

Handout: Applying the Language Experience Approach

The Language Experience Approach (LEA) involves using a story dictated by a student 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 help you in selecting lesson materials.

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

Steps

1. **Converse with students to identify an experience or topic.** Begin the language experience approach by inviting the student or students to talk. The conversation helps you narrow the topic for the language experience story, and helps the student generate ideas. Topics for the conversation might include asking the student 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 student to tell you a story.** Once you have discussed and narrowed the topic, have the student create a story on that topic. If you are working with a group of students, you might move from student to student, with each student giving you one or two statements about the topic.
3. **Print exactly what the student says.** Use correct spelling and punctuation, but do not change any words. It is very important to maintain the integrity of the student's voice. Leave blank lines between each printed line. Give the student a chance to make edits later in the process. For beginning readers, a story of three to five sentences is long enough. For more advanced students, a longer story is better. Ask the student or students to give the story a title.
4. **Read and verify the story.** Read the story back to the student and ask if the story says what they wanted it to say. Ask the student 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 student.** Read the story to the student, tracking the words with your finger, while the student watches and listens.
6. **Ask the student to read the story.** After you have read the story, ask the student to read the story. For beginning students, combine steps 5 and 6. Read a sentence, tracking the words, and then ask the student to read that sentence back to

you. Repeat the process until the student can read the entire story independently. Higher-level students may be able to read the story on their own after listening to you read it first. When working with a group of students, have the students read the story together and then give each student a chance to read parts or all of it on their own.

7. **Identify reading and writing skills.** Now that you have a story, use the story to identify reading and writing skills for the student to work on. Based on the student's needs, you might focus on:
 - **Alphabetics and word study.** Review the story and identify words that reflect specific phonemic awareness and phonics skills the student 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 student use it to form new words. You might select a group of words that uses prefixes and suffixes and have the student practice identifying the prefix, suffix, and root word for each one.
 - **Vocabulary.** Because the vocabulary in the language experience story is the student's own words, he or she has some idea of what the words mean. However, people often do not have a complete understanding of the words they use regularly. Review the story and identify Tier 2 vocabulary words. Ask the student what he or she thinks each word means, then read the complete definition. Discuss how the word is used in other contexts and create a word chart. Identify vocabulary words that lend themselves to helping the student 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 student and the student read it back to you. If certain phrases or portions of the story gave the student 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 because the student 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. Compare these structures to similar examples in other stories the student 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 student another opportunity to revise the story.
8. **Student copies the final story.** Finally, ask the student to copy the story.

Benefits of the Language Experience Approach

There are many benefits to using the Language Experience Approach with students. It:

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