

Using Wordless Picture Books to Support Emergent Literacy

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Wordless books—picture books that rely entirely on illustrations to tell a story—are an excellent resource for educators of young children. This article provides a research-based rationale for using wordless books, offers a developmental sequence for introducing children to stories told through pictures, suggests a general strategy and wide array of early literacy activities based on books without texts, and recommends ways of communicating with parents/families about the value of wordless books. Outstanding wordless books and examples of children's responses to this growing genre of children's literature are also included.

KEY WORDS: picture books; wordless books; children's literature; emergent literacy.

INTRODUCTION

I once found myself standing in a very long and slow-moving line at a Detroit bank on a Friday afternoon. I struck up a conversation with two rambunctious brothers, ages 3 and 6, who were waiting with their mother directly in front of me. Then I remembered that there was a copy of the humorous pictorial account of a pet frog's disruptive visit to a fancy restaurant, *Frog Goes to Dinner* (Mayer, 1974), in my purse. When I asked the boys if they wanted to "look at a funny book," the older of the two eyed me skeptically, evidently wondering if this was just another teacher's ploy to get him to read. But after I showed him that the book had no words whatsoever and the story was told entirely through the pictures, he brightened. Within a few moments, both boys were stretched out on the carpet commenting on the slapstick humor, poring over the details in the illustrations, and laughing delightedly together while the bank customers looked on, smiled, and wondered aloud

about what could be so enthralling. Illustrator Mercer Mayer was paid the highest compliment that day when the boys decided to look at the book again, then asked, "You got any more of these?"

This article is an answer to that child's question. It will familiarize early childhood educators with the many excellent examples of wordless books, describe how this genre of picture book supports young children's emergent literacy, and show how wordless books serve as a resource for the language arts curriculum.

DEFINITION: WHAT IS A WORDLESS PICTURE BOOK?

Wordless books are "pure" picture books (Hillman, 1995). In a high-quality wordless book, "the pictures tell it all" (Lukens, 1999). Also included in the category of wordless books are "almost" wordless books that contain very minimal text, such as books with one word like *Oink* (Geisert, 1991); books with a few labels, such as the book on prepositions *Snake In, Snake Out* (Banche, 1978); books that use one phrase or sentence, such as *Good Dog, Carl* (Day, 1995); or books that include words for sounds, such as *The City* (Florian, 1982). Wordless books offer surprising variety in topics, themes, and levels of difficulty.

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RATIONALE: WHY USE WORDLESS BOOKS WITH YOUNG CHILDREN?

Wordless picture books connect visual literacy (learning to interpret images), cultural literacy (learning the characteristics and expectations of social groups) and literacy with print (learning to read and write language). In making these linkages, wordless books support the literacy skills highlighted below.

Wordless Books Develop Book Handling Behaviors

Before children can explore books for themselves, they need to learn how a book “works.” Such skills as identifying the front and back of the book, top and bottom of the book, turning the pages one at a time, moving from right to left, as well as appreciating and respecting books pose challenges to toddlers (Rothlein & Meinbach, 1991). Wordless books are particularly useful in teaching children how a book works because most children recognize, interpret, and express themselves through pictures long before they master print.

Wordless Books Are Well Suited to Contemporary Children’s Strengths

Children live in a society dominated by visual images that they see on television, on computer screens, on billboards, and so forth. Because these books relate a story entirely through the illustrations, they encourage children to apply visual literacy skills and not only draw inferences from what is pictured but also respond to the quality of the pictures and note details that adults sometimes miss (Avery, 1996).

Wordless Books Adapt to Special Needs

Through wordless books, emergent readers, children with limited English proficiency, and older children with various types of reading difficulties can draw on their interpretive skills. Likewise, children with hearing impairments are able to comprehend the story, even without hearing an accompanying spoken narrative. Unlike books with words that not-yet-readers cannot access independently, wordless books can be appreciated, shared, and enjoyed by children at many different stages of emergent reading and levels of familiarity with the English language.

Wordless Books Inspire Storytelling in Many Different Forms

Wordless picture books support learners who are not yet deciphering print and build their confidence as

readers and writers. As they invent narratives, children develop their sense of story, demonstrate an understanding of sequence, practice oral or written storytelling skills, and expand their cognitive abilities (Nelson, Aksu-Koc, & Johnson, 2001).

Wordless Books Support Curricular Integration

The many different topics and subject areas represented by wordless books serve to integrate subject matter. A group of kindergartners who were familiar with Aliko’s (1995) pictorial account of a tabby cat’s life were inspired to create illustrated observational journals for their own pets and the class’ guinea pig during science class. Then, as their knowledge of written language grew throughout the school year, they added words to the pictures in their journals. The same students used wordless books to represent math story problems in a concrete way.

DEVELOPMENTAL APPROPRIATENESS: HOW ARE WORDLESS BOOKS MATCHED TO THE CHILD’S LEVEL?

Most wordless books are designed for 2- to 8-year-olds, making them ideally suited for the early childhood years. Yet wordless books differ considerably in terms of complexity and detail. Fig. 1 is an overview of the developmental sequence for wordless books.

Select

Concept books with clear, bright, simple pictures of familiar objects are the focus as in Tana Hoban’s (1969, 1976, 1989) or Helen Oxenbury’s (1991a, 1991b, 1991c, 1982). Wordless books are suitable for the youngest readers because these books can be labeled in the “point and say” fashion used by toddlers. Wordless books that depict a familiar routine such as going to bed (Omerod, 1982) and getting up in the morning (Omerod, 1981) are well suited for young preschoolers. But when the pictures tell a story with a more elaborate plot such as the Cherokee tale *The Animals’ Ball Game* (Arneach, 1992) or contain intricate detail like the books *The Angel and the Soldier Boy* (Collington, 1987), they are generally better choices for kindergarten or the primary grades. Just because a book is textless does not make it suitable for young children. Actually, “a reader has to know quite a lot about language to articulate the story the pictures represent” (Hillman, 1995, p. 98). Take, for example, the Brinton Turkle book, *Deep in the Forest* (1976). To fully appreciate the role reversal humor of

<i>Levels</i>	
book handling	starting at the front and moving toward the back holding the book right-side up turning the pages one at a time looking at pictures from left to right appreciating and responding to the illustrations (Rothlein & Meinbach, 1991)
labeling	child responding to questions (e.g., "Where's the dog?")
pictures	child asking questions (e.g., "What's that?") child pointing to items and making appropriate gestures or sounds child labeling items with the correct word
interpreting	adult interpreting pictures for the child and comments on plot
pictures and actions	child emulates interpretations of pictures and plot
inventing narrative	child uses oral language to create a story to accompany the illustrations child invents a written text to accompany illustrations child invents original wordless picture books

Fig. 1. Matching Wordless Books to Children's Developmental Level

Goldilock's home being wrecked by the bears, a child must first know the story of the three bears.

When choosing wordless picture books, try to put yourself in the role of the child and think about all of the background knowledge that would be necessary in order to interpret the theme. Most of Emily McCully's (1987a, 1987b, 1988a, 1988b) wordless books contain themes that preschoolers can identify with—getting lost on a family outing, reveling in the snow, going to school, and adjusting to a new baby. Because most young children would bring these experiences to these books, they can "get" the story.

Format, the book's shape and size, is another consideration. Small format books such as *The Yellow Umbrella* (Drescher, 1987) are better for individual lap reading, while the larger format books lend themselves to group sharing. A simple way to convert a tiny wordless picture book into a format that can be shared with a group is to make an enlargement of the story or to convert each page of the book into a transparency for the overhead projector.

When evaluating the pictures in wordless picture books, "think of what you'd like to hang on the wall of your mind" (Hearne, 1983, p. 577) and avoid trite, cliché-ridden illustrations that do little to stretch the child's thinking (Lukens, 1999).

Collect

Consider gathering a collection of wordless books with the help of your librarian or published guides (see Lima & Lima, 2001; Richey & Puckett, 1992; Tuten-Puckett & Richey, 1993). Most computer-assisted searches treat wordless books as a separate category, so they are easy to locate. Using resources such as *Booklist* or *School Library Journal*, strive to remain current about the new wordless books that are being published. Also be aware that several of the best wordless books are available as films, such as Raymond Briggs' delightful winter fantasy, *The Snowman* (1978).

Use wordless books to build a special bond with parents and families who have limited proficiency with English. They can understand, discuss, and enjoy these books by relying on the illustrations. Family members who speak another language can write and record a text for the wordless book that can be shared with other children who speak their language. Fig. 2 is an example of Chinese text to accompany the wordless book, *Jungle Walk* (Tafari, 1988) prepared by Ann Zhang. Wordless books do require an introduction. Otherwise families may not understand the point of a book without words. Fig. 3 contains a letter to parents from first-grade teacher Denise Dragich that explains the use of wordless picture books.

Support

Use wordless books as a language experience. After a child has viewed the entire book, invite her or him to produce an accompanying story. You may want to set up a recording area for this purpose so that children can do this more independently, and then ask a classroom volunteer to print or type the stories. Do not forget to include an audible signal at the end of each page, such as a bell, just like the professionally recorded stories. Familiarity with the words and the page-turning signal supports children in memorizing the texts they have invented and in tracking the print, both important emergent literacy skills. If you make the children's varied interpretations of wordless books part of your classroom lending library, you soon will find that these books become favorites. At the end of the school year, children can take them home as keepsakes.

IMPLEMENTATION: WHY AREN'T WORDLESS BOOKS USED MORE EXTENSIVELY?

Survey research with classroom teachers identified barriers to the effective use of wordless picture books in



preschool and elementary classrooms (Raines & Isbell, 1988, 1994). One obstacle was the fact that many teachers were relatively unfamiliar with the genre and did not know how to select quality wordless books. Another impediment was that few teachers had considered the many ways in which wordless picture books could support young children's growth in literacy. Additionally, many teachers reported that their public and school libraries were not well stocked with wordless books. Many teachers and librarians balk at the idea of a book that has few words or none at all. If the purpose of books is to read them, then what good is a book without words? they wonder. Yet, as an undergraduate early childhood major remarked, "When you really start thinking about it, there's a lot you can do with a word-

less book." Fig. 4 provides a list of activities to try with wordless books.

EVALUATION: INFORMAL LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT WITH WORDLESS PICTURE BOOKS

Begin by asking students to make predictions about the story based on the title alone. For young children, books with simple, straightforward titles like *Pancakes for Breakfast* (de Paola, 1978) are a good choice. For children in the primary grades, try books with intriguing titles such as *Double Dutch and the Voodoo Shoes: A Modern African-American Urban Tale* (Rosales, 1991). Working with book titles is also a good way to check



on children's comprehension of the main idea after they have interpreted the pictures in the book. Invite the children to discuss the suitability of the title selected by the author and suggest other possible titles (Raines & Isbell, 1988).

When children are invited to compose a written text for the book, they make the wordless picture book "word-full" (Tompkins, 1987). This can be done individually, with a partner, or in a group. One suggestion for working with an individual child is to position the child's written words on each page, using self-adhesive notes. Fig. 5 shows a story written by a second grader in response to *Sir Andrew* (Winter, 1976), the slapstick story of a vain donkey who is accident-prone. If working with a group, text can be written with a marker on over-

head transparencies of each page. Step-by-step guidelines for composing individual and group stories with wordless books include:

1. Introduce wordless books as a special category of literature.
2. Model the process of first going through all of the pictures in a book, and then demonstrate to the children how you invent a narrative and/or dialogue, page by page.
3. Choose a different book and look through all of the pictures together.
4. Go back to the beginning of the book and invite the child or children to tell a story. Write down the comments while the child or children watch.
5. Read and view the entire story together. Ask if the child or children want to make any changes.
6. Provide an assortment of wordless books and invite each child to choose one and develop an accompanying story in small

Tafari, N. (1988). *Junglewalk*. New York: Greenwillow Books.

Junglewalk

雷梦大森林奇遇记

雷孟大森林漫游记

It was a peaceful Saturday night. Tazz, the family cat purred loudly and yawned. Raymond was lost in the book "Jungles of the World".

好宁静的星期六晚上。雷孟象往常一样，坐在被窝里静静地在读书，完全沉静在名叫“世界大森林”一书里了。雷孟家的猫，塔思舒适地倦缩在雷孟脚边，发出满意的呜呜声。

Slowly, sleep crept onto Raymond's bed, Raymond's eye-lid grew heavier, and heavier. Raymond finally put down the book and turned out the light. But his mind went somewhere else, somewhere far, far away...

睡意慢慢地爬上了床头，爬上了雷孟的眼帘，他的眼皮一阵重似一阵。雷孟放下书房关上灯进入了梦乡，那遥远，遥远地梦乡...

It was a place in the deep wild jungle. Tazz sat up, his ears wide alert. He looked at Raymond and then, as if asking for Raymond to follow, meow urgently.

哇，好大，好大的大森林啊。塔斯坐了起来，警觉得竖起耳朵。它瞅着雷孟，呜呜声一阵紧似一阵，好像要雷孟跟着它往前走。

After that, Tazz silently jumped out of the window. Raymond rubbed his eyes. Strange, he thought, Tazz's tail looked like a tiger's stripped tail for a minute. He climbed out the window and ran to catch up.

然后，塔斯轻轻一跃，跳出窗口。雷孟坐起身，揉揉眼睛，心想，奇怪，塔斯的尾巴这么一下成了老虎的花尾巴？于是，雷孟也爬出窗口，追了上去。

Raymond couldn't believe his eyes. They must be playing tricks on him, for Tazz had turned into a full-grown tiger. He turned around and nudged Raymond's hand, turned back and walked on, turning every once in a while to make sure that Raymond is following.

雷孟几乎不能相信他自己的眼睛；因为塔斯已经变成了一个老虎，雷孟觉得，这肯定是一魔法。只见塔斯转过脑袋，用前爪轻轻碰一下雷孟的手，然后，转过身，又往前走。它每走一段，都要往后瞧一眼，看看雷孟是否还跟着。

Raymond heard screeching and squawking sound. He wondered what it was, so he climbed onto a tree. What a beautiful picture! It was three toucans eating ripe berries. Raymond's mouth watered just looking at them.

雷孟听到一阵叽叽喳喳声，心想这是什么声音，于是他就近爬上以棵树枝。呵，雷孟看到了一幅美丽的画面：三个黄嘴巨鸟正吃着熟透了的，鲜红色的野果。雷孟看得口水直淌。

Raymond giggled at what he saw next; "Monkey!" he laughed. "Gibbons," Tazz growled. Hearing the tiger's growl, the gibbons hurriedly swung from tree to tree, away from where the sound had come from.

一看到猴子，雷孟就咯咯笑了起来，并大声叫了起来，“猴子！”。 “长臂猿”，塔斯闷声闷气地纠正着。听见老虎的声音，长臂猿们急速从一棵树荡到另一棵树，逃离老虎发声的地方。

Raymond and Tazz walked on, until they came to a lake. Raymond gasped in delight. What a beautiful scene! There were pretty water lilies growing along the lake, and a graceful Egret flew over the lake looking for fish. Suddenly, Raymond saw something move! It was a huge 20-foot crocodile! Raymond quickly edged away from this humongous crocodile. After this he ran, and how he ran!

雷孟和塔斯又往前行，一直来到一个大湖边。雷孟倒抽了一口气，多漂亮的湖景呵！湖边是婀娜多姿，含苞欲放的水莲，湖中央，一群飞姿优雅的白鹭在觅食。忽然，雷孟发现有东西在移动。定睛一看，是一约二十英尺长的鳄鱼！雷孟赶紧擦身而过。然后开始往前跑呵，跑呵…

Raymond was out of breath when he saw something grayish pink. It was two hippos! Raymond smile at the big pudgy animal, and walked on...

真正雷孟跑得上气不接下气的时候，他看到一片灰粉色。那是两匹大河马！雷孟对着圆滚滚的河马笑笑，又往前行走…

Suddenly, Raymond found himself face to face with a parrot. Raymond chuckled and said, "Polly wants a cracker", but the parrot just looked at him. The jungle parrot. "That's too bad that the jungle parrot can't speak", Raymond said to himself. Raymond turned around and grinned at what he saw. A big gorilla eating a banana! The gorilla grunted, so Raymond left him alone.

忽然，雷孟发现自己一下子来到了一鹦鹉面前。雷孟暗喜，并说到，“早上好！”。可那鹦鹉直定定地看着雷孟，没有一点反应。“大森林里的鹦鹉不会说话，太差劲了”，雷孟失望得自言自语到。雷孟忽然回头，裂开嘴傻笑，原来他看到一大猩猩在吃香蕉！大猩猩不愿雷孟打扰它的早餐，不满地对着雷孟咕噜，于是雷孟只得离开。

What Raymond saw next, he just couldn't not resist, a baby elephant! Raymond ran to pet it, but the mother elephant used her trunk to push Raymond away. Disappointed, Raymond continued walking.

接着，雷孟看到一头幼象，他忍不住跑上前去抚摸小象，那知，母象不让，使劲地用角推雷孟走。没法，雷孟只得失望地走开，继续往前行走。

Raymond felt dizzy as he looked at the zebras' stripes, but as Raymond looked farther behind the zebras, he saw a nest of lions! Raymond wanted to yell "Watch out!". Better thought better of it, for he didn't want the lions to see him.

雷孟作一看到斑马，觉得有点恍恍惚惚，待一看到斑马后面的狮群，马上警觉起来，刚想叫“当

心!”，又吞了回去，想想最好别出声，雷孟可不愿意狮群发现他。

Raymond walked and walked, and finally came to ...his own house! Raymond ran and ran and ran ...

雷孟走呵走呵，忽然发现他已来到自己门口不远处，于是雷孟飞快地往家跑，跑呵跑呵...

And found himself in his bed!

雷孟坐起身，发现原来自己就在床上!

There was Tazz, sitting on his bed, looking at his as if expecting something.

"Oh, Tazz, that was a great adventure, thanks so much!" said Raymond, scooping Tazz into his arms.

塔斯静静地坐在床头，看着雷孟，好像期望着什么。雷孟一把揽过塔斯在自己胸前，呐呐地说，“哦，塔斯，多好的一次大森林旅游，谢谢，谢谢!”。

The End (全文完)

Fig. 2. Text Written in Chinese and English for *Junglewalk*. Ann Zhang wrote the text for this book in both languages while in sixth grade. Illustration from Nancy Tafuri (1988) *Junglewalk*. New York: Greenwillow. Reprinted with permission.

Dear Families:

We are starting the year with books that tell a story entirely through pictures. These books, called wordless books, are used to support your child's reading in several important ways. Wordless books will enable your child to:

- interpret meaning from pictures and notice details
- practice beginning reading skills
- understand sequence and story plots better
- gain confidence in sharing a book with a group
- use storytelling as the basis for reading and writing

Later this week you will receive an audio tape of the story your child invented to go along with the pictures in the book. Please listen to it together and write a sentence or two on the comment card enclosed in the plastic bag.

Next, your child will produce a written text to go along with the book. If you can spare some time to help print or type these texts, please give me a call at _____. You will receive a copy of the wordless book with the child's written version of the story in a couple of weeks. Enjoy sharing it together. Even though it may not seem like "real" reading, memorizing a story and paying attention to the print is how reading begins.

Throughout the year, your child will have the opportunity to borrow book/tape packets created by the other children from our classroom library.

Your support of this project is appreciated. The children are very excited about sharing their stories and showing you what they have learned!

Sincerely,

Ms. Dragich

Fig. 3. Letter to Parents About Wordless Books

groups, with a partner, or individually. Stories may be told, recorded on audio or video, dictated to an adult, or written by the child.

7. Make copies of the books to circulate in the classroom library.

When the story is complete, this information can be used to conduct an informal assessment of the child's narrative abilities, examining such variables as story length, story setting, sequence/plot, characterization, dialogue, and vocabulary (van Kraayenoord & Paris, 1996). Generally speaking, young children's stories that are told *with* a wordless book as a prop are more sophisticated in terms of length, setting, plot, characters, theme, style, complexity, and vocabulary than stories

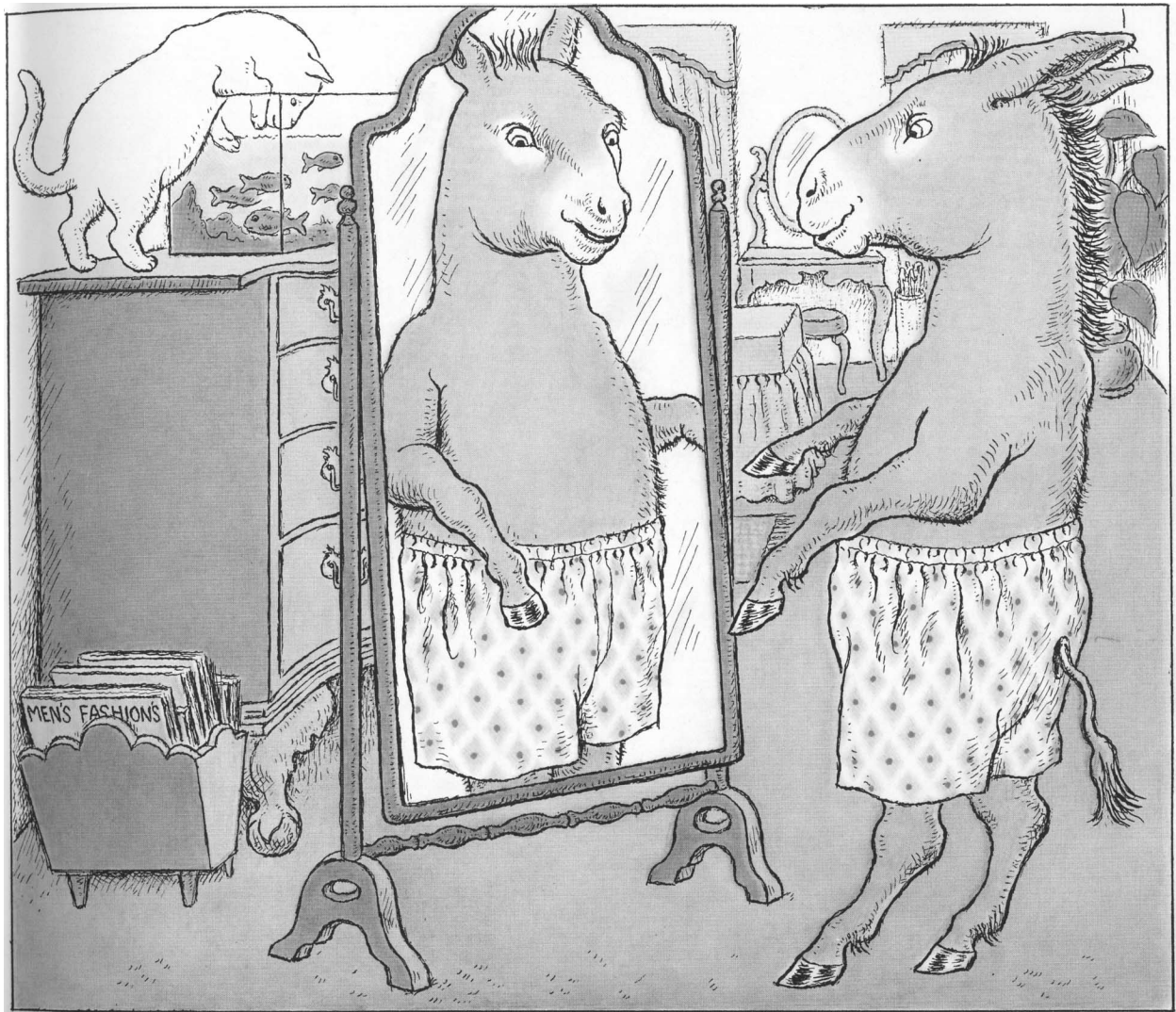
that are generated without a wordless book (Norton, 1996).

CONCLUSION

Returning to the child's question that introduced this article, "Do you got any more of these?" the answer is a resounding "Yes!" There are many different, practical, and worthwhile uses for wordless books in early childhood settings; uses that enhance children's motivation to learn, support growth in literacy, provide performance assessment data, and foster communication with families.

- *Record the story inspired by the wordless book.* Dictate a story to a teacher, tutor, volunteer, or use computer software that converts children's speech to print. If an audio or videotape is made, make it part of a lending library and send it home in a plastic case.
- *Change the format of a wordless book.* "Translating" a story from one format to another provides good practice in comprehension. Children could convert a wordless book into a big book or pocket-sized book with a written text. They might try creating a book with moving parts, such as a lift-the-flap book.
- *Draw a prequel or a sequel.* Wordless books help children to develop a sense of story and narrative abilities, particularly if they imagine the past and future of the story.
- *Focus on the plot.* Children can chart or map the plot. Use a paperback copy or duplicated copy of the pictures, cut apart, laminate and arrange in sequence on the floor or chalkboard ledge. One book that is especially well suited to this is Jeannie Baker's (1991) *Window*, a story that shows what happens as a country environment becomes increasingly urbanized.
- *Dramatize the story.* Children can role play a particular scene or the entire story, invent dialogue between and among characters, or use simple puppets to reenact the story. Try dramatizing *Changes, Changes* (Hutchins, 1971) using blocks and toys.
- *Create a group mural.* Draw a mural with cartoon bubble dialogue, a storyboard that is presented in frames, like a cartoon strip, or use cardboard tubes to create a story scroll.
- *Write a text in a different language.* Wordless books are well suited to support linguistically and culturally diverse students and families. Invite parents and their children to invent a story for the wordless book in their first language, and then share the story in both languages with the children (see Figure 2).
- *Revisit the invented text for a wordless book.* After children have written a text to accompany a wordless book, they can return to it and make a different story or a story from another character's point of view.
- *Use photographs of classroom or center activities.* A series of photographs can become the basis for a wordless book. After the children have arranged the photos to document an event, invite them to write captions for each one.
- *Invent original wordless books.* Wordless books support creative expression and can be used to explore different art media and technology. Try having one group of children create the illustrations for a wordless book, then have another group dictate or write a text for the book.
- *Make a book with a text into a wordless book.* Convert a new story book or a book that is unfamiliar to the children into a wordless book using strips of construction paper to cover the words. Ask the children to imagine what the author wrote about each picture before actually reading it.
- *Investigate an artist's style.* Gather two or more wordless books by the same author, and then gather the books of different authors. Ask the children to cluster books together by looking at illustrations alone and ask them to explain how they decided. Point out that these things are the artist's style.
- *Work with older students.* Consider a project in which students, such as 6th graders or high school art students, create a wordless big book and present it to young children. Smaller sized wordless books can be produced, laminated, and donated to the library. Older children can also volunteer to type or print the original texts that children create for wordless books (see Swan, 1992).
- *Contrast wordless books in different media.* Use the film version Mercer Mayer's (1973) *Frog Goes to Dinner*. The film is live action while the book consists of cartoon drawings. Invite children to compare/contrast the two using a Venn diagram.
- *Invent a wordless book.* Using clip art on the computer, create a wordless language experience story (e.g., Our Trip to the Zoo), then compose a text and make into a big book or story chart.

Fig. 4. Learning Activities Based on Wordless Books



He is singing in the shower. He dries off. He puts on cream. He very happy and now he's mad. He dries his hoof and his cat go after his fish. He gets on the outfit and the cat eats one of the fish. He got on his hat and went for a walk and out the door. He went . . . uh oh! He go to the hospital and went to sleep and the next day he went home. He lost his hat. He almost got car squished. Oh yes! He had his hat! And he has a broken leg and the pig got mad. Oh, No! Oh, boy! Watch out!

Fig. 5. A Second Grader's Text for *Sir Andrew*. Illustration from Paula Winter (1980). *Sir Andrew*. New York: Crown.

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