

# Using wordless books to develop literacy skills

Sara Head illustrates the benefits of wordless books for deaf children

For years Teachers of the Deaf have made use of picture books for teaching language and literacy. In recent years, a significant number of high quality, completely wordless books have been published. These offer tremendous scope for teachers to develop a variety of language skills for pupils, but particularly inference skills.

Teaching inference requires children to use text to:

- activate their prior knowledge
- make connections
- fill gaps.

When reading any book it is important that pupils are able to visualise what is happening, so that they aren't simply 'barking at print'. By using books without words this step is simplified, allowing a whole range of language and literacy skills to be developed in pupils of all ages and abilities.

This allows teachers to encourage skills related to active reading, where children are making sense of what is happening. This happens through activities such as

- asking and answering questions (particularly 'Why?' 'How do you know?')
- prediction (what will happen next)
- seeking clarification (where they might be uncertain about something)
- summarising (being able to explain what has happened in your own words).

The use of quality books without words can help support and teach:

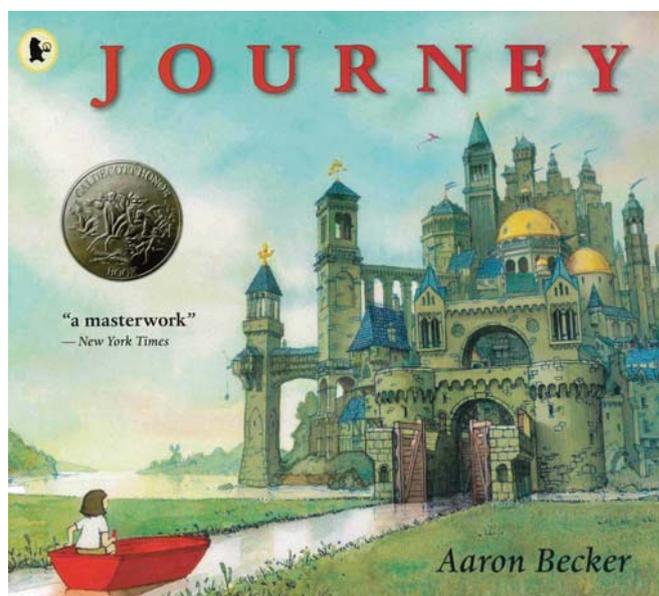
- pupils' understanding of story structure and conventions
- vocabulary (at a level appropriate to the pupils, controlled by the teacher)
- understanding of language
- cause and effect (consequences)
- shared knowledge of the world/experiences/culture.

It also develops some of the skills that may be harder to teach such as

- working memory
- theory of mind
- understanding of relationships.

To illustrate how this works in practice this article focuses on work carried out with a group of year 3 and 4 pupils who use sign language. The literacy ability of this group ranges from age appropriate to pre key stage. The book used was 'Journey' by Aaron Becker which is the first of a trilogy (published by Candlewick Press).

The book starts by showing a black and white picture of a girl sitting on a step. There is one red object in the picture,



her scooter. The use of colour in the book is significant and towards the end of the book pupils were making links back to the beginning and the thread of colour throughout. The book was deliberately introduced with one or two pages at a time and the work spanned several weeks, consciously taking the time to draw out quality writing from the book, rather than rushing quickly through the story.

The initial question posed was "What can you see?". This is always a good, open question as it allows the children to say anything and be 'right' while also pushing them beyond the obvious answer. Using a prompt such as "... and ... and ..." gets them to look deeper and harder. Within a group it also encourages students to watch each other and build on, rather than repeat, what others have said.



Next we focused in on feelings the picture evoked – why do we think the artist used black and white? Who are the people in the house? What are their relationships to the girl? Why is she sitting on the front step?

# General

One of the advantages of texts without words is that they can be used to teach almost any grammar or language point. For this particular group we wanted to look at different ways of starting a story.

Using the same picture I asked the children to write a beginning that began with when, subject, verb, where.



Your idea.

**A question**  
Have you ever felt bored?

**Alliteration**  
One dark, damp, dismal day...

**A conjunction that changes things**  
Everything was quiet until...

Include when, who and where - don't forget the verb!



Then, using the same picture, the children thought about starting with direct speech.



Start with someone saying something.

" \_\_\_\_\_ "

said \_\_\_\_\_.

After that the children thought about an opening sentence that included a character's feelings.

Think how your character is feeling and why?



\_\_\_\_\_ was feeling \_\_\_\_\_

because \_\_\_\_\_.

Then they thought about other, alternative ways to open a story such as using a question, alliteration or a conjunction that changes things.



Your idea.

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Have you ever felt bored?

**Alliteration**  
One dark, damp, dismal day...

**A conjunction that changes things**  
Everything was quiet until...

This work took several days but because of the quality of discussion and interest generated by the text they were highly motivated to discuss, to write and to find out what happened next.

The next part of the story focuses on relationships within the family and the children used paired drama to support their understanding. The main teaching focus was on using direct speech and being able to write dialogue with appropriate punctuation. Questions were used to support children to structure their writing.



**Where was Mum?**

**What was she doing?**

**What did they say?**

**How did they feel?**

**What happened next?**



**Where was Mum?**  
Mum was standing in the kitchen.

**What was she doing?**  
She was very busy cooking dinner and talking on the telephone.

**What did they say?**  
"Mum, I'm bored," said Millie.  
"Shh, not now, I'm on the phone," hissed her mum.  
"But I want to play," Millie moaned.  
"Go away!" demanded Mum.

**How did they feel?**  
Mum was annoyed. Millie felt really fed up and frustrated.

**What happened next?**  
She stomped out of the kitchen, sulking.

In the next part of the story the girl finds a magic crayon that makes anything she draws come alive. The children were asked to think what they would draw if they had a magic crayon and give their reasons.

While many children had plenty of ideas, for some children this was a difficult concept; they could discuss what they saw the girl HAD drawn, but to think about what they would draw was more complex and so role play was used

to help the children understand and different pictures used to suggest a variety of options.

Where were they?  
What were they doing?  
What did they say?  
How did they feel?  
What happened next?

Amy and her dad, Mr Binkwood, was in the office



Mr Binkwood was working in his computer.  
"Dad! I want to play with you!" cried Amy.  
"Go away! Get a hobby!" said Mr Binkwood, disinterested.

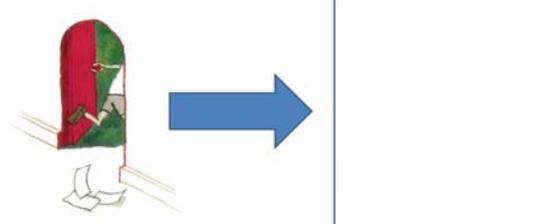
Amy was still in the office, watching Mr Binkwood doing his work, sitting upside-down.

"Go and ask your sister!" said Mr Binkwood, annoyed.



Amy walked slowly to the living room.  
"Hi," said Amy, sadly.  
"Go away! I am greeting with my new boys, and called David! So Shoo Shoo!" shouted Molly.  
"What! you got a new boyfriend! ... AAAAAH!" you've got like 1000 boyfriends!" yelled Amy. "But can you play with me?"  
"No of course!" laughed Molly.

The girl draws a door and this allows children to predict what they think will be the other side of the door and gives opportunity for writing to describe settings. When a child has written what they think will be through the door, they can swap descriptions and the other child draw what the first child has written. This type of activity gives a real audience for the writing and, through their peers asking questions or checking to clarify understanding, supports children editing their work for clarity.



In the book the girl steps into a forest. Providing a framework for children to write can support lower ability pupils produce something without worrying how to start,

The girl stepped through the door and was in

\_\_\_\_\_



\_\_\_\_\_ river, \_\_\_\_\_ trees and \_\_\_\_\_ rocks.



while higher ability pupils may need less structuring. Opportunity was also taken to pick up on children's errors and group text created with common mistakes which the class worked to edit together. Within the book there is a variety of different settings and thus different opportunities to write about them and build on the skills they have learnt.

Another focus for this particular group was the use of conjunctions and, but and because. Having worked on it in a specific context towards the start of the book the children were encouraged to use those conjunctions in their own writing. With wordless books there is plenty of opportunity for children to rewrite the story in their own words providing the 'text' for the pictures at whatever level is appropriate to the child. This means that differentiation can be easily achieved as every child is working at their own level.

The girl looked at the floor. She saw a red crayon.



and but because



The girl looked at the floor but she saw a red crayon. X

The girl looked at the floor because she saw a red crayon. ✓

The girl looked at the floor and she saw a red crayon. ✓

The girl looked at the floor and saw a red crayon. ✓

The girl looked at the floor because saw a red crayon. X

The story is fast moving and surprising (and I won't add 'spoilers' by including all of it!). There is plenty of opportunity for sequencing, prediction and for children to use their imagination. By the time the girl is trapped in the cage (not giving anything away) the children are well equipped to use their knowledge from the rest of the story to problem solve and consider how she might escape.

Towards the end the girl ends up flying on a magic carpet. This provides another opportunity for independent story

How would it feel to ride on a magic carpet?  
Riding on a magic carpet would feel...



Where would you go?  
I would go...

What would you do?  
I would...

What might you see?  
I might see...

▶ Continued at bottom of next page

## General

writing and can link to a whole range of other stories where magic carpets appear.

The children were highly motivated by this book and the level of discussion it engendered was significant, with children demonstrating a whole range of inference skills, without needing to be able to read any words.

Things come full circle when the purple bird takes the girl through a purple door and there was a real 'eureka' moment from one pupil who had previously been a reluctant reader when he realised the significance of colour to the plot and how it had ended linked to the beginning. This understanding of the 'author intent' also enabled them to continue the story to predict what might happen in a possible sequel.

This is just a taster of some of the ways the book was used. There are many other books that have few, or no, words and can be used in similar ways to develop inference, motivate pupils and develop high quality writing. Give it a try!

*Following is a list of some high quality wordless picture books which can be used with a range of ability*

*and ages (not exhaustive):*

*Journey – Aaron Becker (Trilogy with the books below)*

*Quest – Aaron Becker*

*Return – Aaron Becker*

*Window – Jeannie Baker*

*Belonging- Jeannie Baker*

*Mirror – Jeannie Baker (two wordless stories from two different cultures in one book)*

*The Arrival – Shaun Tan (excellent for older KS2 or KS3 pupils – addresses the immigrant experience)*

*Freefall – David Wiesner*

*Mr Wuffles! – David Wiesner (particularly good for teaching dialogue)*



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