

Are Current Popular Children's Books An Effective Tool in Language Intervention
For Preschool Aged Children?

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Abstract

The popular children's book, *Mr. Tiger Goes Wild*, which was published in 2013, was examined to determine its appropriateness with preschool-aged children with language impairments. The examination included qualitative measures based on the physical appearance of the book and quantitative measures involving an analysis of the book's syntactic and semantic content. This book was then compared to previous research done by Kent Brorson and Kristin Lee Milbrath, to determine if *Mr. Tiger Goes Wild* is as appropriate as other books identified as in stimulating language development in language impaired preschool aged children.

Introduction

The use of storybooks in language intervention are a common tool in the field of speech-language pathology. If used properly, books can help facilitate the development of language in areas such as, vocabulary acquisition, literacy skills and conversation etiquette (Kaderavek & Justice, 2002). Books are a great way to introduce children to turn taking, vocabulary, sentence structure and narratives. However, books used in therapy cannot be picked at random. It is important that the language used in the story matches the child's linguistic ability.

This is a continuation of a study conducted by Kent Brorson and Kristin Lee Milbrath on the top children's books of all time. She developed a top 10 list of children's books that are most appropriate for preschool aged children with language impairments based on each book's physical appearance, as well as their semantic and syntactic content. However, many new books have been published since her report. Her list will need to be constantly reevaluated and updated as new books are published. The purpose of this study is to look at popular children's books published in 2013 to determine if they make Brorson and Milbrath's top 10 list and if they are more appropriate to use with preschool-aged children with language impairments than classics, based on their physical characteristics, and semantic and syntactic content.

Literary Review

Advantages of Early Reading Experiences

Shared reading experiences influence a child's receptive and expressive language development (Dexter & Stacks, 2014). Children learn receptive language skills through shared reading experiences by listening and taking in the story being told. Children learn expressive language by watching their parents during shared reading experiences or by interacting with them in response to questions or comments about the book. These reading experiences also help foster vocabulary development thru use of new words and encourage positive attitudes about reading and strengthen emotional ties between parents and children (Egan & Murray, 2014). Most children learn the importance of reading at home. Early experiences with spoken and written language are important because they promote children's early reading skills (Dexter & Stacks, 2014).

Furthermore, an Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children (ALSPCA), discovered that the number of books owned at six months of age was a predictor of a child's expressive language at two years of age and educational success (Egan & Murraray, 2014). Therefore, it is important that children have resources like books to ensure future success. This study also found that it is more beneficial to read to younger children than older children when promoting literacy skills (Egan & Murraray, 2014). Literacy emerges as infants begin to understand the meaning of language and are able to understand and recognize symbols. Emergent literacy continues during preschool with pre-reading activities like naming and sounding levels. It ends when children become proficient readers in elementary school

(Dexter & Stacks, 2014). These emergent literacy skills help foster children's reading and writing skills when they enter school.

Reading skills learned in early childhood set the foundation for which all later reading skills and knowledge are built upon, developed and refined. This is important because children who have poorly developed reading skills often fall behind their peers when they enter school and never catch up. For example, children who have poor reading skills when they enter kindergarten have an 84% chance of being a poor reader with poor comprehension in third grade (Dexter & Stacks, 2014). Therefore, it is important for children to develop literacy skills before they enter formal school.

The Parent's Role In Shared Reading Experiences

Parents play a major role in a child's early reading experiences. Without parents, the child would have a book of pictures, but no story. Shared reading experiences allow adults and children to engage in joint attention. Joint attention is the shared attention by two individuals on a single subject. This is important in shared reading experience because both parties must actively engage and participate in the reading of the book. Parents can actively engage children in reading experiences by drawing attention to particular pictures or aspects of the story (Egan & Murray, 2014). This forces both parties to focus their attention on the same picture or object. Therefore, reading regularly provides the opportunity to engage in joint attention. Furthermore, joint attention during parent child reading at

nine months is predictive of a child's vocabulary at 34 and 58 months (Egan & Murray, 2014).

Joint attention rapidly develops between 9-12 months of age and is associated with the development of language and theory of mind (Egan & Murray, 2014). Joint attention helps children develop language and language helps to further the development of joint attention, it is a two way street. Furthermore, joint attention is important because it affects long-term memory (Egan & Murray, 2014). It allows parents to help children foster the development and retrieval of long-term memory focusing on a single object together and discussing it. Lastly, joint attention influences problem-solving skills in middle childhood (Egan & Murray, 2014). Parents ask children questions about the pictures or content on the book, in order to develop problem-solving skills at an early age.

Many parents believe that the more they read to their child, the better. Although frequency of reading experiences are important, the quality of the interactions are more important in determining reading success (Dexter & Stacks, 2014). Parents can increase the quality of their reading experiences by asking or answering questions about the book and by providing or responding to cues about the book's content depending on the child's receptive language skills. Additionally, the quality of the parent-child shared reading interaction is predictive of child's receptive language development (Dexter & Stacks, 2014).

Furthermore, it is important that parents adapt their reading style to fit with the age of their child. Well known child-psychologist, Lev Vygotsky, considers this the Zone of Proximal Development, which is the difference between what the child

can do and can't do without help (Egan & Murray, 2014). Parents should stay within their child's Zone of Proximal Development by staying between their child's current receptive and expressive language ability and their potential ability with a little help.

Likewise, parents must be able to read their child's cues and be responsive to their needs while reading (Dexter & Stacks, 2014). This allows for high quality reading experiences and teaching opportunities. Parents can model behaviors, label objects, ask children for information or expand on a child's utterance to support and facilitate learning while also meeting their child's needs.

Use of Books With Children With Language Impairments

Reading to young children has long been recognized as an important precursor to language and literacy development. Reading to children increases their vocabulary development, encourages positive attitudes toward reading and strengthens emotional ties between children and parents (Eagan & Murraray, 2014). For these reasons, reading is especially important for children with language impairments. Children with early language delays are at risk for later reading difficulties, which can put the child behind in school (Dexter & Stacks, 2014).

According to the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association's *Roles and Responsibilities of Speech-Language Pathologists With Respect to Reading and Writing in Children and Adolescents*, using books in therapy is an important strategy for improving the emergent literacy skills of children with receptive and expressive language delays. Books can help children recognize the relationship between oral

and written language (2001). Using books in therapy allows children to be exposed to a language rich environment, which could help enhance their language and literacy development. Even if children are not particularly interactive during the shared reading experience, they can continue to gain language and literacy skills (Kaderavek & Sulzby, 1998). Research indicates that intensive shared book reading is effective in increasing young children's vocabulary. A study conducted by Davis, et al. (2011) found that young children with initially low vocabulary scores saw significant improvement after intensive storybook readings. However, the results were less significant with older children.

As stated earlier, it is important for the language of the story to match that of the child. It is important to not only consider the age of the child when selecting a book, but their developmental age as well, to ensure that the child has the greatest chance of success. Additionally, the success of the reading experience is also dependent on the adult's interactions. According to Kaderavek & Sulzby (1998), children with language impairments negatively react to direct questions during reading experiences. Therefore, it is in our best interest to choose books that limit the number of questions within the text, as well as, refrain from asking questions while interacting with the child and the book.

Types of Storybooks

There are many different types storybooks available. Some, such as board books, are targeted towards a younger audience, while picture books can come in many shapes and sizes, leaving something for everyone. It is important to select

books that are appropriate for the developmental age of the child you are working with. When a book is selected appropriately, it can be an effective tool in fostering a child's vocabulary development (Egan & Murray, 2014). Furthermore, the language used in the text of the book should match the child's linguistic abilities. When a book matches a child's linguistic abilities, it increases the child's enjoyment of the reading experience (Dwyer & Neuman, 2008). The choice of books should be based on the skills required (i.e. pointing to pictures), format (i.e. board book), features (i.e. simple, large pictures), content and language.

Board books are made of durable cardboard or plastic to protect it from a young child's sticky fingers, drool or even chewing. These books are good for all ages but are usually specifically targeted for children under the age of two (Burnell, 2009). Board books that use a single word or object on each page are often popular with the age. This allows a child to focus on one object and/or word at a time. Additionally, the pictures tend to be big and bold with clear outlines, making the pictures easier to see and understand. The purpose of these books is to increase vocabulary through stories about daily activities.

Picture books generally appeal to a wide variety of ages because of the variety of stories and styles they come in. As a child's expressive language continues to develop, so does their desire to participate. Books that offer predictable repetition of a few words are popular with children between the ages three and four because they allow the child to easily participate (Burnell, 2009). Furthermore, language development explodes around a child's third birthday. Picture books are a book way for children to learn manners, social skills and grammatical structures

(Burnell, 2009). However, the best books do this in an exciting and imaginative story that keeps children entertained.

Wordless picture books are another common form of available picture books. They are popular with children that are just beginning to develop expressive language skills (Weber, 2009). These books allow children to actively engage in a shared reading experience. Both children and adults can describe and interpret the pictures, which helps to keep the child's interest and expand their receptive and expressive language abilities. A study conducted by Dwyer and Neuman, states that pictures appropriate for preschool-aged children are large, simple and use contrasting colors (2008).

Lastly, it is important to consider the type of language used in the story when choosing a book to use with children. As stated earlier, it is best to use language that is at or slightly above the child's Zone of Proximal Development. Younger children may have difficulty comprehending a story with complex plots or multiple characters or settings (Kaderavek & Sulzby, 1998). Therefore, it is important that the story is simple enough that the child can understand the concept, but complex enough to keep the child entertained.

Methods

Rationale for Choosing the Book

The children's book, *Mr. Tiger Goes Wild* by Peter Brown, was chosen for the purpose of this study. This book was chosen after careful evaluation of five lists of top children's books of 2013. The titles of these lists include: *Best Children's Books of 2013: Ages 3-5* by Amazon.com (2013), *Best Pictures Books* by Good Reads Choice Awards (2013), *Best Illustrated Books of 2013* by New York Times (2013), *PW's Best Children's Books of 2013* by Publishers Weekly (2013), and *SLJ Best Books 2013 Picture Books* by School Library Journal (2013). Each title mentioned on these lists was then recorded and tallied for each time it was mentioned on a list.

In order to be considered for this study, the book had to be mentioned on three of these five lists. A total of 39 unique titles were obtained, seven of these titles were mentioned on three or more lists. Of these seven titles, two were eliminated because they contained no words. Though wordless picture books can be a useful tool for young children just beginning to learn language; for the purpose of this study, they are impractical because they lack syntactic and semantic content. The following five titles were then evaluated based on their physical characteristics such as, the book's available formats, pictures, colors and a child's familiarity with the content. Two additional books were eliminated due to the amount of words they had on each page. They each contained four to six sentences per page, which would be too long to keep a preschoolers interest. The final two books were eliminated because their pictures were overwhelming and had too many focal

points. The final book remaining was *Mr. Tiger Goes Wild*. It is the author of this study's opinion that this book contains the right amount of words per page, has simple but interesting pictures and a storyline that would keep preschool aged child entertained.

Qualitative Measures

Table 1

Qualitative Measures	Description	Score
Available in board book format	Yes	2.0
	No	1.0
Pictures on every page	Yes	2.0
	No	1.0
Size of pictures	Pictures fill approximately the whole page	2.0
	Pictures fill approximately ½ of the page	1.5
	Pictures fill approximately ¼ of the page	1.0
	No pictures	0.5
Format of pictures/contrasting colors	Maximum contrast (one focal point with a contrasting background)	2.0
	Moderate contrast (multiple focal points, but contrasting colors)	1.5
	Minimal contrast (one focal point, but no contrasting colors – colors blend together)	1.0
	No contrast (no focal point, pictures and colors blend together)	0.5
Familiarity of Content	Activities of daily living (dressing, pets, eating, toys, etc.)	2.0
	Unique or special activities	1.0

Qualitative Scoring Measures

Note: Adapted from *Identifying Children's Literature Well Suited for Children with Language Impairments*, p. 13, by Kent Brorson & Kristin Lee Milbrath, 2013.

Qualitative measures were obtained based on the physical characteristics of the book. These characteristics were based on the book's available formats, pictures, colors and a child's familiarity with the content. Each characteristic was

then rated on a 2-point scale developed by Kent Brorson and Kristen Lee Milbrath. Brorson and Milbrath's scale was used so that the results of this study can easily and significantly be compared to the results of her study on classic children's books. The most desirable features for preschool-aged children were given the highest scores and the least appropriate characteristics were given the lowest. Table 1 provides a breakdown of this qualitative scoring system.

A total of five qualitative traits were analyzed, making the highest attainable score 10.0. This score indicates that the book is most appropriate for pre-school age children with language impairments based on its measurable physical characteristics. The first physical characteristic evaluated was the various formats the book is available in. If the book is available in a board book format, it is given a score 2.0. If it is not available in a board book format, it is given a score of 1.0.

Furthermore, the book's pictures were analyzed based on three characteristics. The first determined if there were pictures on every page. If the book had a picture on every page, it was given a score of 2.0. If the book did not have a picture on every page, it received a score of 1.0. Secondly, the size of the pictures on each page was evaluated. Books with pictures that filled up the approximately whole page received a score of 2.0. Those that filled up about half of the page received a 1.5; those that use a fourth the page received a 1.0 and those with no pictures received a 0.5. The last characteristic related to the pictures, was the color and complexity of the images. Contrasting colors call attention to the page and allow for the image to stand out against the background. Books with a single focal point and a contrasting background received a score of 2.0. Books with

multiple focal points but still had a contrasting background received a score of 1.5. Books with a single focal point but used colors that blend together (no contrast) were given a score of 1.0 and books with multiple or no focal point and didn't use contrasting colors received a score of 0.5.

Lastly, the familiarity with the books content was analyzed. Common daily activities for three-year-old children such as dressing, eating, pets and toys, were given a score of 2.0. Unique or special activities were given a score of 1.0. All of the scores mentioned above can combine to make a total qualitative score of 10.0. This score is the highest obtainable value and relates to the most appropriate use for preschool children with language impairments based on it's physical characteristics.

Quantitative Measures

Quantitative measures were obtained by conducting a quantitative analysis using Systematic Analysis of Language Transcripts (SALT) software. The text of the book was transcribed into SALT as a conversation sample and compared to the developmental norms of children ranging in age from 2 years, 6 months to 3 years, 6 months. The transcripts were measured quantitatively based on mean length utterance word (MLUw), type token ratio low values (TTR-low), type token ratio compared to norms (TTR-norm) and total number of words. The total number of words was used to calculate the percentages of nouns, verbs, adjectives, prepositions and interjections within the book.

The value MLUw was selected based on its importance in assessing the language development of preschool-aged children. According to the SALT database,

the mean MLUw for children in the target age range of this study is 3.34. Other values considered were TTR-low and TTR-norm due to their ability to identify the types of words used in each book. TTR-low measures repetition and it known that repetition is important for language development. A small TTR-low value represents increased word repetition. Furthermore, TTR-norm was obtained to assess how accurately the book meet developmental norms. According to the SALT database, the mean value for TTR-norm is 0.40. Finally, the total number of words in the book was obtained to calculate the percentage of nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions and interjections. The SALT database counted the total number of each type of word and classified it. Percentages were calculated by dividing the total number of each type of word by the total number of words. Then these percentages were compared to the norms that were identified by E.A. Davis (Davis, 1938). Scores were then based on the range (plus or minus) from the established norms.

Each of these measured were converted into the same two-point rating system used for the qualitative measures and given a scoring range from 0.5-2.0, which was determined by SALT. The highest obtainable score was 18.0, which represented that the language used in the book was the most closely related to the developmental norms of preschool-aged children. Table 2 provides a breakdown of these quantitative scoring measures.

Table 2:
Quantitative Scoring Measures

Qualitative Measures	Value	Score		Qualitative Measures	Value	Score
MLUw	3.00-4.99	2.0		Adverbs - % from norm	0.00-1.99	2.0
	5.00-6.99	1.5			2.00-3.99	1.5
	7.00-8.99	1.0			4.00-5.99	1.0
	9.00 or greater	0.5			6.00 or greater	0.5
TTR-low	0.00-0.19	2.0		Pronouns - % from norm	1.00-5.09	2.0
	0.20-0.29	1.5			5.10-9.00	1.5
	0.30-0.39	1.0			9.10-13.00	1.0
	0.40 or greater	0.5			13.10 or greater	0.5
Nouns - % from norm	0.00-3.75	2.0		Prepositions - % from norm	0.00-1.59	2.0
	3.76-7.59	1.5			1.60-3.09	1.5
	7.60-11.25	1.0			3.10-4.59	1.0
	11.26 or greater	0.5			4.60 or greater	0.5
Verbs - % from norm	3.00-6.25	2.0		Interjections - % from norm	0.60-0.75	2.0
	6.26 - 9.59	1.5			0.76-0.90	1.5
	9.60-12.75	1.0			0.91-1.05	1.0
	12.76 or greater	0.5			1.06 or greater	0.5
Adjectives-% from norm	1.00-4.75	2.0				
	4.76-8.59	1.5				
	8.60-12.25	1.0				
	12.26 or greater	0.5				

Note: Adapted from Identifying Children's Literature Well Suited for Children with Language Impairments, p. 18, by Kent Brorson & Kristin Lee Milbrath, 2013.

The scores of both the qualitative and quantitative measures were then combined to create the highest attainable score of 28.0. A book with this score is considered the most appropriate book to use with preschool-aged children with language impairments based on this study's qualitative and quantitative measures.

Results

The book, *Mr. Tiger Goes Wild*, was evaluated based on its qualitative and quantitative measures to compare to developmental norms of pre-school aged children to determine its appropriateness for pre-children with language impairments. The following results were obtained.

Mr. Tiger Goes Wild received a qualitative score of 8.5 out of 10.0. Table 3 provides a breakdown of the scoring criteria and scores. As shown in the table, *Mr. Tiger Goes Wild* received a score of 1.0 for available formats because it is not currently available in a board book format. However, there are pictures on every page and they are relatively large, taking up the whole page. Furthermore, the pictures have a single focal point, are of contrasting colors and stand out from the background. Finally, the content of *Mr. Tiger Goes Wild* is not considered familiar or daily life activity for pre-school aged children.

Table 3: Qualitative Scores for Mr. Tiger Goes Wild

<i>Qualitative Measure</i>	<i>Score</i>
Available in board book format	1.0
Pictures on every page	2.0
Size of pictures	2.0
Format of pictures/contrasting colors	2.0
Familiarity of content	1.0
Total	8.0

Mr. Tiger Goes Wild received a quantitative score of 11.5 out of 18.0. Table 4 provides a breakdown of the scoring criteria and scores the book received. The percentage of various aspects of speech were determined based on the calculated value's percent plus or minus from the norm.

Table 4: Quantitative Scores for *Mr. Tiger Goes Wild*

	Calculated Value	Percent +/- from norm	Score
MLUw	4.19		2.0
TTR-low	0.58		0.5
Nouns	23.8%	4.5	1.5
Verbs	17.8%	7.9	1.5
Adjectives	2%	8	1.5
Adverbs	8.3%	0.3	2.0
Pronouns	8.9%	12.5	1.0
Prepositions	2.7%	4.3	1.0
Interjections	0.005%	1.3	0.5
Total Score			11.5

Mr. Tiger Goes Wild received a combined score of 19.5 based on its qualitative and quantitative features. These scores were then compared to the Brorson and Milbrath's qualitative, quantitative and combined top 10 lists of the top children's books of all time. Table 5 shows where *Mr. Tiger Goes Wild* fits in Brorson and Milbrath's top 10 lists. When looking at the physical characteristics of the book. *Mr. Tiger Goes Wild* scored an 8.0 and tied for 8th with *Green Eggs and Ham*, *The Runaway Bunny* and *We're Going On a Bear Hunt* on the Qualitative Top 10 list. Looking at specific language scores, *Mr. Tiger Goes Wild* received a score of 11.5 and tied for 9th with *The Carrot Seed*, *Green Eggs and Ham*, *Harold and the Purple Crayon* and *The Runaway Bunny*. Finally, the qualitative and quantitative scores were

combined to create an overall “Top 10” list. *Mr. Tiger Goes Wild* scored a combined total of 19.5 and tied for 9th with *Green Eggs and Ham* and *The Runaway Bunny*.

Table 5: Qualitative, Quantitative and Combined Top 10 Lists

Qualitative Top 10		Quantitative Top 10		Combined Top 10	
Book Title	Score	Book Title	Score	Book Title	Score
1. Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?	10	1. Ira Sleeps Over	14.5	1. Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?	22
1. The Very Hungry Caterpillar	10	2. We’re Going On A Bear Hunt	13.5	2. Are You My Mother?	21.5
3. Chica Chica Boom Boom	9.5	3. Are You My Mother?	13.0	2. We’re Going On A Bear Hunt	21.5
3. The Snowy Day	9.5	4. Corduroy	12.5	4. Corduroy	21
5. Goodnight Moon	9.0	4. Strega Nona	12.5	5. The Snowy Day	20.5
6. Are You My Mother?	8.5	6. Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?	12	6. Ira Sleeps Over	20
6. Corduroy	8.5	6. Caps For Sale	12	6. Strega Nona	20
8. Green Eggs and Ham	8.0	6. Curious George	12	6. The Very Hungry Caterpillar	20
8. The Runaway Bunny	8.0	9. The Carrot Seed	11.5	9. Green Eggs and Ham	19.5
8. We’re Going On a Bear Hunt	8.0	9. Green Eggs and Ham	11.5	9. The Runaway Bunny	19.5
8. Mr. Tiger Goes Wild	8.0	9. Harold and the Purple Crayon	11.5	9. Mr. Tiger Goes Wild	19.5
		9. The Runaway Bunny	11.5		
		9. Mr. Tiger Goes Wild	11.5		

Note: Adapted from Identifying Children’s Literature Well Suited for Children with Language Impairments, p. 22, by Kent Brorson & Kristin Lee Milbrath, 2013.

Discussion

The goal of this study was to find out if any books published in 2013 were more appropriate to use with preschool aged children with language impairments than classic books. The book *Mr. Tiger Goes Wild* was identified and used to compare to Kent Brorson and Kristin Lee Milbrath previous research on the top children books of all time. Brorson and Milbrath identified the top 10 books based on qualitative, quantitative and combined characteristics. The book *Mr. Tiger Goes Wild* was compared and integrated into these top 10 lists.

Mr. Tiger Goes Wild has large pictures with a single focal point and contrasting colors on every page. However, it is only available in a paperback format and the content isn't familiar in the daily lives of preschool children because it is about a tiger that doesn't fit in and wants to be wild. Furthermore, it has an appropriate MLUw of 4.19, which is in the developmental norms for preschool aged children and closely resembles their speech. However, this book has a high TTR-low value indicating that it has very little repetition, which is very important for children with language impairments. Through this study, it was found that *Mr. Tiger Goes Wild* is appropriate for preschool children with language impairments based on the physical, semantic and syntactic measures of this study. It makes the top 10 lists for qualitative, quantitative and combined lists. However, it is in the last spot on all lists.

The results of this study should be viewed with caution due to some limitations. First, only one book published in 2013 was evaluated. This one book cannot physically represent all the books published in 2013. Though other books published in 2013 were considered for this project and *Mr. Tiger Goes Wild* was

believed in this author's opinion to be the most appropriate for preschool age children with language impairments. However, there may be books that were overlooked. Additionally, new books are constantly being published and may be more appropriate for preschool age children with language impairments. Another limitation would be the qualitative scoring system. Brorson and Milbrath recommended that the qualitative scoring system be reevaluated to become more objective and that the quantitative measures be expanded to obtain more in-depth language scores. However, it was important in this study to use the same qualitative and quantitative measures as Brorson and Milbrath so that the results can be compared meaningfully.

It can be concluded from this research comparison of classic books and the top books of 2013 that classics may be more appropriate for preschool age children with language impairments. Many new books have too many words or none at all. Additionally, the pictures often have many focal points and blending (no contrast) of colors. However, this does not apply to every new book and it does not mean that every classic book is appropriate for preschool age children with language impairments. Each book should be evaluated in terms of its qualitative features, such as, available formats, pictures, colors and familiarity of content. Also, each book's individual syntactic and semantic content should also be evaluated in terms of the target age of the population you are working with.

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