

The Language Experience Approach: An Initial Reading Instruction Approach in a Bilingual Elementary School

**BY GLORIA SCHON LIBERBERG, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de
México**

Perhaps the most important part of a young child's educational experience is beginning reading instruction. Success at this time is likely to foster continued success in later years, while failure usually produces frustration that handicaps the child in future scholastic activity.

There is no miracle approach that will teach all children to read. Children are individuals and will learn using the approach or approaches most meaningful to them. Thus, the teacher must be familiar with a variety of approaches and materials. Professional skill enables the teacher to determine what approach would be best suited for the needs and learning styles of the students.

The person who teaches reading at any grade level should possess a basic understanding of the following fields: psychology of personality and of learning, sociology, linguistics, psycholinguistics, measurement and literature.

The teaching of reading to any child--English-speaking or otherwise--necessitates an approach which treats the written word as an extension of the spoken word.

Lee and Van Allen (1963) believe that the initial reading program should integrate the student's needs and experiences:

The initial reading program should be based on the learner's experiences and should reflect the goals of a society which values creativity and divergent thinking. Learning experiences are selected which generate productive thinking, allow freedom of expression, stimulate individuality, value ingenuity, satisfy curiosity, and promote personal satisfaction to the extent that learning to

read is a lifelong experience which requires ever-maturing and more complex skills and knowledge (p. 13)

To ensure maximum success, particularly at the initial level of reading, a language arts approach is recommended. The language experience approach to initial reading instruction is an instructional program designed to utilize the child's needs, interests, skills, and motivation; to answer his questions rather than expect him to answer the book's or the teacher's questions; to determine the reality of moving from an oral expression of meaningful language to a written style which preserves the content of the message.

This process based on oral language experiences presents reading simply as one step in the process of communication.

The language experience approach to reading introduces reading through the use of language experience reading charts. These are original compositions arising from the children's common experiences. With the help and guidance of the teacher, the group or child composes stories and/or materials based on a trip, the weather, a holiday, a greeting, a message, classroom rules, and the like (Spache and Spache 1973).

By using the language experience approach to initial reading, the following skills are developed:

- 1) Sharing experiences: The ability to tell or illustrate something on a purely personal basis.
- 2) Discussion of experiences: The ability to interact with what other people say and write.
- 3) Listening to stories: The ability to hear what others have to say and relate it to their experiences.
- 4) Telling stories: The ability to organize one's thinking so that it can be shared orally or through dictation in a clear and interesting manner.
- 5) Making and reading books: The ability to organize one's ideas into a form that others can use and the ability to use ideas that others have shared through books.

6) Outlining: The ability to use various methods of briefly restating ideas in the order in which they were written or spoken.

7) Reading critically: The ability to determine the validity and reliability of statements.

I shall summarize some of the advantages of the language experience approach to initial reading instruction:

1) This type of approach promotes confidence in language usage. It creates a desire to reword and refine the child's own language.

2) Language development is assured in a program that encourages self-expression in many media throughout the day.

3) It helps children become increasingly sensitive to their environment by discussing and recording their experiences.

4) The development of language experiences gives depth of meaning to art and construction activities. Discussion, verbal and then written, is used as a reading lesson for many activities.

5) It encourages greater creative experiences in writing original stories.

6) Children learn to share their own ideas, but more importantly, they learn to listen to the ideas of others.

7) In using the language experience approach to reading, each child is encouraged to proceed at his own pace.

8) The language experience approach offers the wise teacher unending opportunities to use the factor of self-interest.

9) The language experience approach to reading makes the first step of reading the child's own dictation, not books written by others. This guarantees vital interest.

Thus during the instructional program using this approach the child conceptualizes:

- What I can think about I can talk about.
- What I can say I can write (or someone can write for me).
- What I can write I can read.
- I can read what others write for me to read. (Van Allen, 1968,1)

The most realistic approach to beginning reading is through the medium of language experience charts. These are group or individual compositions on any subject of interest, written down first by the teacher and later, as they learn to write, by the children themselves. Through the use of language experience charts, the children see the very words they have spoken, written on paper. This approach equates reading progress with the child's verbal and thinking skills. (Spache 1973).

Some of the behavioral outcomes obtained through the use of the language experience approach are:

- To participate in group story composition.
- To recognize the importance of sequence in a series of ideas or events.
- To express ideas in an organized manner.
- To express ideas in printed form; to connect meaning with printed symbols.
- To recognize ideas in printed form; to connect meaning with printed symbols.
- To read his/her own compositions and those of his/her classmates.
- To use and understand simple punctuation marks (commas, periods, question marks).
- To read aloud with the inflections characteristic of speech.

There are several forms of charts which are appropriate and valuable in teaching language and reading. At least four types should be used.

Personal Language Charts Work Charts Narrative Charts Reading Skill Charts

Below are examples of each type of language experience chart to be developed by the teacher or by the students:

1) Personal Language Chart

Lizards

I have a lizard
She eats bugs,
She lays eggs,
She is small.
She has two babies.
I like them.
(Child illustrated the story.)

2) Work Chart

Getting Ready for our Trip to the Zoo

- Bring permission slips from home.
- Bring a sack lunch.
- Choose a partner for the bus ride.
- Learn the safety rules.

(Children may illustrate the story.)

3) Narrative Chart

Our Halloween Party

We had a Halloween party.
We played games.
We ate cookies and pumpkin bread.
We had fun.

(This story was dictated by the students in the
Pre-First Class, American School Foundation A.C.,
Mexico, City.)

4) Reading Skill Chart

Words We Know

Color	Size	Smell	Sound	Space
red	little	sweet	quiet	astronaut
blue	big	stink	noise	rocket

As mentioned above, an initial reading program using the language experience approach may be supplemented by numerous methods and language activities. The following are suggested:

- 1) Basal Reading Series: This approach to initial reading instruction is presented systematically and developmentally.
- 2) Make a copy of the story. Cut sentences or words apart. have the student put them back in order on the pocket chart.
- 3) Make a copy of a language experience story for each student deleting some of the words. Have students fill in the missing words and take the story home and read it to parents.
- 4) Have the children dictate a classroom newspaper of things they did or studied during the week.
- 5) Have children make a television with children's pictures and dictated stories related to the Social Studies unit of work.
- 6) Make games: Lotto or Bingo games can be made using the words from their stories or from the basal reading stories.
- 7) Make class books: Use children's pictures and dictated stories about the Social Studies units of work.
- 8) Exchange the class books with another class.
- 9) Have "Word Banks" for each child. Each child will have his own personal words in his/her bank.

10) Make flash cards of the new words employed in the language experience chart or in the basal reading series stories.

11) Write letters and address envelopes. Motivate children to dictate the letters. Teachers will first write them on the blackboard and then students may copy them. (Write a letter to Santa Claus or to President Bush.)

12) Select one child every week to be "The Student of the Week". His/her classmates will interview the child who is the student of the week and then write about the child.

13) Have children create their own stories. Motivate the children to illustrate their stories.

14) For gifted children: Motivate them to write book reports about the story or book they liked best during the week.

15) For the gifted learners, the teacher will make an "Activity Card Box." Children will "read" the cards from the box and must follow the directions: For example, instructions may tell the child to do the following:

- Put these words in A B C order.
- Write 6 words that begin with "St".
- Write a story about Christmas.

Follow-up or enrichment activities using the language experience approach are as unlimited as a teacher's imagination. Language experience stories can reinforce oral language practice, comprehension skills, decoding skills, thinking skills and auditory skills.

In using the language experience approach to initial reading instruction the children will learn how to read because they will be reading about their own personal experiences. They will also learn how to read with greater enjoyment, and at their own pace. This approach allows for great flexibility; the student can have access to a large variety of teaching techniques, methods, and activities.

Since there is a strong relationship between reading and language, this system is particularly recommended for bilingual elementary schools because it

may be used with a heterogeneous group of language speakers. This program may be adapted to meet the linguistic needs of all the students.

There are considerations of an individual nature specific to each of the students which were not included in this report, such as the student's perceptual skills, motivation, IQ, aptitude, memory, personality, family characteristics, and socioeconomic background. The classroom teacher may analyze these factors to gain insight into each child's learning and reading processes. Hence, these factors should be taken into consideration in all elementary schools.

In conclusion, I hope this brief study has been enlightening and will stimulate teachers of initial reading programs in bilingual elementary schools to undertake the teaching of reading imaginatively by finding other creative approaches, methods, and materials in their teaching of reading.

References

- Crawley, S. and L. H. Mountain. 1988. Strategies for guiding content reading. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc.
- Goodman, K. S. and Y. M. Goodman. 1980. "Learning about psycholinguistic processes by analyzing oral reading," in M. Wolf and M. McQuillan. Harvard educational review. Cambridge, Mass.
- Gonzalez, P. C. 1985 "Beginning English reading for ESL students." The reading teacher. November, 154-161.
- Lee, D. M. and R. Van Allen. 1963 Learning to read through experiences. New Jersey: Prentice Hall.
- Perez, E. 1987 "Oral competence improves reading skills of Mexican-American third grades." The reading teacher. October, 23-27.
- Richards, J. C. and R. Rogers. 1986 Approaches and methods in language teaching. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Schon, G. (1985) Language proficiency as a key variable in the outcome of the language experience approach to initial reading instruction. Mexico City: University of the Americas. (Master of Arts Thesis)

Smith, F. (1980) Reading. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Spache, G. D. and E. Spache. (1973) Reading in the elementary school. Boston: Allyn & Bacon, Inc.

Tinker, A. and C. M. McCullough. (1973) Teaching elementary reading. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc.