

Wordless picture books trigger conversations at primary level of education

ISSN 2657-9774; <https://doi.org/10.36534/erlj.2025.01.03>

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Abstract

*The aim of the paper is to demonstrate the methodology behind the forthcoming wordless picture book *Monsterland* and its accompanying methodological manual. Together these resources are designed to support the development of foreign language vocabulary and social-emotional skills in young learners aged six to eleven. The picture publication is divided into eleven teaching units that align with topics from the primary school curriculum. Each unit contains emotionally colored pictures representing selected vocabulary, which invite young learners to a spontaneous conversation between the teacher and the other learners using basic grammatical constructions. All the images and story examples were created by the young learners who will use the book. The publication also includes a six-language dictionary. The picture book together with the methodological manual presented in the form of sample lesson plans corresponding to each teaching unit will be piloted in selected primary schools. Observation and self-reflection tools, the structure and content of which are outlined in this paper, will be used for the evaluation of the project.*

Keywords: *Monsterland, methodology, vocabulary, social-emotional development.*

Introduction

Using wordless picture books by parents with their children is a logical reaction to the fact that the children are not able to read and write properly at the early stages of their language development. This characteristic of child's natural development should be respected in primary schools by developing (very) young learners' speaking and listening skills communicating with the pictures and interpreting the situations they see. It means that young learners recognize people, animals and things in the picture based on their personal experience but they often have insufficient vocabulary to name them in the foreign language and sometimes cannot find the appropriate word in the mother tongue, as well. Goriot, Jongstra and Mensink (2024) carried out a systematic literature overview of peer reviewed articles written in English from 1998 to 2022 about the benefits and potential drawbacks of using wordless picture books for learner's development. The articles contain only empirical research done using wordless picture books in which the participants were not older than twelve years old. The authors finally collected 35 articles respecting these criteria of selection discovering some remarkable findings concerning language development and social-emotional skills.

Language development using wordless picture books

The fact that wordless picture books foster language development of young learners was confirmed in all 35 articles. It is not only connected to increased number of words in learner's vocabulary. It may reflect the situation when weaker learners are able to learn from their peers whose cognitive abilities are at a higher level (Lambert, 2015). In other words, the learner can be an observer of a language situation and absorb foreign words and grammatical structures by listening to the classmates. Hu et al. (2018) and Guichot-Muñoz et al. (2020) believe that wordless picture books are very useful tool for building up a positive relationship to reading as a skill and also free time activity. Young learners are active creators of the story, they decide about the sequence of events, about the twist in the story, about the tone of the story and about the ending of the story. In addition, they learn to formulate their preliminary ideas developing their speaking skills. These benefits of wordless picture books are also valid for the learners

with special educational needs or for the learners with weaker communication competence, which makes them a universal teaching and learning aid. The absence of text enables the learners to fully concentrate on the meaning, plot, emotions of characters and overall atmosphere in the story. They prepare the learners for reading texts, which appear everywhere around them - at school and outside of school.

Arif & Hashim (2008) and Crawford & Hade (2000) state that wordless picture books may serve as an assessment tool in terms of literacy-related activities connected with all language skills and critical thinking. Consequently, the teacher can make interventions and it results in learner's language progress. Chaparro-Moreno et al. (2017) discovered that teachers' use of richer vocabulary working with wordless picture books was immediately reflected in learner's use of words, in comparison to picture books with the text where teachers use longer and more complicated sentences due to the explanation of written words into spoken language. Smadja et al. (2019) and Schick et al. (2021) confirm this fact in their research done with bilingual very young learners and twelve teachers. This research clearly demonstrates that teachers asked more questions, and very young learners were able to share their thoughts and were more willing to participate in the discussions and complete various tasks more using wordless picture books. The researchers use the term "co-constructive style" which describe a vivid communication between the learners and the teacher/parents (In Goriot, Jongstra and Mensink, 2024: 10, 11). These results are valid in a school environment as well as at home (ibid).

Communication which is provoked by wordless picture books is happening between the reader, young learner, and the picture while the coordinator who moves the communication forward is usually an adult. Communication is then a social interaction in which a level of emotions is manifested consciously or subconsciously through personality traits of participants involved.

Social-emotional development using wordless picture books

Mantei & Kervin (2015) agree that wordless picture books support language development of young learners adding a psycho-social dimension and open mindedness to other cultures as other areas developed by wordless picture books. A young learner needs to read wordless picture books with his peers and with adults. An adult should coordinate with the learner by giving him specific questions in terms of the plot, or they may together think aloud about the situations which require an explanation, or they can use a similar story to compare it with the actually interpreted one focusing on the development of social-emotional skills. An adult can let the learner take the position of the leader in the discussion and the adult can observe and coordinate learner's ideas (Wiseman, 2011). Furthermore, young learners may develop empathy and self and social awareness, or improve and even challenge moral and ethical aspects of the topics presented so they shape their inner values (Lysaker & Miller, 2013; Nikolajeva, 2014).

On the other hand, Schoroškienė (2022) recommends reading picture books with text (we would suggest also wordless picture books) using toys, calling it play-based pedagogy in her research carried out with young learners under the age of nine. Except for promoting learner's language development (the author states some sayings or expressions used rarely in active communication), she mentioned that the combination of picture books with printed text and toys helped "to notice and understand the peculiarities of the expression of the picture book" (ibid, p. 98). The author found out that the toy helped to explain some situations not clear for young learners, which may have an impact on learner's social-emotional and human development. She introduced the following example of seven-year-old learner: "For instance, by simulating a ride with a small toy bicycle, the child understood why the hair of the boy on the bicycle was blowing. The teacher discussed with the student how the artist conveyed speed in the drawing and how speed was related to the character's mood" (ibid, p. 99). What is more, she highlights that when using a toy, young learners had better understand the connection between the written text in the picture book and a real life. However, the author admits that using a toy and a picture book at the same time may distract learner's attention because the learners do not know what to focus on - on a toy or on the pictures in the picture book (ibid).

Based on the selected studies from 1998 to 2022, Goriot, Jongstra and Mensink (2024) believe that the aim of the future researches should be to explore concrete benefits of wordless picture books over the picture books with text and vice versa. They suggest that the research can be done with older participants. So far they have found just one study from 2004 conducted by Fiestas & Peña focused on this aim. This research proved the benefits of using wordless picture books in terms of creating a more colorful language environment introduced by the adults, which contributes to learner's language development in the future.

Taking into consideration all the above stated research and also our own findings concerning this area (2020-2025)¹, we decided to prepare own project under the contract No. 006UKF-4/2024 financially supported by Cultural and Educational Grant Agency (KEGA) which is categorized as the applied research. Its title is Developing Young Learners' Vocabulary and Their Social-Emotional Skills Using Picture Books in English Lessons.

Methodology - the main aim of the project and layout of the wordless picture book Monsterland

The aim of the project was to design supplementary teaching material - a wordless picture book and methodological manual for creative work with this wordless picture book called Monsterland with the aim to develop vocabulary and social-emotional skills in English lessons of young learners' aged six-eleven. Respecting primary school curriculum, the project team developed eleven teaching units with the corresponding vocabulary (each unit contains a selected number of words).

The first unit is dedicated to the introductory session during which the learners become familiar with the main protagonists, monsters, in the wordless picture book. The next units are organized according to the selected topics: family, school, furniture, animals, fruit and vegetable, free time, transport, town and country, seasons and weather and clothing. At the beginning of each unit we used a circle of pictures where we put all key vocabulary related to that particular unit in order to divide one topic from another one. In simple words, if a child sees a circle full of pictures, it is a signal for him that a new teaching unit starts. At the end of each unit, there is an orange-yellow rectangle or so called "the golden frame" in which the learners can draw something personal connected to that particular unit. For instance, their favorite fruit in the basket, their favorite room/piece of furniture in the house or they can glue there a photo of their family. At the end of Monsterland, young learners may find several pictures drawn as the stories. The teacher can encourage the learners to come up with their own story being as creative as possible.

The final section of wordless picture books contains a multilingual dictionary that comprises the overview of all words, which young learners should acquire in each teaching unit. It consists of Slovak language, which is the state language of the project team members, then there is English which is taught at school as the first compulsory foreign language in Slovakia. The languages such as German, Spanish, French and Italian are also included in the dictionary as other foreign languages taught in primary schools. As a result, Monsterland can be used to teach vocabulary of any language because the main element to work with are pictures and not the text. We include the following link with the picture book publication Monsterland and its methodological manual which are scheduled to be printed in October 2025: https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/17GLfslowktJG4TQzplxlwkSpvxVMwq_

Process of drawing the pictures in Monsterland

All pictures used in Monsterland were drawn by young learners (mostly in the 3rd and 4th grade) in primary schools in Slovakia. Since the aim of the project was to develop vocabulary and social-emotional

¹ Except professional articles, in 2022 I created the Slovak alphabet book in which each picture hides one letter of the Slovak alphabet whereas the name of the picture itself starts with the same hidden letter. The shape of the letter is highlighted in green color if the user moves a mouse cursor on the picture, e.g. a lemon in Slovak is "citrón" and the picture of this fruit is shaping the letter C.

skills, we asked the teachers to instruct their learners to draw the pictures, which are emotionally loaded and colorful, and if possible they will act accordingly. For example, if the topic is “school”, the project team selected the words such as a book, a pen, a pencil, a pencil case, a school bag, a desk, a blackboard, a rubber, a teacher. As a result, we received the pictures of an open, happy book, a sleeping purple school bag, a smiling red-blue pen, a blackboard with double emotions: the right hand side is unhappy and the left hand side is smiling, a green and yellow happy pencil case with pens, pencils, and eraser inside, and also the picture of a teacher who is teaching the group of learners representing by the curious small active animals sitting at their desks.

Respecting the main protagonists, monster girl and monster boy, we asked learners in the 3rd and 4th grade in two selected primary schools to draw them under the supervision of their teachers. The instructions of the project team were as follows: the size of the picture where the protagonist will be drawn should be A5, monster girl should have big eyes, long legs, four short hands, thick long hair, a freckled long nose, two pairs of ears, narrow eyebrows, a big mouth with gaps among teeth and sharp chin. She should be wearing a big hat with a decoration, T-shirt with flowers, short flounced skirt and sandals with another decoration. The instructions for the monster boy were similar. The teachers who were supervisors for drawing protagonists added their own suggestions for improvement of these monsters; for example, the monster girl should be wearing a short dress with a belt, tights with holes and butterfly’s wings. Young learners also modified the monster a little bit; for instance, the monster girl was wearing a ribbon in her hair and had a bat’s wings instead of a butterfly’s. The teachers suggested a few optional accessories such as rings, bracelets or scarf. Regarding the emotions, young learners preferred laughter, fear, sorrow, surprise, enthusiasm, anger, or madness. The project team was consequently responsible for the selection of pictures, which fulfilled their expectations the best, whereas the teachers of two selected primary schools responsible for drawing the main protagonists were involved in the decision process, too. All in all, we received around 400 drawings of monsters and other unique pictures. The teachers during the process of drawing the main protagonists emphasized that the learners revise the vocabulary considering body parts, plural nouns and demonstrative pronouns “this” and “these” by improving the work in pairs.

A few remarks to methodological manual

As we mentioned above, Monsterland is suitable for any language. Due to the fact that the book was developed by a Slovak project team, we decided to use Slovak language as the language of the methodological manual with examples of a foreign language, specifically English, in the sample lesson plans because it is the first foreign language taught in Slovak schools. The manual consists of eleven lessons plans written as a working document for the teacher, which means that the teacher can freely modify them. The heading of each lesson plan is structured in the same way containing the title of teaching unit, the basic and additional vocabulary, basic communication structures (for example: I like ... This is ... What color is it?), specific social and emotional skills developed during the lessons and teaching aids. Each lesson plan is divided into 3 lessons with the exception of the very first lesson plan in which the learners are becoming familiar with the main protagonists and their role in Monsterland. These 3 lessons for each teaching unit consists of the introductory “encounter” with the main and additional vocabulary, then the teacher starts to work with the social and emotional skills of young learners in the form of interactive activities such as total physical response, competition, karaoke, singing songs, drama activities, drawing, movement-based activities, showing or guessing combined with activities promoting repetition and imitation, or describing visual materials.

The manual is based on the audio-lingual approach. It means that young learners practice their listening and speaking skills. There are no tasks for writing or reading. There is no time limit for the suggested activities because the working tempo of the learners can be very individual depending on their

level of English language proficiency and their mental maturity. The same pictures used in Monsterland are also available online as flashcards so the teacher can use them whenever he needs.

Monsterland together with its methodological manual will be piloted at primary schools who became the participants in the project. The project team will welcome possible modifications and suggestions for improvement in both publications.

Suggestions for the structure and content of the research tools

During piloting, the project team is planning to use two self-reflection tools for the teacher and one summative assessment of the Monsterland for the teacher.

Regarding the first self-reflection tool, the teacher should focus on the first subtopic - the way the introductory presentation of the topic is happening. The topic may be presented meaningfully and playfully, it can be connected to real life of the learners, and/or the teacher may activate prior knowledge of the learners. Then, the teacher concentrates on the second subtopic - development of learner's vocabulary through the pictures. The teacher can follow the pictures of people, animals and things naming them. He can reinforce the vocabulary through the repetition and questions. He can use new words in context (in sentences and/or in stories), and/or he supports the learners to create their own sentences. Considering the third subtopic - the development of social-emotional skills, the teacher can choose from the following options: the teacher helps the learners to identify different emotions of people, animals and things; he supports the feeling of empathy leading the learners to imagine how they would feel in that situation; he lets the learners share their feelings, and/or he highlights moral and ethical aspects within the topic. The fourth subtopic can be focused on the overall clarity of instructions and their appropriateness for the age level.

The second self-reflection tool is related to learner's reactions with the Monsterland. The teacher should notice if the learners acquire the new words easily and they use them correctly, if the learners asked for more repetition, and/or the words were difficult for them and they had a problem remembering them. Then, the teacher focuses on whether learners were able to identify the emotions and discuss them, if they needed more time to identify the emotions, and/or the learners were not able to identify the emotions, and, if possible, the teacher comments on the possible reasons of this inability. Lastly, the teacher comments on the cooperation and communication having these options: the learners collaborate together and they were listening to each other, the collaboration among learners was coordinated by the teacher, and/or a conflict appeared and the teacher made an intervention.

Summative assessment deals with the overall satisfaction with the Monsterland and methodological manual. It will be written for the English primary teacher in the first person singular as follows: how did I present the topic to the learners using Monsterland? (was I able to catch learner's attention?), how did I support a creative usage of vocabulary using Monsterland?, how did I develop social-emotional skills using Monsterland? (had the learners enough space to introduce their own experiences?), what would I like to improve the next lesson? (e.g. the formulation of questions, more interest in learner's emotions, let the learners use new words more creatively, ...).

Conclusion

The aim of the paper is to demonstrate the methodology behind the forthcoming wordless picture book Monsterland and its accompanying methodological manual, which develop foreign language vocabulary and social-emotional skills of young learners from the age of six to eleven.

The significant theoretical basis for elaborating this paper was a literature review of Goriot, Jongstra and Mensink (2024) who systematically sum up the benefits and potential disadvantages of using wordless picture books for learner's development in the last 24 years. The articles contained only empirical research related to wordless picture books in which the participants were not older than twelve years old. This literature review and other articles used in this paper confirm the benefits of using wordless picture books

in the field of language development. For example, young learners learn to formulate their preliminary ideas developing their speaking skills; teachers use richer vocabulary working with wordless picture books in comparison to picture books with text where teachers use longer and more complicated sentences; they also use specific questions related to the plot or the twist in the story. In the field of social-emotional development, there are other advantages; for instance, open mindedness to other cultures, developing of empathy, self and social awareness, ethical and moral values and peer learning.

Monsterland is a unique publication, which contains the drawings made by young learners on eleven topics chosen by the members of the project team respecting the curriculum for primary learners in terms of foreign language. Monsterland contains a space for personalization. There is also a six-language dictionary including the state Slovak language of basic and additional vocabulary for parents to check the number and content of words acquired by their children within one unit. However, Monsterland is possible to use with any language because the pictures, not the text, makes this wordless picture book widely applicable. The project team included three lesson plans in the methodological manual for each teaching unit giving inspiring tips for the activities for the English primary teacher such as total physical response, competition, karaoke, singing songs, drama activities, drawing, movement-based activities, showing or guessing combined with the activities promoting repetition and imitation, or describing visual materials. The aim of the self-reflection tools is to monitor teacher's work with Monsterland and learners' reactions to teacher's instructions accompanied by overall summative assessment of the Monsterland. These three research tools are interconnected in terms of structure and content as well.

We strongly believe that we as the project team developed useful and helpful publications for larger number of users - children, parents and teachers speaking various languages. We hope that these publications may become even of a higher quality after the piloting stage with the possible refinements of strategies and procedures suggested from the English primary teachers and the learners.

Acknowledgements

The paper is part of the project with the title Developing Young Learners' Vocabulary and Their Social-Emotional Skills Using Picture Books in English Lessons under the contract No. 006UKF-4/2024 (Cultural and Educational Grant Agency (KEGA)).

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