

**LANGUAGE EXPERIENCE APPROACH REVISITED : THE USE OF
PERSONAL NARRATIVES IN ADULT L2 LITERACY INSTRUCTION**

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Abstract

This article considers nearly a century of language and literacy research and practice, and such international notoriety as Charles Fries, Kenneth Goodman, Princess Masako, Australian immigrants, and Latin American mariachi bands, to confirm the old adage, "Experience is the best teacher." Written in easy and accessible prose for classroom teachers worldwide, the article reviews basic procedures and theories supporting the Language Experience Approach as it applies to second language learning and literacy instruction. Since the approach is well suited for a wide variety of literacy tutoring programs, LEA's application to ESL literacy instruction is worth reviewing.

"The world cheats those who cannot read" – IX century Chinese poet¹

Introduction

For almost a century now, educators have used personal experience as the basis for learning (e.g., Dewey, 1938) and literacy instruction (Huey, 1908). The Language Experience Approach (LEA) draws upon and takes advantage of this important link between experience and education by using student narratives as the basis for reading instruction. Although most commonly associated with first language (L1) literacy instruction, LEA was used with some success in the mid 1980s to 1990s in second language (L2) literacy courses with students of diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Since the approach is well suited for a wide variety of literacy tutoring programs common on college campuses today such as community literacy (Peck, Flower, & Higgins, 1995) and service-learning (Herzberg, 1994), LEA's application to ESL literacy instruction is worth (re)considering. This article will review the basic LEA procedures and theory as they apply to beginning adult L2 literacy instruction.

LEA Described

The basic LEA procedure is quite simple. Dixon and Nessel (1983, pp. ix-x) outline a five-step process²:

1. Teacher and student discuss the topic to be focused on in the dictation. Observations and opinions are exchanged. Oral language skills are developed and reinforced.
2. The student dictates an account or story to the teacher, who records the statements to construct the basic reading material.
3. The student reads the story several times (with the teacher helping as needed), until the story has become quite familiar. Reading comprehension is made easier by the fact that the student is reading material that is self-generated.
4. Individual story words are learned, and other reading skills are reinforced through teacher-designed activities related to the story.
5. Students move from reading their own dictation to reading other-author materials as they develop confidence and skill with the reading process.

Theoretical Support

As Jones (1986) notes, the basic approach to LEA as outlined in the five-step process above draws on several key language learning principles:

1. Learning occurs from the known to the unknown. The learner begins with his or her own spoken language.
2. Learning occurs most effectively in a general to specific direction. In reading, students must be immersed in a meaningful context of written language for learning to be most effective.
3. Struggling adult readers usually have a low self-concept as readers and need to be assured of some immediate success. There is little to lose and much to gain with the LEA and assisted readings.
4. Adult learners are often very time conscious and need to leave each lesson with a feeling of accomplishment. Everyone reads at every LEA session.

With a better understanding of the theory behind the LEA, teachers can and should adapt the basic “dictate and read” procedure Dixon and Nessel propose to meet the needs of individual teaching and learning contexts. One such example is the more recent application of LEA to ESL instruction (e.g., Wales, 1994).

However, while L1 and L2 learners may both benefit equally from instruction based in the here and now of personal experiences, beginning L2 learners have not reached the same degree of oral fluency as their native-speaking counter-parts. This presents a challenge for applying LEA to L2 contexts since traditionally LEA assumes the learner has oral and syntactic fluency, as can be seen in the following quotation by Jones (1986):

By converting the learner's own words to written form and using these words and sentences as the student's first reading 'text' ... we can be assured that the learner is familiar with the vocabulary, the sentence structure, and the content encountered in beginning reading. (p. 29)

If the teacher is not able to engage the students in the type of oral discourse described above, then can or should LEA be used?

Traditional accounts of language learning describe a sequential acquisition of skills, from listening to speaking, then reading to writing. Charles Fries, a proponent of the audiolingual method of language instruction, argued that mastery of one skill was necessary before moving on to the next. Teachers using such an approach to L1 or L2 instruction would advocate postponing reading instruction until sufficient oral proficiency had been developed. However, Kenneth Goodman and advocates of more current approaches to language instruction believe "the four skills" are interrelated and mutually beneficial components of the "whole language" and thus should be taught simultaneously. Whole language proponents argue that reading should be taught along side speaking, writing, and grammatical skills.

If we accept the arguments for whole language instruction, then the next question needs to be: How do we most effectively adapt the basic LEA procedure to work with limited-English proficiency students?

Since beginning level students cannot be expected to converse easily in the L2 classroom, the instructor will have to assume a greater responsibility for managing and maintaining the conversation. In an adult immigrant LEA literacy program in Australia, teachers discovered that most students:

...found self-assertion in directing the course extremely difficult, particularly in the first 100 hours. The instructor did what the students expected from an instructor, providing all the input for some time and taking the heat off the students. (Wales, 1994, p. 203)

To overcome students' limitations in, and inhibitions about, speaking, Ringel (1989) advocates the use of picture or word cues to initiate and contextualize topics of conversation. Universal topics such as food, clothes, wedding customs, holidays, and animals allow students from all cultures a segue into the conversation. A picture of Princess Masako or Diana or a written prompt such as "mariachi" could be used to encourage students from one country to describe the topic to students from other cultures (Ringel, 1989). The teacher can help students expand on the topic by adopting a reporter's stance and asking simple "who," "what," "where," "when," and "how" questions in order to get more information from the students while also navigating around their limitations in speaking. Although this technique works best in groups since it allows for scaffolding and cooperative learning (e.g., Bruner, 1983; Bruffee, 1993, respectively), it may also be used with individual students with the teacher or tutor adjusting his or her speech to match the students' communicative ability. In either case, such regalia has the advantage of drawing out students reluctant to express themselves in the L2 by providing them with contextually-rich schemata.

In beginning-level ESL classes, an economy of words is an asset. Lengthy explanations or text in the L2 quickly becomes “gobbledygook” to students with limited L2 processing abilities. Therefore, in eliciting topical information from students to create an LEA text, a few sentences may provide sufficient material for subsequent lessons. However, while the text should be simple in structure, it must also be sophisticated in content so as not to insult the intelligence of adult learners.

One final caveat on the basic five step LEA procedure outlined earlier that instructors should bear in mind when working with language minority students is translating the students’ dialect into more accepted grammatical forms. For L1 students, Jones (1986) warns, “the syntax [should be] preserved exactly as it was spoken” in order to “prevent affronting the students with the suggestion that his/her language needs to be changed” and “assure the strongest possible connection with the student’s spoken language” (29-30). Recent immigrants usually have not invested as much time in learning the target language as the illiterate adult L1 speakers to whom Jones refers, and thus are often more amiable to corrections from the teacher or fellow students. Language minority students who have resided in the country for some time might be more resistant to such correction since they have years of experience successfully using nonstandard but intelligible forms with native speakers. One approach to working with this issue is using the group’s collective knowledge of language use in different contexts (i.e., different registers and styles) such as home, work, and school to adjust the form to match the context.

Since the context to a large extent determines if dialect variations should be considered errors or not, raising the students’ awareness of the appropriacy of different registers and dialects in various discourse communities or settings offers another way to approach the problem. Language minority students usually have an extensive L2 vocabulary and high oral proficiency, so encouraging them to draw upon these linguistic resources in LEA instruction is beneficial. In both cases, the students’ own language and life experiences still provide the basis for instruction, but attention is also focused on differences between the students’ own oral language and that of target language speakers in a collaborative, supportive way.

Accuracy and Negative Feedback

Since LEA challenges traditional notions of error avoidance in language teaching (e.g., behaviorism, audio-lingual method, and phonic instruction) by allowing of oral language features and other nonstandard sentence structures, teachers who wish to use this or other whole language approaches in their classroom often have to spend a considerable amount of time and energy “selling” the parents and administration on the rationale behind such an approach to language instruction. LEA/ESL instructors may encounter resistance not only from the target community, but also from the students themselves since they may have been educated in countries that emphasized grammatical accuracy or taken standardized tests such as the TOEFL that place a similar premium on correct forms. An Australian colleague once described the torrent of complaints his school received when a teacher sent students home with a collection of student-generated LEA stories that contained many grammar “mistakes.” The parents of these immigrant children were not educated in schools favoring such an approach, and consequently

viewed the errors negatively. A flexible approach to LEA seems the best solution here.

In order to anticipate and address these concerns for accuracy, instructors wishing to use LEA with ESL students may want to consider follow-up lessons on:

- Grammar: Word order and verb tense through the use of scrambled sentences and chronological sequences. Models and self-correction can also be useful.
- Lexicon: Lists and charts of new words learned.
- Pronunciation and spelling: Whole-word recognition reinforced through the discussion of word meaning and peculiar spellings, copying of words into vocabulary notebooks, and simple dictation exercises.

The extent to which an individual instructor chooses to focus on grammar should reflect the needs and concerns of the students. The instructor who notes recurring errors will be in a better position to address the students' needs and concerns in subsequent lessons.

Affective factors

Adults who are illiterate in their first or second language may also suffer from a host of negative emotions associated with previous failures in school and learning to read. They may feel that they are too old or too stupid to learn. Adults illiterate in their L1 have often harbored a lifetime of frustration and sense of failure making sense of the written symbols that convey meaning to everyone else but them. These feelings will be compounded if the learner then must undertake learning a second language, particularly if the host community doesn't value multilingualism and/or harbors anti-immigration sentiments. Wales (1994) notes, for example, that many Australians believe "immigrants should have learnt English already and that any difficulties they have are due to laziness, stupidity, or lack of commitment..." (202). Such sentiments are unfortunately common in the United States and other countries too. LEA can reduce some of the learner's anxieties by using familiar content in friendly one-on-one or small group interactions. Students' gain a sense of accomplishment since they are reading material that is self-generated and thus easily comprehended, as well as a sense of satisfaction working with materials that are personally meaningful.

Conclusion

Although there is no one "super method" for language teaching, LEA offers a useful and effective method for beginning literacy instruction by linking the students' language and experience in learning. While LEA was initially created and used for one-on-one L1 literacy instruction, it is readily adaptable to L2 and group learning environments too. Creating group generated texts, as Wales (1994) did with beginning learners, or sharing student-generated texts with other learners as Dixon and Nessel (1983) suggest as the final step in the LEA procedure they outline, are just a few examples of how LEA can be adapted to other teaching and learning contexts. Other example LEA projects might include oral histories, literacy anthologies, or cultural reports. In all cases, the teacher must work to create a cooperative and supportive learning environment by actively listening and responding to ideas in a nonjudgmental way, and fostering an environment where mistakes can be made without an

accompanying sense of failure. Used sensitively in these ways, LEA can effectively help beginning adult readers regain a sense of pride and accomplishment as they become active readers, writers, and contributing members in the target language community.

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¹ Translated by Arthur Waley (Morris, 1979, p. 139)

² Many of the basic ideas and activities used in LEA might be described as “common knowledge” in reading pedagogy since the techniques have been used in one form or another since the early 1900s. In citing Dixon & Nessel’s work here, I do not mean to suggest that they are the original creators of LEA, but rather that their description of the basic procedures is one of the more concise and applicable statements to be found in the literature on LEA. (For more on LEA, see Caplan, 1989; Lamoreaux & Lee, 1943; Nessel & Jones, 1981; Stauffer, 1980). I have made minor modifications to the expression but not the content of the outline they provide.

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