

Social-emotional development of learners in primary level of education through “reading” wordless picture books

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Abstract

The aim of the paper is to demonstrate that selected wordless picture book *Sidewalk Flowers* (2015) by JonArno Lawson and Sydney Smith develop social-emotional skills of learners in primary level of education in English lessons using specific teaching tools suggested by Mikki Rogers (2020) such as character emotion charts, the character tree, the mood meter, character charts and the ruler approach. These tools are gradually implemented during six consecutive 45 minutes English (virtual) model lessons. The first three lessons primarily support learners' emotional development. The following three lessons are concentrated on the development of positive feelings and their impact on social relationships, social-emotional development of young learners. Based on the qualitative character of the study, we suggest to use a narrative approach and to use the methods of observation, individual interview and a test as a research tool for data collection. Lessons oriented towards social-emotional development of young learners may possibly contribute to the art of noticing which definitely helps the learners to improve the quality of their social contacts, to verbalize and justify their positive and negative emotions, to increase their vocabulary, to foster their self-regulation at school and outside of it and it teaches them to be emotionally resilient. These lessons should be, therefore, an essential part of the school curriculum because they shape cognitive and affective dimensions of the learners.

Keywords: *social-emotional development, primary education, wordless picture book, demonstration, English lessons, specific teaching tools, narrative approach.*

Introduction

Social-emotional learning (SEL) should be an essential part in families, communities, English language classrooms and schools as illustrated in the “CASEL wheel” (<https://casel.org/fundamentals-of-sel/what-is-the-casel-framework/>). The authentic settings in which we live and grow contribute to the holistic development of each human being shaping him/her into complex personality who is able to acquire a set of certain notions, recognize and deal with own emotions, set yourself some short and long-term goals trying to accomplish them, be responsible, make a carefully considered decision, work collaboratively rather than competitively, cultivate healthy and enriching relationships and show empathy for other people's situations growing self-concept. Implementing and developing social-emotional skills is a demanding process which requires not only time and effort but also specific teaching aid (wordless picture book) and specific teaching tools (character emotion charts, the character tree, the mood meter, character charts and the ruler approach) used during the lesson to support all the above mentioned aspects.

(Wordless) picture books in ELT

Going through various definitions of picture books, we can generally describe them as a kind of short dynamic literary genre and didactic material associated with text and visual components typical of a simple, understandable plot with easily predictable and repetitive language and minimal number of characters. If we specifically focus on the expression “picture book”, we realize that the pictures should

be an integral part of the book. However, there are also picture books in which a written text is central and pictures have a motivating function. On the one hand, this approach is convenient for teachers because it helps them to generate some ideas, questions to provoke discussion so they avoid unpleasant quiet moments in the classroom. On the other hand, it may be restrictive for the teacher and for the learners because they are working with ready-made ideas without the opportunity to introduce own suggestions, thoughts, interpret the meaning of the pictures freely, to convey different emotions and compare them in interaction with their classmates trying to understand how others think and feel improving their vocabulary. If the teacher wants to exclusively focus on “reading” pictures, it is better to use the term “wordless picture book” whose potential stated above is supported by several scholars.

Serafini (2014) claims that using wordless picture books enables the learners to be equally involved in a teaching process. All learners observe a set of pictures and they are free to introduce their own perception. It is important to tell the learners that the first encounter with pictures, which they have never seen before, does not have to be only positive but also negative or neutral. Arizpe (2014) believes that the learners should learn to enjoy the moment of observation. “Looking at complex pictures, children wonder, compare, discover, infer and comprehend” (Bland 2010: n.p.). Nowadays the learners are facing increasing pressure from the outside world to react immediately, without hesitating avoiding silent moments. In other words, there is no space to reflect upon things, which they see in front of them. Therefore, Arizpe (2014) suggests to use wordless picture books to explain characters’ attitudes, their behavior, posture and external conditions which may influence characters’ current mood. If the picture contains some objects, they can be mentioned, as well explaining their purpose. Dowhower (1997) collected thought-provoking research results about wordless picture books published from 1998 to 2012. She divided them into the following categories: the first category is related to emergent (visual) literacy and the appreciation of aesthetic values presented by Jalongo et al. (2002) and Yu (2012), the second category includes the fact that wordless picture books may improve second language learning as presented by Chen and Pan (2009) and the third category presented by Gorman et al. (2011) refers to organizational style and paralinguistic devices used by non-native English speakers such as African American, Latino and Caucasian learners emphasizing the influence of their culture which was perceived during the interpretation of pictures. The fourth category focuses on the importance of using wordless picture book at home because they are a perfect tool for intervention as mentioned by Caspe (2009). The fifth category includes building self-esteem (self-worth), identity or social imagination (Lysaker, 2006). The sixth category embraces learners with special educational needs whose narrative comprehension is assessed (Leonard et al., 2009). To sum it up, wordless picture books explicitly or implicitly include the idea of “development” so they shape learners’ qualities, their abilities and skills. Using wordless picture book in the classroom requires to use a specific approach suggested in the following paragraphs emphasizing the development of learners’ social and emotional skills (elaborated according to Horváthová, 2021a, b).

Social and emotional development at primary level of education

Hestnes (2011) claims that “picture books are highly suitable for individually adapted teaching goals and can be of assistance to the teacher in his/her work to help both stronger and weaker students” (ibid, n.p.). In the past, it was generally believed that picture books have mostly aesthetic function and they are funny. We agree with this common belief but it is important to add that based on the recent theoretical studies and scientific papers, they are primarily used for educational purposes embracing cognitive and affective domains of young learners (O’Neill & Nyhout 2014).

Social and emotional aspect are two inseparable parts included basically in each (wordless) picture book. Their importance is stressed in terms of wordless picture books because the learners themselves become co-authors of the story adding emotional coloring to them thinking about concrete circumstances in which people/animals in the story are. As we stated in the previous paragraph, picture

book contains minimal number of characters. This lower number of characters enables the learners to analyze their reactions and attitudes more deeply, think about the potential reason of their actions trying to verbalize different social emotions, for example love, empathy, embarrassment, gratitude and others. Several degrees of the emotions and their nuances will be discussed in the paragraph Application of teaching methodology and discussion. Moreover, the position and size of the characters may influence learners' way of thinking. When the character is placed in the middle of the page and it is bigger in comparison to other characters, there is a tendency to think that it is the main protagonist of the story. Furthermore, bright colors used in the story may create a peaceful and joyful atmosphere and darker ones may evoke pessimistic and gloomy atmosphere and a possible foreshadowing that something negative is going to happen which has a certain impact on the feelings of each learner. The protagonists themselves can also be depicted either in black and white colors, in colors, or both and it is up to the learners to discover the author's intention.

We also mentioned that a plot should be simple and understandable so the learners dedicate their attention to their state of mind looking at the pictures describing concrete situation, which is usually not possible working with picture books with textual elements. Whether the teacher or the learner want or not, they are bound to verbal responses and they consciously or subconsciously follow them. The reason for heavy dependence on the text can be a cognitive aim of the lesson, i.e. acquiring vocabulary, grammatical structures, some fixed expressions, etc. omitting affective aim. Anyway, the language should be easily predictable, repetitive and rhythmic which helps the learner acquire these cognitive aims more easily which is different from wordless picture book since there is no text or only a few words and/or sentences.

Serafini (2014) asserts that wordless picture books are a visually rendered narrative so the picture can be also considered the text because it presents a story. There is a hidden message as it is seen in the selected wordless picture book *Sidewalk Flowers* (2015) by JonArno Lawson and Sydney Smith. Young learners usually connect the stories in the book with their own life and they are able to fully identify with the characters (Kuzmíková 2021).

Methodology

The aim of the paper is to demonstrate that selected wordless picture book *Sidewalk Flowers* (2015) by JonArno Lawson and Sydney Smith develop social-emotional skills to learners in primary level of education in English lessons using specific teaching tools suggested by Mikki Rogers (2020) such as character emotion charts, the character tree, the mood meter, character charts and the ruler approach. We originally planned to design two consecutive 45 minutes English lessons. The length of the lesson can be different with respect to country. After careful consideration, we came to the conclusion that it would be better to work with each teaching tool for 45 minutes to design six model lessons; three ones focus on the emotional development and the other three ones focus on social development. The reason is that in the process of perceiving narrative pictures, their contemplation, recalling reading impressions, feelings and experiences, the young learner creates his/her attitude to the world and to himself/herself which takes some time (six model lessons). The learner builds "the first floor" of his/her own identity, which should be firm and stable (Chaloupka 1979, 100-101 in Liptáková et al. 2015, 2022).

Based on the qualitative character of the study, we suggest to use a narrative approach (known as a storytelling) which may explore unique viewpoints of learners and encourage them to think deeply about selected topic. Due to the fact that *Sidewalk Flowers* is a wordless picture book, it offers many possibilities for learners to construct their own story resulting from their individual experiences. To maintain a chronology of their experiences, which is also one of the characteristics of narrative approach, we recommend to follow the structure indicated below. In this way, the teacher may collect "stories" of learners creating an interesting mosaic of their ideas and suggestions (Squire 2008).

Moreover, specific teaching tools suggested by Mikki Rogers (2020) may help learners to generate more ideas.

Due to the fact that the aim of the paper is “to demonstrate”, research questions are stated on the level of theory with the aim of their application in a teaching process in primary level of education during the following months whereas one more teacher, a methodologist should be presented in the classroom to provide the one who is teaching a detailed feedback regarding learners’ ability to respond to questions, their ability to concentrate on the lesson, their ability to manipulate with the given teaching tools and their willingness to cooperate.

Data collected from observations will be coded and divided into several categories and then they will be analyzed and interpreted by both teachers. Individual interviews will be used as the second data collection method. The maximum number of learners involved in the interview is from five to seven. To measure social and emotional development to learners, we recommend to take the following test as a research tool which is related to positive character strengths: <https://www.viacharacter.org/survey/account/register?registerPageType=popup> before conducting research and after it to register potential changes to learners in terms of their social and emotional skills.

Research questions:

1. How do learners at primary level of education react to suggested specific teaching tools such as character emotion chart, mood meter and the ruler approach during the English lesson? (emotional development)
2. How do learners at primary level of education react to suggested teaching tools such as the character tree, folding the paper with semantically similar adjectives during the English lesson? (social, social-emotional development)
3. How do young learners at primary level of education improve their social and emotional skills during English lesson using suggested teaching tools?

As a result, we recommend to organize the lessons in the following manner:

Emotional development:

- 1st lesson: Teachers show the learners all selected pictures from the book (the homeless man sleeping on a park bench, the dead sparrow, the neighbor’s dog, little girl’s mother, little girl’s older brother and younger brother) and they use character emotion charts.
- 2nd lesson: The teacher shows the learners all selected pictures from the book one by one and asks them how they feel about using mood meter.
- 3rd lesson: The learners see all selected pictures from the book in front of them using the ruler approach.

Development of positive feelings and their impact on social relationships (social-emotional development):

- 4th lesson: The learners dedicate their attention to the positive qualities of the main protagonist (little girl) using the character tree.
- 5th lesson: The learners fold the paper in eight sections.
- 6th lesson: The teacher points out the importance of small things (“*Sidewalk Flowers*”).

Application of teaching methodology and discussion

Emotional development:

- **1st lesson:** Teachers show the learners all selected pictures from the book (the homeless man sleeping on a park bench, the dead sparrow, the neighbor’s dog, little girl’s mother, little girl’s older brother and younger brother) and they use character emotion charts.

Figure 1: The homeless man sleeping on a park bench.



Figure 2: The dead sparrow.



Figure 3: The neighbour's dog.



Figure 4: Mother of the little girl.



Figure 5: Brother and sister of the little girl.



Source: <https://www.themarginalian.org/2015/03/17/sidewalk-flowers/>

Figure 6: Character emotion chart.



Source: inspired by <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/499899627384795006/> and modified by the author

Before the teacher starts to carry out the following suggestions or own ones connected with social-emotional development, it is recommended to create a relaxing and motivating atmosphere and to discuss this topic with young learners based on an extract from the wordless picture book to explain

them the purpose of the lessons specifically designed to develop their social-emotional skills. During the first three lessons the teacher uses the same pictures but different teaching tools gradually shaping learner’s emotions. The point is that each picture contains *Sidewalk Flowers*, which make common situations exceptional.

The very first step is to observe the given situations and let the emotions release. To help the learners identify emotions in themselves, we suggest to use character emotion chart⁶ (see Figure 6). At this point, many learners have problems to express / verbalize their emotions and the combination of emoticons together with the adjective below may help them. Beside this, using character emotion chart as a starting point could be a good idea because the learners are already familiar with emoticons. They are frequently used on a noticeboard as a motivation and feedback for the learners: happy emoticon represents good points and sad emoticon represents bad points. Emoticons are also used when learning emotions in general, they are often used in text messages, the thumb up and down is sometimes used with emoticons. When the learners are listening to each other, they (maybe for the first time) realize that their classmates feel differently looking at the same “things”. If possible, the teacher draws or sticks the emoticon on the blackboard to see the difference among learners. This lesson can be a little bit exhausting when teachers want each learner to identify their emotions but it definitely helps the teacher “map” learner’s state of mind at a particular time.

Emotional development:

- **2nd lesson:** The teacher shows the learners all selected pictures from the book one by one and asks them how they feel about using mood meter.

Figure 7: Mood meter.



Source: <https://www.ps120q.org/mood-meter>

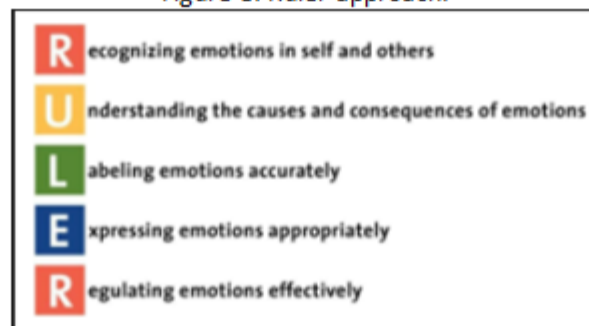
⁶ There are different character emotion charts depicting faces, objects, cartoon/animated characters, figures animated clipart, etc.

During the second lesson, the learners are working with the same pictures and they revise some emotions from the previous lesson. The task of the learners is to decide which set of feelings representing by colors (red, blue, green, yellow) is the most suitable for them. The mood meter (see Figure 7) is a tool that helps the learners develop their emotional and social awareness thanks to more nuanced vocabulary which will be probably a cognitive aim of the lesson (except an affective one). In this way, the learner is aware of his/her own emotions and moods, emotions of other people and he/she understands that several degrees of emotions exist. Different feelings are grouped together based on their pleasantness and level of energy, which connects our current emotional state and body⁷. In addition, the proper recognition of own emotions helps the learners understand their cause, manage them and to realize that they have an impact on our behavior and making decisions because our emotions are changing during the day. As a result, the adjectives “happy” or “sad” become insufficient to describe positive and negative emotions because they are rather neutral and general. To address emotions precisely, there is the whole range of adjectives with a slight difference in meaning, which the mood meter offers to describe positive emotions, e.g. “cheerful,” “optimistic”, “enthusiastic”, “blissful”, “elated”, “exhilarated” and negative ones, e.g. “sullen”, “desolate”, “despondent”, “disheartened”, “morose”, “glum”. As we mentioned above, it is recommended to take some notes to see the difference among learners and to also see the difference between emotions introduced using character emotion charts at the first lesson and the mood meter used during the second lesson.

Emotional development:

- **3rd lesson:** The learners see all selected pictures from the book in front of them using the ruler approach.

Figure 8: Ruler approach.



Source: <https://www.vbsds.org/academics/social-emotional-learning-ruler-approach>

This is the last lesson focused on the development of emotional skills of the young learners. They are now supposed to understand why they feel in that particular way recognizing various levels of their emotions. Moreover, the learners learn to consciously control their emotions and they learn to explain the feelings of their classmates. At the beginning of the lesson, it is appropriate to mention some adjectives from each quadrant showing the mood meter. Then the teacher concentrates more on the causes of the emotions and encourage the learners to interpret their own emotions and emotions of their classmates based on the situations from the book, which are in front of them. The learners can sit in the circle and discuss. If possible, they share their experiences encountering similar or identical situations in their families, in the nature, in the street or the teacher shows some flash cards with these situations. During this lesson, it is not necessary to talk about the qualities of the little girl but to deepen

⁷ Damasio (1994) puts emphasis on the connection of physical reactions and emotional responses (In Fekete 2020).

the meaning of the five verbs from the ruler approach, i.e. recognize, understand, label, express and regulate.

Development of positive feelings and their impact on social relationships (social-emotional development):

- **4th lesson:** The learners dedicate their attention to the positive qualities of the main protagonist (little girl) using the character tree.



Source: <https://www.imom.com/printable/are-you-raising-your-children-with-character/>

The aim of the following three lessons is to develop social skills to young learners. Firstly, it is important to perceive, identify and name positive character qualities of the little girl. Character tree (see Figure 9) can contain empty spaces to fill in and young learners show what they have learnt during the previous lessons. However, it is recommended to write down at least two qualities as an example. Then the learners are encouraged by the teacher to add other positive qualities. Their number is not limited. It depends on the learners' richness of vocabulary but in general we suggest to introduce four qualities. If the learners introduced many qualities, the teacher with the help of the learners select four main ones. Consequently, these qualities are discussed by the whole class using selected pictures from the book as a support.

Development of positive feelings and their impact on social relationships (social-emotional development):

- **5th lesson:** The learners fold the paper in eight sections.

Figure 10: Folding the paper in eight sections.



Source: inspired by <https://www.sciencefocus.com/science/whats-the-maximum-number-of-times-that-you-can-fold-a-piece-of-paper/> and modified by the author

During this lesson, learners' task is to write down semantically similar adjectives to the four main positive character qualities mentioned at the previous lesson. It is probable that most of young learners will have problems to complete a column on the right-hand side. Because of this fact, we would recommend to prepare a piece of paper as it is illustrated in Figure 10 (the adjectives may be naturally different). It is also possible to write down some letters of semantically similar adjectives as a hint, e.g. the adjective "helpful" could be written as follows: h_ _ pf_ l . The folded paper has something in common with the mood meter that is the enrichment of learners' vocabulary, however, during this lesson, social aspect should be emphasized so how these positive attributes of the little girl influence the quality of her relationships with other people. After answering this question, the learners finish the following statement in order to personalize its content, which connects their social and emotional development: When I am happy/grateful/generous/brave (it is recommended to use the adjectives one by one), other people ... If possible, the statements are written on the blackboard by the learners.

Development of positive feelings and their impact on social relationships (social-emotional development):

- **6th lesson:** The teacher points out the importance of small things ("*Sidewalk Flowers*").

The last lesson starts with the presentation (not necessarily PowerPoint one) of selected situations from the wordless picture book. The teacher asks the learners what they see in the picture highlighting the symbol (not the meaning) of "*Sidewalk Flowers*." Then the teacher calls some learners giving them some flowers. Their task will be to put them somewhere in the classroom, to give them as a gift to other classmates. Firstly, the teacher asks givers and receivers about their feelings. Secondly, the teacher asks why these small things make us happy and which kind of gifts they would like to get from their parents, relatives and siblings. The aim of the discussion is to start to perceive the importance of small things ("*Sidewalk Flowers*") which has a potential to shape our feelings (emotional development) and change people's life helping them to cultivate positive character qualities (social development).

Conclusion

To fill the mind with knowledge is very important because young learners need a solid educational background which is constantly increased but the development of their social and emotional skills is equally important, if not more important than acquiring notions. Wordless picture book "*Sidewalk Flowers*" naturally connects three levels, i.e. cognitive, emotional and social one contributing to a holistic approach to life, which is clearly depicted by several scholars in the theoretical part of the study. For this reason, it is significant to develop all these dimensions because only emotionally stable person who is able to collaborate with others and respect their attitudes can achieve goals, which are beneficial for him/her and also for the society.

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