# LANGUAGE EXPERIENCE APPROACH to READING (and WRITING)

## Language-Experience Reading for Second Language Learners

# LANGUAGE EXPERIENCE APPROACH to READING (and WRITING)

## Language-Experience Reading for Second Language Learners

Carol N. Dixon • Denise Nessel

*Alemany Press*
Prentice Hall Regents, Englewood Cliffs, NJ 07632


Published by Prentice-Hall Regents
A Division of Simon & Schuster
Englewood Cliffs, NJ 07632



Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

ISBN 0-13-521352-5

Prentice-Hall International (UK) Limited, *London*
Prentice-Hall of Australia Pty. Limited, *Sydney*
Prentice-Hall Canada Inc., *Toronto*
Prentice-Hall Hispanoamericana, S.A., *Mexico*
Prentice-Hall of India Private Limited, *New Delhi*
Prentice-Hall of Japan, Inc., *Tokyo*
Simon & Schuster Asia Pte. Ltd., *Signapore*
Editora Prentice-Hall do Brasil, Ltda., *Rio de Janeiro*

# *Acknowledgements*

We thank the following ESL teachers, who generously shared ideas with us and gave us copies of their students' work to include in this book:

Barbara Clark
Sandra Coopersmith-Beezy
Millie Farnum
Elida Flores
Joan Hahn
Linda La Puma
Cheryl Morgan
Doug Parham
Sara Sanchez
Matilda Sanchez-Villalpando
Nancy Shibata
Katherine Shoenrock
Lydia Swanson
Simon Unzuerta

We also thank Roger Olsen for his valuable suggestions and encouragement, and Russell Stauffer who taught us to honor our students' language and experiences.

# *Introduction*

The Language Experience Approach (LEA) to reading instruction is not a new idea. It has been documented and discussed since early this century (Huey, 1908; Smith, 1967). Adaptations and variations have been explored and described by many. Sylvia Ashton-Warner's key word concept (Ashton-Warner, 1963) and Doris Lee's chart stories (Lamoreaux and Lee, 1943) are only two examples of educators using basic LEA principles to help students learn to read. Reading experts have generally considered some form of LEA to be basic methodology for teaching reading, and teacher education textbooks have recommended its use (Wilson and Hall, 1972; Spache and Spache, 1977; Stauffer, 1980).

In all its forms the central LEA concept remains the same — use the student's own vocabulary, language patterns, and background of experiences to create the reading text and make reading a meaningful process. The usual LEA techniques (Stauffer, 1980; Nessel and Jones, 1981) involve these steps:

Step 1 Teacher and students discuss the stimulus, or topic for dictation. Observations and opinions are exchanged. Oral language skills are developed and reinforced.

Step 2 The student dictates an account (the story)* to the teacher who records the statements to construct the basic reading material.

Step 3 The student reads the story several times, with teacher help as needed, until the story has become quite familiar. Comprehension is assured because the student is reading material that is self-generated.

*We use the term *story* to mean any dictated account, whether a fanciful narrative or a factual account of something the learner has experienced.

Step 4 Individual story words are learned, and other reading skills are reinforced through teacher-designed activities related to the story.

Step 5 Students move from reading their own dictation to reading other-author materials as they develop confidence and skill with the reading process.

In all LEA programs, whatever variations might occur at each step, students talk about personal and familiar experiences, and their statements are used to help them acquire the ability to understand written language — to read. Discussion prior to dictation develops and encourages oral skills. Students learn to read using material uniquely suited to their needs and interests, material they have composed orally. Motivation for reading their own stories is high. Recognizing their own words in print is easier than dealing with the unfamiliar language of many readers and textbooks. Eventual transfer to other-author materials can be made comfortably, given the strong base of reading-for-meaning established with the use of dictated stories. The individualized nature of LEA programs allows each teacher to suit instruction to the specific needs and interests of the students.

Rather than using the Language Experience Approach, however, schools have usually chosen basal reader approaches to reading. Basal packages have been presented as safe, well-controlled systems for teaching reading. The materials are backed by experts who serve as program consultants, and detailed scope and sequence charts appear to provide systematic instruction. Most important, the teachers' guides and program components make for an organized approach to planning and conducting lessons. For busy teachers with large classes, the basal approach has seemed preferable to designing an individualized program such as LEA.

While basal readers remain popular, recent theoretical and practical considerations have generated new interest in LEA. Linguists have argued for meaningful input as a prerequisite for language acquisition (Krashen, 1981; Krashen and Terrell, 1983). Psycholinguists have focused attention on the relationship between language acquisition and reading (Goodman and Fleming, 1968; Shuy, 1977). Researchers and theoreticians began suggesting that reading would be easier when the reading text closely matched the learner's own experiences and oral language patterns (Tierney, Readence, and Dishner, 1980). These works provide theoretical justification for choosing LEA as a reading method. At the same time, in the practical world of schools, teachers have been faced with wave after wave of new students from other cultures whose language and experiences have little, if anything, in common with the characters in basal readers. Published American texts and readers have had little relevance to those recently arrived from Asia, Latin America, or other non-English-speaking areas. For these practical reasons many teachers are

turning to LEA to help learners with these special problems. Recently, teacher education materials have also specifically recommended using some form of LEA with these students (Ching, 1976; Ransom, 1978).

This text will introduce, or re-acquaint, teachers with the Language Experience Approach, a natural way of helping learners acquire oral, aural, reading, and writing skills, one particularly suited to the needs of the student for whom English is a second language.

*Carol N. Dixon and Denise Nessel*

## *REFERENCES*

Ashton-Warner, S. *Teacher.* New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963.

Ching, D. C. *Reading and the Bilingual Child.* Newark, DE: International Reading Association, 1976.

Goodman, K., and Fleming, J., (Eds.). *Psycholinguistics and the Teaching of Reading.* Newark, DE: International Reading Association, 1968.

Huey, E. B. *The Psychology and Pedagogy of Reading.* New York: Macmillian, 1908.

Krashen, S. D. *Second Language Acquisition.* Oxford: The Pergamon Press, 1981.

Krashen, S. D., and Terrell, T. D. *The Natural Approach.* San Francisco: The Alemany Press, 1983.

Lamoreaux, L., and Lee, D. M. *Learning to Read Through Experiences.* New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1943.

Nessel, D. D., and Jones, M. B. *The Language-Experience Approach to Reading: A Handbook for Teachers.* New York: Teachers College Press, 1981.

Ransom, G. *Preparing to Teach Reading.* Boston: Little, Brown, 1978.

Shuy, R., (Ed.). *Linguistic Theory: What Can It Say About Reading?* Newark, DE: International Reading Association, 1967.

Smith, N. B. *American Reading Instruction.* Newark, DE: International Reading Association, 1967.

Spache, G. E. and Spache, E. B. *Reading in the Elementary School.* Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1977.

Stauffer, R. G. *The Language Experience Approach to the Teaching of Reading.* New York: Harper and Row, 1980.

Tierney, R. J., Readence, J. E., and Dishner, E. K. *Reading Strategies and Practices: A Guide for Improving Instruction.* Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1980.

Wilson, R. M. and Hall, M. *Reading and the Elementary School Child.* New York: D. Van Nostrand, 1972.

# *Table of Contents*

# Chapter 1

# The Value of LEA for ESL Learners

We use LEA with ESL (English as a Second Language) students because it makes sense as a method and because it works. It makes sense because it is based on what is known about acquiring language and learning to read. It works because, as a flexible, individualized approach, it meets the unique needs of the ESL learner.

## LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND READING

Recent studies suggest that the process of language acquisition has several characteristics which cut across all language and cultural barriers (Brown, R., 1973; Asher, 1977; Brown, H.D., 1979; Krashen, 1981; Krashen and Terrell, 1983). First (native) languages are acquired in informal, non-academic settings through real life, non-threatening interactions with others, such as family and friends. In fact, acquisition actually slows or even stops altogether in settings where the learner is constantly corrected or reprimanded for incorrect speech. Language is best acquired in settings where there is a need to know, the chance to try, and the freedom to fail without penalty. Once oral language is acquired, the basis for learning to read has been established. Learning to read is an extension of the language learning process.

Second language acquisition may seem a very different matter, yet research has shown that several principles are just as true for acquiring a second language as they are for acquiring a first (Nelson, 1973; Asher, 1977; La Puma, 1980; Krashen, 1981; Krashen and Terrell, 1983). Second language acquisition also takes place most effectively in informal, real life settings where the learner is freely interacting with fluent speakers of the target language. The learner must also have many opportunities to listen

to the language without being forced to respond. And, when learners must use the new language, they need to do so naturally, in a supportive, non-threatening environment with the freedom to make mistakes, just as the infant can say "me bottle" without fear of reproach.

These principles of second language acquisition are applicable to second language reading. Learning to read a second language is best accomplished when the reading materials are based on real life experiences that are meaningful to the learner. The student needs many opportunities to practice reading in settings which are both comfortable and designed to promote success, and where errors are regarded as an acceptable part of the process.

## *THE LEARNER'S NEEDS*

ESL learners share some common characteristics despite the diversity of their cultural and language backgrounds. Most, if not all, are in confusing and often frightening situations. Their native language, on which they have learned to depend, is no longer adequate. They must learn a new system of sounds and symbols which may be radically different from those they have previously known.* In fact, they may lack the ability even to discriminate some American sounds from others. Using English can be an ego-shattering task for the learner who has trouble hearing the sounds of language. When physical existence and that of loved ones depends on accurate speech, life can become terrifying. Not only is the ESL student faced with the disconcerting task of learning another sound/symbol system in order to communicate basic needs, but that same student is also stressed by attempting to understand and acquire a new culture. The fact that the move to the new culture may be accompanied by high hopes for a better life makes it no less difficult. The older the student, the more threatening these changes may be. As a result, the more unwilling such students may become to interact with native speakers, the very behavior which is crucial to learning the new language.

Classrooms for second language students need to approximate natural, real world settings, filled with language. Learners need numerous opportunities to hear fluent English and to interact with fluent English speakers in meaningful situations. Ideally, ESL students at all grade levels will have many opportunities to converse with English-speaking peers. If students are placed in regular classrooms, they will have chances for conversation. If they are placed in special ESL classrooms, every effort must be made to plan times when they can work with and talk with English-speaking peers. When students are encouraged to talk with

*Table 5-1 (page 71) lists several English sounds that are difficult for certain ESL learners.

English-speaking classmates, they will hear many words and phrases over and over. This repetition, which is necessary for language learning, is effective and pleasant because it occurs naturally, in contrast to textbook drills of often meaningless (to the student) phrases and sentences.

ESL learners also need individual practice to refine new language skills. Because they are just learning English, they will make many errors in vocabulary and usage, but these will not be as frustrating if the students are not always expected to perform for the teacher or the whole class. Ideally, these students should have access to practice stations or activity centers to use alone or with a partner. These centers should contain an abundance of films, records, and tapes as additional models of English usage, as well as a wide variety of books, pictures, and objects to stimulate talking, browsing, and reading. Besides many opportunities to practice English, these learners need instruction. The instructional approach needs to increase their total communication skills so that they can use the new language in all communication settings.

## *TEACHING FOR COMMUNICATION*

The Language Experience Approach has many advantages for the ESL learner because it involves all the communication skills. Dictation is preceded by discussion of the subject or stimulus for the story. The learner has the opportunity both to listen to what others in the group are saying and to participate verbally in the discussion, thereby practicing oral language in a natural communication setting. The dictation itself serves as the basic material for developing reading ability. Once students have begun mastering the reading process through their dictation, writing their own stories is a natural extension.

The reading material—the dictated story—has immediate relevance since it makes use of the learners' own experiences, vocabulary, and language patterns. Attention and motivation remain high, and the learners' self worth is constantly reinforced by the very fact of seeing their own language turned into print. LEA provides ESL students with a meaningful, personally rewarding experience in learning to read English.

The learner's task is made easier and less frustrating because the reading materials match oral language patterns and draw on personal experiences. Learners are not asked to confront unfamiliar or confusing language of texts or readers which are not yet meaningful.

Above all, the Language Experience Approach is one in which the teacher is a facilitator, choosing tasks that will help, not frustrate, the learner. The student is not expected to conform to the demands of a pre-designed program, with unfamiliar characters and language. The teacher

plans experiences and activities to meet special learning needs. Language acquisition is promoted when the teacher selects meaningful topics for dictation, thoughtfully guides the discussion before dictation, and encourages the student to use English while dictating the story. Expectations are determined by what the student can do at each stage, not by external standards of performance.

Finally, LEA is an extremely flexible method; there are many variations of the Language Experience Approach. Only one rule remains inviolate—the student's own language is written down to produce the text material for reading instruction. The exact procedures to be followed may be modified in numerous ways to meet individual needs. LEA is well-suited to language learners, allowing, as it does, maximum adjustment to learning needs and minimum threat to self confidence and self worth.

## *CHOOSING THE RIGHT APPROACH*

ESL learners vary as much in their needs and abilities as any group of students. It is as much a mistake to give all ESL students the same reading program as it is to give any heterogeneous group of learners exactly the same tasks to do and requirements to meet. Of course, a most significant variable among ESL students is English language competence. Assessing that competence is necessary for planning appropriate instruction. Many language assessment tests have been developed, but they do not always provide an accurate picture of the student's total language. Such assessment procedures should be supplemented with observation of the student in natural language settings in order to plan instruction.

The Levels of Use (LoU) model (Hall, Loucks, Rutherford, and Newlove, 1975; Hall and Loucks, 1977) is useful for evaluating acquisition. The LoU was developed to evaluate teachers' abilities to use innovative instructional procedures. The model is based on the recognition that teachers must learn to use an innovative technique, that the learning process takes time, and that teachers will go through predictable stages as they acquire the ability to use the new technique smoothly and efficiently. Although LoU is not intended for evaluating students, we have found the framework useful for looking at language learners, who are, in fact, using an innovative technique — the new language. We have modified the LoU approach to provide a guide for observation and assessment of oral second language acquisition. Our experience suggests (confirmed by Krashen and Terrell, 1983) that there are at least three stages of language acquisition. Table 1-1 summarizes these stages and their respective levels of oral second language use.

*Table 1-1*

***Adapted Levels of Use for Assessing Use of English***

*Stage 1 Student*

| | Level 0: Non-use | Level I: Orientation (Awareness) |
|---|---|---|
| Quantity of oral English | Student has little or no knowledge of English | Student has recently learned a few words of English through incidental daily experiences |
| Ability to use oral English | Student is not using English at all to communicate | Student occasionally understands a single word or phrase of English used by others to communicate |
| Interest in learning additional English | Student is not trying to learn English | Student occasionally attempts to learn the meaning of a new English word used by someone else |

*Stage 2 Student*

| | Level II: Preparation (Investigation) | Level III: Mechanical Use |
|---|---|---|
| Quantity of oral English | Student can understand several English words and phrases | Student can understand and use a vocabulary of stock words and phrases covering many daily situations |
| Ability to use English orally | Student attempts to use a limited number of English words and phrases to communicate basic needs | Student attempts to communicate in English in familiar, non-threatening situations |
| Interest in learning additional English | Student shows interest in understanding new words and phrases related to particular interests or needs | Student is actively seeking to understand new words and phrases through a variety of daily experiences |

*Stage 3 Student*

| | Level IV-A: Routine Use | Level IV-B: Refinement |
|---|---|---|
| Quantity of oral English | Student's language skills are adequate for most day-to-day communication needs in concrete situations | Student understands and uses English correctly except for some idioms, figures of speech, or words with multiple meanings |
| Ability to use English orally | Student is willing to attempt to communicate in English in new or unfamiliar settings if the occasion arises | Student is able to use English successfully in new learning situations |

*Table 1-1 cont.*

| | *Level IV-A: Routine Use* | *Level IV-B: Refinement* |
|---|---|---|
| Interest in learning additional English | Student shows regular, stable interest in all language improvement activities and lessons | Student actively seeks opportunities to use English in new or unfamiliar settings |
| | *Students Beyond Stage 3* | |
| | Levels V and VI: Integration and Renewal | |
| Quantity of oral English | Student understands multiple meanings of words, English idioms and figures of speech | |
| Ability to use English orally | Student uses English fluently in all communication settings (listening, speaking, reading, writing) to acquire and manipulate both concrete and abstract ideas | |
| Interest in learning additional English | Student actively searches for new English words and meanings, reads a variety of prose forms and attempts a variety of forms in own writing | |

Classification into stages depends on students' *ability to use English*, not age or grade in school. LEA can be modified to provide for the needs of students at each stage. The LoU assessment plus knowledge of the students' abilities to read in their native language should be used to choose the most effective language experience variation. Table 1-2 summarizes the major features of each variation for each of the three stages.

*Table 1-2*

***LEA Summary Chart for ESL Students***

| | Student Characteristics | Instructional Procedures* |
|---|---|---|
| *Stage 1* | almost no oral English and no experience with any written language | key vocabulary; dictated pattern stories |
| *Stage 2* | some oral English and some fluency with written native language | story dictation; structured word lists |
| *Stage 3* | considerable oral English and fluency in oral and written native language | story dictation; story language revision |

* *These procedures may be used for lessons with individual students or for group instruction.*

*Table 1-2 cont.*

| | Oral language/Dictation Topics | Reading-related Activities |
|---|---|---|
| Stage 1 | student's daily experiences; structured experiences of immediate utility | conversation; role-playing; listening to stories; word discrimination activities |
| Stage 2 | student's daily experiences; American cultural events such as holidays or typical family celebrations; other American customs | read-along books; reader's theater; word recognition activities |
| Stage 3 | student's daily experiences; new areas of learning such as other academic areas; areas of special interest the student is studying | rewriting of dictation; developing study skills; responding to literature |

The remainder of this book provides detailed suggestions for managing instruction for students at each stage. The program features outlined in Table 1-2 are elaborated. We suggest numerous designs for oral language activities, dictation sessions, and reinforcement activities. Word recognition activities and ways to teach writing are also included in separate chapters. Finally, we provide an example of a successful modification of our basic plan to illustrate the flexibility of the approach.

Our suggested lessons and activities throughout may need to be modified to suit the ages and interests of a particular group. The basic *procedures* we outline for each stage are suitable for students of any age, as we have repeatedly confirmed in our own teaching and as our colleagues have found in their classes. It is the *content* of discussions/dictation that will vary depending on student age. A topic that interests a seven-year-old will not necessarily engage an adult although their levels of English competency require the same instructional procedures. The way directions are given and the way students are handled will also, of course, vary with student age. We stress these points because some educators believe that teaching procedures must be basically different for children and adults. We have found that this is not so. It is the level of oral skills that should determine lesson procedures, not the age of the student.

## *REFERENCES*

**Asher, J. J.** ***Learning Another Language Through Actions.*** Los Gatos, CA: Sky Oaks Productions, 1977.