

January 1970

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Ronald L. Cramer

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### Recommended Citation

Cramer, Ronald L. (1970) "The Language Experience Approach to Beginning Reading Instruction," *Michigan Reading Journal*: Vol. 4: Iss. 1, Article 6.  
Available at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mrj/vol4/iss1/6>

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# THE LANGUAGE EXPERIENCE APPROACH TO BEGINNING READING INSTRUCTION

by Ronald L. Cramer

The Language Experience Approach to Beginning Reading Instruction is an attempt to use the child's ability to communicate his experience through oral language (speaking and listening), written language (creative writing), artistic ability (drawing and painting) and dramatic ability (creative dramatics).

The child is introduced to reading instruction by means of pupil-dictated experience stories. Thus, the dictated story becomes the basic source of reading material. From this material an initial sight vocabulary is developed. This initial sight vocabulary is unique in that each child develops a reading vocabulary peculiar to his own capacity, interests, and oral language facility. In the beginning pupils are asked to respond to a stimulus presented by the teacher in the classroom. The stimulus may be any object, event or experience that is likely to evoke a lively response from children. Lively discussions frequently result when the stimulus is a pet (e.g., dog, cat, white mouse, snake) or some object of interest that can be manipulated or handled through personal contact by the students.

## The Group Experience Story

In the early stages the teacher begins with group-dictated ex-

perience stories which are recorded on newsprint or other appropriate material. The first story of the year may be conducted with the entire class. When a story is recorded for the entire class a number of children should be encouraged to contribute sentences or parts to the story. At some early point the teacher groups the children and begins group stories. Typically group stories are continued for a period of from two to four weeks. The groups should be flexible — that is static grouping for the group-dictated experience stories should be avoided. Normally, the groups should be limited to five or six pupils.

The teacher records the individual sentences which comprise the story in manuscript print onto a large piece of lined paper. The members of the group should be positioned so that they can see the recording of the story. All appropriate punctuation should be included in the story as correct usage demands. The form of the story should provide a visual impression similar to prose material found in books. Story titles may be added either before or after the production of the story depending on the desires of the group.

The integrity of the child's language must be maintained.

This means that the language of the child is recorded precisely as given. For example, if the child says, "The dog, he look like Paul," the teacher doesn't "correct" it up by writing "The dog looks like Paul." This destroys the integrity of the child's production and introduces a visual configuration which is different from what was said. Furthermore, such correction or standardization of the child's language implicitly suggests that his language is inferior — which in fact it is not. It is simply non-standard language — a dialect variation. I will leave for another time and place the debatable issues involved and the educational questions raised by the preceding statements. Suffice it to say that I am aware that this raises the issue of when, where and how (and even if) the divergent speaker of English should be taught to speak the standard dialect. I am convinced that the very beginning stages of learning to read are complex enough without insisting that the beginning reader learn a quasi-foreign language concomittment with learning to read. Furthermore, correcting the child's language may lead to a reluctance on his part to dictate stories.

After the dictation of the story the teacher leads the children in the re-reading of the story in the following manner:

1. Teacher reads the story back to the group using pointer.
2. The group reads the story together in unison following the teachers lead.
3. Individual pupils are invited to read their contributions.

4. One or two pupils may be asked if they would like to try to read the whole story. The teacher should provide help as needed.

### Individually Dictated Stories

Individually dictated stories follow the period of group dictated stories. This can be initiated fairly early in the year — one or two weeks into the school year at the first-grade level — although some teachers prefer to wait for three or four weeks. Individually dictated stories should be started when it becomes apparent to the teacher that, (1) the children are acquiring some story telling facility concerning their experiences and, (2) when the teacher perceives that the children understand the basic procedures developed in the group stories.

The stimulus for individual stories can often be presented to the entire class or if preferred to a subgroup within the class or to an individual student. <sup>1</sup>At some point early in the process the teacher will soon discover that students are eager to dictate stories about their personal experiences consequently, a special stimulus to initiate student talk becomes less and less necessary. This is particularly so when the teacher provides a wide range of learning activities and interest areas which the children are able to utilize and explore as part of their learning options.

It should not be assumed that eagerness to dictate will occur with all students. Consequently, pupils need the oral language sharing experience that is fostered by

group and class stimulus sessions. The favorable mix of ideas and exchange of words that occurs in such sessions are useful experiences at any rate. One common motivation session will often produce individually dictated stories which are quite divergent in vocabulary, arrangement of ideas, thought patterns, and basic emphasis. Teachers sometimes prefer to deal with one group at a time when obtaining individual stories. If so, it is wise to:

1. gather a group of children in the room,
2. present the stimulus,
3. provide meaningful work for the children, and
4. take one child aside from the group and record his story.

The arrangement should be such that each child has a private audience with the teacher so that he can dictate without fear that other children will overhear his story. Not all children are concerned about privacy. However, some children appear hesitant to share their private thoughts within the hearing range of others. Hence, their desire for privacy should be respected.

The individually dictated stories are recorded either using manuscript printing or typewritten on a primer typewriter. If the teacher is not skilled in the use of a typewriter, manuscript printing will suffice quite as well as a typewritten story.<sup>2</sup> Available evidence indicates that children have little difficulty in shifting back and forth from manuscript to print and vice versa. When the individual story has been com-

pleted it is typically pasted or taped into a standard composition notebook. One side of the sheet is for the story and the other is for the illustration which the child will prepare for his story.

The teacher should take the following steps in the re-reading of the story.

1. The teacher reads back what the child has said, or they may read it together if the child is able to do so. The teacher must be sensitive to when support is needed and when it is not required. Since it is useful to make reading appear normal and easy it is best not to allow the student to stumble and struggle over unknown words. At a later time in his development it may be more appropriate to allow a very brief time of independent struggling with words.
2. The child returns to his desk and underlines the words he knows. Sometimes later he is asked to underline the words he does not know. The transition to underlining unknown words is made when the child is capable of recognizing over seventy percent of the different words in any one story.
3. When the child returns to his desk he is asked to illustrate his story. These illustrations are intended to reflect the pupils artistic ability, his choice of ideas to represent the story and the attributes of the concepts which he has chosen to illustrate.<sup>3</sup>

4. The next day the group is reassembled and each child is asked to read his story to the group (with appropriate teacher help). The underlined words give the teacher a clue as to the help the child will need. Unrecognized words are supplied by the teacher rather immediately. This is done to prevent embarrassment to the student and to facilitate the flow of the story to the listeners. Word recognition needs may be noted at this time but it is not an appropriate time for an extended word recognition lesson.
5. On a third day the child returns to the teacher and reads his story again, with the child underlining the new words he wishes to include in his word-bank. New words remembered after the third reading are recorded on cards and given to the child.

### Learning A Sight Vocabulary

The words that have been remembered after the third re-reading of the story are recorded on small cards (1½ inches by ½ inch). Gradually each pupil accumulates a personal stock of sight words. Obviously, this personal stock reflects the pupils individual oral language facility and is quite dependent on the types of stories he has chosen to dictate. In basal reading programs each student learns a common core of sight words. In the Language Experience Approach, however, the sight words learned differ from pupil to pupil. The

redundancy of many English words results in different children accumulating many of the same words. Consequently, the words each child learns turns out to be a more accurate reflection of the pupils own interests, experience, knowledge, and oral language usage. Finally, this stock of words is learned within a context of material that is not stultified by the constraints which typify the basal system of controlled vocabulary and controlled concepts.

The sight words each pupil obtains are kept permanently at each pupils desk in a small container, envelope, box, etc. When a child has acquired a sufficient number of words he may begin to use them in many different ways. Some of the typical ways that the words have been used are listed below. Its use, however, need only be limited by the teachers own imagination and creativity.

1. Children can use it to alphabetize the words. In this way they soon grasp the functional nature of the alphabet.
2. Pupils can produce questions, inquiries, remarks, etc. by arranging their words into meaningful units. These questions and remarks may be directed to the teacher or to another student.
3. Children are encouraged to invent stories built around the words in their banks. When a child discovers a need for a word not in his bank he may request this word from the teacher. It is best initially, however, to

restrict pupils to using the words they have available or words that they can approximate with their own crudely devised spellings.

4. Children can be given various types of work recognition practice and activities using the words in their banks.

These invented stories are a natural forerunner to creative writing and they provide an effective transition to writing stories with pen and paper.

When the child's stock of words becomes so large that use of the word bank becomes cumbersome, he introduces words into it very selectively. Most of the children reach this stage during the first-grade year. Periodically, the teacher checks the words each child has in his word bank. Words that are unknown and cannot be re-established through re-reading of the stories are discarded. The teacher should expect a nominal amount of forgetting. If the activities with words are enjoyable, purposeful, and judiciously spaced forgetting sight words will not become a serious problem. Finally, forgetting will be minimized if words are not placed in the word banks haphazardly. A reasonable criterion is to put only those words in a child's container that he can readily identify in isolation.

### Word Analysis Skills

Word recognition skills can be handled in a number of different ways. One can, if he chooses, use some prepackaged word recognition program. Another possibility is to allow the teacher to develop her own program based

on her experience and knowledge of what constitutes a proper word recognition program.

There are, however, things which should be stressed in any sound word recognition program. Word recognition skills should be taught on a whole class, group, and individual basis. This is best done by segmenting the allotted time into several sessions ranging in length from four to ten minutes. In addition to whole class activities word recognition should be taught at appropriate group and individual levels. Special emphasis ought to be placed upon auditory and auditory visual discrimination skills. From the first day of school children should receive instruction in recognizing initial sounds, ending sounds, and rhyming words. Gradually they should progress into the full repertoire of word recognition skills that must be taught. Research clearly suggest that word recognition activities can and should be paced faster and begun earlier than we have been wont to do in the recent past.

### Language Experience and the Total Language Arts Program

School and classroom libraries. There should be a strong central library program staffed by a competent, well-trained librarian. The number of books should meet the American Library Association minimum standard of ten books per child. Early in the year the first graders should be taken to the library and shown how it works. Weekly visits should be scheduled and each child permitted to take out several books if he wishes. Within each classroom provision should be made

for a large and varied library. The central library is no substitute for this facility. A library and materials center should be established by each teacher. This center should be provided with several informal chairs and an old rug if possible. Children are invited to go to the library corner to look for known words in the books and other materials. Magazines and periodicals should be available so that children can cut out words and paste them on paper. This type of immediate transfer activity will help recognition and facilitate retention of the sight words.

**Creative writing.** Through the foundation provided by the dictated stories, the word recognition program, and the word banks, there is a natural progression into creative writing. Creative writing should be initiated as soon as the children have obtained some facility with handwriting skills. For this reason it is essential that the teaching of handwriting skills be commenced at the onset of school. As soon as children can write they are urged to create their own stories. Since spelling demands are faced early children should be urged to spell the best they can. The removal of the constraint of the orthography causes children to respond favorably to the invitation to write. On occasion the teacher can supply the correct spelling of a word but in most instances she should encourage the child to try it on his own. The teacher should provide only certain clues such as, "How do you think it begins?" or "It begins like the word big."

**Directed Reading Instruction.** Group instruction in basal readers is commenced at the first grade level and not before. Preprimers and primers are not used in the formal sense but are used much like trade books. As soon as a group of six or seven children have reached the first reader stage they are introduced to the Directed Reading Thinking Activity. This often occurs in December or early in January in our experimental programs. Once formal instruction on a DRTA basis is started a dual reading instruction program is employed. The dictated stories continue throughout the year. Then, for a period of three or four weeks, group instruction in basal readers is carried on. Basals are then put aside and individualized instruction in trade books is commenced. This alternating plan is followed for the remainder of the year.

## FOOTNOTES

1. Russell G. Stauffer, "Language Experience Approach," unpublished material, (Reading Study Center, University of Delaware, Newark, Delaware).
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.

(Ronald Kramer is Assistant Professor, School of Education, Oakland University.)