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Title	The language experience approach in beginning reading instruction
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Source	<i>Teaching and Learning</i> , 2(2)5-13
Published by	Institute of Education (Singapore)

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# THE LANGUAGE EXPERIENCE APPROACH IN BEGINNING READING INSTRUCTION

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The definition of the Language Experience Approach (LEA) in reading is dependent on two things as the name implies – the language and the experiences of the child who is learning to read. Of all the approaches in the teaching of reading, the LEA is the only one that begins where the child is in terms of his ability to think with words. In this approach, the level of language at which the beginner functions is not highly significant. His progress in language development is an individual matter, which is gradually nurtured as the teacher helps him develop a wider and deeper skill with words. The plan for reading instruction is dependent not on some series of books, but rather upon the oral and written expression and identified needs of the child. The basic motivation for a child to learn to read is his realization that his oral language, based on his thoughts and experiences as well as the ideas of others, can be written and recalled. This self-realization may be expressed as the Allens<sup>1</sup> have phrased it:

“What I can think about, I can talk about.

What I can say, I can write.

What I can write, I can read.

I can read what I write and what other people can write for me to read”.

MaryAnne Hall<sup>2</sup> offers what she terms a linguistic rationale for language experience:

- 1 The beginning reader must be taught to view reading as a communication process.
- 2 The beginning reader is a user of language.
- 3 The beginning reader should understand the reading process as one of consciously relating print to oral language.
- 4 The beginning reader should incorporate the learning of writing with the learning of reading.
- 5 The beginning reader should learn to read with materials written in his language patterns.

- 6 The beginning reader should learn to read meaningful language.
- 7 The beginning reader should learn to read orally with smooth, fluent expression.

During a language experience lesson, the child (or group of children) dictates a story to the teacher who transcribes the story for the child on a chart and then helps him to read the story aloud. These dictated stories form the core of the reading lesson. These charts are illustrated and later bound into books. Each child's charts and books are shared freely and these contribute to the writing and reading growth of the other children. These books are constantly used as resource materials for ideas, vocabulary enrichment, spelling and other purposes. To a certain degree, each child learns a personal writing-reading vocabulary suited to his needs for self-expression. No artificial controls are placed on the vocabulary any child employs<sup>3</sup>.

In support of the use of writing as an aid to reading, Gertrude Hildreth<sup>4</sup> emphasizes the wide use of this procedure in many countries. She believes, as does Fernald<sup>5</sup>, that the simultaneous training promotes growth by aiding memory of letter forms, directing attention to structural elements and other details of words, helping to form the habit of left-to-right direction in dealing with words and providing an overt activity for restless pupils. Other advantages of this procedure include its tendency to strengthen association between word forms and meanings and to promote familiarity with sentence patterns.

Pikulski<sup>6</sup> advocates the use of LEA in kindergarten to foster readiness for reading. He believes that the approach gives these kindergarteners who are ready to read an opportunity to do so while at the same time providing language instruction for those who are not yet ready to read.

Most reading specialists believe that the LEA makes a valuable and strong contribution to beginning reading. Stauffer<sup>7</sup> suggests that after several weeks of experience with group-composed charts, small groups be formed within the class. These groups are organized on the basis of language facility, social maturity, the children's interests and compatibility. By grouping, the teacher will have more opportunity for stimulating small-group or individually dictated stories. A rotating schedule for teacher-group or teacher-pupil conferences should be arranged, and as each group meets, group stories or individual charts are

dictated to the teacher. Since these stories are brief – perhaps, only two or three sentences at this stage – these activities are not as time-consuming as they might be. The small groups also provide more opportunity for frequent exchange or presentation of children's own stories to other children. Small-group reading, learning to read one's own story independently, preparing illustrations for a story, practising with individual word cards, using picture dictionaries (or "pictionaries") or other related resource books for additional ideas or words are activities promoted at this early reading stage.

Phonics instruction stems from the children's stories. If generalizations or rules appear, they do so because of spontaneous generalizations by the children and not through deductive teaching.

Emphasis is not placed upon separate periods for phonics instruction or spelling. These skills are based on the vocabulary used in the children's stories and are taught when an opportunity presents itself and as the children need them rather than in some arbitrary sequences but they *are* taught<sup>8</sup>. Phonics, structural and contextual analysis and vocabulary development are introduced as children appear to need them in writing and reading their own and other children's materials. Recreational or free reading in class and at home is encouraged by the provision of a wide variety of children's booklets and supplementary trade books.

Language experience is by no means an easy way to teach reading. It demands flexibility in classroom management, a recognition of individual differences in language development, personalized record keeping and teacher skill in diagnosis and evaluation. In other words, it is a flexible method of instruction that requires considerable teacher expertise and confidence. Its greatest asset is its adaptability to individual needs, but that asset can only be utilized fully if the teacher understands the programme thoroughly and is willing to invest a great deal of time to make the programme work.

The following procedures are offered as a guideline for providing reading instruction through the language experience approach. Different teachers will have different interpretations of the approach resulting in different applications of the LEA. This plan is only an example of how the LEA may be used. The suggested time span for developing this activity with young children is nine weeks.

## Step One : First 3 Weeks

### Procedure

#### 1 Readiness:

- Read a story to the children.
- Show the pictures in the story.
- Talk about the story with the children.
- Ask the children questions about the story.

#### OR

- Show the children a film or filmstrip.
- Let the children discuss the film.
- Let the children "act out" the story.
- Ask the children questions about the story.

#### OR

- Play a record for the children.
- If the record tells a story, ask the children about it.
- If the record teaches a song or dance, let the children sing or dance as the record says.

#### OR

- Talk to the class about something which all or most of the children know about. This might be their favourite TV programme, classmates, etc. Then say something like, "Boys and girls, now we are going to write a story about what we have just said. You tell me the story, and I will write down what you say."

#### 2 Title:

- Ask for the name of the story. You might say, "What can we call our story?" Usually the children will select a title. If they cannot decide upon a title, let them choose from several titles. For example, "What do you think would be a good title for our story?" More than one title may be given. If this is the case, you might say, "Let's choose between Zhu's title, 'Going to Town' and Roslan's title, 'Downtown'."
- Let each child know that you appreciate what he or she has said, such as, "Thank you, Xuchen. That is a good title."
- When the title has been selected, print the title on the chalkboard.

## 3 Story:

- Ask the class for the first line of the story. Several children may talk at the same time. If they are saying the same thing, write a four- or five-word sentence about what they are saying. You may call on different children to give you a sentence for the story.
- Write the rest of the story the same way. Remember to keep the sentences and the story short.
- Say each word as you write it on the board.
- When the children have told you the story, read it to them.
- Point to each word as you read it aloud.
- Next, have different children read the story, one sentence at a time, to the rest of the class.
- Be sure to draw attention to the right word when a child miscalls the word.
- Write the story on a large chart.

## 4 Review:

- Have the children re-read the story at different times.
- Have the children point so that when you read (exactly the same order of words that they point to) the story "comes out" right.

## 5 Follow-up:

- Give the children 21 cm by 30 cm pieces of blank paper.
- Point to a letter on the chart.
- Tell the children the name of the letter.
- Tell children to write the letter on paper.
- Check each child's work.
- Correct the work, if necessary.
- Do no more than one to three letters a day.

## Materials:

Chalkboard; chalk.

21 by 30 cm sheets of blank paper.

Large chart paper; felt pen.

## Step Two : Second 3 Weeks

### Procedure

The procedure is the same as that for Step One, except that the teacher now writes the story on chart paper instead of on the chalkboard.

#### 1 Follow-up:

- The teacher points to a word she has written on the chart.
- She asks the children whether they know the word.
- She writes the word on a blank card.
- The teacher calls on several children to match the word card with the word in the story.
- The same thing is done with several words.
- The teacher gives the children blank cards.
- The children write the word on blank cards.
- The teacher checks the children's work.
- Several words are written this way.
- The teacher tells the children to choose a word to draw a picture of.
- The children are then told to write a word, a phrase or a sentence under the picture they have drawn.

#### Materials:

Chart paper; felt pen.

Blank word cards; pencils.

21 by 30 cm blank paper; crayons/colour pencils.

## Step Three : Third 3 Weeks

### Procedure

The procedure is similar to that for Step One, except that the story is written on chart paper.

#### 1 Follow-up:

- The teacher writes sentences in the story on blank sentence cards.
- Children put sets of word cards in the same order as the words in the sentence.
- Children match sentence cards with sentences on the chart.

- Children put sets of sentence cards in the same order (top to bottom) as the sentences on the chart.
- Children read the sentences to the class (individually or in groups).
- The teacher gives the children blank sentence cards.
- Children are told which sentence to write from the story.
- The teacher checks the children's work.
- Children write several other sentences from the story in the same way.
- Children are told to illustrate the story or parts of it and to write a sentence or a few sentences under the illustration.

**Materials:**

Chart paper; felt pen.

Blank sentence cards; pencils.

21 by 30 cm blank paper; crayons/colour pencils.

### **Possible Topics for Group/Class Experience Stories**

- (a) The Trip to School Each Day
- (b) My Best Friend
- (c) Making Wishes
- (d) The Last Time It Rained
- (e) How to Save Money
- (f) Sleep
- (g) What I Want To Do Most of All
- (h) Good Things to Eat
- (i) What Is Fun?
- (j) My Teacher
- (k) Wash Day at Home
- (l) What I Do at Home

### **Examples of Experience Charts**

There are different types of experience charts, of which the narrative chart is the most common. Below are examples of several types of charts written by children in primary one and two:

#### **1 Narrative Chart**

We went to the supermarket.

We bought some food.

We paid for it.

We went home.

**2 Suggestion Chart**

See a film.  
Write a story.  
Play a game.  
Listen to a story.

**3 Class Rule Chart**

Help each other.  
Do not disturb others.  
Plan our work.  
Finish our work and hand it in to teacher.

**4 Planning Chart**

Learn to read.  
Learn our alphabet.  
Play.  
Draw pictures.  
Listen to stories.  
Learn our numbers.

**5 Diary Chart**

Jan 2 : We started school this year.  
Feb 15 and 16 : We had our Chinese New Year holidays.  
Feb 28 : We had a spelling test.

**6 Direction Chart**

Write your name at the top of the page.  
Draw a ball.  
Colour the ball red.  
Draw yourself playing with the ball.

**7 Fanciful Story Chart**

One day we were playing.  
A monkey said, "Can I play, too?"  
We said, "Yes, you can."  
We played with the monkey all day.

**8 Poetry Chart**

"A little boy  
bought a toy" by Ali bin Said.  
"If I turn blue,  
what shall I do?" by David.

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