

Wordless picture books and building a reading community in public libraries

El álbum sin palabras y la construcción de una comunidad lectora en la biblioteca pública

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Abstract

This article presents a qualitative case study of ethnographic modality. The study was conducted in a public library of the rural areas in Aragón. During one academic year, 41 children from three to eleven years old participated in a reading course by using wordless picture books. This research answers two questions: What strategies did the children's readers use in the reception of wordless picture books? What meanings gave the actors to the context with that socio-educational experience? Regarding to the treatment of data, The Constant Comparative Method was used with the support of the NVivo software. The texts were analyzed with the readers' responses generated by the reception of *Wave* and *Shadows* by Suzy Lee, the interviews with the participants and the field diary of the researcher. The reader responses indicate that wordless picture books promote the development of reading strategies through oral interaction and with the construction of meaning. The results show that continues collective reading generates a reading community and reading habits. Also, the data proof how the social function of the library was reinforced due to that collective reading.

Resumen

Este artículo presenta un estudio de caso cualitativo de modalidad etnográfica. El estudio se efectuó en una biblioteca pública del ámbito rural aragonés. Durante un curso escolar, 41 niños de tres a once años participaron en un taller de lectura en el que se utilizaron álbumes sin palabras. Esta investigación responde a dos preguntas: qué estrategias utilizaron los lectores infantiles en la recepción de álbumes sin palabras y qué significados otorgaron los actores del contexto a la experiencia socioeducativa. Para el tratamiento de los datos se utilizó el método comparativo constante con el apoyo del software NVivo. Se analizaron las respuestas lectoras generadas en la recepción de *La ola* y *Sombras* de Suzy Lee, las entrevistas realizadas a los participantes y el diario de campo de la investigadora. Las respuestas lectoras indican que los álbumes sin palabras propician el desarrollo de estrategias de lectura a través de la interacción oral y la construcción conjunta de sentido. Los datos obtenidos a lo largo del estudio muestran además que la lectura colectiva continuada generó una comunidad lectora y que los hábitos de lectura y la función social de la biblioteca se vieron reforzados.

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Introduction

This study is part of a research project on how do reading children receive wordless picture books, a case study conducted by a rural local library in Aragon, Spain. Three important axes when building a reading community were developed in this article: wordless picture books, public libraries and rural environment.

Wordless picture books: concept and lines of research

Bosch (2015) defines wordless picture books as 'a narration of fixed and printed sequential pictures, supported by the book's structure, its fragment unit being the page, where pictures are essential and the text is an underlying element' (p. 16). In his study, he identifies two major lines of research, although they are linked. The first line deals with the analysis and knowledge on picture books, how they are built and their main authors. In this sense, it is worth noting the contributions made by Van-der-Linden (2008), Beckett (2012), Lartitegui (2014), Bosch (2015) and Terrusi (2017).

The second line of research focuses on the reader. It is a series of empirical research using reading answers of one or more informants and pursues further in the didactic objectives of wordless picture books. Some of the most representative cases are the studies conducted by Crawford & Hade (2000), Arizpe & Styles (2004), Arif & Hashim (2008), Domiciano (2008), Lysaker & Miller (2013), Arizpe, Colomer & Martínez-Roldán (2015) and Chaparro-Moreno, Reali & Maldonado-Carreño (2017). Their results obtained in all of them highlighted the potential of these picture books as they encourage recipients of a wide range of levels and ages to participate actively in building the story. In spite of these studies, the beliefs of those adults acting as mediators and their selection criteria show that picture books and the new, more experimental literary discourses are not very usually included in the school curricula as they tend to give priority to the pedagogic

criterion over the artistic and literary criterion (Taberero, 2013). Additionally, wordless picture books also break the expectations of adults and they are thus hardly accessible for children of different ages (Graham, 1998); in other words, when mediators link the absence of text with the pre-reading stage (Van-der-Linden, 2008), these books are dissociated from the teaching of reading and literary skills.

The social and educational function of public libraries

Originally, public libraries in Spain basically kept and maintained cultural heritage; reading was not a socially widespread activity and only a minority used them (García-López, 2016). As literacy become general among the population, the status of reading and the evolution of the sense of the public sector and the information society transformed the function of libraries. The current *Ley de la lectura, del libro y de las bibliotecas* (Act on Reading, on the book and on libraries) 10/2007, dated 22nd June (published in the Official State Gazette, 2007) emphasises access to information, education and culture as a right of all citizens from the principle of equality. Nevertheless, the social changes have led to their adaptation and modified their function: searching for information is no longer the exclusive of these institutions, while 'the promotion of reading is one of the most largely provided in recent years' (Yubero, 2015, p. 11). Regarding this change process, the social use of libraries as a space of cohesion and integration for citizens is worth noting (Castillo, Gómez & Quílez, 2010). On the basis of the results of a series of studies and reports, Marlasca (2015) emphasised the social and educational work of public libraries and their link to 'social welfare, economic development and progress in all communities' (p. 97). In this same line, the recommendations of Lluç, Escandell, Francés, Baldaquí & Esteve (2017) regarding public policies concerned with reading also emphasise this social nature, in an effort to promote the cohesion, inclusion and participation of citizens and insist on the need for recognising their

'dimension as generator of social welfare and collective quality of life' (p. 131).

Public libraries in the rural context

The social and education contributions of libraries are even more significant and necessary in critical contexts (Castillo *et al.*, 2010) where they can be the only cultural space accessible to the citizens (Yubero, 2015). The Local Public Library (BPM, as per its Spanish acronym) where this study was conducted is located in a rural area in Aragon suffering from depopulation and its resulting lack of resources. Although Spain and Western Europe suffer from depopulation in general terms, Aragon is an extreme case (Sáez, Ayuda & Pinilla, 2016), as it is a large territory, mainly rural and with low population density: small population centres grouped in 731 municipalities, 86% of which has less than 1,000 inhabitants (Statistics Institute of Aragon [IAE], 2018).-

In these rural areas, all population movements are a socially relevant issue. The cultural and educational services are essential and their preservation promoted more committed reactions; in other words, the survival of a small town becomes a public asset all the community is involved in (Sáez *et al.*, 2016). In this sense, a library can be a highly valued asset even for those inhabitants who do not use it, as it is a cultural asset that can be lost. In this research, the BPM became a significant variable due to its potential as an educational centre and the decline of the social function that had to be recovered.

Objectives and questions of this study

Based on this theoretical framework, the objective of this study is introducing wordless picture books in a rural public library in Aragon and analysing in depth the inhabitants' response by through shared reading with children of school-going age. The objectives of this research had a twin-track approach covering the aforesaid educational and social function. This approach is based on the interest in literary education

in the field of Children's and Youth Literature and covers the analysis of the intervention context. The BPM was a space where we could analyse the response of the inhabitants when receiving the wordless picture books and where we could explore their educational potential; therefore, our first objective was identifying the strategies used by children when receiving these books. The library also needed to recover its social function through reading promotion; therefore, a second objective emerged: analysing the meaning attached by the actors -reading children, families, social agents- to the social and educational experience in this sense. This research thus aims at answering two questions linked to the objectives suggested: What strategies were used by the reading children when receiving the wordless picture books? What meanings did the actors give to this socio-educational experience?

Method

Design of the research

As a research way in line with the objectives and the singularity of the context described above, a qualitative case study was proposed (Stake, 2010) of an ethnographic mode (Simons, 2011). As far as data processing is concerned, an inductive category analysis was performed to refer all common patterns and elements and also to notice the singular nature of the case (Arraiz, Azpillaga & Sabirón, 2016). The 'Constant comparative method', consistent with the 'Grounded theory method' (Glaser & Strauss, 2017) was used for the category analysis due to the potential provided by theoretical knowledge generation. This process was supported by NVivo 11 computer software, specialised in processing qualitative data.

Fieldwork performance

A reading workshop in the BPM was organised in collaboration with the local municipality. 41 out of the 45 children attending the local school -24 girls and 17 boys- were

registered. They were distributed in small groups of between five and seven participants, organised by age (graph 1). The children went to the library after school, once a week, and the sessions lasted an average of one hour with each group. In these sessions, it was proposed to carry out shared and mediated reading of wordless picture books. The theoretical sampling was made up by all the participating children and the feedback provided by the families, the person in charge of the library and the town hall. The techniques and instruments used to collect data were audio-video recording of the reading workshop sessions, interviews with the families and other actors from the town and the researcher's field diary.

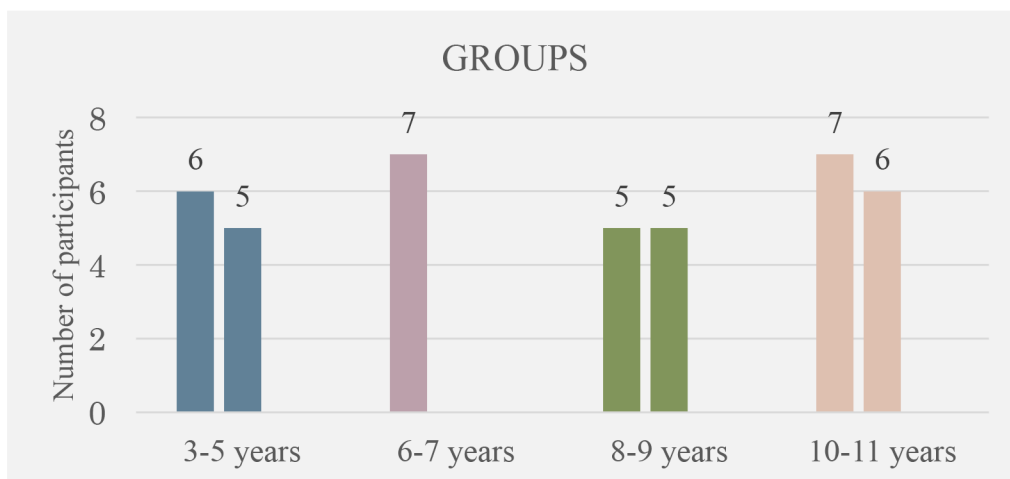
Data analysis

The reading answers collected in the workshop sessions were used to identify the strategies used by the informants when receiving the wordless picture books. The category analysis was inductive. No previous classifications were used, which is typical in the emerging constructivist designs (Charmaz, 2013), but the data were then checked against with the proposal of Sipe (2008) as it was more appropriate for this subject of study. The category analysis was conducted in two ways: making a comparison between groups and making a comparison within the same group. The com-

parison between groups followed a synchronic axis, as various answers when reading the same book were checked against. The comparison within the same group followed a diachronic axis, as it focused on analysing the answers during the workshop and studying their evolution. Additionally, 19 interviews with families were conducted, as well as one interview with the person in charge of the library and we also held several talks with staff from the town hall and neighbours, which were collected in the researcher's field book. The triangulation of data allowed us to identify relevant categories to understand the meaning given to the intervention by the actors of this context.

Body selected

25 wordless picture books were used within the framework of this research. The body was selected following criteria of current publications and artistic quality, identified by the text shadow concept (Nodelman, 2008), and which makes access to readers of different ages easier. In some sessions, the children were given the opportunity to pick the reading book, as their selection criteria were also analysed. This article presents the results of the analysis of the reading answers when reading *Wave* (2008) and *Shadow* (2010), two wordless picture books by Suzy Lee that belong to *The border limit* (2014). *Wave* is about a game between a little girl and the



Graph 1. Distribution of informants by groups.

sea, with the girl chasing and escaping from the waves, and *Shadow* is about a game of a little girl playing with her shadows. These two books were more present in the sessions and thus provided relevant data. The answers collected allowed for the aforesaid two-way analysis: between groups and within the same group, which strengthens the validity of the emerging categories (Arraiz et al., 2016).

Results

The analysis of the results obtained from the two questions made in this research is presented below.

What strategies were used by the reading children when receiving the wordless picture books?

The absence of text and the ambiguity of the pictures led to spontaneous verbalisation. The analysis of the answers given when reading *Wave* and *Shadow* shows the strategies used by the children when they received these books. The categories identified were distributed in two groups: comprehension strategies and mediation strategies.

Comprehension strategies: At the beginning, the children paid attention to details in the illustrations, their discourse was selective and mainly descriptive, but they soon started to make inferences and tried to make narrative interpretations:

H.: Yeah, because this is the staircase and these are trees. This is the hose and this is the...hose.

V.: This is the little girl and that is a wolf.

H.: Yes, these are the saw and the hammer.

(...)

R.: It came out of the shadow and wanted to eat her because in the other page it was coming out and when it is dancing it wants to eat her.

V.: It is my turn. The shadow. No, it is like... (he/she is thinking) and now the girl is getting in and the wolf has come out where she is, so it means that the shadows are coming back for real.

(...)

J.: Ah! I think the little girl was in a dream.

(...)

V.: The girl does not create things, they are created by spontaneously, because there can always be magic in tales.

(8-9 year group, receiving *Shadow*)

At the end of the reading, a talk on the books was triggered, which led to their revision and re-reading, resulting in a more synoptic and distanced narration was built. The categories (table 1) shows those strategies more frequently used by the informants during the processes of meaning construction and picture book comprehension.

Table 1

Categories: comprehension strategies

Comprehension: Descriptive level	-Object identification -Character identification -Space identification -Event identification
Comprehension: Interpretative level	-Anticipation -Identification of key elements -Inferences: characters' feelings -Inferences: characters' intentions -Inferences: relationships between characters -Inferences: relationships between pictures -Inferences: relationships between events -Inferences: ellipsis (hidden, between pages...) -Recaps -Development of a coherent argument
Comprehension: Critical level	-Identifying topics -Critical assessment of the picture book -Inferences: narrative working -Inferences: authors' intentions -General assessment of wordless books
Meaning construction	-Contributing own ideas -Contributing other's ideas -Concatenated construction of an idea by several informants -Search for confirmation -Refutation of an idea -Question to the group

The categories of the comprehension levels correspond to the type of analytical answer developed by Sipe (2008), although his classification refers to those answers related to the text analysis children conduct when they are reading or after reading text albums; in other

words, these answers are largely conditioned by the written text. Nevertheless, in the case of wordless picture books, a significant finding is that in spite of the fact that there is no written text, the children created their own oral text with analytical foundations. As shown in table 1, the comprehension level evolves during the reception process. At the beginning, the readers are at a descriptive level when they identify the elements of the picture; they then move to an interpretative level when they make different types of inferences and show some kind of narrative comprehension; finally, they achieve a critical level when they maintain a certain distance from narration and reflect on the work deeply. On the other hand, the categories related to meaning construction show more frequent strategies used by the children when they carry out shared and comprehensive reading of picture books, how do children organise their thoughts, negotiate meanings and search for coherence when constructing the story.

Mediation strategies: Mediation strategies fostered shared reading. For example, in the groups of children aged between 3 and 5, the answers were based on the mediation of an adult:

Mediator: And the little girl went to see...
J.: The waves.
I.: The waves.
Mediator: And then...
L.: The little girl...
A.: Was scared of the waves.
Mediator: (...) Was scarred of the waves and...
A.: Runs with the gulls or the eagles.
Mediator: And then...what does she want to do?
J.: Awakening the waves.
(3-5 year group, receiving *Wave*)

In the groups of older children, the peer structure plays a key role, and some children even acts as mediators spontaneously. In the following example, two girls aged 10, after reading *Shadow*, decided to present the picture book to the other children; the following day, they accessed the 6-7 year group:

A.: (Shows the cover) This tale is about a little girl who creates her imagination with shadows.
(...)
L.: But, did you notice that the cycle has disappeared?
(...)
L.: Here the little girl is creating everything in her imagination.
(...)
L.: There is a swan, an elephant, a crocodile... (modulates her voice, it seems that she wants to scare the other children) a snake.
(...)
A.: But, is he evil too? (modulates her voice) Oh! (surprised)
(...)
L.: The wolf pushed the little girl to the shadow world. Why would he do that? (modulates her voice)
(...)
A.: But... Something is going on. Her mother says to the little girl: Dinner is ready!

Some mediation strategies were similar to other comprehension strategies but had a different objective, as a specific purpose of making the picture book easier to be understood by the group is identified in the case of mediation strategies. Therefore, the mediation categories (table 2) include the objectives implied in their use.

Both the comprehension categories (table 2) and the mediation categories (table 2) show that when receiving *Wave* and *Shadow*, the informants used complex strategies required to understand written texts (Solé, 2009). Although seemingly paradoxical, the results show that wordless picture books can develop the reading competence, as all the informants participated in a cognitive process of reconstruction of meanings in which language skills and competences were triggered (Mendoza, 2002). The children applied these strategies when conducting the joint activity of constructing a coherent oral text with the narrative sequentiality of the pictures. Collaboration was essential and reading became 'an act of social interaction' (Bosch, 2015, p. 25). Nevertheless, although the groups shared strategies and interpretations, the readings were always different. The

Table 2
 Categories: mediation strategies

	Strategies	Objectives
Adult and peer mediation	-Anticipation -Recaps -Voice modulation -Gesture -Onomatopoeias -Open questions -Addressed questions -Incomplete narrative sentences -Standard narrative forms -Challenge induction -Request to clarify an idea -Key identification at a descriptive level -Key inference at an interpretative level -Reflection at a critical level	-Start a story -Create anticipation -Draw attention -Trigger verbal responses -Trigger non-verbal responses -Draw attention on key aspects -Get back to the plot -Trigger generation of opinions -Generate pleasure -Lead to reflection -Make findings -Clarify things to the group -Give a meaning to the ambiguous -Defending an interpretation

meaning construction was linked to the book but also to the readers, to their previous experience and to the way they see the world and live in it; in other words, the picture books were the driving force, and their plot was useful to create the basic text, but it was interrupted by inserted texts (Bal, 2015), new narrations arising from the links between the informants and their experiences. These insertions is what Sipe (2008) calls personal responses, when a vital connection takes place, and intertextual responses, when there is a link to other reading or cultural products. Wordless picture books make easier for these responses to arise due to the absence of any authority text acting as a still point. The reader feels he/she is playing a more important role and uses all his/her interpretation strategies, both vital and textual:

J.: (Looks at one page and takes de floor) I wanted the say Moses as he drives the sea apart.

Mediator: Did you study it in the religion class?

J.: Yes, we saw it in a movie.

(...)

V.: The little girl is looking at the see... she is imaging the see and she is going to touch it. And she is going to stop the waves...

R.: Just like Vaiana, who has power over the sea.

Mediator: Who is Vaiana?

Several voices: A movie.

R.: A brand-new movie. Yesterday I went to the cinema with... (keeps telling about his/her experience)

J.: (Looks at another page) Oh, yeah! This is like in Vaiana on a boat and gets wet due to a wave.

(...)

J.: It is like big jet water slides in theme parks.

R.: In the theme park, I... (keeps telling about his/her experience)

(7-8 year group, receiving *Wave*)

The oral narrative story was gradually modified by virtue of the interference of interpersonal and analytical responses. Consequently, the product created in each group turned out to be a unique, ephemeral and one-off oral text created by several authors, based on the constructive involvement of the reading children.

The picture books by Suzy Lee promoted this joint reading of experiences with intervals. In first place, the children were invited to explore its physical space. The author established (Lee, 2014) two levels of fiction differentiated by the fold of the book where the characters are hidden, which was a significant element.

V.: Tell me something, why this does not match this? (Referring to the little girl's arm, which disappears in the central fold)

R.: Let's looks for her hand in the other page. (...) Now there is a part of her...missing

V.: I know what is going on.

R.: Now part of her leg is missing.

V.: For example, when it is in the middle, this part is some kind of distance and it thus cannot be seen.

(7-8 year group, receiving *Wave*)

On the other hand, the readers of all ages felt comfortable with both books and were familiar with the scenes of the main character, whom most readers impersonated and felt identified with:

Mediator: What is she doing the water?

All: Splashing!

Mediator: Ah! Who likes splashing?

All: (Rise their hand and yell). I do, I do! (All of them laugh and pretend they are splashing)

(3-5 year group, receiving *Wave*)

Finally, the children were challenged by the ambiguity of the pictures, which told as much as they concealed, and the desire to find significant keys kept the participants active throughout the whole reception process:

L.: Wait, wait... (Does not want to turn the page) Is the moon this wheel of the bike? And this, this.

D. Yes, and this here is the vacuum cleaner. With this like this and this is the box.

(They point at objects in the upper part and compare them with their shadows in the bottom page)

(10-11 year group, receiving *Shadow*)

What meanings did the actors give to this socio-educational experience?

The workshop sessions resulted in encounters, the children shared their thoughts about the library or the books they borrowed. The interviews with the families, the observation of the evolution experienced by the library and the talks with staff of the town hall also provided data on the importance these actors attached to reading, to the workshop and to the library itself.

Several important conclusions are drawn about the evolution of the BPM concept. At the beginning of the study, the adult informants the library as a common meeting point in their childhood; their memories clashed with the present day, as they stated that their children hardly went to the library, which became a harsh place. So, it was corroborated by the person in charge of the library, because the children never used the library before the workshop started

and, at the end thereof, they all were members and used the book loan service on a weekly basis. The reading workshop also challenged the reading activities conducted at home when they focused on instrumental reading only; this was a significant issue during the interviews with the families who were interested in promoting reading habits in their children. Wordless picture books contributed to this challenge and to break any existing stereotypes about 'the usefulness of picture books'.

During the study, the library was also used to conduct cultural activities and to hold meetings of associations; therefore, the neighbours took over this public space. It is also worth noting that a reading group made up of 28 adults was created in a town with low population. The revitalisation of the social function of the BPM was basically due to the fact that the actors were committed to recover a space they saw as a public asset for the community (Sáez *et al.*, 2016) and to the performance of reading promotion activities over time. In this sense, wordless picture books were useful to promote community reading in a democratising context; these books provided a challenging but welcoming space, where the children participated in an active and fully competent way, regardless of their roots in the town, their socio-cultural background, their reading competence or their age.

Conclusions

The results show that the building foundations of wordless picture books promote oral, creative and spontaneous reading, making recipients become active actors. It is thus read, looked, observed, interpreted from orality and joint meaning construction. In line with constructivism learning theories, this study shows the impact of this shared oral reading on the implementation of complex reading strategies of written texts (Solé, 2009). Reading is learnt by making questions, predictions and inferences; therefore, wordless picture books are a useful tool to learn certain literary reading skills through description, interpretation and

critical analysis. The absence of text acting as a still point (Barthes, 1970) makes reading children share their own inferences of the act of reading in order to ensure literary interpretation. In this sense, Bosch (2015) states that the polysemic nature of visual signs is some kind of 'acknowledgement of receipt' that validates proper interpretation of pictures. Thus appears when identifying the strategies used by the informants. The search for confirmation of the interpretations, the questions to the group, the discussion generated and the steady creation of inserted text based on the respondents' life experience confirm this oral, shared reading; therefore, constructing a meaning becomes a collective task, although the text created will always be unique and ephemeral due to the nature of orality.

On the other hand, the strategies used by the readers to understand a work show how genre poetics create active readers, skilful when interpreting what is not said, what is concealed. Feelings, emotions, reasons, key ideas are inferred. The fact that the book is material object plays a key role and confirms the idea of Bajour (2016) that, as far as wordless picture books are concerned, reading pictures is not the only interesting thing, but also the way recipients are linked to books as objects. It is not difficult to extrapolate Littau's idea (2006) to this effect, whereby forms, matters and contents condition a way of reading.

Regarding the meanings attached by the actors to the educational experience, the data show a change in attitude compared to the reading habits and using the library as a meeting point. On one hand, this change is related to the context, a rural context with low population where cultural services are essential and the risk of losing them enhances community engagement (Sáez *et al.*, 2016). On the other hand, wordless picture books led to oral and group reading in a public place, the library, where the meaning is constructed within a community because readers need to compare their interpretations. The polysemic concept of

pictures and the absence of words make access to all readers easier, regardless of their age, their vital and literary context and their instrumental mastery of reading and writing. Therefore, the discourse encourages recipients to play a proactive role and they mediators sometimes. Given the results, wordless picture books facilitate a mainly joint way of reading that builds a community required by a type of poetics that turns into a welcoming genre to all kinds of readers.

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