

A Systematic Review of Wordless Picture Book Interventions for Supporting Young Learners' Second Language Skills

Muhammad Maghfur Fahrur Rozzi¹

¹ English Education Department, UIN Walisongo, Semarang, Indonesia

✉ email: elfahrur43@gmail.com

Received:

January 1, 2025

Revised:

April 28, 2025

Accepted:

May 10, 2025

Published:

May 12, 2025

ABSTRACT

Wordless picture books (WPBs) are increasingly recognized as effective tools for enhancing reading comprehension and language acquisition among young learners in second language education. This study explores their integration into primary education settings, emphasizing their ability to foster creativity, develop narrative skills, and support vocabulary growth. By relying solely on illustrations, WPBs encourage learners to construct meaning, engage with visual cues, and interact with stories in open ended ways. The findings highlight diverse methodological approaches, including qualitative and quantitative studies, which reveal the potential of these books to promote bilingual literacy and reduce language barriers. Despite the promising potential of WPBs, significant gaps remain in the current literature, particularly in the areas of teacher perspectives, cultural adaptations, and the integration of modern technologies. Future research should specifically address these gaps. WPBs. Additionally, there is a need to investigate how emerging technologies, such as augmented reality (AR) or interactive digital platforms, can enhance the learning experience with WPBs. Focusing on these aspects will allow researchers to optimize the integration of WPBs in second language classrooms, making them more accessible and effective for a wide range of learners.

Keywords: *Wordless Picture Book, Young Learners, Second Language Learner, Bilingual Students, WPBs*

INTRODUCTION

Reading is an essential skill that lays the foundation for lifelong learning, particularly among young learners. In an educational landscape increasingly focused on engaging students, innovative teaching methods are vital to enhance reading comprehension (Sanchez, 2021). Traditional reading

approaches often fail to capture the attention of young learners, leading to a lack of interest and poor comprehension skills (Schwartz, 1988).

The integration of WPBs into the reading curriculum has emerged as a promising strategy to foster literacy skills. Wordless picture books, which rely solely on illustrations to convey a story, allow children to engage in narrative construction without the constraints of text. This approach promotes imagination and creativity, enabling children to interpret and narrate stories based on visual stimuli (Giorgis & Johnson, 2022; Schick et al, 2021).

Despite these potential benefits, there is a research gap, the lack of research on WPBs in second language learning contexts. I chose the time period 2015 to 2024 due to the limited literature and to analyze the literature because this period reflects significant developments in second language learning approaches, especially those involving wordless picture books. In the past twelve years, research related to visual literacy and language skill development has grown rapidly, with more and more attention to non-text media such as WPBs.

In addition to traditional WPBs, advances in educational technology, such as digital platforms, augmented reality (AR), and interactive e-books, offer exciting opportunities to further enhance the effectiveness of WPBs in language learning. For example, AR can overlay interactive elements on top of book illustrations, allowing learners to engage with the story in a more immersive and dynamic way. Similarly, e-books with integrated audio narration can support bilingual learners by providing auditory cues alongside visual storytelling.

Exploring how these emerging technologies can be integrated with WPBs is an important avenue for future research, as it could further increase engagement and comprehension for young learners in second language classrooms. This time span has allowed me to examine the latest trends and innovations in foreign language learning that not only improve students' language skills but also enrich their creativity and imagination. Limited studies focus on using WPBs within foreign or second language education, particularly in enhancing comprehension among young learners. This study seeks to address this gap by examining the current literature on WPBs and assessing their potential to maximize reading comprehension for young learners in second language contexts, specifically within primary education settings.

METHOD

An electronic search was carried out in three academic databases such as, Semantic Scholar, Taylor and Francis, and Oxford Academic, to gather relevant

studies on the use of WPBs in improving reading comprehension among young learners. The search terms, listed below, were used in titles or abstracts to ensure that the articles were directly relevant to the topic. This review evaluated the abstracts of the selected articles based on the following inclusion criteria: The study must primarily focus on the use of WPBs to enhance reading comprehension among young learners in primary educational settings. Both empirical and theoretical studies were included, and this also considered studies that explored teachers' perspectives on using WPBs as a pedagogical strategy, as well as those that examined the impact of WPBs on student engagement, cognitive outcomes, and language development.

In addition, studies that provided clear and rigorous methodologies, such as controlled experimental designs or longitudinal research, were prioritized to ensure the robustness of the included studies. Inclusion criteria: 1) specifically addressed WPBs in the context of reading comprehension for young learners, 2) examined the impact of these books on foreign language acquisition or literacy in primary education, 3) focused on any aspect of reading development, from student engagement to cognitive outcomes, 4) covered studies published in English from 2015 to 2024. Exclusion Criteria: 1) were not published within the given time frame 2015-2024, 2) did not address reading comprehension or the use of WPBs for primary learners, 3) focused on non-educational contexts or unrelated methodologies.

This literature review was structured in three phases Necà et al., (2022). In the first phase, we conducted a broad search using general terms like wordless picture books, wordless picture book for young learners, wordless book, and wordless picture books. This phase 40 yielded articles, with 24 deemed directly relevant to the topic. The second phase, we utilized more specific terms such as WPBs bilingual, WPBs reading skill, and WPBs second language. This phase identified 20 articles for reference to the study. Next, the third phase, we examined the reference lists of articles selected in the previous phases to uncover pertinent literature, leaving 7 articles for a detailed review (see Table A1). The selected articles were analyzed to identify the methodological approaches used, the specific strategies applied within wordless picture books, and the literacy outcomes targeted.

The findings from this review are summarized below, followed by a discussion of their implications for future research and educational practice in primary reading instruction.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

Table A1. Research on WPBs for Young Learners, 2015-2024 (N=7)

Methodologic al Approach	Author(s)/ Year	Country of Research	Data Collection Technique	Findings
	Halpin & Melzi, (2021)	USA	Narrative elicitation and language assessment	wordless books encourage parents to use more open-ended questions and conceptual expansions, allowing children to actively construct narratives and develop critical thinking. This process fosters the use of decontextualized language, which is crucial for building advanced reading and comprehension abilities. By promoting inference and encouraging discussion around the story, wordless books support vocabulary development and the ability to
Quantitative Studies (n=2)				

connect ideas beyond the immediate context. These attributes make wordless books a valuable tool for improving reading skills in language learning environments.

Tunkiel & Norwegia Bus, (2022)	Questionnaire, Pre and post intervention testing, and Audio recordings of home reading sessions	reading picture books, including wordless books, can improve the reading skills of children learning a second language.
Lucero et al., (2021)	Examination	This study found that Spanish-English bilingual children, particularly in grades one and two, showed significant differences in the use of referential forms (nominal and pronominal) when retelling stories.

Methodological Approach	Author(s)/Year	Country of Research	Data Collection Technique	Findings
Qualitative Studies (n=4)	B. Louie & Sierschynski, (2015)	USA	Observation	<p>The use of WPBs is effective in developing deep reading skills in ELLs, as it focuses on visual elements without the emphasis of written text. The book enhances oral and written language skills through discussion and retelling, and encourages student engagement in the learning process.</p> <p>Teachers also provide cognitive scaffolding to help students understand the narrative structure, while their observation skills develop through identifying</p>

important details in the pictures.

Hu et al., (2018) USA and China recording of session and Researcher's reflection journal

This study examines how 2-4 year old bilingual (Chinese and English speaking) children develop reading skills through wordless picture books. The research provides insights into how bilingual children use WPBs to develop reading skills in a foreign language. They not only understand the pictures, but also practice constructing narratives in two languages, which supports their overall literacy development.

WPBs can be an effective tool in Analysis of foreign

Sun, (2022)

Australia Literature Review, Analysis of foreign

Moody et al., USA
(2022)

reading activities and parent-child interactions, and Observasi Case Study language teaching, with the support of parental interaction and appropriate use of technology. The use of WPBs encourages creative interaction between parent and child through self-narration, which enhances creativity and comprehension. Translanguagin g occurs naturally as they use both Spanish and English to understand the illustrations, aiding second language (English) development through visual clues and support from the first language (Spanish). The book also supports

	cultural identity and strengthens children's confidence in both languages.
--	--

Table A2

Title	Integration in Learning
Translanguaging During Shared Read Alouds: A Case Study (Moody et al., 2022)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Book and Environment Preparation: Select bilingual or wordless books and prepare a comfortable reading environment. 2. Initial Approach: Introduce the book (title, author, illustrations), and encourage students to share experiences related to the story using language they are comfortable with. 3. Interactive Reading: Read the book using translanguaging to explain vocabulary or ideas, and ask questions that provoke responses. 4. Enrichment Discussion: Invite students to relate the story to personal experiences using both languages. 5. Post-Reading Activity: Ask students to retell the story or create their own version of the story, giving feedback.
Enhancing English Learners' Language Development Using WPBs (B. Louie & Sierschynski, 2015)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Supporting Activities: Combine picture book reading with activities such as word games, art projects, or songs. 2. Multimedia Utilization: Use tools like digital pens or educational apps to help connect visuals with pronunciation and meaning. 3. Parent Collaboration: Engage parents through guided reading at home.

	<p>4. Phonology and Vocabulary Awareness: Do phoneme, syllable and rhyme recognition activities using picture books.</p>
Examining meaning making from reading WPBs in Chinese and English by three bilingual children (Hu et al., 2018)	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Gradual Strategy: Apply the Gradual Release of Responsibility model by gradually shifting tasks from teachers to students in storytelling.2. Visual Interpretation: Teach students to use pictures as narrative guides to enhance creativity and storytelling skills.3. Personal Connections: Encourage students to make connections between stories in books and personal experiences or real-life situations.4. Teacher Intervention: Use prompts and scaffolding to help students develop narratives.
The English referencing behaviors of first-and second-grade Spanish-English emergent bilinguals in oral narrative retells (Lucero et al., 2021)	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Choose wordless storybooks: Use books like <i>Frog, Where Are You?</i> for narrative sessions.2. Story exposure: The teacher reads or shows the story visually and asks the students to retell it in English.3. Analyze the form of reference: Guide students to understand the use of nouns (nominal) and pronouns (pronominal) when describing the main and supporting characters.4. Collaborative exercise: Students work in small groups to create stories from pictures, focusing on using character references clearly.5. Feedback: The teacher gives feedback on the clarity of the story and the use of character references, and gives examples of improvement.

Digital Picture Books for Young Dual Language Learners: Effects of Reading in the Second Language (Tunkiel & Bus, 2022)	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Choose bilingual digital books: Prepare digital books with narration in L1 and L2, such as <i>Unni og Gunni</i> with mother tongue and second language options.2. Read at home: Instruct parents to read books in L2 at home using digital audio narration.3. Interactive activities: Encourage the child to point out story elements on the screen (e.g. pointing to characters or objects according to the story).4. Repeat in class: The teacher rereads the book in class in L2, with additional group discussions to improve comprehension of the story.5. Vocabulary test: Use pictures from the book to evaluate understanding of story-specific vocabulary.6. Conduct cross-language discussions: Ask students to explain the story in L1 to check for understanding and build connections between languages.
Code-switching in the narratives of dual-language Latino preschoolers (Halpin & Melzi, 2021)	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Use picture books without text: For example, <i>A Boy, A Dog, A Frog, and A Friend</i> to practice narration.2. Practice free narration: Have students tell the story in their dominant language, but encourage code-switching when necessary.3. Identify the function of code-switching: Discuss the reasons students use code-mixing, such as to emphasize or fill vocabulary gaps.4. Reinforcement of grammatical rules: Analyze with students whether the language change adheres to the grammatical rules of both languages.

Enhancing Picture Book Reading for EFL Young Learners (Sun, 2022)	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Book Preparation and Selection: Choose picture books that are interesting and appropriate for the students. Provide tools such as digital pens or e-book apps if possible.2. Book Introduction: Use illustrations to predict story content and introduce print concepts such as reading from left to right.3. Reading and Interaction: Read the book expressively, use illustrations to explain new vocabulary, and engage students in discussion.4. Support Activities: Create story-based vocabulary games, songs, or role plays.5. Parent-Child Interactive Activities: Encourage parents to read books with their children at home and use digital tools if needed.6. Reflection and Follow-up: Ask students to draw a favorite scene, retell the story, or construct sentences with new words.
---	---

This study analyzed the integration of WPBs in second language learning environments based on literature published between 2015 and 2024. A total of 7 relevant articles were identified and examined for their methodological approaches and findings regarding their effectiveness in enhancing reading comprehension among young learners. Result review revealed that qualitative methods were more frequently utilized ($n = 4$; 57.14%) than quantitative methods ($n = 3$; 42.86%). This prevalence is likely due to the exploratory nature of studies focusing on the interpretive and contextual use of wordless picture books.

From the analysis, four main themes emerged as key aspects of integrating WPBs into second language learning. These include fostering creativity and narrative skills ($n = 6$; 42.86%), enhancing vocabulary acquisition and comprehension ($n = 5$; 35.71%), parental involvement and interaction ($n = 2$;



14.29%), and promoting bilingual literacy through translanguaging ($n = 1$; 7.14%). The integration strategies outlined in Table 2 provide practical examples of how these themes are implemented in diverse educational settings.

For example, the *Translanguaging During Shared Read Alouds: A Case Study* emphasizes creating a comfortable reading environment, engaging students in interactive reading using translanguaging, and encouraging them to connect stories with personal experiences. These strategies align with findings by B. Louie & Sierschynski (2015), who demonstrated that WPBs effectively develop critical thinking and narrative skills through open-ended discussions and visual storytelling.

Similarly, the *Enhancing Picture Book Reading for EFL Young Learners* study highlights the importance of expressive reading and supporting activities such as vocabulary games, songs, and role-playing. These approaches foster engagement and comprehension, as evidenced by Tunkiel & Bus (2022), who found that digital WPBs improve vocabulary acquisition and storytelling in bilingual learners. Additionally, the inclusion of parent-child interactive activities reflects findings by Moody et al. (2022), emphasizing the value of family involvement in language development.

The analysis of the 7 selected articles (see Table A1) encompasses studies that used various methodological approaches. Most of this literature relied on qualitative methods ($n=4$; 57.14%), including observations, audio recordings, and literature reviews. These studies explored how WPBs enhance narrative skills, bilingual literacy, and student engagement B. Louie & Sierschynski, (2015); Hu et al., (2018) . Quantitative studies ($n=3$; 42.86%) utilized narrative elicitation, language assessments, and pre/post-intervention testing to examine the impact of these books on vocabulary development and second-language acquisition (e.g., Halpin & Melzi, (2021); Tunkiel & Bus, (2022).

This studies selected for this review were also conducted across several countries, with a notable concentration in the USA ($n=5$), as well as contributions from Australia, Norway, and China. These diverse geographical contexts suggest that WPBs hold potential for enhancing literacy development and second language acquisition across different cultural and linguistic settings.

However, it is important to note that the studies reviewed primarily focused on English-speaking contexts, and further research is needed to explore how WPBs perform in other language settings, particularly in non-Western countries. A comparative analysis of WPB efficacy in different cultural environments could yield valuable insights into how these tools can be adapted to suit varied linguistic needs.

Finally, strategies such as the use of digital picture books, as noted in studies like Digital Picture Books for Young Dual Language Learners: Effects of Reading in the Second Language, integrate technology to bridge gaps in language proficiency. Tools like digital pens and e-books enhance comprehension by combining visual cues with auditory support, allowing learners to connect meaning and pronunciation effectively.

These practical applications demonstrate the versatility of WPBs in addressing diverse learning needs. However, gaps remain in exploring teachers' perspectives, cultural contexts, and the potential for combining these books with emerging technologies like augmented reality. Future research should focus on these areas to further optimize the integration of WPBs in second language learning.

CONCLUSION

The study highlights the significant potential of WPBs in enhancing reading comprehension and second language acquisition among young learners. These books encourage creativity, develop narrative skills, and improve vocabulary without the constraints of text, making them effective tools in bilingual and primary education. While this review provides valuable insights into the effectiveness of WPBs in second language education, there are limitations in the studies reviewed that should be considered. Many of the studies reviewed suffer from small sample sizes, which may limit the generalizability of their findings. Furthermore, several studies lack control groups or longitudinal designs, making it difficult to draw conclusions about the long-term effectiveness of WPBs in language acquisition. Another limitation is the narrow geographical focus, as most studies were conducted in Western countries, which may not reflect the experiences of learners in non-Western educational contexts. Future research should aim to address these limitations by using larger, more diverse samples and employing more rigorous research designs, such as randomized controlled trials.

REFERENCES

Arif, M. '., & Hashim, F. (2008). Reading from the Wordless: A Case Study on the Use of Wordless Picture Books. *English Language Teaching*, 1, 121–126.
<https://doi.org/10.5539/ELT.V1N1P121>

Crawford, P., & Hade, D. D. (2000). Inside the Picture, Outside the Frame: Semiotics and the Reading of Wordless Picture Books. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, 15, 66–80.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02568540009594776>

D'Angelo, K. (1981). Wordless Picture Books and the Young Language-Disabled Child. *TEACHING Exceptional Children, 14*, 34–37.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/004005998101400106>

Giorgis, C., & Johnson, N. J. (2022). "It's a radical decision not to use words": Partnering with wordless picture books to enhance reading and writing. *Middle School Journal, 53*(4), 13–19.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00940771.2022.2095603>

Halpin, E., & Melzi, G. (2021). Code-switching in the narratives of dual-language Latino preschoolers. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism, 24*(9), 1271–1287.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2018.1553928>

Hu, R., Liu, X., & Zheng, X. (2018). Examining meaning making from reading wordless picture books in Chinese and English by three bilingual children. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy, 18*(2), 214–238.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1468798416643357>

Jalongo, M., Dragich, D., Conrad, N. K., & Zhang, A. (2002). Using Wordless Picture Books to Support Emergent Literacy. *Early Childhood Education Journal, 29*, 167–177. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1014584509011>

Louie, B., & Sierschynski, J. (2015). Enhancing English Learners' Language Development Using Wordless Picture Books. *The Reading Teacher, 69*(1), 103–111. <https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.1376>

Lubis, R. (2018). The Progress of Students Reading Comprehension through Wordless Picture Books. *Advances in Language and Literary Studies, 9*, 48–52. <https://doi.org/10.7575/AIAC.ALLS.V.9N.1P.48>

Lucero, A., Donley, K., & Bermúdez, B. (2021). The English referencing behaviors of first- and second-grade Spanish–English emergent bilinguals in oral narrative retells. *Applied Psycholinguistics, 42*(5), 1243–1261.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0142716421000278>

Moody, S. M., Matthews, S. D., & Eslami, Z. R. (2022). Translanguaging During Shared Read Alouds: A Case Study. *Literacy Research and Instruction, 61*(2), 113–136. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19388071.2021.1889724>

Neca, P., Borges, M. L., & Pinto, P. C. (2022). Teachers with disabilities: a literature review. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*. Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2020.1776779>

Pantaleo, S. (2023). Reviewing the Multifaceted Complexity and Potential of Wordless Picturebooks. *Bookbird: A Journal of International Children's Literature, 61*, 15–25. <https://doi.org/10.1353/bkb.2023.0020>

Sanchez, D. T. (2021). Interactive and Conventional Teaching Approaches to Optimizing Reading Comprehension Performance. *Revista Gestão Inovação e Tecnologias*.

Schick, T., Udupa, S., & Schütze, H. (2021). Self-Diagnosis and Self-Debiasing: A Proposal for Reducing Corpus-Based Bias in NLP. *Transactions of the Association for Computational Linguistics*, 9, 1408–1424.
https://doi.org/10.1162/tacl_a_00434

Schwartz, S. (1988). A comparison of componential and traditional approaches to training reading skills. *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, 2(3), 189–201.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/acp.2350020305>

Serafini, F. (2014). Exploring wordless picture books. *The Reading Teacher*, 68, 24–26. <https://doi.org/10.1002/TRTR.1294>

Sun, C. (2022). Enhancing Picture Book Reading for Young EFL Learners. *Education Reform and Development*, 4(2), 1–7.
<https://doi.org/10.26689/erd.v4i2.4527>

Terrusi, M. (2018). Silent Books. Wonder, Silence and Other Metamorphosis in Wordless Picture Books (p. 879). MDPI AG.
<https://doi.org/10.3390/proceedings1090879>

Tunkiel, K. A., & Bus, A. G. (2022). Digital Picture Books for Young Dual Language Learners: Effects of Reading in the Second Language. *Frontiers in Education*, 7. <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2022.901060>