

The Language Experience Approach: An Invitation to Talk, Read and Write

Sonika Kaushik | sonikakaushik@yahoo.co.in

Sonika Kaushik has a doctoral degree in Education. Her research focuses on children's engagement with literacy in pre-school settings. She works with various organizations in the areas of early language and literacy, children's literature and in-service teacher education.

Key Words: Oral language, Written language, Literacy, Experiences, Home language, Transition

Abstract

In this paper, I will focus on the significance of Language Experience Approach in the early learning years. I will discuss the different features of this approach, which contribute towards making it an effective and meaningful approach for language learning and literacy. In particular, I will highlight the relevance of using children's experiences for making a transition from home language to school language, and from oral language to written language. In the multilingual context of India, this approach welcomes the use of different languages, not just for the purposes of speaking but also for reading and writing.

It is the beginning of the school day. The few children of Grade I who have reached school are huddled together in a corner of their classroom and are engaged in a spirited talk. As other children trickle in, the whole class is abuzz with a certain news. Soon the teacher of that grade enters the classroom and notices that the class is charged with excitement. As children become aware of her presence in the classroom, they rush to spill the news to her.

A goat has given birth to a kid—a baby goat—in Dinesh's household, a five-year old boy in the class. With some directions from the teacher, the children settle into their places on the *taatpattis*, readying themselves for the morning message. The whole class is drawn into an animated discussion about the birth of the baby goat. What does the kid look like? Did someone see the birthing? What name will it be given? Is it a boy or a girl? How small is it? Who else has kids and calves? Following the daily routine, the teacher offers to write the morning message that the children would like to have her write on the board. After a few attempts and suggestions at phrasing a message by the children, finally, she writes the following sentence:

“वा की बकरी ने बच्चो दीया “
(His goat has given birth to a kid.)

The teacher asks tentatively if they would like to add whose goat it is, clearly indicating that it is the children's decision to make any change to the sentence phrased by them. The children find the suggestion suitable and the sentence is rephrased as:

“दिनेष की बकरी ने बच्चो दीयो“
(Dinesh's goat has given birth to a kid.)

The teacher asks the children to help her write their message. As she holds the chalk to the board, she waits for the children to dictate the message. She mouths the words as she slowly writes

each letter of the word in the message on the board. The children adjust their pace of dictation to the teacher's pace of writing. As she finishes writing each word, she tracks it with her finger from left to right and reads it aloud. She invites the children to read the message with her. Once again, she points to each word as the children read the message.

When starting school or pre-school, most children are at the point of making transitions of several kinds. Firstly, the transition from the familiar environs of their homes to the relatively unfamiliar school setting. Secondly, the transition from the language of their home to the language of the school. Thirdly, the transition from oral language to written language. However, these transitions are not absolute; they are diverse in nature. These transitions happen in classroom contexts which are fairly complex because of the linguistic diversity of the classroom. There are some children who come from a linguistic background that is similar to the one in school, while others find themselves in a school environment in which teachers speak a language that is alien to them. In addition, classroom contexts wherein the teacher and children do not have a “common” language for communication are not rare. Similarly, the nature and kind of exposure children have to the written language or print before entering school is fairly diverse. The transition for a child who has had access to print and opportunities to engage with it will vary from that of a child who has had little or no such access or opportunities. Whatever be the case, these transitions are not easy for most children. Our concerns around poor reading and writing achievement, and getting children to learn the language of the curriculum or school is evidence of the fact that these transitions are not smooth for children entering the early grades in school. However, teaching children how to read and write in the language of the

curriculum or the language of the school is a challenging task in a multi-lingual country such as India. The children belong to diverse language backgrounds, and for many of them the language of the school or the curriculum is not the language they have grown up listening to or speaking or witnessing the significant others around them at home read and write.

In this paper, I will examine how Language Experience Approach draws upon children's experiences and invites young developing readers and writers to engage with reading and writing. The relevance of the Language Experience Approach in supporting young children's transition from oral language to written language in the early years is well-known (Dorr, 2006). In the following section, I will briefly discuss Language Experience Approach, often referred to as LEA.

The Language Experience Approach (LEA)

The vignette described at the beginning of the paper gives us a glimpse into what the Language Experience Approach is all about. In the vignette, the teacher and children are collectively engaged in talking, writing and reading, at the centre of which is an experience shared by a child. The "ownership" of the experience by the child or children, and for it to become the "purpose" or reason for discussion, reading and writing are aspects that are vital to this approach.

In this approach, children are invited to share their experiences—collective or individual, thoughts or feelings—on something of personal value and meaning to them. The experiences can be as varied as the children's personal lives, the different classroom situations and

settings in different places. They could range from doing things together in the classroom such as rearranging the books in the reading corner; dusting the taatpattis each morning; watching a cricket match or a movie; spotting a spider or a lizard on the classroom wall; visiting the local haat with their family; watching the din and pandemonium of an election campaign; talking about the entry of a new child in the classroom; or responding to a book read by the teacher. Alternatively, but, perhaps less often, are instances where the teacher "suggests" an idea. For example, a class of kindergartners was asked if they would like to collectively draft a letter to the author of a storybook they had enjoyed listening to and reading. Ordinarily, this is something which will perhaps not occur to four-year olds. The teacher showed them a possibility of meaningful and purposeful reading and writing. The text emerging from each interaction acquires a shape and format congruent with the purpose of writing. In the vignette shared earlier, the class was composing a morning message. It was a message that will stay on the board for the entire school day. Children will have the opportunity to read it as often as they would like.

This is an approach which essentially looks at children's experiences and personal worlds as significant contexts, which lend organically to the development of reading and writing in young children. Put simply, the teacher writes what the children dictate. However, the process unfolding during this interaction is a powerful one. The teacher scaffolds (Mason & Sinha, 1993) the children's writing and reading with the required support as children lead the process.

In the following section, I will further elaborate on a few significant aspects of LEA.

Valuing Children's Experiences

Children's experiences make for a very familiar and comfortable context for learning and is therefore a powerful resource. By using their own experiences, children bring or create their own meaning because they "own" the experiences by virtue of having lived them. These experiences provide the content and context of reading and writing in the practice of LEA. Further, LEA invites children to talk about and share their experiences. This breaks the boundaries between the in-school and the out-of-school worlds. LEA also demolishes another barrier—the barrier between the home and school languages of the children. This has been discussed in the next section.

Legitimizing the Use of Home Language in School

The language children are born into is the language in which they experience the world. The child's home or first language is the language in which some of the earliest concepts and ideas about the world are formed in the child's mind. The child's oral language is one of the most powerful knowledge resources that the child brings to school. However, quite often, the language a child brings from home and the language of the school and curriculum are not the same. This is hardly surprising in our multi-lingual country. LEA recognizes the significance of the child's oral language in the early years. It does not interfere with the children's language and values, or with

their oral expression in their home language. This sends a vital message to the children—that their home language is welcome in school. Then LEA goes a step further and represents the oral language of the children in reading and writing as well. LEA makes it possible for the children to use their home language for reading and writing in school. The metaphor of "bridging" is often used to explain the connection that LEA creates between the children's oral and written language. As the children dictate the message, the teacher writes it in clear and legible handwriting on the board. The children witness their words taking form on the board or on paper. This experience of watching their words and experiences transforming into print conveys to them several significant concepts about the written language.

Space for Multilinguality

The vignette described at the beginning of the paper is from a classroom in a village school in Mathura. The school prescribes textbooks in Hindi, which is also the medium of instruction. However, the children are more comfortable dictating the message in Brij, the language spoken in the region of western Uttar Pradesh. The teacher writes simultaneously, as the message is dictated by the children. The teacher does not suggest any change in the words or syntax to align the language of the sentence with the school language. Multilinguality is not merely about providing labels to things in different languages. LEA embraces the use of non-school languages not just in their oral forms but also in reading and writing.

Experiencing Reading and Writing as Meaningful Processes

In the process of watching the teacher write the dictated message or word, the children experience writing and reading as processes which can document and represent their thoughts, experiences and words. The dictated message or word is not based on any teachable aspect of language and literacy, but emerges out of the organic nature of the shared experience or thought. However, the possibilities it offers to develop concepts related to print are multiple and diverse. The processes of reading and writing are not fragmented or sequenced to “teach” any particular word, letter or sound. Children witness and engage with them in their wholeness. In other words, they are engaging with real or authentic reading and writing, which is an end in itself. The reading and writing taking place in the context of the LEA is led by the child or children. Consequently, the experience of being a reader and writer is immediate for the child.

Holding the Reins of the Writing Process

Right from the idea to be written, to the choice of words and phrases used, to the length of sentences and the text, everything is decided by the child. The child is the decision maker. The child holds the reins of the most important aspect of writing—the process of composing. As the child dictates, the teacher supports the developmental aspects of writing, for example, the formation of the letters, the letter-sound association, the spellings of words and

other such mechanical aspects of writing. LEA gives children an opportunity to observe writing in the context of purposeful and authentic writing and not as a drill exercise to learn the letter shapes and sounds. Of course, children need several opportunities during the school day to observe others read and write and be a part of the process. In a nutshell, the teacher “demonstrates” (Cambourne, 2002) to the child how to “handwrite”, while the child shoulders the “responsibility” (Cambourne, 2002) of composing.

Creating Texts

The practice of LEA leads to the creation of texts which are not only written in children's language, but are also rooted in their personal contexts. This is an empowering experience for children. The texts represent the child's world view and the larger socio-cultural context of the child. Once written, depending on the theme and nature of the texts, besides being displayed in the classroom for reading, they can also be put together as reading material in the classroom libraries or reading corners. In addition to a variety of books, children's writing and dictated stories make excellent resources for nurturing reading and writing in the early years.

Conclusion

Children need several and diverse opportunities to read and write in order to learn how to read and write. Opportunities to read, write and talk provide the young developing readers and writers with possibilities to create formulations about written and spoken language and discard them, if needed. LEA is a way of looking at these reading and writing opportunities, wherein the focus is on the children's

experiences. The acknowledgment of children's lives and experiences in their language makes the school classroom a friendlier place for them and eases their various transitions. However, in our country, the value of this approach remains mostly undermined, even in circles where it is known. The primary efforts to teach reading and writing are geared towards the sequential teaching of fragmented bits of language and LEA

remains a "frill" exercise. However, the possibilities this approach offers to children in terms of dealing with various aspects of reading and writing simultaneously are immense. Perhaps, a reconsideration of what the processes of reading and writing encompass, especially for a young learner, will allow a better appreciation of the Language Experience Approach.

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