

The Language Experience Approach (LEA)

The Language Experience Approach (LEA) was originally developed (Lamoreaux and Lee, 1943) to prepare children for reading controlled vocabulary readers. Through the years, the method has evolved to a focus on simply teaching children to read. The basic premise of this pedagogical approach can be summed up as follows:

What I think about, I can say. What I say I can write or someone can write for me.
I can read what I can write and what others write for me to read (Allen, 1964).

Language Experience teachers reject traditional notions about how children learn to read. They use the natural language of the child as the basis for reading and writing instruction, use a variety of texts to teach reading (rather than using a basal reader only), and do not adhere to the belief that writing development must necessarily follow reading attainment.

The Language Experience Approach can be used quite naturally as part of a balanced literacy approach because of its emphasis on the child as meaning-maker. However, LEA is only one of many methods used by teachers in literacy-rich classrooms. Traditionally, the Language Experience Approach has been more teacher-directed than student-centered. Teachers took dictation and added in the necessary conventions of print as they wrote, rather than allowing children to explore language, spelling, and grammar on their own. Teachers usually read the transcribed stories back to the children instead of asking the children to read the finished work themselves. LEA teachers often focused on the mechanics of the text over the meaning of the text. In writing for the child, LEA teachers prevented students from experiencing the act of putting pencil to paper.

Teachers of English language learners may sometimes employ some of the methods used by LEA advocates, but more often, these teachers allow children to develop language use on their own terms. Children in literacy-rich classrooms are encouraged to ask questions about their own reading and writing and are urged to take risks to explore language use. Teachers only intervene when necessary to help students develop generally accepted rules of grammar and spelling. The basic premise of this approach is that students are at the center of their own learning.

References:

- Allen, R. V. (1964). The language experience approach. In W. G. Cutts (Ed.), *Teaching young children to read*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Office of Education.
- Lamoreaux, L., & Lee, D. (1943). *Learning to read through experience*. New York: Appleton Century Crofts.