It was a joy for us to see students' collaboration in sharing their discoveries of visual details, reflections, and questions about the text. Students were able to read their own subsequent self-authored texts with confidence because the written text captured the memory of a fun time of viewing and sharing. From viewing of images, students produce linguistic output—oral language output as they exchange ideas and analysis as well as written output in their self-authored texts.

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## TAKE ACTION!

1. Preview the peritextual features of a wordless picture book with ELs.
2. Use repeated viewing to identify details in layers, such as setting, text structure, and characters in the book.
3. Analyze the author's purpose by asking students why the author/illustrator uses certain images.
4. Help students to put their discussion in writing by choosing a text structure as a retelling guide.

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