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The Language Experience Approach

A Rationale

It is very difficult for adults to recall what happened when they actually learned things in chilhood. They do recall more easily, however, the striking circumstances under which they were supposed *to learn things — the classroom seen from a certain desk, a certain teacher's awesome behaviour, the exercise books, the homework, the drills. Most people and many teachers in consequence assume those memorable circumstances to have been the cause of their learning, and become puzzled and uneasy with other less customary, and seemingly unnecessary, explanations such as the "language experience" approach in learning to read. Harker undertakes to establish the validity of each of the underlying assumptions of this approach, and hence to provide a lucid rationale for it. The approach reduces the cognitive confusion that makes learning to read difficult for so many children (confusion that those who are successful soon forget) and ensures that they have a purpose in reading that will render unnecessary a number of traditional but irrelevant compulsions.*

How do children learn to read, and now does this learning relate to other aspects of children's language development? These and similar questions have occupied the attention of many teachers and researchers, with the result that interest has developed in recent years in "the language experience approach" to teaching reading.

Roach Van Allen (1964), a leading proponent of the language experience approach, describes the following principles upon which it was founded:

What I can think about, I can say.
What I can say, I can write.
I can read what I have written.
I can read what others have written for me to read.

The emphasis for reading is that it constitutes one aspect of an integrated language communication process. In each aspect, the child is actively engaged in

using oral or written language either to establish or to derive meaning. This direct emphasis on the communication of meaning is fundamental to the language experience approach.

A number of assumptions underly the approach:

1. Reading is a communication process closely related to the learning and development of other language processes — writing, speaking, and listening.

2. There is a close relationship between a child's language development and his concept development.

3. Learning to read is directly influenced by a child's attitudes, interests, and experiences.

4. The difficulty experienced by many children in learning to read results from their confusion about the nature of the reading task.

5. The purpose of teaching reading is to provide the child with a means for increasingly independent exploration in an expanding realm of experience.

The purpose of this discussion is to examine each of these assumptions so as to establish their validity. In this way, a rationale for the language experience approach will be developed.

Children's language and their reading

Few aspects of human activity equal the intricacy and mystery of children's language development. From the time when children's babbling ends about half way through their second year to the time they enter school, their oral language develops from single-word utterances to grammatically complex, complete sentences. The learning process underlying this development appears to depend more on the ability to generalize than on imitation. Studies show that children's language does not duplicate, but rather successively approximates, adult language (Cazden, 1965; Gough, 1967; John and Goldstein, 1964).

Not withstanding that first-grade children are already competent in the use of structures (Fraser, Bellugi, and Brown, 1963; Brown and Fraser, 1964), children's language performance continues to develop well beyond the first grade (Chomsky, 1969; Menyuk, 1963). A number of other studies have since demonstrated the development of syntactic complexity in both the oral and the written language of children as they move through the grades.[1]

These studies clearly indicate the importance of the language environment of the classroom. That children learn much of their language by generalizing from their environment suggests that the classroom should provide them with

extensive opportunities to experience and experiment with a wide variety of oral and written expression.

When children's language ability is compared with their reading achievement, a clear relationship is revealed. Strickland (1962) found that sixth-grade children who scored high on measures of silent reading and listening comprehension also exhibited superior oral language. Loban (1976) also reported a positive relationship between reading and oral and written expression.

The relationship between language development and reading achievement is more specifically demonstrated by studies comparing the syntactic structure of reading with the children's own language.[2] For example, Ruddell (1965) found that fourth-grade children's reading comprehension was increased when they read passages composed according to their frequently occurring oral-language structures. He later (1966) found that the reading comprehension of first- and second-grade children could be improved significantly by emphasizing the meaning relationships among key structural elements within and between sentences.

This research provides strong support for an integrated language arts emphasis. Since a close relationship exists between language development and learning to read, reading instruction should be planned as part of a total language program rather than in isolation. And since children's own oral language patterns are easier for them to comprehend in written form, the use of child-authored instructional material derived from children's oral language is more likely to result in successful reading, especially with beginning and retarded readers.

Their reading and their thinking

Language represents the symbolization of ideas and of the events and experiences which give rise to ideas. The validity of the language experience approach depends upon its consistency with what is known of children's concept development.

One of the most coherent explanations of children's concept development lies in the work of Piaget (1961; 1970). Briefly, Piaget states that children pass through five successive periods. During each of these periods, children conceptualize the world in characteristic ways, and their language develops accordingly.

The first period, extending from birth until about two years, Piaget calls the sensori-motor period. Here the child relates to his environment through his senses — sound, touch, sight, taste, smell — rather than through any abstract system of thought or language. In the second period, the preconceptual period (ages two to four), the child organizes the sensations he receives from his environment through a process of selection and identification of relationships. At this time, the child begins to formulate his first concepts, and to associate words

with images. The third period, the period of intuitive thought, occurs between the ages of four and seven. Here the child develops concepts of number, length, height, and weight, but without a corresponding understanding of causality. For example, the child will not recognize that coloured liquid poured from a shallow container into a tall one is the same amount of liquid, since he perceives only one dimension at a time, in this case that of height.

As the child enters the fourth period, that of concrete operations (ages seven to eleven), he becomes less bound to the external world as he develops the ability to manipulate his perceptions of his environment logically and internally. However, he is still dependent on concrete external stimuli for his conceptualizations. The final period of formal operations extends from ages eleven to fourteen, and is characterized by the building and testing of hypotheses without reference to concrete reality.

Two key processes in Piaget's theory account for the child's intellectual development — assimilation and accommodation. As a child responds at successively higher levels of abstractions to his environment he is involved in a dual process of internally assimilating new information derived from a widening array of external experience, while at the same time accommodating his own behaviour to this expanding world of his conception. This dual process provides an explanation of the relationship between language development and concept development. Piaget maintains that the development of language results from the child's attempts to externalize his internalized (or assimilated) concepts. In this way, language development proceeds in response to concept development and, as the child seeks to communicate his thoughts to others in his environment, would seem to be one aspect of accommodation.

Vygotsky, on the other hand, has postulated a relationship between concept and language development which is basically the reverse of Piaget's (1962). He maintains that, rather than language representing an external symbolization of a child's conceptual development, it serves as a device by which his concept development is furthered. According to Vygotsky, the child adopts the adult language models of his environment as an aid to imposing conceptual order on his environment. Seen in this way, language development is a means through which concepts are developed rather than as a response to concept development.

For the reading teacher, the controversy generated by the opposing positions of Piaget and Vygotsky is essentially of only academic concern. The key point in both positions is the inextricable interrelationship between children's language and their concept development. Two major implications of this interrelationship are of concern to the teacher. The first concerns the language-thinking environment of the classroom, and the second relates to the instructional materials used to teach reading.

First, the teacher's role is to encourage a child to establish relationships between new experiences and previous experiences. These new experiences may be

ones which occur naturally in the life of the child, or they may be introduced directly by the teacher. The child's oral and written language serves to symbolize concepts derived from these experiences, and at the same time provides the teacher with a device for monitoring the child's concept development. When recorded, the child's oral and written language become instructional material for reading. In this way, the child moves gradually from concrete to more abstract concepts, while gaining experience in symbolizing and comprehending these concepts in language. At each stage, reading is emphasized as the communication of meaning.

The second implication is for the content of the instructional material from which children learn to read. If this material contains language which is not part of children's oral vocabulary, and if the comprehension of this material involves cognitive operations which children have not learned to perform, extreme difficulty and frustration will result. One of the strongest points of the language experience approach is that using child-authored reading material is consistent with the pace of children's oral language and concept development.

Reading and a child's interests

Both language and concept development are essentially natural learnings. The child has little direct control over whether he learns to speak or think — he just does, as a result of exposure to his environment. Left unanswered is the question of whether or not the child *wants* to learn to read. No amount of careful planning for language and concept development will produce successful readers if children have a negative attitude toward reading.

Durkin (1965) reported that children who had learned to read before entering grade one were characteristically curious, serious, persistent, and able to concentrate. Kress (1955) found that superior readers in the elementary grades demonstrated more initiative and persistence in problem-solving than did poor readers. The important question raised for teachers is: what conditions in the learning situation encourage children to like reading and to want to learn to read?

One of the most imaginative and successful responses to this question has emerged in the "organic reading" concept of Sylvia Ashton-Warner (1959; 1964). Working with Maori children in New Zealand, Ashton-Warner realized the futility of teaching these children to read using vocabulary and concepts which were largely foreign to their experience. She therefore evolved her "key vocabulary" approach based on the following principles:

> First words must have intense meaning.
> First words must be already part of the dynamic life.
> First books must be made of the stuff of the child himself, whatever and wherever the child. (1964, p. 35)

Ashton-Warner realized not only that the content of children's reading material should be consistent with their level of language and concept development, but that this material must also be "real" to the children — it must be "organically" part of them and must contain vocabulary which is a key to their backgrounds, interests, and innermost feelings. She concentrated on children's key vocabulary by isolating those words in their oral vocabulary which had the most intense meaning for them, those words which were characterized by "passionate usage." Among her Maori children, she found she could classify these words as fear words ("cry," "ghost," "mad," "drunk," "steal," and "lost"), and sex words ("kiss," "love," "likes," "me," and "you"). These single words were infused with such intense reality for her children that Ashton-Warner labelled them as "captions of mind-pictures." They were words which, when printed on cards, children recognized and used immediately. For this reason, she called them "one-look" words.

Once they had been determined, she combined individual key words with other words into sentences and then into stories, which were bound together as the child's "reader." Her description of these books reveals her enthusiasm for the method:

> The drama of these writings could never be captured in a bought book . . . no one book could ever hold the variety of subjects that appears collectively . . . each morning. Moreover, it is written in the language that they use themselves. These books they write are the most dramatic and pathetic and colourful things I've ever seen. (1964, p. 52)

Many aspects of the language experience approach are apparent in Ashton-Warner's methods. Her emphasis on using children's oral language to generate child-authored instructional material is consistent with the basic tenets set down by Allen (1964). But she adds a further dimension by revealing the dynamic power of children's interests and attitudes — what Ruddell (1969) calls the "affective mobilizers" — when they are learning to read.

The key vocabulary concept is particularly applicable to teaching beginning reading, especially to children for whom the vocabulary and content of basal readers are incompatible with experience and background. Ashton-Warner's statement in *Teacher* may be somewhat exaggerated — that children learn as many of their "own" words in four minutes as they would normally learn in four months with a basal reader; yet a study by Packer (1970) revealed that the key word used by children in four American cities had little similarity to basal word lists. Children must ultimately be cut adrift from reading material authored by themselves, but if this should occur after an introduction to reading through key vocabulary, they will then approach the material of other authors with a positive expectancy of interest and success.

The key-vocabulary approach is also applicable to retarded readers, whose experiences with reading are those of frustration and failure. For these children

the introduction and use of a vocabulary which has a direct relevance to their own interests and lives is a sound first step towards successful reading.

Cognitive confusion

Any theory of reading development contains within it, either implicitly or explicitly, a theory of reading retardation. Once an idea has been formulated of how children learn to read, it directly suggests why children fail to learn to read. One of the most cogent recent explanations for reading difficulty, termed "cognitive confusion," is consistent with the language experience approach.

Cognitive confusion was first suggested by Vernon (1957). In concluding her review of evidence relating to reading retardation, she suggested that "the fundamental and basic characteristic of reading disability appears to be cognitive confusion and lack of system." (p. 71) She characterized the retarded reader as one who "remains in a state of confusion over the whole process." (p. 48) Similarly, Vygotsky (1962), attempting to account for differences between children's oral and written language development, contended that "it is the abstract quality of written language that is the main stumbling block," and that the child "has little motivation to learn writing when we begin to teach it. He feels no need for it and has only a vague idea of its usefulness." (p. 99)

For both the beginning and the retarded reader, a major obstacle is the abstract nature of written language. The difficulty appears to be the gap between oral language which a child uses to express his conceptualizations and the mysterious code with which he is confronted when he is asked to read. The resulting cognitive confusion centres around the question of what exactly he is expected to do when he reads. Morever, the purpose for reading may itself be obscure. He may well be asking himself such questions as "Why should I have to do this?"

The idea of cognitive confusion and the research findings in support of it[3] are consistent with what is known about children's oral language development. As has been discussed above, preschool children's language is characterized by short utterances which expand into grammatically complex sentences by the time they enter school. Research by Brown and Bellugi (1964) suggests that young children conceptualize an oral sentence as a holistic unit of meaning rather than as a series of separate words. It would seem to follow that the concept of a word as an independent unit of meaning, represented by a separate visual configuration on the page, is something inconsistent with how children conceive oral language and is therefore something which has to be learned specifically for reading. If this premise is accepted, then learning to distinguish sounds and to read words must be viewed as highly artificial tasks which are bound to be attended by cognitive confusion.

Research also suggests that there is a requirement that children actually "see" the syntactic structures of written language on the page, something quite

foreign to their experience as oral language users. As early as 1917, Thorndike reported a study of reading errors among sixth graders from which he concluded that difficulties resulted from children's inability to see that "each word produces a correct meaning," and "each element of meaning is given a correct weight in comparison with the others." In a later study, Gibbons (1941) found third graders' ability to see relationships among parts of sentences to be highly related to sentence comprehension and total reading achievement. More recently, studies by Ruddell (1966) and Fagan (1971) have indicated that children's comprehension can be improved by teaching them to attend to the structure of written language.

By teaching a child to read using materials derived directly from his experience and from his oral language, many of the elements of cognitive confusion are reduced. The child is still faced with making sense out of written language — a major task in itself — but the message which confronts him is one of his own making, translated into written form either by himself or, directly in front of him, by the teacher. Hence, the language experience approach presents written language to the child as a coherent representation of reality. The task of learning to read becomes one of seeing the direct relationship between what the child has thought and then said, and the written representation of his thoughts. The contributions to cognitive confusion imposed by an unknown vocabulary and unfamiliar concepts have thus been eliminated.

Purposes for reading

This discussion has sought to rationalize the language experience approach by placing reading within a total language communication framework, by indicating its compliance with present knowledge of child development, and by suggesting how it reduces the cognitive confusion associated with learning to read. Throughout this discussion, however, no direct reference has been made to how language experience provides a purpose for reading.

One purpose is that children may learn through reading. Reading is a tool for learning, and language experience develops in children an expectation that reading is a meaning-getting activity. Their first experiences as readers involve comprehension of their own messages, which are interesting and have purpose. This expectation will carry over to the reading of material written by others. Reading therefore represents a direct and legitimate means of answering children's learning needs as these successively appear through their years in school.

But reading has a joy as well. It is a source of personal enrichment and discovery. Children see human experience rendered in written language — at first their own, and then that of others. They come to anticipate pleasure in reading and to expect the excitement and personal discovery that reading can bring.

The language experience approach is not a panacea, however. A major comparative study of different approaches to teaching reading (Bond and Dykstra, 1967) came to the rather predictable conclusion that the expertise of the classroom teacher is the critical factor. The value of the language experience approach is that it provides the classroom teacher with a coherent and defensible framework within which children can be taught to read. Materials and methods taken from other approaches can be integrated easily with the language experience approach so as to develop truly eclectic reading programs. These programs will be based on what is known about children's language development and on their need for planned and integrated language experience.

NOTES

1. Strickland (1962), in her study of the oral language of children in grades one to six, found that sentence complexity increased with grade level. The findings of Loban's (1976) twelfth grade support those of Strickland. O'Donnell, Griffin, and Norris (1967), using transformational analysis rather than the structuralist methodology of Strickland (1962) and Loban (1976), reached similar conclusions regarding the significant syntactic development of children in grades one, two, three, four, and seven. Hunt (1964) studied the written expression of fourth, eighth, and twelfth grade students and mature adults, and found a progressive development in syntactic complexity. Braun's (1969) study of both oral and written expression in grades one, four, and six also revealed syntactic development as children move through the grades.

2. MacKinnon (1959) observed that beginning readers attempted to impose and substitute familiar syntactic patterns on to new reading material which contained unfamiliar patterns. Fagan's (1971) research with fourth, fifth, and sixth graders revealed that the types of transformations presented within reading material affected its comprehension difficulty. He went on to suggest that children should be taught to be aware of the structural elements and their relationships within sentences as an aid to reading comprehension.

3. Research strongly supports cognitive confusion as an explanation for reading retardation. Stott (1973) concluded from studies of children with learning difficulties that "the overriding causes of failure lay in the use of incorrect (cognitive) strategies," and that, assessing these causes, "it was often a matter of inappropriate mental behaviours rather than of perceptual or mental handicap." Reid (1966), in a study of Scottish five-year olds, found that children tended not to know what was meant by the terms "sound," "letter," or "word." He concluded that these children had a "general lack of any specific expectation of what reading was going to be like, and what the activity consisted in, of the purpose and use of it." Downing (1970) studied English five-year olds and, like Reid, found that children often confused sentences and phrases with words, and words with sounds. Downing concluded that "young beginners have difficulty in understanding the purpose of written language," and that "they have only a vague idea of how people read . . .". In separate American and Canadian studies, Meltzer and Herse (1969), Kingston, Weaver and Figa (1972) and Downing and Oliver (1973-74), reached similar findings.

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