

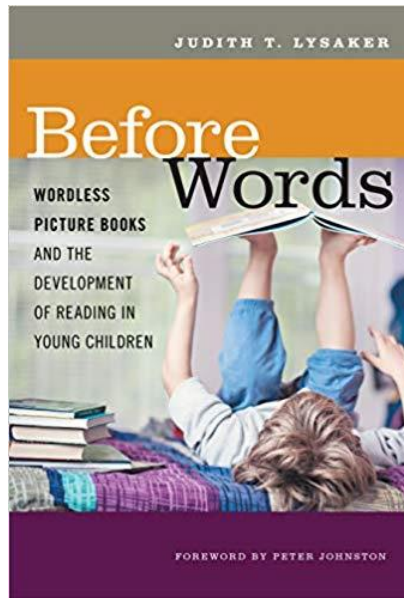
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JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE & LITERACY EDUCATION

## Review of *Before Words: Wordless Picture Books and the Development of Reading in Young Children*

By Judith T. Lysaker

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Citation: Lysaker, J. T. (2019). *Before words: Wordless picture books and the development of reading in young children*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

ISBN: 978-0-8077-5916-5

As a former in-service EFL (English as Foreign Language) teacher for 12 years, I have always wondered how reading of English learners with limited English proficiency including young EFL students can be properly assessed. Despite their limited knowledge in English language, when reading picture books, I witnessed that they can make sense of texts along with visual images at a very profound level. It seemed to me that there could be alternative aspects regarding language learning and assessment with the use of picture books, especially concerning reading assessment. Reading assessment should not be all about scores and the number of correct answers written on a paper. Although targeted at L1 language learners at very young age, this book envisions alternative reading assessment that can capture English language learners' critical thinking skills and their affective aspects at the same time. It provides very empirical and theoretical accounts regarding alternative reading assessment of emergent readers. Lysaker (2019) illustrates how children with limited language proficiency read wordless picture books by conceptualizing "comprehending as human-meaning making activity" (p. 1) rather than as skills to be mastered: This book encompasses the ways of 3- to 6-year-olds' comprehending and transacting with wordless picture books, which is "intricate, personal, complex, lively and intensely relational" (p. 1).

In chapter 1, the author foregrounds her assumption regarding emergent readers' comprehending process based on Dialogism (Bakhtin, 1981), Sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) and Reader-response theory (Rosenblatt, 1983). Emergent readers' or young children's reading is considered as the enactment of being and becoming, and relational nature of human "beingness". The author defines wordless picturebooks not as the ones with a minimum set of words but as the ones with literally no

words that can possibly distract the readers' meaning making. In this regard, wordless picture books can be an ideal medium for emergent readers to make meanings in creative and imaginative ways instead of intensely focusing on decoding words in a limited sense. Images possess the multiple layers of embedded meanings that should be excavated with the use of readers' imagination. The author also accentuates the potential of *transmediation* (Suhor, 1994)—moving between different language modes, which has been a neglected pedagogical aspect of emergent readers' reading practices. For example, as a visual artform, wordless picture books can act as a platform for readers to view the visual images and to verbalize their interpretations in spoken or written words. According to Lysaker, the constant and complex act of moving between visual and verbal forms can serve as a groundwork for the emergent readers' later reading of printed texts.

Through chapters 2 to 6, children's *comprehending* processes are delineated as orchestration (Chapter 2), embodied (Chapter 3), imaginative relationship with text (Chapter 4), social imagination, narrative imagination and intersubjectivity (Chapter 5), and prosody and dialogic agility (Chapter 6). It must be noted that these processes account for activities in motion, hence the author's preference for the use of comprehending instead of comprehension in this book. Chapter 2 examines how transmediation is enacted during a child's comprehending activities. The author names verbalization of visual thinking as "orchestration across modes" (Lysaker, p. 19). Orchestrating activity is defined as thinking strategies adopted by child readers during transmediation process, which entails "searches/chooses, pauses/hesitates, cross-checks/self-corrects, and rereads/self-corrects" (p. 23). In their comprehending activities of

wordless picture books, child readers search for the details of images, choose what to focus on, transmediate their visual observation into verbal words, and intricately orchestrate the meanings while taking risks.

In chapter 3, children's comprehending process embodied in bodily expressions is thoroughly explored. Multiple modes of bodily expressions such as gaze, prosody, facial expressions, gestures and dramatization are often incorporated interchangeably in a synergistic manner. These modes can be characterized by three qualities – “intensity, complexity and density” (Lysaker, p. 37). The author argues that it is important to take these qualities into consideration “because they represent children's preferences for modal use during reading and bring their active comprehending to light” (p. 37). More importantly, educators will be able to look into the “hidden inner worlds” (p. 49) of child readers through the careful examination of their body readings. These examinations can provide an alternative gateway to children's reading comprehension assessment. Instead of heavy reliance on verbal language, it can shed light on complex thinking activities, that are carried out in multiple modes of emergent readers' expressing thoughts and feelings.

Chapter 4 illustrates how child readers relate themselves to and transact with the storied world, which include “response, recognition and recontextualization” (Lysaker, p. 51). The author calls this process as “comprehending as imaginative relationship with text” (p. 51) in that child readers incorporate imagination to land into the storied world, and to relate various aspects of themselves with the story. The author explains that this process occurs in the order of response, recognition and recontextualization, which are produced based on the emergent readers' sociocultural circumstances. At the first encounter with visual representations, response

opens the doors to the storied world, and recognition is what follows next. Readers recognize “themselves, their experiences, and their world” (p. 53) in visual representations. Lysaker asserts that recognition plays a steppingstone for emergent readers to transact with the storied world. Subsequently, recontextualization takes place. This requires an active and imaginative transaction on the readers' part in that the readers have to merge their beings, time, and their lives, thereby coauthoring the text.

Chapter 5 shows how child readers' initial responses are expanded into social and narrative imagination, and intersubjectivity, which are indeed instigated by emotion, imagination, and texts. Social imagination is enacted once child readers recontextualize their experiences and move into the narrative world, hence enabling them to imagine characters' feelings, thoughts, beliefs and intentions. Narrative imagination, on the other hand, is akin to reinventing aspects of narrative to make sense of the storied world. The author argues that it is different from traditional inference in that it incorporates the readers' personal imagination separate from textual-implied meanings, or even negation of the storied world. Once children make deep dialogical relationship with the text based on the imaginative processes, they can feel connected to fictional characters and imagine their thoughts and feelings, or enacting intersubjectivity.

In chapter 6, the author explores children's comprehending process in relation to prosody and dialogic agility, which are closely related to fluency. Unlike traditional rendering of fluency in reading print texts, fluency in reading wordless picture books is embodied in prosody and dialogic agility. Prosody, or musicality of language, reflects how much the child readers

are engaged with storied world in the form of pitch, rhythm, stress and pauses. Moreover, child readers can shift positions between characters with ease and delight, which the author names as dialogic agility. It is important to note that such fluency developed during reading wordless picture book (before words) can serve as a platform for their later print reading (after words).

The reconceptualization of reading assessment is provided in chapter 7. The author contends that assessment should be conducted holistically while the practice occurs, hence making the process “side-by-side reading” (Lysaker, p. 91). The assessment encompasses observing, listening, paying attention and noting what the teachers see. This form of on-site assessment can be bolstered by more systematic and detailed observations by making “the First Glance Noticing Map and the Digging Deeper Noticing Map” (p. 92). Thanks to Noticing Maps, teachers can respond to children more effectively, for these maps can inform teachers the ways children use comprehending activities and in which developmental level they are in. Additionally, incorporating these maps can make it possible for teachers to “provide a more culturally responsive and nuanced picture of what young children are doing” (p. 93) during individualized meaning making processes.

The concluding chapter proffers empirical classroom strategies, such as practical uses of wordless picture books in everyday classroom practices, and the ways to extend wordless picture book readings into other literacy

practices. In addition to side-by-side reading, wordless picture books can be used for independent reading, daily practices where adults can serve as accompanying readers giving warmth and support, less formal and caring reading conversations, and group reading practices that children can co-construct meanings. Child readers’ wordless picture book reading practices can be extended by the use of various creative practices including audio or video recording, book making activities based on children’s own narrations, turning picture books into wordless picture books, and building a wordless picture book library.

Overall, Lysaker showcases how theory and practice are aptly merged with empirical evidence based on her hands-on experiences and theoretical expertise. Each chapter includes vivid descriptions of child readers’ meaning making processes in detail and the author’s responses to these young readers. These empirical accounts from children’s and teachers’ perspectives respectively, make this book distinctive in the field of young emergent readers’ literacy development. More importantly, alternative assessment that values child readers’ meaning making processes and their affective sides of reading can reveal undervalued child readers’ multimodal comprehending processes such as transmediation and self-expressions through body movements. The author shows the reader that the emergent readers’ various forms of beings and becoming during their transactions with wordless picture books. That is, child readers’ comprehending process is indeed a process of becoming in their own splendid ways.

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