

Improving College Student Writing Skills by Using Wordless Picture Books

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Abstract

This study attempted to examine the extent to which students in the Department of Applied English in one selected university learn to sustain their English writing by using wordless picture books, and the effectiveness of using wordless picture books in terms of students' English learning. In this study, a qualitative case study methodology was used to gather data from the perspectives of the participants involved. This study employed the following techniques to collect data in this study: 1) teacher observations of student participation in whole-class and small-group activities; 2) students' writing sample; 3) informal interviews; 4) class presentation; 5) pre-test writing sample, 6) students' reflective writing and 7) questionnaires. The benefits by using wordless picture books showed that students improved their visual literacy and oral to written expression, promoted their creative writing and thinking skills, and enhanced the enjoyment of the writing process. Limited developmental progression of writing skills, limited oral language skills, and lacking of time for teachers to teach and evaluate the writing process were examined in depth for this research question. Based on the data and observation, this study highly endorsed the use of wordless picture books to improve student writing. Keywords: Wordless picture books; Student English writing; Creative writing.

Introduction

Students' inability to communicate through written language appears to be problematic in vocational colleges. Generally speaking, students as a whole are poor writers. College teachers are stunned at the students' inability both to express ideas clearly and to use the conventions of correctness in conveying those ideas. Students in vocational colleges exhibited a need for improving writing skills as evidenced by classroom teacher observations, authentic writing portfolios and surveys, and testing scores. When students read the assigned textbooks in schools to improve their writing, they are frustrated to write what they know in English and begin to get away from English often. The frustration affects students' attitude and abilities on their English writing. In the past, the conventional teaching approach primarily focused on vocabulary learning and grammar drills in the classroom. However, the effectiveness by using such teaching approaches is limited. Most of the students are still incompetent in communicating with people in their written language. As Graves (1983) mentioned, most schools "ignore the child's urge to show what he knows. We underestimate the urge because of a lack of understanding of the writing process and what children do in order to control it. Instead, we take the control away from children and place unnecessary road blocks in the way of their intentions" (p. 3). Since vocational students feel frustrated and are afraid to learn English, it is necessary to make the change of college teachers' instructional methodologies beyond traditional textbooks in order to increase their students' ESL writing skills.

A number of studies (Anderson and Lapp, 1988; Henry, 2003; Salminen, 1998) supported that the use of wordless picture books as an effective way to improve students' writing skills. "Wordless picture books can be used to encourage the development of writing skills, not only with young children who are beginning writers, but also with older students who already possess some skill in writing" (D'Angelo, 1979, p. 813). Salminen (1998) also

mentioned that wordless books are a gift to ESL students as well as an ideal medium for initiating writing activities because wordless books actively stimulated readers' imagination and thoughts which stimulated students' creative writing. Although wordless picture books usually are viewed as vehicles to enhance the reading and writing process, few empirical studies are found to investigate the effectiveness of improving college students' English writing skills through the use of wordless picture books in Taiwan. Thus, the purpose of this study is to examine the effectiveness of the use of wordless books in terms of college students' writing skills in ESL classes in Taiwan, how wordless picture books serve as a resource for the English writing curriculum and what difficulties and problems students encountered in this approach.

Definition of Term

Wordless picture books in this study were defined as books that have no written text to accompany the pictures and had to be available in print.

Literature Review

Using wordless picture books as a language experience is likely to connect visual literacy (learning to interpret images), cultural literacy (learning the characteristics and expectations of social groups) and literacy with print (learning to read and write language) (Jalongo ed.et., 2002). Namely, these connections support that wordless picture books offer a variety of topics, themes, and levels of difficulty to develop literacy skills in terms of language learning.

Wordless picture books are explained as "pure" picture books (Hillman, 1995). Wordless picture books are read by means of illustrations and the story depends on what the readers visualize. The picture books without texts help students create their own story by the pictures they see rather than the words they read. Beyond the typical characteristics of conventional beginning, a sequence of events, and a conventional ending, wordless picture books help students to inspire more ideas through the pictures. In the study of Reese (1996), through discussion and critical examination of the details of the illustrations, students wrote sentences that effectively complemented the pictures. This is a way to build their confidence as readers and writers because these books employ the illustration, the possibilities for students' understanding and enjoyment are expanded (Bishop and Hickman, 1992).

However, this does not mean wordless picture books are replaced of books with text. Instead, they are used as an asset to motivate students to use the picture to expand their vocabulary by expressing their ideas more precisely. As Carter (et. ed., 1998) stated, building on this skill, students probably can be guided to expand sentences; in turn, they may also have the potential to integrate visual literacy skills into writing skills.

Furthermore, Degler (1979) suggested that students are allowed to evaluate a character's actions, focus on some aspect of the unfolding drama, and develop a variety of thinking strategies through the use of wordless picture books. Hopkins (1979) also argued, "using wordless picture books in your classroom can provide many opportunities for listening, discussing, writing, and dramatizing activities that stretch young minds and stimulate thinking" (p. 28). Apparently, these literatures indicated that the use of wordless picture books encourages students to develop higher-order thinking skills to apply to creative writing activities.

As Lindauer (1988) suggested, "with wordless books, there are no 'right' words to read: a perfect foundation for purely creative thinking" (p. 138). Students have more flexibilities

and freedom to show what they want to express in wordless picture books, in turn, they feel safe and comfortable to create their work without the fear of making mistakes. Wordless books served as a framework for students to become creative and successful writers through presenting pictures which clearly portray actions and sequences (D'A ngelo, 1979).

In Whalen's (1974) study, wordless books allowed her students are capable of writing well-developed stories that they could share with others. This study also found that students enjoyed the writing process while using wordless picture books. If students perceive writing to be enjoyable and fun, they will be confident enough to share their perspectives and feelings on paper. Given this assumption, students are able to feel they got a whole world in their hands by using wordless picture books.

The literature clearly reveals that utilizing wordless picture books improves student writing. However, these studies do not elaborate detail about how wordless picture books were used with ESL students in order to compensate for the language barrier. These literatures also claimed that these wordless picture books have been helpful when working with younger students, but there are little suggestions offered on how to use them in English writing. Nevertheless, wordless picture books were viewed as only for preschool and kindergarten students, but their greatest asset seems to be that they ensure successful reading experiences. Cassady (1998) stated,

wordless books enhance creativity, vocabulary, and the language development for readers of all ages, at all stages of cognitive development, and in all content areas. Along with teacher guidance, wordless books can especially benefit linguistically or culturally different readers and struggling readers and writers, as well as the more experienced ones in the middle or junior high school years. Those are crucial years in the development lifelong readers. (p. 429)

Since then, wordless books are not just limited to younger readers but elder readers. However, few empirical studies are conducted for college students' writing, especially for students in vocational colleges in Taiwan, by using wordless picture books. According to Heish (2001), in addition to general English, the proficiency and competency of English writing for technical and vocational students are essential after Taiwan joined WTO. There is a need to foster technical and vocational students' English writing aiming to cultivate professionals who are good at English for private-run corporations or government organizations.

This study attempts to examine the extent to which students in the Department of Applied English in one selected school learn to sustain their English writing by using wordless picture books, and the effectiveness of using wordless picture books in terms of students' English learning. Here are the research questions:

- How do the students perceive the effectiveness of using wordless picture books?
- What challenges and problem do the students perceive an alternative way to improve their English writing by using wordless picture books?

Method

Participants

Forty freshmen students at the Department of Applied English in one selected university of science and technology were selected to participate in this study. These participants included eight male students, and thirty-two female students. This study started from September 2006 to January 2007. The participants were required to meet 2 hours at least per week for this study.

Data Collection

This study employed the following techniques to collect data in this study: 1) teacher observations of student participation in whole-class and small-group activities; 2) students' writing sample; 3) pre-test writing sample; 4) class presentation; 5) informal interviews, 6) students' reflective writing and 7) questionnaires.

Procedures and Activities

Pair-and-share meeting. Students were encouraged to select a wordless picture book to read and develop an original story line. Students should have the opportunity to create their own story line to create their own story line for the book and tell the story to their partner. Using Story Map tool, students began to write their story line by identifying the setting, main character, conflict, and resolution. Once students completed the Story Map, each map should be used as a guide to further develop their story. Students shared their story lines with another student for critique. Comments and suggestions were provided for further story development. The books students selected included *Pancake for Breakfast* by DePala (1978), *Truck* by Crews (1980), *The Snowman* by Briggs (1978), *Changes, Changes* by Hutchins (1971), and *In my Garden* by Cristini (1981). Any revisions were necessarily made based on the pair-and-share meeting.

Whole-class sharing. Students were asked to read their original story to the class. Students were also encouraged to use multimedia in the picture books during their presentation.

Data Analysis

A pre-writing sample was administered on the first day of the study. The sample provided baseline data on students' writing skills. After all the participants carried out the tasks, the research administered a questionnaire on the assigned tasks in this study. All of the data were triangulated to interpret the information and clarify the research questions.

Several steps were taken to establish the trustworthiness (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) of data collection and analysis. First, data were collected through six months to validate classroom observations. Second, multiple data sources were used to ensure methodological triangulation. In this study, an audit trail was used to establish dependability and confirmability. The audit trail in this study included informal interview transcripts, interview guides, lists of interviewees, students' writing sample, students' reflective writing, pre-test writing sample, questionnaires and notes about research procedure. This description should allow the reader to understand the researcher's thought processes in collecting and analyzing the data.

Results and Discussion

Perceived Benefits of Using Wordless Picture Books

Students in this study showed that three benefits they perceived as the effectiveness of using wordless picture books. These benefits included: enhancing the enjoyment of the writing process, promoting creative writing and thinking skills, and fostering cooperative learning.

Enhancing the Enjoyment of the Writing Process

70.97% of students from students' questionnaires indicated that writing wordless picture books was interesting for their English learning, although they felt difficult to write their story based on the wordless picture books they selected. From students' questionnaires and students' reflective writing, more than 30 students reported that this was their first time to write picture books in English. They felt proud of writing "a book" on their own when they

read their story. Data in this study showed that this is a valuable experience for students to write their first book in their life.

75 % of the students agreed that their English writing will be better if they keep on learning English by using wordless picture books. This evidence showed that this approach provides motivation to encourage students to learn English. Patricia, et.al., (1998) mentioned that when students perceived writing to be fun, they will be more confident to share their thoughts and feelings on paper. However, according to the teacher's observation, students in this study did not show their confidence to share their story with classmates, although they felt this is an interesting way to learn English. This might explain that students' English proficiency is limited so that they had hard time sharing their thoughts in English. Given the fact that students have difficulties in sharing English, they really need a way to motivate them to learn English without traditional English teaching. This study suggests that using wordless picture books can be a way to motivate students for English learning because this way can enhance students' enjoyment of the writing process.

Promoting Creative Writing and Thinking Skills

71% of the students in the questionnaire and 30 students from students' reports indicated that using wordless picture books can develop their creative thinking. Students in this study felt that they have more flexibilities and freedom to develop their stories in their words. They also reported that this approach is open for them to think what they never thought about. When students invented narratives, students demonstrated an understanding of sequence in their stories, practiced oral or written storytelling skills, and expanded their cognitive abilities. Under this practice, students have a chance to develop their logic philosophy in their story development, in turn, to foster their creative thinking and even their creative writing. Students have to create their own story by the pictures they see rather than the words they read, so they are more likely to be encouraged to add text in English in wordless books. As Lindauer (1988) said, "with wordless books, there are no 'right' words to read: a perfect foundation for purely creative thinking" (p. 138). From the teacher's observation in classroom and students' writing samples, students' writing tended to be creative in their own stories. For example, a group of students developed their story with Raymond Briggs' *The Snowman*. Each page in this book consists of a series of picture of a little boy interacting with a snowman. In this book, students have to use their higher order thinking skills to explain their thinking process. Students explained the adventures of a snowman who comes to life and how he interacted with the boy who made him in this book.

The other example students wrote is *Truck* by Donald Crews (1980). This book described an enormous trailer truck loaded with tricycles, and its trip on the road. Students in this study displayed the truck turning corners, going through a tunnel, moving up hill, stopping at an all night diner, and traveling in rain to deliver tricycles.

After students worked through wordless picture books, their writing improved and they became increasingly willing to revise. Their sentences were longer and more descriptive and used conversation. For instance "The big rabbit seemed to show something interesting to me." became "The big rabbit said : "I would like to show you something interesting to you. Are you interested in it ?" asked the rabbit."

Throughout the 6 months of the project, the teacher believed that students learned to write stories in complete sentences, to expand their ideas to better describe the pictures, and to produce a meaningful story. They learned how to link words to make story cohesive, and how sentences were begun in different ways. Students also learned to use quotation marks for conversations, commas for items in a series, exclamation marks for emphasis, ellipses to tell the reader that the thought was not yet complete and correct verb tenses. Data from this study

showed that using wordless picture books provided an environment where students are free to explore and create.

Fostering Cooperative Learning. 61.29% of students from the questionnaire reported that they learned more vocabularies they never thought of by writing wordless picture books. From questionnaires and students' reflective writing, students in this study showed that they usually used dictionaries and visited websites as their references to complete their story. However, students also agreed that their biggest problem for writing wordless picture books is the limitation of vocabularies. Students in the study showed that they learned how to use vocabularies in their real-life. They said that they usually learned some difficult words in textbooks which they don't know how to use in their real life. The evidence in the study showed that students with limited vocabularies are likely to be guided to expand their vocabularies to complete sentences. When students are encouraged to invent their own stories by using the pictures, students' vocabularies were expanded by expressing their ideas more precisely. For example, in the book *Truck* Donald Crews (1980), students not only learned words such as tunnel, fire hydrant, diner, diesel, bridge, etc. but also the consequent words such as first, next, then, last, and so on. This evidence corresponded to the argument of Carter (et. ed., 1998) that using wordless picture books helps students to develop their writing skills and enhance students' vocabularies. When students' vocabularies increase, they are more likely to develop their English writing.

Furthermore, more than half of the students believed that group discussion and editing helped their English writing. According to students' reflective writing and questionnaire, students thought that group editing is helpful for their story development, especially in English writing. During group discussion, students can talk with their teammates about how their story developed, how to make the story logic and coherent, what words should be used, and what grammar structure should be. The map story tool made students think about the settings, problems, possibilities, consequences, solutions first when they read their wordless picture books first. Then, they talked their map story with their teammates, and modified their story. It is not surprising that 61.29% of students in the questionnaire showed they liked to work with their teammates on writing wordless pictures.

In students' reflective writing and students' questionnaire, most of the students believed that class presentation helped to improve their communication, and provided opportunities for them to practice English. Students also noted that they not only learn English, but also learn computer skills from this project. They have to learn how to load up the pictures in the wordless picture books to the computer, how to modify a fit size when typing words in the photos, and how to present their own book with music as a narrator.

From teachers' evaluation and assessment, although there were mistakes in students' writing samples, their English writing improves in comparison with their pre-test writing. The teacher found that students' writing tended to be more cohesive and logical from their writing samples, more capable to organize their ideas that enrich theme, and more correctness of the writing, including spelling, grammar, usage, paragraphing, and capitalization.

According to teacher's observation, students' informal interviews, students' questionnaire, students' writing samples and presentation, the cooperative learning happened to students' English learning in terms of writing wordless picture books.

Problem Students Perceive toward Wordless Picture Books

What challenges and problem do the students perceive toward wordless picture books as an alternative to improve their writing? Limited developmental progression of writing skills, limited oral language skills, and lacking of time for teachers to teach and evaluate the writing process were examined in depth for this research question.

Limited Developmental Progression of Writing Skills

In examining problems and challenges involved in student writing, the natural development of skills plays a significant role. According to Graves (1983), there are five developmental stages of student writing: a) spelling; b) motor aesthetic; c) convention; d) topic information, and e) revision. As Graves (1983) stated, students have the most difficulties growing beyond the first stage. Without mastering previous stages of writing development, students are unable to grow in their writing skills and therefore lack the basic skills needed to communicate effectively.

The researcher found that students in this study have developed skills in spelling, motor aesthetics, and conventions from students' writing sample, and students' reflective writing. However, these skills exist at a very literal level. Most students have a relative weakness in the inferential or higher-order skills involved in topic information and revision.

Limited Oral Language Skills

Another problem of students' inability to communicate through written language involves oral language skills. Students in class presentation had difficulties presenting what they have written in English. In students' presentation, students presented their stories without fluency. As Tiedt (1983) said, "without a strong oral language foundation, no student will write well" (p. 10). Obviously, students need to have opportunities to use the mode of communication that they are most familiar with to develop their oral language. "Student indifference to written composition is often due to the isolation of written from spoken discourse" (Haley-James, 1981, p. 10). Thus, this study suggested that teachers need to provide more opportunities for students to dialogue before and during the writing process in order to develop their ideas.

Lacking of Time for Teachers to Teach and Evaluate the Writing Process

The third problem is that teachers do not have enough time to teach or evaluate student writing because of big class size. The teacher is hard to find enough time to edit and evaluate students' writing in this study due to large number of students. According to Anderson and Lapp (1988), they stated, "in a daily writing program, thirty children might generate sixty to ninety pieces of writing a week. Even if teachers spend only one and a half minutes per paper (most would probably spend two to three minutes) they would have to find approximately two more hours per week to grade written work" (p. 330). Corresponding to this study, teaching writing becomes a burden and less time is allocated for instruction. Large class size apparently increased teachers' teaching load and decrease teacher efficacy. The evidence in this study suggested that writing class should be in a small class size, otherwise, teachers have difficulties finding enough time editing students' writing.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on the presentation and analysis of the data on the study of wordless picture books, the students showed a marked improvement in their writing skills. The results of this study showed that the students improved their sequencing skills by retelling the story in chronological order with details and consistent use of time-order words. The benefits by using wordless picture books showed that students improved their visual literacy and oral to written expression, promoted their creative writing and thinking skills, and enhanced the enjoyment of the writing process. Based on the data and observation, this study highly endorsed the use of wordless picture books to improve student writing.

There are some recommendations showed from the data in this study. There are some vital components to the effectiveness of this approach. First, utilization of lessons on vocabulary supports word development. Second, incorporating visual aids throughout instruction increases the awareness of specific skills. Third, making real-world connections in curriculum planning is effective for students' language learning. Fourth, organizing students in cooperative pairs and sharing fosters student enjoyment. Fifth, the cost was quite high while conducting this study if each student has one book with himself or herself. For best results, each student should have their own book in order to completely see the pictures and visualize the actions of the story.

This study encourages educators working with students to use wordless picture books to develop students' writing skills. By doing so, students and educators will be challenged to move toward new and exciting levels of accomplishment.

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