

## **THE LANGUAGE-EXPERIENCE APPROACH**

The language-experience approach (LEA) combines all of the language arts--listening, speaking, reading, and writing. When using the language-experience approach, one need not be concerned about whether the material being read is in the learner's background and will be too difficult to comprehend or whether the student will be interested in the subject. One also need not be concerned about whether the reading material will appear too "babyish" for the student. This is because in the language-experience approach, the reading material is generated by the student.

The language-experience approach can be used with a single student or with a group of students. Much has been written on the use of the language-experience approach, and varying procedures for its use have been suggested. The material presented here indicates how it might be used with an individual and with a group. Certain procedures are also stressed that may seem unimportant at first. However, certain aspects of the language-experience approach are extremely important for its success, and we recommend little variation from these specific procedures. The material that follows is divided into five sections: (1) the theory behind the success of the language-experience approach; (2) using the language-experience approach with individual students; (3) using the language-experience approach with small groups of students; (4) important procedures and information about the language-experience approach; and (5) a description of a number of highly motivating language-experience activities.

### **The Theory behind the Success of the Language-Experience Approach**

The language-experience approach uses the language of the students as the basis for writing materials that will later be read by those same students. When a student dictates something to the teacher or writes something herself, it will naturally be something in which the student is interested and will also be something that the student will understand with no difficulty. Furthermore, it will be written at a reading level appropriate for the student, and its content will not insult the student regardless of age.

### **Using the Language-Experience Approach with Individual Students**

In using the language-experience approach with individual students, the teacher should follow this general procedure:

1. Tell the student that you would like her to dictate a story to you, so she will have something to read immediately. Spend some time discussing topics that interest her about which she would like to talk or write.
2. When she has chosen a subject, ask the student what she would like to use as a title for the story. You may wish to make suggestions; however, it is much better to get the student to use her own language. The student may wish to write about some experience that she has had lately, or she may wish to write about a favorite pet or a brother or sister. There are often hands-on experiences that have taken place in the classroom setting about which the student may wish to write; for example, a science experiment or something the student is making as an art project or social studies assignment.
3. When the student has decided on an appropriate title, begin to write. Use either manuscript or cursive writing, depending on the age/grade level of the student and what she has previously been taught. If the student has done very little writing of any kind, or if you are in doubt, then you should use manuscript writing. As you write each word, make sure the student is watching. Say each word as you write it. As soon as you have finished writing the title or any sentence, stop and bring your finger down on each word and read it back to the student. It is important to bring your finger down on each word for two reasons. First, it will help the student understand that each set of letters stands for a particular word; second, it will set a pattern for the student to follow when she begins to read. It is also important that you read the material first, so that the words will again be emphasized. This will give the student a second chance to learn each written word.
4. Ask the student to read the title to you. Make sure that the student brings her finger down on each word as she reads it. This will ensure that the student again notes each word carefully and sees each word as a

part of the overall title or sentence. In most cases, a student will be able to read the title or a sentence back to you without carefully looking at what has been written. Having the student bring her finger down on each word will also ensure that she is actually looking at the word she is pronouncing and not saying one word while looking at another. If you allow the student to slide her finger under the words as she reads, she may have a tendency to read ahead of or behind where her finger is pointing. Students are hesitant to do this at times; they may have had a teacher who told them not to point to words as they were reading. A student may also resist raising her finger up and bringing it down on each word. Insist that it be done this way and you will, in most cases, find that any initial resistance is quickly overcome.

5. Continue to do the rest of the story as you did the title. Stop after you have written each sentence and point to each word as you reread the sentence. Bring your finger down on the word and say it at exactly the same time your finger comes down on the word. After reading the sentence, have the student do it in the same manner. Then add a sentence at a time until you have finished the story.
6. After finishing the story, point to each word and read the entire story. Then have the student do the same. If she miscalls a word, quickly correct her and continue. Depending on the student and her ability to remember, it may be advisable to read the story several times.
7. The length of each story will depend on the characteristics of the student who is dictating it. However, in the beginning stages, be careful not to make the stories too long. The student will lose accuracy in rereading a particularly lengthy story, thus defeating the purpose of having her create her own material. As students continue to improve their reading, you are likely to find that they begin to dictate longer stories.
8. At this point you may let the student illustrate the story or apply stickers or appropriate pictures from other sources.
9. Next, type or print the story using a word processor. If you use a typewriter, use primary or pica type, whichever is appropriate to the age/grade level of the student. If you use a word processor, you may be able to select from a number of fonts and sizes. The student should have the ability to transfer knowledge of words from manuscript or cursive writing to printed type.
10. After a period of time, such as would elapse after doing another activity, have the student reread the original story and then the typewritten or printed copy. You may wish to have the student take the original illustrated story home and practice reading it to someone in her family. Some students may lose their stories, and having prepared and saved it on a word processor will ensure that all stories remain intact.
11. When next meeting with the student, ask her to again read the story written in the previous session. If she reads it without errors, write another story and use the same procedure. Continue this sequence, that is, rereading all previous stories and writing another one each time you meet.
12. After the student has written a number of stories, you may bind them into a booklet and let the student illustrate the cover.
13. After the student has built up a considerable sight vocabulary and has developed some beginning word-attack skills, you may have her gradually begin to read basal readers or general books.

### **Using the Language-Experience Approach with Small Groups of Students**

In using the language-experience approach with small groups of students, you may wish to follow a sequence such as the following:

1. Find some event or subject of interest to the group, and tell the students that you would like to help them write a story about the event or subject.
2. Ask students to decide on a title for the story. When they have agreed on a title, write it using the exact words given by the students. As you write it, say each word. After finishing the title, instruct the students to watch carefully as you read it. Point to each word as you read it. Be careful to bring your finger down on each word and read it only as your finger touches the word. Then ask the students to read the title as you point to each word. You may have several students read it individually.
3. When writing the story, use these general guidelines:
  - Use the type of writing to which the students are accustomed, that is, either manuscript or cursive.

- Use the language that the students suggest and make very few, if any, changes.
  - Write on something that can be saved for future use. Use 24" x 36" lined chart paper if it is available.
  - Use a felt-tip pen or marker that will make broad, readable lines.
  - In the beginning stages, use one-line sentences and gradually increase the length of the line as students' reading improves.
  - Emphasize a left-to-right movement.
  - Make sure students see all words as they are written.
4. After the story has been finished, read it to the class, being careful to point to each word as you read it. Be sure to read the story with enthusiasm.
  5. Have the students read the story as a choral exercise as you point to each word.
  6. Have individual students come to the chart and read the story. The chosen student should point to each word as she reads it, exactly as you have been doing. While this student points and reads, the rest of the students should read the story quietly as a choral exercise. (Although this may seem like a lot of reading of the same story, you will find that it is excellent practice and the students will enjoy participating.)
  7. Use a typewriter or word processor to prepare a printed copy of the story after it is finished. Also, have the students copy the chart in its exact form.
  8. If possible, duplicate the story and give each student a copy to take home to practice reading to someone in her family.
  9. After a period of time, ask students to reread the story. You may have students take turns reading a sentence at a time.
  10. After the students have practiced reading the story a number of times, you may also duplicate the story on a large piece of tagboard. The tagboard may then be cut into strips with one sentence on each strip. Either you or the students may then place the strips in a pocket chart to re-create the original story. At this time, make sure each student can read each sentence in isolation. After you have done this, you may cut the strips of sentences into words and re-create the original story by placing each word in the pocket chart.
  11. Each time you meet with the group, read the previously written story and then write another one. Continue this process until stories have been read many times and students know all, or nearly all, of the words as sight words.
  12. As students grow in their ability to read, let them begin to write and illustrate their own stories. Then bind these into booklets and let the students illustrate the covers. Let students exchange booklets and read each other's stories.
  13. Let students begin to read commercially written materials as their sight vocabulary and word-attack skills permit.

### **Important Procedures and Information About the Use of the Language-Experience Approach**

1. Teachers should remember these important procedures about the language-experience approach:
  - When students dictate stories, attempt to use the exact language of the students. However, if you are concerned about students' incorrect usage or inappropriate language, you may modify the transcription of the dictation slightly and tell the students, "That's a good thought; another way we might say this is . . ." (See item 4.)
  - Make sure that both you and the students point to each word as it is being read. Doing this in the beginning stages of using the language-experience approach ensures that each word is memorized as a separate entity as well as a part of an entire story.
  - Keep words clearly spaced, so students will recognize the difference between words and letters.
  - In the beginning stages, be sure to use only one-line sentences. Then gradually expand the length of the sentences as the students become more adept at reading.
  - Emphasize a series of events, if possible, so students will see the development of the story.
  - If possible, use 24" x 36" chart paper, so capital letters are 2" high and lowercase letters are 1" high.
  - Make sure students see the words as they are being written.

- Duplicate the chart so students can take the materials home to be practiced with another member of the family.
  - Emphasize left-to-right direction and the return sweep in writing and reading the stories.
2. Keep in mind that there are certain limitations to the language-experience approach. For example, a teacher using this approach almost exclusively is not likely to follow a sequential program in teaching word-attack skills. Many studies have shown that structured programs tend to produce better overall achievement from students. For this reason, you would probably want to use the language-experience approach in conjunction with a basal reader program or as a supplemental program for students with reading difficulties.
  3. Different types of charts may be written in essentially the same manner as has been described in the preceding material. Some types of charts and their uses are the following:
    - Summarizing chart. This chart shows a series of events on a field trip or a step-by-step procedure for doing an experiment in science.
    - Story chart. This chart describes an event in the life of a group or an individual.
    - Planning chart. This chart lists plans for such things as an anticipated trip or some other event in which the entire class will participate.
    - Directions chart. This chart gives specific directions, such as for the assembly of a toy or paper-folding exercises.
    - Dictionary chart. This chart lists new words that students have learned in science, social studies, or other subject areas.
  4. There has been considerable controversy over the shaping of the language of students who are using the language-experience approach. For immature speakers and students whose language is somewhat divergent from what might be considered standard English, the question sometimes arises as to whether the teacher should correct certain usage errors made by these students. It is probably true that more fuss is made over this issue than is necessary. If the teacher chooses to modify the students' language slightly, as indicated in the preceding directions, and if this is done gently, then no damage to either the children's self-esteem or their reading progress need occur.
  5. It should be remembered that unless students begin to read trade books and other types of materials as they develop their sight vocabularies, their reading vocabularies will, of course, be limited to only those words in their speaking vocabularies. Therefore, students using the language-experience approach should be encouraged to read other materials along with their language-experience charts and books.

### Twenty Language-Experience Activities

Listed here are a number of language-experience materials created by children. Most of the items in the list are examples of individual descriptions of illustrations done in a group setting. With this approach, the teacher motivates the students and leads a brief discussion on the topic. The children then draw pictures of the topic. Some sample topics for this type of activity for beginning readers might be:

Happiness is ...	Sadness is ...
A friend is ...	I feel afraid when ...
If I were the teacher I would ...	If I had a million dollars I would ...

The children decide how they will finish the sentence and begin their illustrations. (These are sometimes called model sentences.) The teacher (and other adults, if available) circulates quickly about the room and writes down the children's words, such as "A friend is my Daddy," or "A friend is someone who rides bikes with you," or "A friend is a big yellow zebra." The teacher writes down the exact words the student says. With practice, the teacher can catch all the students' responses while they illustrate. Then, the teacher collects the pictures and binds them and the sentences into a book that the children can read later.

A collection of these student books often becomes the single most popular item in the classroom. The students eagerly read them many times and learn to recognize not only their own words but also the words dictated by their peers. Variations on these examples can be created for virtually any grade level.

The student books can be made from simple materials. The most common type uses a fabric cover around construction paper pages. Here are the directions for making this type of book.

Materials:

A piece of fabric, approximately 22" x 16"	Sheets of 12" x 18" construction paper (you'll need one sheet for every four pages of the book, plus one sheet to attach to the cover)
One sheet of 12" x 18" tagboard for the cover	Needle and thread
Rubber cement or equivalent	

Procedure:

<b>For Pages:</b>	<b>For Cover:</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fold construction paper pages in half.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Put rubber cement around inside edge of tagboard.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sew pages in the middle from bottom to top.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Put fabric around cover; cement overlap on inside edges of cover.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Do not sew through the tagboard cover.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fold cover in half.</li> </ul>
<b>To Attach Pages to Cover:</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Put rubber cement on outside of front and back pages.</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Cement outside of pages to cover.</li> </ul>	

### Some Ideas for the Beginning of the Year

1. **Our Class:** You will need one page for each student. The student selects a precut circle of the appropriate color for her face, then draws in the face and the body around it. The student dictates a couplet, which the teacher copies along with the student's name. If one is available, the teacher adds the child's actual picture from a class composite. Examples: "My name is Russell and I have a big muscle," "My name is Brenda Lee and I got stung by a bee," "My name is Ted and I fell out of bed."
2. **All about Us:** Originally these were individual projects that were placed on bulletin boards or around the room. Later they were put together in a large class book. Each student creates her face, arms, and legs out of construction paper that is pasted to a large tagboard sheet. Each student also makes hair out of yarn. The body is 9" x 12" construction paper with writing paper on the inside. The construction paper is folded to make the body, then unfolded to read the dictated story.
3. **All about Me:** In this case, each student makes her own book, consisting of many pages. Pages may be done one per day and then bound into an individual student book when finished. Example pages: Page 1 – All about Me. The student colors the page and writes her name. Page 2 – My name is \_\_\_\_\_. This is me. The student draws a picture of herself, writes her name, and learns to read a few words. Other pages may include: This is my house; This is my family; I like; I would like to be a \_\_\_\_\_; My best friend is \_\_\_\_\_; I like to eat \_\_\_\_\_; I don't like to eat \_\_\_\_\_; I like to play \_\_\_\_\_; I am afraid of \_\_\_\_\_; and so on.
4. **My Favorite Things:** This activity is the same as item 3. Pages for individual books like these are sometimes available commercially in teacher supply stores. Typical pages:

My favorite pet is	My favorite color is
My best friend's name is	If you want to phone me, call this number
If you want to send me a letter, here's my name and address	My teeth – I've counted them. I have ___ up top and I have ___ downstairs
My hair looks like this	My nose looks like this
My eyes look like this	My favorite song is _____
My favorite sport is	My favorite instrument is
I go to bed at _____	I get up at _____
When I grow up, I want to be _____	

5. Let's Pretend: This activity is similar to items 3 and 4; the teacher makes an individual book for each student. Example pages:

If I were invisible I would	If I had a magic carpet I would
If I had one million dollars I would	If I were the teacher I would
If I met Jack Frost I would	If I could have only one wish it would be
If I lived under the sea, I would	Once upon a time there lived an ugly princess who
A long, long time ago there lived a tiny mouse who	The wicked witch waved her magic wand and turned the boy into a

### More Ideas

6. Happiness and Sadness: This is a two-part book. For the first part, each student draws a picture and then dictates a statement about "Happiness Is." The second part is "Sadness Is." Examples: Happiness is: "Holding a cat and eating ice cream," "Looking at your muscle." Sadness is: "Getting picked on by someone bigger."
7. A Friend Is: This is another sentence completer. The student finishes the thought. A friend is \_\_\_\_\_ and draws a picture. The teacher or other adult takes dictation, collects the pictures, and binds them into a class book. Examples:
- A friend is someone who rides bikes with you
  - A friend is someone who celebrates your birthday in a tent with you
  - A friend is my Daddy

### Holiday Specials

8. Secret Recipe for Witches' Brew: The teacher writes the word cauldron on the chalkboard and discusses it with the children. Each child has a page shaped like a cauldron and draws on it pictures of items to go into the witches' brew. The teacher or other adult then writes down the words that describe the pictures, collects the pages and binds them into a book. Examples from a kindergarten version: skeleton, fairy godmother, spider, bloodsucker, and spider web.
9. The Turkey Book: This is similar to item 8. The students' pages are shaped like a turkey, and the students draw items related to Thanksgiving.

### Still More Ideas

10. Round Is: This is a concept book. Each student has a circle on which she draws a picture of something that is round. The teacher or other adult writes down each student's words to describe the picture.
11. Class Fortunes: An inscription on the first page describes the book. "Before we made this book we pretended that we were fortune tellers. We said some magic words and then looked into our make believe crystal balls and concentrated very hard. We each drew the name of another person in the class. These are the people whose fortunes we wrote." (Warning: Students must be prohibited from making unpleasant fortunes for their classmates) Examples (written by second and third graders): (1) "In my crystal ball I see Sherry. She is an astronaut but works in a hospital and at Sir Pizza in her spare time. She lives in Hawaii and is married to a bachelor." (2) "In my crystal ball I see Dennis. He is a truck driver. He lives in Arizona. He is a bachelor and is playing around." (Bachelor must have been a popular word that week).
12. Riddles from A to Z: Each student is given a letter of the alphabet. The student writes a riddle, the answer to which begins with the letter. Example: For the letter F--It runs around the house, yet never moves. (A fence.)
13. Words with Feeling: Each page in this book has pasted on it an item that students can see or feel. The pages consist of a listing of words that the item makes the students think of. For example, a piece of aluminum foil is pasted on Page 1. The page has written on it: "SHINY makes me think of: diamonds, gold, silver, sun, rings, and clean hair." Other examples: "VELVETY makes me think of my mother's rug, shag carpets, and green moss." "STRETCHY makes me think of rubber bands, elastic, waking up,

spaghetti, gum, and silly putty." Other key words are: SILKY, STRIPED, ROUGH, WAVY, FURRY, BUMPY, SMOOTH, SPOTTED, SPONGY, and BRIGHT.

14. **Moody Me:** The inscription on the first page describes the book. "We had a lot of fun writing this book! First, we acted out all the different moods and talked about them. All of the things in the book have happened or could easily happen to us. These are our real joys, sorrows, dreams, and fears." Each student picks one mood or emotion, draws a picture of herself expressing that emotion, and dictates to the teacher or other adult. Examples: "I feel sad because I don't have any friends." "I feel nervous because I saw a ghost." Other key words: silly, embarrassed, relieved, happy, awful, excited, confused, proud, mean, overjoyed, itchy, pretty, sick, kind, anxious, mad, hot, worried, cold and scared.
15. **Ridiculous Rhymes:** Each student dictates a couplet and draws a picture that the couplet describes. Examples: "I saw an ant who had no pants." "I saw a turtle who wore a girdle."
16. **Whose Eyes:** The all-time favorite. The inscription on the first page describes the book. "One night, as I lay in my bed almost asleep, I heard a loud knock at my door. The door opened slowly and in the doorway I could see two eyes staring in at me. I have never been so scared in all my life! Who or what could those strange eyes be?" On each page, the student sees a door made of black construction paper, with a yellow self-sticking dot for the doorknob. When the door is opened, the student sees two more yellow dots, which are the eyes. The student then draws a picture around the eyes and dictates to the teacher or other adult what the picture is about. Examples: (1) "It was my mother. She came to bring me a glass of water." (2) "It was a vampire. It wanted to suck my blood." (3) "It was my cat. It came to get tuna fish." (4) "It was my Mom. She came to take my money." (5) "It was a ghost. He was looking for potato chips."
17. **How the Elephant Got Its Trunk:** Inspired by the Just So Stories, the students dictate or write their own versions of how the elephant got its trunk.
18. **Our Monsters:** This book combines an art activity with language experience. The students make watercolor monsters and dictate stories about them.
19. **Did You Ever See . . .** Based on the book of the same name, this is a collection of illustrated couplets. The illustration on the front side of the page corresponds to the first rhyming word of the couplet; the illustration on the back side of the page corresponds to the second rhyming word. Examples:
  - "Did you ever see a lion . . ." "Cryin?"
  - "Did you ever see a pig . . ." "Wear a wig?"
  - "Did you ever see a rabbit . . ." "Kick the habit?"
20. **Interviews.** This is a series of language experience books created by a small group of students. Here are the directions:
  - The students interview each other in partners.
  - Each student introduces her partner to the members of the small group.
  - The members of the small group write a page about each student in the group.
  - Each student draws a picture about herself.
  - The teacher makes copies of the books for all members of the group.
  - The students then read each other's books.