The Group Experience

Groups may also develop language experience stories together. An experience can be set up and carried out by the group, or stories can grow out of experiences and stimuli from any part of the learners' personal, work, or classroom lives. The following steps are often involved:

1. *Choosing the experience or stimulus.* In collaboration with the learners, choose a prompt or activity that can be discussed and written up in some form. This might include pictures, movies, videotapes, songs, books or articles, class projects, field trips, holidays or celebrations, or an activity designed for this purpose.

2. *Organizing the activity.* Develop a plan of action with the class. This might include what you will do and when, and what you will need. The plans can be written on the board to provide the first link between the activity itself and the written word.

3.

3. *Conducting the experience.* The following activities might be done in the classroom or in the community.

In the classroom	**In the community**
Preparing food (sandwich, French toast, salad, popcorn)	Taking field trips (to the bank, market, malls, library, city hall)
Making cards (thank you notes, get well cards, holiday cards)	Mapping the school or the neighborhood.
Class projects (simulations, bulletin boards, skits)	

If the experience takes place within the classroom, the teacher can narrate it as it unfolds, repeating key words and phrases.
For more advanced learners, discussions, as well as actual experiences, can evolve into group-produced texts. Discussion topics might include work, adult education, adjustment to life in the U.S., or current local and world events. Again, the teacher might write key words and phrases on the board as they are mentioned in the discussion.

4. *Discussing the experience*, including all learners in the discussion and writing key words and phrases on the board. The class might, for example, reconstruct the sequence of events that took place. Some learners may be capable of describing an entire experience or generating an extended text about a prompt, while others may only be able to answer questions about it. The teacher may need to stimulate or focus the discussion by asking wh-questions--Who was involved? When did this take place? What did we do first? Regardless of the level of active participation of various learners, it is crucial that all *understand* the discussion.

5. *Developing a written account.* The class works together to develop a written account of what was done or discussed. Before actually writing a text, the class might do some planning activities like brainstorming, webbing or mapping, listing, or sequencing ideas. Learners may dictate a description or sequence of events in an activity while the teacher or aide writes it down, or a group of students may work together in groups to produce an account. Regardless of who does the writing, it should be easily visible to all learners--on the board, on a flip chart pad, or on an overhead transparency. The teacher does not correct the learners' language at this point, although learners may correct themselves or each other as they work together. Formal correction can be done later, as part of the revising and editing stages.
With beginning students, written compositions may be very simple, just a sentence or two if this represents their level of English proficiency. Length is not significant.

6. *Reading the account.* Once the written text is complete, the teacher or a learner can read it aloud to the class, focusing on key words and phrases, and then learners can read it silently on their own. Of course, oral reading of the account does not need to occur *only* at this stage, but can be done at many different points during its production, thus promoting rethinking and revision throughout its evolution.

7. *Extending the experience.* Many language and literacy activities beyond rereading can be based on the written text. The following possibilities can be selected and adapted according to learners' proficiency levels.
With beginning learners, teachers can

- have students copy the story themselves;
- have students match words with pictures or definitions;

- delete every *n*th word (4th, 5th, 6th, etc.) to create a cloze exercise. Have the students fill in the blanks either with or without the assistance of a word bank, depending on their literacy level;
- select words from the story for vocabulary, spelling, or sound-symbol correspondence activities;
- use the texts to review a grammar point, such as sequence of tenses, word order, or pronoun referents;
- dictate the story for learners to write;
- write the sentences in scrambled order and have students rewrite them, restoring the correct sequence;
- scramble key words and have students unscramble them.

More advanced learners can

- use the group-produced text as the basis for individually written texts about the same topic, about a similar experience, or as a critique of this experience. Then they might read each others' texts;
- revise and edit the texts and prepare them for publication;
- read other texts related to the topic;
- generate comprehension questions for classmates to answer;
- write other types of texts--songs, poems, letters (for example, a letter to the editor), or directions for how to do something.

In a class with learners at different proficiency levels, the teacher can use the more basic activities with the learners at lower levels while the more proficient learners work on the more advanced activities individually or in groups, with less teacher help.

Conclusion

Although the LEA was developed primarily as a tool for reading development, this technique can be used successfully to develop listening, speaking, and writing as well. This integrated approach is unique in that it begins with students' individual or shared experiences as a basis for discussion, writing, and finally reading. As students see their personal experiences transcribed into the written word, they also gain a greater understanding of the *processes* of writing and reading and can make the bridge to reading and writing independently.

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