Introduction to the Language Experience Approach

The Language Experience Approach (LEA) to reading instruction is based on principles of learning that have been documented and discussed for many years (Huey, 1908; Smith, 1967). The experience-based chart stories described by Lillian Lamoreaux and Doris Lee (1943) and Sylvia Ashton-Warner's (1963) work with Maori children in New Zealand are examples of how LEA helped students learn to read. Teacher education textbooks have recommended its use and variations have been explored and described by many (Nessel & Jones, 1981; Tompkins, 2003; Vacca, Vacca, Gove, Burkey, Lenhart, & McKeon, 2002). Educators have also advocated the value of LEA for English language learners (ELL), including elementary, secondary, and adult ELLs (Dixon & Nessel, 1983; Dorr, 2006; Nelson & Linek, 1999; Wurr, 2002).

In all forms of LEA, the central principle is to use the student's own vocabulary, language patterns, and background of experiences to create reading texts, making reading an especially meaningful and enjoyable process. Traditionally, LEA techniques involve these steps (Nessel & Jones, 1981; Stauffer, 1980):

Step 1: The teacher and the students discuss an experience in which all have recently participated, such as a school field trip or the examination of an unusual object. As the teacher and the students discuss their observations and reactions, the students' understanding of the experience is deepened while oral vocabulary and language skills are developed and reinforced.

Step 2: As students formulate and express their ideas, the teacher guides them in creating a dictated account. Students offer statements that they

want included in the account, or the teacher selects statements from the ongoing conversation and suggests that these be used. The teacher records the students' statements on chart paper, constructing the text while the students watch. Seeing their words written down, students connect what they just said to what appears on the paper.

Step 3: The teacher reads the account to the students, modeling the sound of fluent, expressive reading. Students then read it several times, with teacher help as needed, until they become familiar with it.

Step 4: With the teacher's guidance, students learn to recognize specific words from the account and develop the decoding skills of context, phonics, and structural analysis, using the account as a resource. Students may also write their own thoughts to supplement and extend the dictation.

Students create and work with a new dictated account each week while continuing to work with past dictated accounts to strengthen their reading and writing skills and to build confidence. As students become comfortable with composing (oral and written) and reading, they begin reading other-author texts. Eventually, the use of dictated accounts is reduced and eliminated as students use other-author texts to refine and extend their reading skills and increase their expressive skills with more complex and challenging writing and speaking activities.

An important advantage to this approach is that, from the start, students learn to recognize words in print that are orally very familiar to them. For many students, learning to read their own words, in the meaningful context of their own dictated accounts, is easier than grappling with the unfamiliar language and contexts of a published reading program. Although dictated accounts and the selections in a published reader may be similar in some ways, learners will invariably perceive the dictated accounts to be more relevant, significant, and engaging because they are so closely connected to the learners' own experiences and because they are created while the students watch.

Because students compose the account, comprehension is inherent to their interaction with the text, leading them to expect written language to make sense. As a result, they expect other-author texts to contain meaningful ideas and comprehensible language. Dictation also develops and strengthens students' skill at composing their thoughts in writing. Reading skills and composing skills develop in tandem in an LEA program.

The flexible nature of LEA allows each teacher to tailor instruction to the specific interests and needs of individual students. For example, students' personal and cultural backgrounds are readily reflected in their dictated accounts and in their writing, especially when they are encouraged to base their accounts on their experiences outside of school. This individualization occurs within a structure that is the same for everyone: discuss, dictate, read, write, and develop skills. Two students can dictate

different accounts and yet work together on the same skill-building activities. Also, LEA lends itself to such cooperative learning activities as reading dictated accounts to classmates, working collaboratively on word-recognition activities, or responding to peers' writings.

Despite its many advantages, LEA is not currently in widespread use. Most schools use published programs for literacy instruction. With their many useful features, these programs are considered well-organized and well-controlled systems for teaching literacy. They are designed by experts to provide systematic instruction. The teachers' guides provide detailed plans, and components such as workbooks provide ready-made practice exercises. For many busy teachers, these programs are preferable to an approach such as LEA that involves more planning and decision making.

However, theoretical and practical considerations generate perennial interest in LEA. Linguists have argued for meaningful input as a prerequisite for language acquisition (Krashen, 1981; Krashen & Terrell, 1983; Lightbown & Spada, 2006). Psycholinguists have focused on the relationship between language acquisition, reading, and writing (Goodman & Fleming, 1968; Peregoy & Boyle, 2005; Samway, 2006). Researchers have noted that reading is easier when the text closely matches the learner's own oral language patterns and is aligned with the learner's experiences (Tierney, Readence, & Dishner, 1980) and have pointed out that reading, writing, listening, and speaking develop in tandem (D. J. Cooper, 2000). These perspectives provide theoretical justification for choosing LEA as the foundation for literacy instruction for all students and suggest its particular strength for students who do not make good progress when paced through a standard published program.

In addition, many teachers are faced with students from other cultures whose languages and experiences have little, if anything, in common with the characters and situations portrayed in American literacy programs. Stories or writing topics about American families, American historical events, and American culture have little relevance for many students from countries in which English is not spoken as the primary language and where knowledge of America is limited. Educators with particular interest in ELLs have specifically recommended some form of LEA for use with these students (Crandall & Peyton, 1993; M. Taylor, 1992; Thomas, 1999; Tompkins, 2003). In addition, LEA has been recognized as a useful approach for ELLs by centers for education research and practice (e.g., Birdas, Boyson, Morrison, Peyton, & Runfola, 2003; J. D. Hill & Flynn, 2004; and Reed & Railsback, 2003). Furthermore, the skills that students learn in an LEA program are closely aligned with the skills described in the instructional standards for ELLs that have been set by state education authorities. Appendix A provides examples of state standards that can be met within the context of the LEA framework.

This text will introduce, or reacquaint, teachers with LEA, a natural way of helping learners of any age acquire language, reading, and writing

skills and one that is particularly well suited to the needs of ELLs. Although LEA can be used to teach students to read and write in any language, we focus here on its value for helping students read and write English. In explaining the most effective strategies, we concentrate first on the creation and use of dictated stories to teach reading, then on instruction in word-recognition strategies, then on engaging students in writing. We address these components separately to achieve greater clarity in presenting basic principles, but we also show how they are effectively combined in an LEA program and, in the last chapter, we focus on how all of the components work together.