

Visual Communication in Children Picture Book: A Study on *Professional Crocodile* and *Waiting*

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ABSTRACT

Children's books can be in the form of fiction and non-fiction for the children to read in a creative and imaginative experience. This also includes wordless picture books, which are unique in that its content must be communicated solely using illustrations. These images must be able to stand alone, without the support of a printed text, and must carry the full weight of the illustrator's intentions. Therefore, visual literacy is important for the children specifically to have the ability to see, understand and, ultimately, communicate visually. It is an understanding of what is not written, but what is presented using signs, symbols, icons and colours. However, wordless picture books are not widely used in the pre-school setting in Malaysia. Most of the books or storybooks are with text, and children students have been taught to learn and read them. In addition, there are many pre-schoolers who are still not able to proficiently read words, struggling in reading, and being left behind in terms of reading proficiency due to their inability to read at all. Competency in visual literacy is essential for effective visual communication, for them to understand and interpret the content of the story by their own imagination. In this study, visual literacy theory will be applied and the emphasis will be given only to one only on one conceptual component which is visual communication. The selected books, *Professional Crocodile* (a wordless picture book) and *Waiting* (a picture book with text), will be analysed to examine how illustrations are used to communicate and tell the story. This paper will discuss in detail the visual communication techniques found in wordless picture books, the criteria for good design in such books, and the elements and principles in *Professional Crocodile* that can spark emergent readers' interest in reading.

1. INTRODUCTION

Picture books are foundational in early childhood literacy, offering unique ways to communicate stories through both images and text. This review examines the visual communication strategies of wordless picture books, using *Professional Crocodile* as a case study, and compares them to picture books with text, exemplified by *Waiting* by Kevin Henkes. The discussion provides a framework for a literature review in a scholarly article, highlighting key themes and analytical approaches.

Children's books can be either fiction or non-fiction, providing children with creative and imaginative reading experiences. These books include both wordless picture books and picture books with text, which are unique in that their content can be communicated primarily through illustrations. Therefore, visual literacy is especially important for

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children, as it equips them with the ability to see, understand, and ultimately communicate visually. Visual literacy involves understanding what is not written but is presented through signs, symbols, icons, and colours.

According to Nabila et al. (2020), preschoolers who are proficient readers tend to demonstrate excellent academic results from primary through secondary school. Hence, reading should be incorporated as a routine and practiced by everyone. However, in Malaysia, wordless picture books are not widely used in preschool settings because most storybooks contain text, and children are primarily taught to read these. Many preschoolers still struggle with reading proficiency and are left behind due to their inability to read effectively. In fact, one in six Malaysian children (15%) experiences early language development problems (Mohd Mokhtar et al., 2010). For these children, competency in visual literacy is essential for effective visual communication, enabling them to understand and interpret story content through their own imagination.

1.1 Objective

This study aims:

- i. To discuss in detail about the visual communication of wordless picture books; *Professional Crocodile* and picture book with text; *Waiting* on how they communicate and tell the story to children.
- ii. To analyse the elements and principles used in these book *Professor Crocodile* and *Waiting* that can embark emergent readers' interest to read.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Visual Communication as a Core Component of Visual Literacy Theory

M. D. Avgerinou and Pettersson (2011) define visual communication as the intentional transmission of meaning through visual messages, involving both encoding by the creator and decoding by the viewer. This concept is key to understanding picture books as tools for communication. Illustrations serve not just as decoration, but as active elements that convey narrative and emotion, requiring emergent readers to engage both cognitively and emotionally. The theory also highlights that visual literacy can be taught, making visual communication essential for developing children's meaning-making skills.

2.2 Elements and Principles of Visual Communication in Picture Books

The effectiveness of visual storytelling in children's books is grounded in the deliberate use of visual elements such as line, shape, colour, texture, and space. Meanwhile, principles of design such as balance, unity, rhythm, and proportion. These components guide the reader's attention, establish mood, and facilitate narrative flow. Semiotic analysis further reveals how visual signs and symbols function as a "grammar" that children learn to interpret, enabling them to decode complex meanings embedded in images. Avgerinou and Pettersson's theory highlights how mastery of these visual elements and principles is integral to visual literacy, supporting emergent readers in navigating and understanding picture book narratives (Avgerinou & Pettersson, 2011; Pettersson, 2013; Tsapiv, 2022).

Illustrations in picture books use visual elements such as line, shape, and colour to create meaning and convey mood. Lines may be sharp or soft, thick or thin, straight, curved, or broken, and placed horizontally, vertically, or diagonally. Horizontal lines often suggest calmness, while vertical or rising lines convey movement and energy, shaping the story's atmosphere. Shapes also influence interpretation; rounded forms evoke comfort and stability, whereas angular shapes such as triangles and squares suggest tension or excitement. The size of objects or characters further strengthens the visual message. Colour enhances emotional impact, with warm tones (red, orange, yellow) and cool tones (blue, green, purple) appearing soft or intense, transparent or solid, influencing how illustrations are experienced (Lynch-Brown, Tomlinson, & Short, 2011; Matulka, 2008; Russell, as cited in Uluğ & Bayraktar, 2014). Colour is vital in completing a story, as pastel tones create softness and calm, while bright colours add energy

and liveliness. Artists have long used colour to evoke emotions, which viewers often associate with particular feelings or situations (Lynch-Brown, Tomlinson, & Short, 2011; Matulka, 2008, as cited in Uluğ & Bayraktar, 2014). Texture enhances illustrations by suggesting qualities such as roughness, smoothness, hardness, or softness, making images more realistic and engaging. Space is equally important; the effective use of negative space, or the empty areas around objects, helps organize elements and clarify the overall design (Haig, 2019, as cited in Kumar & Naaz, 2023). Positive space contains the main subjects of an illustration, while negative space surrounds them. Balancing these spaces creates visual harmony (Kumar & Naaz, 2023). Lines can also define shapes and, together with the use of space, enhance the meaning and impact of a composition (Kiefer, 1992).

Balance is an essential design principle in infographics, helping present complex information clearly and attractively. It can be symmetrical, asymmetrical, or radial. Symmetrical balance provides stability, asymmetrical balance uses contrasting elements to create equilibrium, and radial balance radiates from a central point to form a dynamic focal area (Kumar & Naaz, 2023). Unity is equally important, ensuring that all visual elements such as line, shape, and value work harmoniously. Designers achieve unity through repetition, continuation, and strategic placement (Heller & Talarico, 2014, as cited in Kumar & Naaz, 2023). Unity ensures that all parts of a design connect harmoniously, with no element appearing out of place (Moughtin, 1999, as cited in Yilmaz et al., 2016). Rhythm arises from the repeated use of shapes or lines to create flow and visual pacing, which differs from simple repetition (Hashimoto & Clayton, 2009, as cited in Kumar & Naaz, 2023). Proportion refers to the relative size and relationship between design elements, ensuring that parts relate harmoniously to each other and to the whole, supporting visual balance and unity (A.Lauer & Pentak, 2011; Ching, 2007).

2.3 Visual Communication as a Foundation for Emergent Literacy and Reader Engagement

Visual communication is key to emergent literacy, especially for young children still learning written language. Picture books help develop visual literacy by letting children “read” images and build meaning on their own or with adults. This boosts motivation, curiosity, and repeated engagement that is essential for a lifelong interest in reading. Visual stories also cross language and cultural barriers, making early literacy more inclusive. Avgerinou and Pettersson’s framework shows that visual literacy is a core and evolving part of overall literacy development (Avgerinou & Pettersson, 2011; Pantaleo, 2005; Sulaiman & Nyong, 2018).

Engagement of emergent readers through visual elements and principles is a critical factor in fostering early literacy and a lifelong interest in reading. Wordless picture books leverage visual storytelling to invite children to become active participants in narrative construction. By interpreting images without textual guidance, emergent readers develop imagination and creativity, constructing personalized stories that reflect their unique perspectives and experiences. This process not only enhances narrative competence but also builds confidence and autonomy in young readers, as they take pride in their ability to “read” and make meaning from pictures independently (Crawford & Hade, 2000; Xia et al., 2023). The open-ended nature of wordless books allows for multiple interpretations, which is especially beneficial for emergent readers learning a second language, as it supports vocabulary acquisition, oral language development, and expressive skills without the constraints of text (Honaker & Miller, 2024). Visual elements such as colour, line, shape, and texture serve as critical semiotic resources that children decode to understand characters, settings, and plot progression, while principles of design such as contrast, balance, rhythm, and emphasis are to guide their attention and sustain engagement throughout the reading experience (Arif & Hashim, 2008; Ellmann et al., 2022).

In picture books with both text and images, visual elements still play a key role in engaging emergent readers within a multimodal context. Illustrations support the text by adding context, emotion, and helping with comprehension and memory. This interplay encourages readers to combine visual and written cues, building higher-order thinking and interpretation skills (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2000). Design principles like unity and proportion create harmony, making books more appealing and easier to follow. White space and layout highlight key moments, while colour sets mood and tone (Serafini, 2015). This visual support helps young readers decode and understand the story, increasing motivation and interest (Pantaleo, 2005). Text–image combinations also support varied learning styles and language backgrounds, making picture books inclusive tools for early literacy.

2.4 Implications for Picture Book Design, Education, and Research

The application of visual communication principles informed by Avgerinou and Pettersson's theory has practical implications for authors, illustrators, educators, and researchers. Creators can intentionally design visual narratives that maximize clarity, emotional impact, and reader engagement. Educators can incorporate visual literacy instruction into curricula to support emergent readers' holistic literacy development. Future research should explore how diverse children interpret visual messages and how visual literacy skills transfer across contexts, thereby enriching understanding of visual communication's role in literacy acquisition (Avgerinou & Pettersson, 2011; Tsapiv, 2022).

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Approach

This study employs a qualitative document analysis to examine illustrations in selected picture books. As a recognised method, document analysis involves closely studying materials, here, picture books, which blend images and text to tell a story (Bowen, 2009). It is especially useful for analysing visuals and understanding how they engage young readers. This approach involves interpreting the content to extract meaning, gain insights, and build knowledge (Corbin & Strauss, 2012; Rapley, 2015).

3.2 Analytical Framework

This study is grounded in the framework of visual elements and design principles as core components of visual communication (Lester, 1995). Visual elements (such as line, shape, form, colour, texture, and space), serve as the foundation of illustrations, while design principles like balance, contrast, emphasis, movement, pattern, rhythm, and unity guide how these elements are organized to create meaning and aesthetic value. To enhance its theoretical depth, the study adopts the visual communication theory of M. D. Avgerinou & Pettersson (2011), which highlights the semiotic and cognitive processes involved in interpreting visual signs within cultural and contextual contexts. This lens supports a comprehensive understanding of picture book illustrations as visual texts that convey narrative, evoke emotion, and engage readers.

The analysis examines how visual elements function within each book to support storytelling. In *Professional Crocodile*, the study focuses on image sequencing, character expressions, and body language to explore how the narrative unfolds without text. It also analyses the use of colour, line, and composition to establish mood and highlight important moments. Since this is a wordless book, special attention is given to how meaning is communicated purely through visuals.

For *Waiting*, which includes both text and illustrations, the analysis investigates how images and words interact, whether they complement, extend, or contrast each other. It also considers how illustrations provide meaning beyond the text, support narrative pacing, and enhance reader engagement, especially for emergent readers. Visual cues that aid in comprehension and language development are also explored.

The selection of *Professional Crocodile* and *Waiting* is based on their inclusion in the IBBY Honour List for illustration, a prestigious recognition of outstanding visual storytelling. Using these award-winning texts strengthens the study's validity, ensuring the examples reflect high-quality illustrations that effectively support narrative and literacy development. These books also exemplify best practices in visual storytelling, offering rich insights into both wordless and text-based picture books.

This study adopts the visual literacy theory proposed by M. D. Avgerinou and Pettersson (2011), which outlines five interconnected components: visual perception, visual language, visual learning, visual thinking, and visual communication. Later developments presented at the 52nd IVLA Conference (Kalestan & Kaptan, 2020; Supsakova,

2020) retained these components but emphasized visual thinking as the central element, highlighting its integrative role. Fig.1 illustrates these core concepts, showing their interdependence. For this research, the focus is specifically on visual communication, due to its relevance in understanding how illustrations convey meaning, particularly in children's picture books.

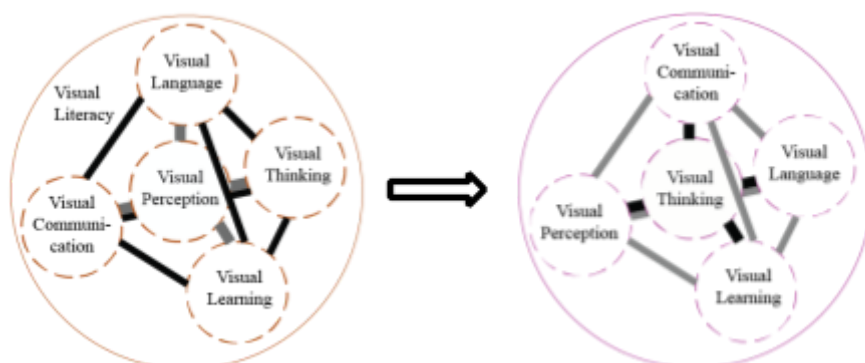


Fig.1. The Components of the Visual Literacy (VL) Theory.

Source: Avgerinou and Pettersson (2011) and Avgerinou et al. (2020)

3.3 Ethical Considerations

Although document analysis primarily involves reviewing existing materials, this study acknowledges the importance of ethical practices in handling copyrighted content. All documents and illustrations analysed in this research are properly sourced and used in accordance with copyright laws and fair use policies. Permission has been obtained where necessary, and appropriate citations are provided to respect intellectual property rights. Any reproduced images or excerpts are accompanied by copyright statements or acknowledgments, ensuring transparency and compliance with academic standards. This approach aligns with best practices in scholarly research to protect the legal rights of authors and publishers while maintaining integrity in the use of materials (Bowen, 2009).

4. FINDINGS

In wordless picture book, the medium to convey the message or the story itself are the illustrations. This also includes picture book with text. According to Ade and Hermanto (2019), a good illustration can always convey the message it is loading. As for the children, who have the shortest concentration compared to adults, the illustrators of the wordless book should have the unique visuals so that the children's memory of the book story remains. *Visual illustrations that are easy to understand will accelerate the delivery of messages in a visual communication that occurs between illustrations and observers* (Ade & Hermanto, 2019).

As for visual communication theory by M. D. Avgerinou (2007), he offered the following operational definition of visual literacy (2001a): *"In the context of human, intentional visual communication, visual literacy refers to a group of largely acquired abilities, i.e., the abilities to understand (read), and use (write) images, as well as to think and learn in terms of images"* (p. 26). In this study, the ability of children to understand, interpret the illustrations well in the *Professional Crocodile*, can think and learn from it is what visual literacy is. Visual communication is one of the components in the visual literacy. As in wordless picture books, visual communication is the use of visual elements to convey ideas and information through illustrations. The details of this theory can be seen as in Fig2 below;

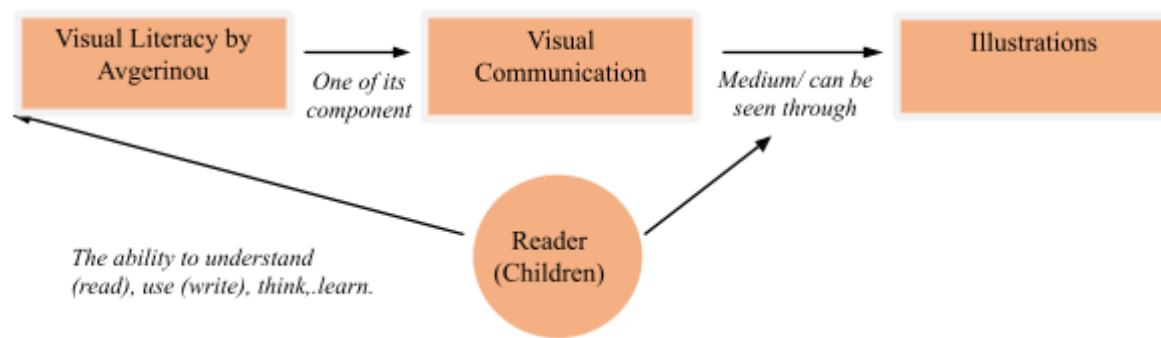


Fig.2. The relation between visual literacy theory by Avgerinou and visual communication in wordless picture books and picture books with text.

Source: .by author on the 13th of July 2025

The researcher will discuss in detail regarding the design elements and principles in the books that can embark emergent readers' interest to read. Understanding the principles of design is very important for the illustrator to create something that both looks good and creates an optimal user experience for both wordless books (WPBs) and picture book with text (PBTs) for children. **Table 1** below is the data analysis of the illustrations, and the elements used in *Professional Crocodile* and *Waiting*:

Table 1. Data analysis for elements of design in *Professional Crocodile* and *Waiting*.

(Note: Data analysed by author on the 15th of July 2025).

Book Title (s)	<i>Professional Crocodile</i>	<i>Waiting</i>
Design Element		
Point	 Small visual details, such as dots for eyes or tiny objects, subtly draw attention to key parts of the story. Example: The crocodile's tiny eyes suggest curiosity or surprise, while objects like an alarm clock, toast, or a tie reflect his routine and professional character.	 Points highlight small objects or details that emphasize waiting and anticipation. Example: Five toy characters (an owl, bear, puppy, rabbit, and pig), each wait for different events like the moon, wind, snow, or rain. Through minimal text and expressive illustrations, the story captures patience and subtle emotions.
Line		

Book Title (s)		
Design Element	<i>Professional Crocodile</i>	<i>Waiting</i>
	Lines define the crocodile and his environment, with curved lines giving him a friendly, dynamic appearance, while straight lines in buildings, windows, and trains create an orderly city that makes him stand out. Example: Elements like stairs and train tracks guide the viewer's eye, leading through his journey from morning to work.	Soft, flowing lines create a calm and peaceful tone, portraying waiting as a quiet, hopeful experience filled with subtle emotions. This design choice makes the story warm and inviting, encouraging readers to appreciate the beauty of patience.
Shape		
	Organic, irregular shapes are used for characters and objects, contrasting with geometric elements to add visual interest and support wordless storytelling.	Simple, rounded shapes create a warm, comforting style that feels inviting for young children, reinforcing the story's themes of patience and the quiet beauty of waiting.
Tone		
	Light and dark contrasts add depth, highlight key scenes or emotions, guide focus, and enhance emotional impact without words. Example: In the crowded subway, dark tones surround others while light highlights the crocodile, drawing focus to him. Light and shadow add movement and show his professionalism in city life.	Subtle colour and shading shifts create a calm mood, add emotional depth, and highlight quiet moments, supporting the gentle, wordless narrative and inviting thoughtful re-viewing. Example: The owl waits for the moon, the sky shifts from light blue to twilight shades. These soft transitions mirror the owl's patient waiting and the natural flow of evening.
Texture		

Book Title (s)	<i>Professional Crocodile</i>	<i>Waiting</i>
Design Element	Implied textures, such as the crocodile's scales and patterned clothing, add visual richness and a tactile quality to the wordless story. Example: Fine lines and shading highlight his skin and crisp attire, emphasizing the blend of animal and professional traits that shape the story's tone.	Soft watercolour and pencil textures reinforce the story's gentle, patient tone. Example: Delicate washes and fine lines create a warm, calming atmosphere, as seen when the five toy friends quietly watch from the windowsill. (Layered textures invite readers to pause and share the characters' sense of calm and patience).
Colour	 Warm, natural tones (greens, browns, and yellows) create a friendly, cozy mood, making the crocodile approachable for children. Brighter colours (red and yellow) highlight actions or emotions, while shifts from soft, light tones in calm moments to richer tones in tense scenes help convey the story's emotions visually.	 Muted pastel colours (soft browns and blues), create a calm, serene mood that supports the theme of waiting. The limited watercolour palette and delicate washes give the illustrations a timeless, soothing quality, inviting young readers to slow down and appreciate quiet, reflective moments.
Space	 The illustrations use positive space for main subjects and negative space for empty areas to direct the viewer's attention. White space emphasizes Mr. Crocodile's expressions and actions, which is crucial in a wordless story. Variations in space also shape the mood, with open home scenes conveying calmness and crowded train scenes reflecting busyness and tension. This careful use of space encourages rereading and rewards attentive observation.	 The book uses space to create a calm, reflective mood that emphasizes waiting. White space around the five toys on the windowsill, paired with soft colours and clean layouts, conveys quiet anticipation and invites imagination. The contrast between positive and negative space creates visual balance, while shifts in space during seasonal changes or new arrivals highlight key story moments and encourage readers to pause and reflect.

Book Title (s) Design Element Type	<i>Professional Crocodile</i>	<i>Waiting</i>
		
	The story is conveyed solely through illustrations, with text limited to the cover and title page, which include the title and creator's name. A simple, clear font complements the playful cover image, setting the tone without distracting from the visuals.	The book employs clear, simple sans-serif typography to enhance readability and align with its calm tone. Text is used only when necessary, complementing the illustrations. The moderate font size, ample white space, and thoughtful spacing direct the reader's eye and reinforce a mood of patience and tranquillity. Example: A sentence like "THERE were five of them. And they were waiting..."

Table 2 below presents the data analysis of the design principles used in *Professional Crocodile* and *Waiting*:

Design Principles	Book Title (s) <i>Professional Crocodile</i>	<i>Waiting</i>
Fig. and Ground		
	The clear difference between the crocodile and the blurred window scenery in the background draws attention to the narrative action.	High contrast between figures and background highlights the toys, whose distinct shapes and soft pastel colours stand out against muted settings. This enhances their emotional presence and interactions with the environment.

Design Principles	Book Title (s)	
	<i>Professional Crocodile</i>	<i>Waiting</i>
Balance		
	Asymmetrical balance and varied panel sizes create dynamic pacing and visual interest. Example: In the subway, small panels contrast with larger close-ups of Mr. Crocodile or key items like his tie, adding rhythm and highlighting emotion or humour. The uneven layout guides the eye and encourages active viewing, enhancing the story without words.	Asymmetrical balance and varied panel sizes create dynamic pacing and visual interest. Example: In the subway scene, small panels contrast with larger close-ups of Mr. Crocodile or his tie, adding rhythm and highlighting emotion or humour. This uneven layout guides the eye and supports wordless storytelling.
Unity		
	A consistent illustration style, harmonious colours, and recurring motifs create cohesion in the wordless story. Example: Repeated elements (Mr. Crocodile's movements, briefcase, and mirrored scenes, link the pages smoothly). Consistent detail, light, and shadow help the visuals flow without text.	Minimal pastel illustrations and spacious layouts around the five toys create a calm, unified visual experience. Repeated windowsill settings, soft textures, and gentle expressions connect the characters across changing seasons. White space, simple backgrounds, and consistent character placement maintain focus and visual harmony.
Rhythm		

Design Principles	Book Title (s)	
	<i>Professional Crocodile</i>	<i>Waiting</i>
	Visual sequencing illustrates Mr. Crocodile's daily routine through repeated shapes and movements.	Repeated visual elements (the lineup of toys, the framing of windows, and the changing weather), create a rhythmic quality in the visual narrative.
	Scenes depicting waking up, commuting, and working establish a visual rhythm.	Changes in time and subtle adjustments in the toys' posture or expressions introduce gentle variations.
	The use of panels and vignette layouts suggests the passage of time and the structure of his day.	The blend of still moments with sudden events (rain or the arrival of new toys), creates a pacing that reflects both anticipation and the passage of time.

Contrast



Colour and Value: Mr. Crocodile's bright green colour stands out against the muted tones of the city, while vivid details like flowers and sunlight capture the viewer's attention.

Colour Contrast: Soft pastel colours in indoor settings contrast with vibrant outdoor scenes, allowing external changes to stand out prominently.

Light and Shadow: Soft lighting enhances depth, guides the eye, and emphasizes texture or movement, such as sunlight breaking through or emotional moments in crowded scenes.

Tone and Mood Contrast: The still and calm presence of toys is set against the dynamic outdoor world, emphasizing themes of anticipation and change.

Busy vs. Calm Scenes: The contrast between the tranquil home and the chaotic subway scene shifts the mood, taking the reader from a sense of calm to tension.

Detail Contrast: The minimal illustrations and simple windowsill create a sparse environment, making small changes (a new toy or a rainbow) visually striking within that context.

Cropping



Close-ups highlight expressions and key objects, enhancing wordless storytelling.

Cropping emphasizes moments of reflection or anticipation, engaging readers with the toys' emotions.

Example: Zooming in on Mr. Crocodile choosing a tie shows his care, while close-ups on the train reveal emotions like patience or surprise.

Kevin Henkes frequently zooms in on faces or subtle gestures to convey feelings (patience, curiosity, or hope).

These focused images guide interpretation and, used with full-page spreads and small panels, emphasise key moments, crucial in wordless picture books.

This close framing eliminates distractions, slows down the narrative pace, and reinforces the quiet theme of waiting, allowing readers to pause alongside the characters.

Design Principles	Book Title (s)			
	<i>Professional Crocodile</i>	<i>Waiting</i>		
Hierarchy			Larger panels emphasize key moments in the story, while smaller ones depict routine tasks or transitions, helping to guide the audience's focus and pacing in this wordless narrative. Example: Larger images of the crocodile waking up or selecting a tie highlight significant actions and character traits, while the smaller panels illustrate daily tasks, providing context and enhancing the overall flow of the story.	The hierarchy is clear, with five toys placed centrally and sized to guide the viewer's focus. The owl, pig, bear, puppy, and rabbit sit side by side, evenly spaced to stand out. This balanced layout leads the eye across the page, showcasing each toy's unique way of waiting. Soft, muted backgrounds draw attention to the toys, highlighting their emotions and reinforcing themes of patience and mindfulness.
Scale			Using varying scales (a large crocodile alongside small objects), adds humour and highlights significant moments. This contrast creates a playful tone, showcasing the crocodile's meticulous routine and adding an element of charm. Example: Mr. Crocodile looms over tiny ties, coffee cups, and crowded trains, emphasizing his unusual presence in a human world.	Differences in scale illustrate emotional closeness or distance, highlighting the theme of waiting. Small group shots on the windowsill symbolize a shared experience of waiting, while larger images of a single toy convey individual emotions. Example: A close-up of the owl portrays deep contemplation, whereas the small, distant moon represents longing.
Proportion				

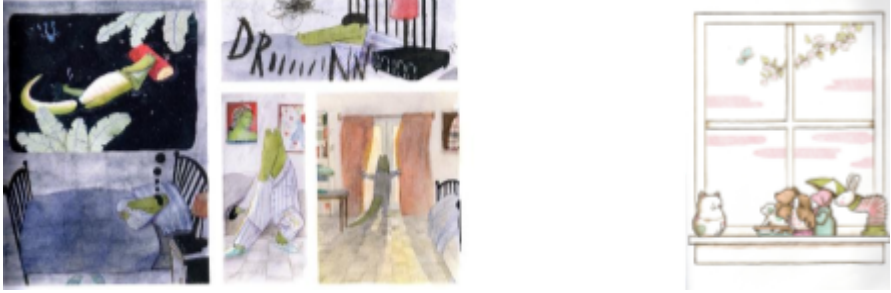
Design Principles	Book Title (s)	
	<i>Professional Crocodile</i>	<i>Waiting</i>
	Exaggerated proportions, such as a crocodile's long body or oversized objects, add whimsy and humour.	Realistic proportions create calm, relatable scenes.
	These playful, unrealistic elements are well-suited for children's books and make the story more enjoyable and engaging.	The toys' soft, familiar shapes offer comfort and support emotional connection.
		Example: Their balanced sizes and natural fit on the windowsill create a peaceful setting that reinforces the story's gentle mood and mindfulness theme.
Pattern		
	Repeated actions (waking, dressing, and commuting) appear in rhythmic panels and mirrored scenes, creating a comforting routine.	The story unfolds visually and conceptually, showing five toys on a windowsill, each waiting for a seasonal or weather change.
	This structure organises the crocodile's life and helps readers notice small changes, adding engagement and surprise.	It celebrates repetition and patience.
	Example: His morning routine with repeated layouts and motifs builds anticipation for the twist.	Visually, their static lineup creates a calm, rhythmic flow.
		Narratively, repeated cycles of time, weather, and arrivals highlight the theme of patient waiting and everyday beauty.

Table 2. Data for design principles in *Professional Crocodile* and *Waiting*.

(Note. Data analysed by author on the 15th of July 2025).

According to **Table 2** above, *Professional Crocodile* uses wordless visual storytelling with detailed, warm illustrations, relying heavily on the element of line, shape, tone, texture, and colour to convey narrative and mood. Its design principles emphasize dynamic balance, contrast, cropping, and playful scale and proportion to engage readers and encourage exploration. Meanwhile, *Waiting* employs simple typography alongside soft, pastel colours and gentle lines to create a calm, reflective atmosphere. Its design principles focus on symmetrical balance, subtle contrast, clear figure-ground relationships, and repetition to support the themes of patience and emotional growth.

5. DISCUSSION

The analysis shows that WPBs like *Professional Crocodile* and PBTs like *Waiting* use different but complementary visual strategies to engage young readers and support storytelling. This supports research showing that images in picture books are essential narrative tools, not just decoration (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2006). The study successfully demonstrates how both formats contribute uniquely to emergent literacy.

In WPBs, *Professional Crocodile* tells a complete story through images alone. The visual sequence forms a clear narrative without text. As Serafini (2014) explains, readers must interpret visual cues (like expressions, actions, and settings) to understand the story. This supports visual literacy theories that highlight the role of sequencing and symbols in meaning-making (Avgerinou & Pettersson, 2011); (Arizpe & Styles, 2003) found that children can read

complex visual features (colour, framing, body language, and metaphor) and respond emotionally, even before they read fluently. They also observed children's body language (pointing, gestures, expressions) as they interacted with illustrations. Serafini (2014) further notes that WPBs build visual-narrative comprehension by encouraging readers to interpret story elements through images alone, strengthening visual literacy.

Waiting is a strong example of multimodal storytelling, where text and images work together to deepen meaning and keep readers engaged. The illustrations don't just repeat the text that they often add new details or emotional depth (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006 as cited in Dayz, 2015). Nikolajeva (2014) explains that this interaction shapes the visual rhythm and pacing, influencing how children engage with the story. She also notes that combining words and images helps children better understand the world, others, and themselves (as cited in Alaca, 2019). Visuals support comprehension by showing concrete, relatable scenes, helping children decode unfamiliar words and events (Sun et al., 2022; Verhallen & Bus, 2011). This strengthens vocabulary and reinforces the connection between text and image. Comparing both formats shows clear benefits. WPBs like *Professional Crocodile* build visual literacy and creativity through image-only storytelling (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2006). PBTs like *Waiting* use text and supportive visuals to help readers at different literacy levels. Pantaleo (2018) adds that visual elements like lines, borders, and composition guide children's focus, helping them identify relationships and key story cues.

Using Avgerinou and Pettersson (2011) visual literacy framework, both books activate key components (visual perception, language, learning, thinking, and communication) with different focuses. WPBs mainly support visual thinking and imaginative storytelling (Serafini, 2014), while PBTs link text and image to build explicit literacy skills (Serafini & Reid, 2024). These findings show that each format contributes uniquely to early literacy.

In conclusion, illustrations are central to storytelling and literacy development. Whether in wordless or text-based books, they enhance narrative understanding and visual literacy, underscoring the value of multimodal communication in early reading (Avgerinou & Pettersson, 2011; Nikolajeva & Scott, 2006).

5.1 Implications for Research/Policy

i. Enhancing Visual Literacy in Early Childhood Education

This study highlights the essential role of visual strategies in supporting emergent literacy. *Professional Crocodile* (wordless) and *Waiting* (minimal text) both show the need for children to interpret visual elements with or without text. Educational policies should embed visual literacy in early curricula, ensuring children are taught to read visual sequences, character cues, colour, and composition. These skills enhance comprehension and engagement, preparing young learners for multimodal literacy demands.

ii. Supporting Multimodal Literacy through Picture Books

Balanced use of text and image scaffolds language and literacy development. *Waiting* shows how interplay between modes supports learning, while *Professional Crocodile* demonstrates the power of visuals alone. Further research should investigate how different visual-verbal formats affect literacy growth and motivation. Policymakers should ensure access to both wordless and text-based picture books to meet diverse learning needs and promote inclusive literacy practices.

iii. Informing Illustration and Publishing Standards

Key visual elements (colour contrast, framing, repetition, and rhythm), help capture attention and support understanding. These findings provide practical guidance for illustrators and publishers. Policy initiatives could support or incentivize the production of picture books that follow research-based visual design principles, aligning with visual communication theory focused on clarity and reader engagement.

iv. *Engaging Families in Visual Storytelling*

Family interactions around picture books strongly influence children's reading interest. Policies should promote shared visual storytelling at home, supported by resources and training that help caregivers guide children in interpreting visual narratives. This approach fosters vocabulary growth, critical thinking, and reflects the social dimension of visual literacy.

v. *Expanding Research on Cognitive and Emotional Engagement*

Visual storytelling techniques (focalization, eye contact, and expression, evoke emotional and cognitive responses such as empathy and imagination. Research should further explore the links between visual literacy, cognitive development, and emotional learning. Funding support is needed for multidisciplinary studies to inform educational and therapeutic applications of picture books.

These implications stress the need to treat visual communication as a core element of early literacy. Educational systems and publishing industries should foster environments (in classrooms and at home) where visual storytelling supports learning, engagement, and emotional growth. This aligns with Avgerinou and Pettersson's visual literacy framework, emphasizing communication, thinking, learning, and perception.

6. CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated how *Professional Crocodile* and *Waiting* employ distinct visual communication strategies to effectively convey stories to children, fulfilling the first research objective. *Professional Crocodile*, as a wordless picture book, relies exclusively on sequential imagery, expressive character design, and contextual visual cues to create a rich, imaginative narrative that invites active interpretation by emergent readers. In contrast, *Waiting* combines clear, minimal typography with balanced and soothing illustrations to support a reflective narrative about patience, showing how text and image can complement each other in storytelling.

Addressing the second objective, the analysis revealed how specific design elements and principles such as colour contrast, framing, scale variation, pattern, visual rhythm and others play vital roles in engaging emergent readers and scaffolding their comprehension of story progression and emotional nuances. These elements enhance accessibility and reader involvement in both books, albeit through different modalities which *Professional Crocodile* through purely visual cues and *Waiting* through a multimodal interplay of text and image. This aligns with Avgerinou and Pettersson's visual communication component of visual literacy theory, highlighting how visual elements not only transmit meaning but also foster cognitive and emotional engagement critical for early literacy.

Overall, the findings confirm that both wordless and texted picture books utilize thoughtfully designed visual strategies to nurture emergent readers' interest and understanding. By illuminating how visual storytelling operates differently yet effectively in each book, this research contributes to a nuanced understanding of picture books as complex multimodal texts that communicate beyond words. These insights have important implications for educators, authors, illustrators, and policymakers seeking to promote visual literacy and early reading skills in children, reinforcing the value of diverse picture book formats in literacy development.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that this research was conducted in the absence of any commercial, financial, or personal relationships that could be construed as potential conflicts of interest.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Raihana binti Mohamed: Conceptualisation, methodology, investigation, data curation, formal analysis, visualisation, and writing—original draft; **Siti Ezaleila binti Mustafa:** Conceptualisation, methodology, supervision, validation, and writing—review and editing. Both authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI IN THE WRITING PROCESS

During the preparation of this work, the authors used ChatGPT by OpenAI to improve the readability, grammatical accuracy, and language quality of selected parts of the manuscript. The tool was not used to generate research data, perform data analysis, formulate the study's findings, or replace the authors' scholarly judgement. After using this tool, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, integrity, and final content of the publication.

DATA AVAILABILITY/SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

No datasets were generated or analysed during this study. The study is based on a qualitative visual analysis of the published picture books *Professional Crocodile* and *Waiting*. No supplementary materials are associated with this article.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Ethical approval was not required for this study because it involved the qualitative visual analysis of published picture books and did not involve human participants, personal data, or any direct interaction with children, parents, or teachers. Therefore, informed consent and participant assent were not applicable.

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