



HANDOUT: THE LANGUAGE EXPERIENCE APPROACH

The Language Experience Approach (LEA) involves using a story dictated by a learner and written by the tutor to teach different components of reading and writing. Using both the learners' own experiences and language as the basis for instructional material is an effective way of collaborating with learners from the very first lesson. This approach gives immediate success and is an icebreaker in a new teaching situation. It also gives you insights into the learners' worlds that can be of great help in selecting materials for a series of lessons.

The Language Experience Approach emphasizes the connections between oral language and written language. This technique allows even beginning readers to create sophisticated oral compositions which are then put into print. Language Experience works well with any level learner and in individual and group settings. Eventually it can be the basis for learners writing their own stories.

Steps

1. **Converse with learners to identify an experience or topic.** Begin the language experience approach by inviting the learner or learners to talk. The conversation will help you narrow the topic for the language experience story and will help the learner generate ideas. Topics for the conversation might include asking the learner what they did over the weekend, what they enjoy doing for fun, or where they went for vacation. You might also use a prompt to spark conversation, like reading a short article from the newspaper or using a picture.
2. **Focus the conversation and ask the learner to tell you a story.** Once you've discussed the topic with the learner, narrow the topic and have the learner tell you a story about it. If you're working with a group of learners, you might rotate from learner to learner, with each learner giving you one or two statements about the topic.
3. **Print exactly what the learner says.** Use correct spelling and punctuation, but do not change any words. It is very important to maintain the integrity of the learner's voice. Leave blank lines between each printed line. You will give the learner a chance to make edits later in the process. For beginning readers, a story of 3-5 sentences is long enough. For more advanced learners, a longer story is better. Ask the learner or learners to give the story a title.
4. **Read and verify the story.** Read the story back to the learner and ask if the story says what they wanted it to say. Ask the learner if there are any changes they would like to make to the story. Reread the story as many times as needed for this process.
5. **Read the story to the learner.** Read the story to the learner, tracking the words with your finger, while the learner watches and listens.
6. **Ask the learner to read the story.** After you have read the story, ask the learner to read the story. For beginning learners, you will combine steps five and six. You will read a sentence

tracking the words, and then ask the learner to read that sentence back to you. You will repeat the process until the learner can read the entire story independently. Higher-level learners may be able to read the story on their own after listening to you read it first. When working with a group of learners, have the learners read the story together and then give each learner a chance to read parts or all of it on their own.

7. **Identify reading and writing skills.** Now that you have a story, you will use the story to identify reading and writing skills for the learner to work on. Based on the learner's needs, here are some of the things you might do:
 - **Alphabetics and word study.** Review the story and identify words that reflect specific phonemic awareness and phonics skills the learner needs to practice, such as selecting words that have a short /i/ and a short /e/ and practice distinguishing between the two sounds. You might select a word that uses a common word pattern and have the learner use it to form new words. You might select a group of words that use prefixes and suffixes and have the learner practice identifying the prefix, suffix, and root word for each one.
 - **Vocabulary.** Since the vocabulary in the language experience story are the learner's own words, he or she has some idea of what the words mean. However, people often don't have a complete understanding of the words they use regularly. Review the story and identify tier 2 vocabulary words. Ask the learner what he or she thinks each word means, then read the complete definition. Discuss how the word might be used in other contexts and create a word chart. Identify vocabulary words that lend themselves to helping the learner develop word building skills – identifying the meaning of a word through understanding the meaning of the root word and any prefixes and suffixes.
 - **Fluency:** You will have already worked on fluency as you read the story to the learner and the learner read it back to you. If there were phrases or portions of the story that gave the learner problems when reading, use an activity such as phrase reading or pencil tracking to practice those phrases.
 - **Comprehension:** You may not be able to work on applying the broad comprehension strategies since the learner already understands what he or she was trying to say. However, you can use the story to develop specific comprehension skills like how cause and effect, main idea and detail, or sequencing function within the story. You can compare these structures to similar examples in other stories the learner may have read.
 - **Writing:** There will likely be grammatical errors in the story. You can use those to teach grammar lessons. After the grammar lesson, give the learner another opportunity to revise the story.
8. **Learner copies the final story.** Finally, ask the learner to copy the story.

GENERATING STORY IDEAS

Use the questions and other ideas below to start conversations that will lead to the creation of a language experience story.

- What is your favorite hobby? Describe it.
- If you could have three wishes, what would they be?
- What type of work do you do? What do you like and dislike about your work?
- What is the strangest thing that ever happened to you?
- Tell me a story about someone in your family.
- If you had as much time and money as you needed, how would you spend your vacation?
- What is something you do well? How would you tell someone else how to do it?
- What was the best choice you made in the last five years?
- What do you most like to do on your day off?
- Do you have a favorite song? Can you tell me the words?
- Tell me about your favorite television show.
- What would you say to the president if you met him or her?
- Think about someone you know. Describe what he or she looks like.
- Tell me about a tradition your family has.
- Have you ever had an experience like _____? Tell me about it. (*after reading a story*)
- Read an article from a newspaper, magazine, or website to the learner. Ask the learner to tell you about the article in his or her own words.
- Read a submission to a personal advice column or blog. Ask the learner how he or she would respond.
- Use a short video clip related to the learner's interest to start a conversation.
- Bring in an interesting picture and ask the learner to describe it, or how he or she feels about it.
- Choose a photo depicting an odd situation. Ask the learner to describe what they think happened just before the photo was taken and just after it was taken.
- Ask the learner to bring in a photo and tell you what the photo represents.
- Create a shared experience such as going on a field trip to a local museum. Afterward, ask the learner or learners to share their thoughts about the experience and what it mean to them.

BENEFITS OF THE LANGUAGE EXPERIENCE APPROACH

There are many benefits to using the Language Experience Approach with learners:

- **Empowers learners to see their own words in print.** When learners see a story about a personal experience, written in their own words, it is both empowering and motivating.
- **Emphasizes the connection between oral and written language.** As learners tell you the story, you write the story down on paper. This immediately helps learner make the connection between their oral vocabulary and the same words in print.
- **Gives insight into the learner's vocabulary and language structure.** The language experience story gives you an opportunity to understand the size and scope of the learner's vocabulary, their understanding of composition and grammar, and their experiences that you may draw upon in later lessons.
- **Allows beginning learners to produce sophisticated work.** Even though a learner may be reading at a first or second grade level, they have been speaking and telling stories all their life. Learners can tell complex and detailed stories using high-level vocabulary words.
- **Works well for individuals or groups.** It is a process that is easily adapted to individual learning or group learning.
- **Works well with new learners.** This approach provides a new learner with an immediate opportunity to experience success in reading and writing. It also gives you an opportunity to establish rapport with a new learner before delving into published instructional materials.