



Ludic Language Pedagogy Special Issue Article: The Ludic You Love

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Picture This: Wordless Picturebooks in the Language Classroom

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Item Details

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Key points

- **Name of ludic object:** Wordless picturebooks
- **Type/genre/theme:** Picturebooks used in the language classroom
- **Intended audience age** 🧑: Young learners (preschool through elementary school)
- **Intended audience proficiency** 💬: CEFR Pre-A1 and higher
- **Typical time to play** ⏳: 10-15 minutes
- **Number of players** 👤: 1-15 (more if a large format book or screen is used)

Microblog synopsis

Wordless picturebooks are a genre of children's literature which focus on a narrative conveyed solely through images. They can be used with any context, age, and language level. Without relying on specific texts, they become ludic objects that invite us to create meaning.

#wordless #narrative

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1. Picturebooks in the language classroom

Picturebooks, along with arts and crafts projects and songs, have long been staples of young learner classrooms around the world. They are a uniquely adaptable resource, being able to be used and enjoyed by a single reader or shared with an entire class, and feature a blend of text and images that can appeal to a variety of ages. From infants exploring board books with tactile pages to emergent readers beginning to understand the crucial links between text, images, and meaning, picturebooks are often a vital key to creating an early love for the written word. Though all genres of picturebooks have significant merits in language learning, pedagogical methodology, and playful engagement, there is one type that has a special place in this teacher's heart and classroom.

1.1 Wordless picturebooks

Among the variety of picturebook types, such as concept books, biographies, and toy books, wordless picturebooks are unique in that they contain no text at all, relying on illustrations alone to convey a narrative. Being completely visual, they encourage imagination and interpretation and allow for multiple levels of engagement. In the language classroom in particular, these kinds of books are a powerful resource for helping children to develop the necessary skills for reading, such as observing details, following a narrative structure, and inferring meaning.

1.2 Language aspects of wordless picturebooks

As the feature of wordless picturebooks is that they have no words, it might be odd to think of them as tools for teaching and practicing language. However, it is this very aspect that allows for an incredible degree of freedom for parents and teachers to join with young learners in language acquisition and the development of verbal storytelling skills. Without being able to rely on written text, learners can create (or co-create with parents and teachers) their own narrative by describing characters, emotions, and settings, and sequencing actions and events.

Wordless picturebooks encourage language development through the building of visual literacy, with learners making meaning naturally and spontaneously from images and feelings as opposed to text. Additionally, the lack of written words can reduce the anxiety and linguistic barriers that are common to both emergent readers and those learning a second language. Without the pressure of specific grammar and reading fluency, learners can be playful with their words and language structures, and parents and teachers can prompt and guide as much or as little as they feel is necessary.

1.3 Pedagogical aspects of wordless picturebooks

These kinds of picturebooks are versatile resources for instructors, allowing for the practice of a great number of important thinking and reasoning skills. Two key aspects of the interaction between a wordless picturebook and a learner is interpretation and inference, using only the illustrations of the book to make meaning of character emotions and motives, as well as understanding the cause and effect of what is happening on each page. Indeed, the visual-only nature of these books underlines the point that meaning does not have to only reside in text.

Instructors can bring learners' attention to concepts such as character development, plot, theme, genre, foreshadowing, and symbolism. Furthermore, many wordless picturebooks have plot points and conclusions that are open-ended, which invite different "readings" and can lead to lively learner-centered discussions. There is no right or wrong way to engage with these books, making them very accessible and putting learners and instructors on equal ground.

"The visual-only nature of these books underlines the point that meaning does not have to only reside in text."

1.4 Ludic aspects of wordless picturebooks

All kinds of picturebooks are inherently ludic in nature, as they are made for learners to explore both physically and intellectually, often with spontaneous fun and humor as their hallmarks. These books are usually light and easy to handle, have colorful and compelling covers, and tell exciting stories that are designed to be read over and over again. Beyond the main progression of the pages, many picturebooks are also full of "Easter eggs"; extra details that may be hidden among the anatomy of the book, or in plain sight but only noticed upon subsequent readings. For example, some books have a dust jacket (see Figure 1) over the actual book cover, which reveals a different cover or details when removed. Other books may incorporate the gutter (the part of the book closest to where the pages are bound together, as shown in Figure 2) as a narrative prop, symbolizing the physical space between characters or other elements.

Figure 1

Example of a dust jacket (Woollvin, 2016)

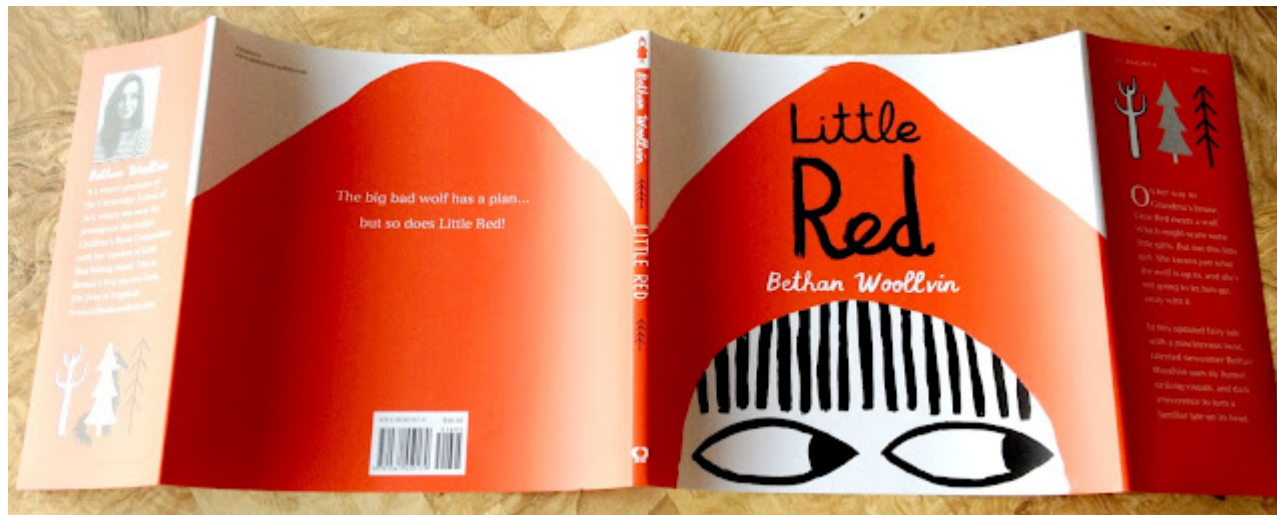
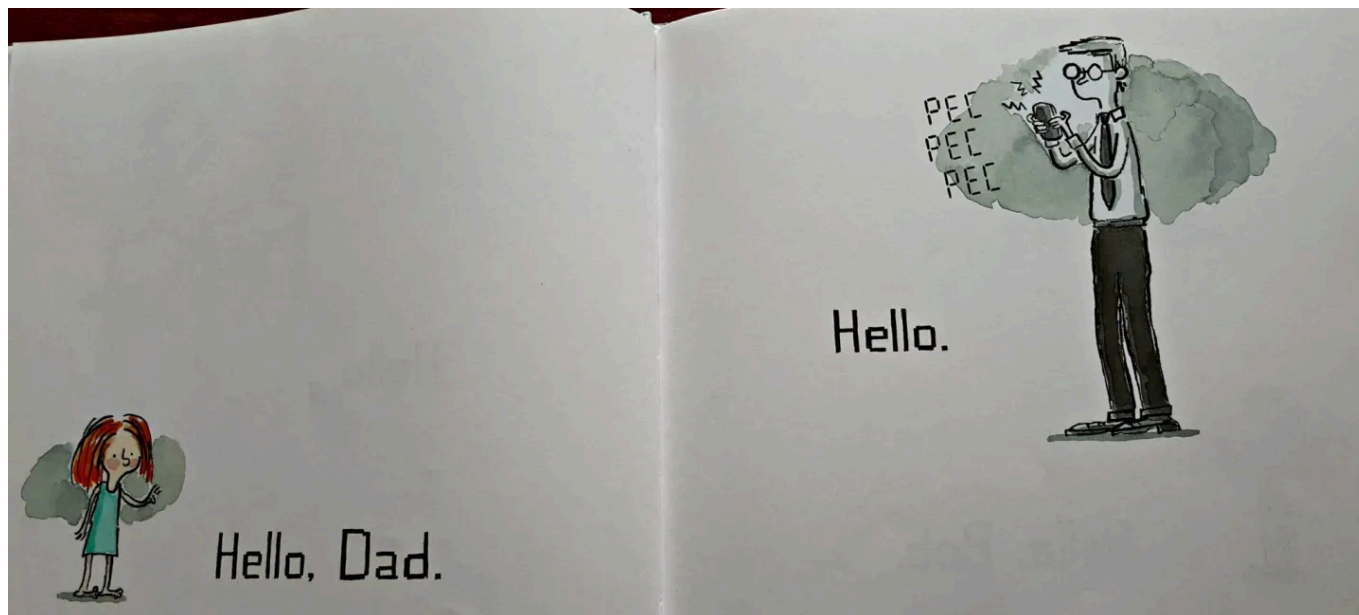


Figure 2

Example of a gutter (Cordell, 2012)



Wordless picturebooks are particularly playful, as readers must take on an active role in co-creating the story, using their imagination and thoughts to fill in the gaps between the illustrations. These books invite us to explore and

create meaning with strong elements of agency and active participation, as opposed to traditional picturebooks which focus on passive reception as learners are only responsible for decoding text. It is also this agency that makes wordless picturebooks excellent for multiple "readings". In subsequent uses of the books, learners can move at their own pace, lingering on pages and illustrations to find new details, characters, or subplots that may not have been noticed before.

2. A brief case study of a wordless picturebook

Now we will look carefully at a specific picturebook, and how it can be used in the classroom to promote language, learning, and playfulness. The book we focus on will be David Wiesner's *Flotsam* (2006), which features a boy at the seaside who finds an old camera that reveals fantastical images from under the waves, as well as a historical record of children who have found the same camera in ages past (see Figure 3). This book is well known among picturebook fans for its beautiful imagery, imaginative scope, and narrative ambiguity.

Figure 3

Illustration from *Flotsam* (Wiesner, 2006)



2.1 Flotsam and language

Flotsam (Wiesner, 2006) is full of vivid illustrations of sea creatures in playful and strange settings, such as an octopus family in an underwater living room (see Figure 4), a giant starfish with a jungle growing on its back, and a group of seahorses pulling the old camera like a carriage. It also has many pages with photos of the children who have found the camera before, with each child holding the photo taken by the previous finder, so that looking more and more closely (the boy uses a magnifying glass and a microscope) reveals a look back in time, eventually showing people in black and white with clothes from generations ago. All of these images invite learners to use descriptive vocabulary to point out what they notice in these unique scenes.

Figure 4
Illustration from *Flotsam* (Wiesner, 2006)



One of the key points of using picturebooks as a parent or teacher is to be sure that the book is being read **with** the learner, as opposed to simply reading **to** them. This method ensures that the narrative of the story is co-created, with the parent/teacher able to support the learner, letting them use words that they know and scaffolding their usage of new or unknown language. This is also a perfect opportunity for asking questions to prompt deeper thinking and reflection:

- What do you see in the picture?
- What do you think about this page?
- How do you think this character feels? Have you ever felt like that?
- What would you do if you were in this scene?
- What do you think will happen next?
- What is your favorite part of the book?
- What would you change about the book?

In this teacher's experience, learners have pointed out details and interpretations that he never would have noticed alone, so the reading becomes very much a shared exploration, blurring the line between student and teacher.

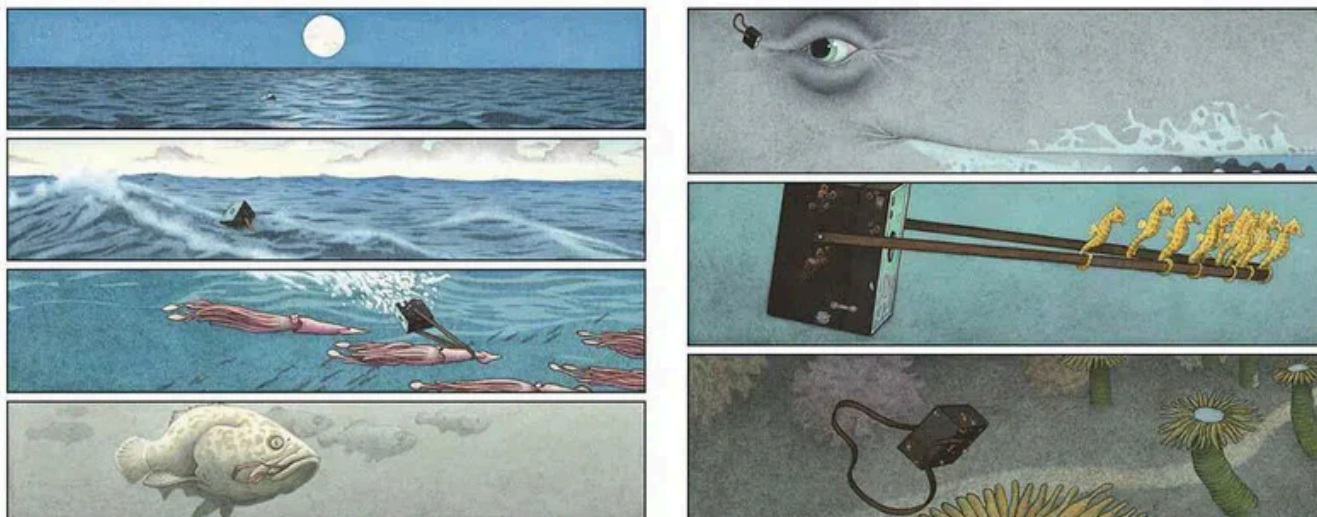
2.2 Flotsam and pedagogy

Many of the pages of *Flotsam* (Wiesner, 2006) include scenes within frames, much like a comic book. This type of sequential storytelling can be very useful for learners who are just beginning to understand the concept of narrative

cause and effect. For example, by seeing seven small frames that show the boy waiting after going to the camera shop to have the film developed, we can understand that it takes time for this process, unlike the instant results of modern digital photography. Another scene shows snapshots of the camera's journey away from the boy after he throws it back into the sea (see Figure 5). It travels to various locations on and under the water before washing up on a different beach where a young girl notices it. The book ends ambiguously with no solid explanation of where the camera is or what will happen next; this is for the reader to think about and decide for themselves.

Figure 5

Illustration from *Flotsam* (Wiesner, 2006)



This structure also encourages critical thinking and a kind of visual detective work. Learners can consider and discuss a variety of points:

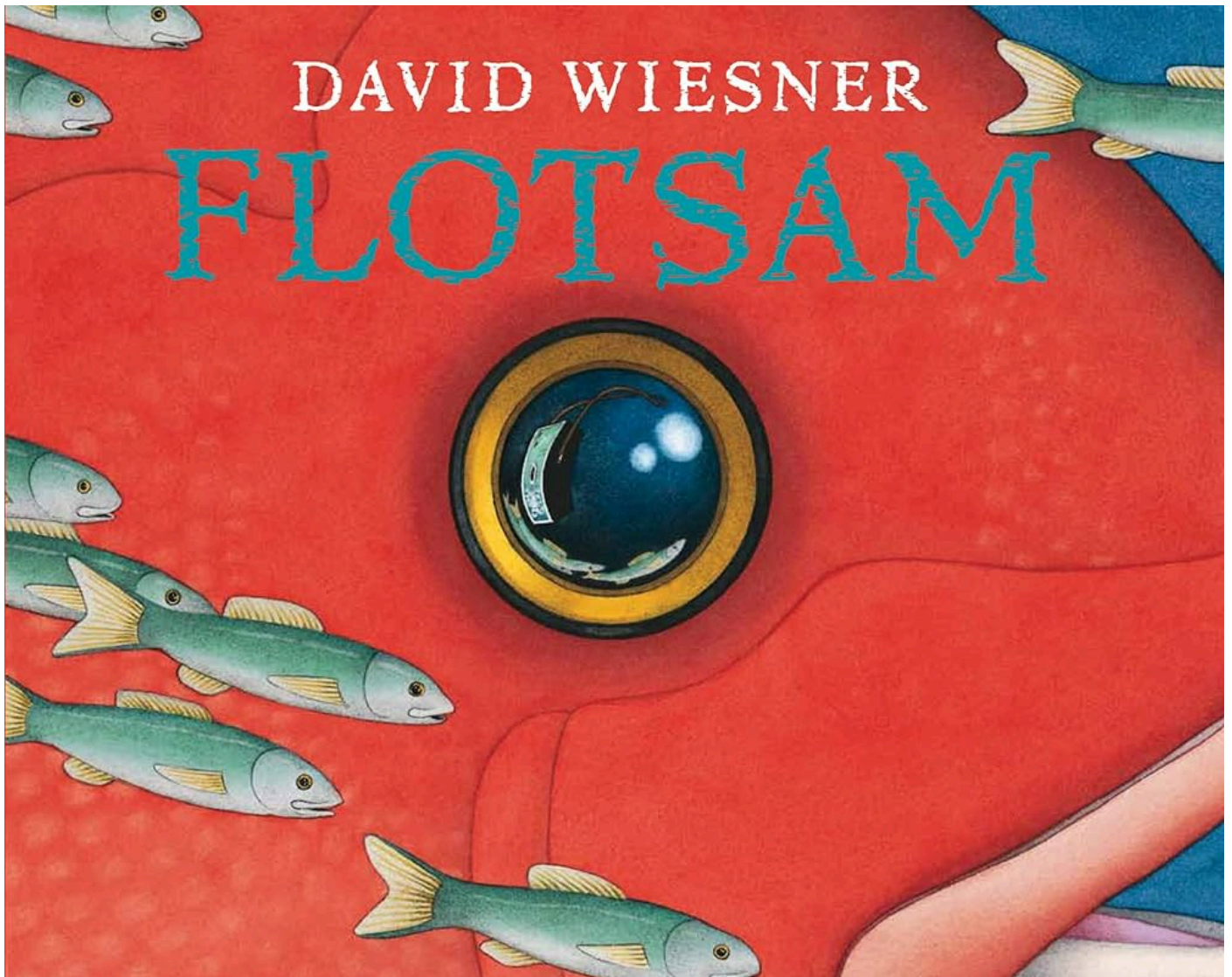
- What is flotsam? Have you ever found anything on the beach? Where do you think it came from?
- Why is one of the fish a robot?
- Where did the octopus get a book? What kind of book do you think it is?
- Are the starfish very big, or are the whales very small?
- How did the children take photos with many small photos in them?
- Why does the color of the photos and the clothes of the children change in the older pictures?
- Why does the boy throw the camera into the sea at the end? Would you throw it back?

Flotsam (Wiesner, 2006) is full of opportunities like these for meaningful dialogue and cognitive play, and in every reading of the book (my preschool students have requested this book multiple times) there is space for new observations and connections. In terms of language outcomes, learners can use either speech or visual media to tell their own sequential stories. They might practice using words such as "first", "then", "next", "after that", or "finally", or use a paper with three panels to draw a sequence in three parts. In my own lessons, I prepared cards with illustrations from the book (such as those in the image above), and asked learners to try to recall, recreate, and retell the order of events from the book.

2.3 Flotsam and playfulness

The first thing we notice about this book is the colorful and visually interesting cover (see Figure 6). What is the circle in the middle? Is it a window, or perhaps a bubble? By opening it out completely and also seeing the back cover, we realize it is a zoomed-in fish's eye. Looking even more closely we can see something reflected in the eye. It looks vaguely familiar but we likely won't be able to guess at what it is until we actually get into the story. In these and countless other examples, *Flotsam* (Wiesner, 2006) is both a book and also a game of interpretation.

Figure 6



In my lessons, I always try to connect picturebooks to small art projects, so that learners can connect their own meaning of the story to something they create themselves. Especially for young children, communicating their thoughts visually with crayons, paint, and paper can be more comfortable and accessible, as some learners are still developing verbally in their first language. With *Flotsam* (Wiesner, 2006), there are any number of engaging mini-projects that can be used:

- Make a picture of yourself with the old camera, like the photos in the story.
- Make a picture of a strange underwater scene that you would like to see.
- Make a picture or collage of some kinds of flotsam that you have found or might find at the beach.
- Imagine that you are the next child to find the camera. Make a picture (or pictures) to extend the story.

Wordless picturebooks, like *Flotsam* (Wiesner, 2006), are so visually rich and conceptually open-ended that they easily lend themselves to playful exploration and extensions such as arts and crafts. Some further examples of playful aspects include visual scavenger hunts, in which readers work together to find the smaller details (visual "subplots") in many of the illustrations, dialogue roleplay, in which readers create their own personalities and "voices" for the characters, and choose-your-own narratives, where readers might

TEACHING TIP

After the learners have finished their artwork, make time for them to share their creations with the whole class, like a show and tell. Ask them questions about what they made and their choices of colors, shapes, and subjects.

decide on the tone or atmosphere of a given scene and then apply that to the rest of the story for that particular reading session.

3. Conclusion

The picturebook, particularly the wordless picturebook, is far more than a simple visual aid; it is a powerful tool for language acquisition, cognitive development, and playful engagement. As demonstrated through the case study of David Wiesner's *Flotsam* (2006), these unique books can overcome linguistic barriers and empower learners—especially emergent readers and second language learners—to become active narrators. By removing the pressure of decoding text, wordless books encourage spontaneous verbal storytelling, rich descriptive vocabulary, and the natural practice of simple narrative structures.

Furthermore, their ludic quality is clear. By inviting interpretation and inference, *Flotsam* (Wiesner, 2006) transforms the reading process into a collaborative visual detective game, with readers (regardless of age or role) working together to notice and decipher all the various aspects of the story, such as characters, setting, tone, and plot. Unlike traditional text-based books/picturebooks, wordless books are designed to be experienced multiple times, with new and unique discoveries and interpretations in each subsequent reading, leading to significant "replay" value.

With this shift in the dynamic from passive reception to active co-creation, learners and parents or teachers are put on equal ground as they explore endless possibilities within the pages. Ultimately, wordless picturebooks like *Flotsam* (Wiesner, 2006) are vital resources that remind us that meaning does not solely reside in text. They cultivate a lifelong love for stories by making the act of reading a playful, imaginative, and renewable adventure.

References

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