

Language Experience Approach

Highlights: The language experience approach to instruction builds learners' literacy skills as their personal experiences are transcribed and become reading material for them. In this type of activity, spoken language and written language are linked. A language experience story can be effective for class community building. It also provides reading material for beginning level learners whose English oral skills exceed their literacy skills. Follow-up activities can include using the class generated text to teach explicit literacy skills through activities that require learners to select words from the story for vocabulary, spelling, or sound-symbol correspondence activities. The text can also be used to review a grammar point, such as sequence of tenses, word order, or pronoun referents (see Cloze Activity).

Objective: To record learners' own ideas and oral language and use the stories to increase literacy skills.

Context: This activity can be very effective in literacy- and beginning-level classes where most of the students have limited writing skills. It is suitable for general ESL classes as well as specific classes such as workplace or family literacy classes. It is not usually used in intermediate level or above classes.

Estimated time: The time varies widely depending on whether the shared activity the class writes about was a lengthy activity such as a class field trip or a shorter activity such as the shared viewing of a photograph in class. The core of the language experience approach - the group telling process while the teacher writes down the learners' words—may take a short time, between 10-20 minutes.

This document then can be used in multiple ways over time (e.g., for building sight vocabulary, spelling practice, listening to dictation, or learning basic grammar points, like personal pronouns or the verb "to be").

Materials: You will need the shared experience of the learners, or the "prompt." In addition, you will need a chalkboard or flip chart to record what students say. (See sample language experience activities below.)

Procedure:

1. First, learners need to share an experience, such as going to a museum exhibit, the local fair, or the grocery store. Sharing an evocative photograph or picture story or watching a video could also provide the prompt.
2. After the shared experience, elicit the story of the experience by asking learners questions and encouraging learners to contribute to the story. **Note:** Each member of the whole group can make a comment. In some groups it might be most effective to go around the room in order, assuming that all will respond. You can also ask for

volunteers and in more multilevel groups, the more proficient or confident learners might share first, giving the other learners more time to think and to pattern their responses after the other students.

3. Write down what learners say. **Note:** There are opposing ideas about how a language experience approach activity should be conducted. Some teachers say that, to be authentic, the teacher must record exactly what each learner says, even if it is not correct. Other teachers say that a teacher should model a learner's words correctly (e.g. changing incorrect number, pronoun reference, or verb form) because students want to use English correctly and that writing down mistakes reinforces the mistake. Writing the learners' words correctly often better serves the learners' needs and wishes.
4. After recording the story, read it aloud to the group and give the group an opportunity to edit or revise (adding or eliminating information).
5. Provide learners with an opportunity to read the story. They can read it in unison or take turns reading it out loud.
6. Use the story to develop reading skill-building activities. For example, you can make sentence strips and have learners put the sentences in order. To build vocabulary sight words, you can create cloze activities in which learners fill in the blanks with key words. See sample language experience approach activities below.

Evaluation: The sharing of the experience and the language experience approach activity itself can give the teacher an idea about how comfortable learners are feeling with the class, other learners, and the topic. An individual's part of the group story can give a little bit of information about oral proficiency. Teachers can monitor reading and writing skills as learners complete follow-up activities.

Extension activities: Learners can write a letter to someone they know telling about the experience in their own words.

(Adapted from the *REEP Adult ESL Curriculum*. Available at reepworld.org . Adapted with permission.)

Sample Language Experience Story and Follow-up Activities

Story (High Beginner Level)

Yesterday our class went to the National Zoo in Washington, DC. At 9:00 AM we took the Metro and got off at the Woodley Park stop. We walked about three blocks from the Metro to the National Zoo. First, we saw the giraffes and elephants. Then we saw the seals. Finally we saw the pandas. The pandas were so cute! We stayed at the National Zoo for two hours. At 11:30 AM we took the Metro back to school.

Follow-up Activity a: Strip Story

Directions to the teacher: Cut the following sentences into strips. Give each pair or group of students a sentence. Suggest that the students read each of the strips aloud to start. Then, tell them to put the story back in order without looking at the original. Tell them to notice words that tell you when something happens, such as “first,” “then,” and “finally.” When the students are ready, they can read the story to you, each group or pair reading their sentence strips in order. Discuss with them why they put the sentences in the order they did.

We stayed at the National Zoo for two hours.

Then we saw the seals.

The pandas were so cute!

At 11:30 AM we took the Metro back to school.

Yesterday our class went to the National Zoo in Washington, DC.

At 9:00 AM we took the Metro and got off at the Woodley Park stop.

We walked about three blocks from the Metro to the National Zoo.

First, we saw the giraffes and elephants.

Finally we saw the pandas.

Follow-up Activity b: Cloze Activity—Practicing Prepositions

Directions: Read the paragraph about our trip to the National Zoo. Then use the words from the list below the paragraph to fill in the missing words. Use each word just one time.

Yesterday our class went to the National Zoo ____ Washington, DC. ____ 9:00 AM we took the Metro and got off at the Woodley Park stop. We walked three blocks ____ the Metro to the National Zoo. First we saw the giraffes and elephants. Then we saw the seals. Finally we saw the pandas. The pandas were so cute! We stayed at the National Zoo _____ two hours. At 11:30 AM we took the Metro back _____ school.

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Source: National Center for Family Literacy and Center for Applied Linguistics. (2008). [*Practitioner Toolkit: Working with adult English language learners*](#). Louisville, KY, and Washington, DC: Authors.