

Getting Started with the Language Experience Approach (LEA)

Overview

The Language Experience Approach is a way to generate authentic meaningful texts from students' discussions.

- First the students participate in a group experience, such as a trip, read aloud, experiment or art process.
- Then you discuss this experience as a class. You can record important vocabulary or concepts on the board during the discussion.
- Finally, the students construct a text based off the experience and discussion. This allows the students use their own vocabulary, language patterns and prior knowledge to capture the essence of the experience.
- Later the students can easily read back the text since it was self generated. This helps language learners move from oral language to literacy development in a natural way.

Suggestions

Start the students off with a prompt from the experience itself. This will scaffold the process for beginning learners. (see bold in sample)

If the students are at a beginning level of proficiency you may decide to "scribe" the entire LEA text. You would write down each utterance that the students share. You may choose to scribe by quoting the students, for example- Ming said, "I made movements like a mouse"

More advanced students can use a shared writing approach. You can do this as a whole class leading the charting as each student adds their contribution to the chart. You may also give the prompt and allow the students to work in a group to record their own experiences.

Once the experience is charted it can be used as a read aloud or used to teach something specific about the language. It is nice to produce a copy of the text for each student to keep.

Since the students generated the text it will be easy for them to read. You can begin a collection of these LEAs in a notebook or folder. This provides documentation for the experiences they have participated in and gives evidence of their growth and development.

Sample LEA

Today we pretended to be different animals in our dance. I made movements like a mouse. It was fun to move around the floor like a snake. We pretended to be a butterfly. We had a lot of fun.

With each experience that gets charted you will see the level of sophistication in vocabulary and grammatical structures start to increase. This serves as a viable language assessment.

Students like to see their ideas validated and shared with others. You should avoid making any grammatical or spelling changes during the original charting process. You can make changes to grammar without changing the meaning of the students' ideas when you type the text to share with others.

Managing an LEA

The key to this being a beneficial activity is to be sure that all students have provided input during the charting. If you are doing this as a whole class you will want to manage the time effectively so that all the students get their turn. It may be helpful to review the rules for group discussions. If the students are charting in a small group, assign each student a different colored marker so that you can be sure each one has added their idea to the chart. You can also assign numbers to each student and tell them to go around in order until all the numbers have had a chance to speak/write.

Reference:

Nessel, D. & Dixon, C. (2008) *Using the Language Experience Approach with English Language Learners: Strategies for Engaging Students and Developing Literacy*. California: Corwin Press.

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