

LANGUAGE EXPERIENCE APPROACH TO LITERACY FOR CHILDREN LEARNING ENGLISH

Pamela J.T. Winsor



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100 – 318 McDermot Ave.

Winnipeg, MB Canada R3A 0A2

www.pandmpress.com

Email: books@portageandmainpress.com

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FOREWORD

IN HER FINAL WORDS OF THIS BOOK, Pamela Winsor tells us about the joy that young children bring to her. When I worked with her in Belize in the late 1990s, I experienced this joy—both on the part of the young Belizean children and on the part of Pamela herself. A person with knowledge and well-tuned oral-language skills, she exudes energy and appreciation for whomever she is with at any given time. She laughed and taught with the children, their teachers, and me. We enjoyed chocolate and literature. The people in Belize, in turn, appreciate and are grateful for Pamela. She knows what she professes.

In this book, she shares her years of experience in developing an approach to literacy that began, for her, decades ago. Over the intervening time since then, Pamela has taught primarily in Canada, has spent the extensive time I mentioned above in Belize, and has worked in other locations.

At all times, she stresses the importance of oral language as a foundation for literacy. I think Pamela would immediately worry, “What’s wrong?” if she were to enter a silent classroom of young English-language learners. They are to be talking! How else can they learn English—the foundation for their literacy?

The artifact at the centre of this book is the stories, essays, informational texts, and poetry that the young children and their teachers compose on charts. Their composition process is a busy, interactive one in which the children continuously suggest ideas, marvel as their words appear across the chart, and energetically reread them together. We experience a scene of engaged learners who regularly gather around their teacher to compose, read, and become confident as English-language learners.

Importantly, these class creations provide opportunities for frequent rereading during the ensuing days, and the children love to revisit them throughout the weeks and months that comprise their school year.

Pamela shows us how to use topics of study, field trips, children’s literature, and children’s experiences to create and surround a chart for several days. If a piece of literature stimulated the class composition, the immersion in it may keep that book alive for many rereadings. Or, vice versa: the class composition may stimulate interest in a new read aloud. Regardless, the charts play a significant role in the development of the children’s literate lives. The time when they gather around to create and reread is special.

When the children leave this gathering place, they engage in extension experiences such as creating illustrations, singing, writing in journals, building block structures, and dramatizing. All of these experiences further enrich their literacy, extend their appreciation for their class composition, and add their personal touches to what the chart means to them.

In the days, weeks, and months ahead, as we educators experiment with Pamela's suggestions, we will keep in mind her final words. Children learn best when they are enjoyably engaged. I look forward, with you, to gatherings around the chart, to dispersal as the children work alone and in clusters, and to continued gatherings as we reread this book by Pamela Windsor.

Jane Hansen
Professor, University of Virginia

PREFACE

THE ORIGINS OF LANGUAGE EXPERIENCE APPROACH TO LITERACY FOR CHILDREN LEARNING ENGLISH (LEALE) stretch back about 15 years, to my workshop notes for my work with primary teachers in Belize, Central America. The teachers with whom I was working wanted to learn ways of engaging the children in their classes in meaningful early-literacy activities. Most of the children arrived at school fluent in Creole or Spanish, or both. Others were fluent in one of the Belizean indigenous languages, but only a few children spoke and understood English. By government regulation, English was the language of classroom instruction. The teachers' challenge was to help the children learn to speak, read, and write in English during their first year of schooling as required by the national curriculum syllabus. Their challenge became my challenge; my goal was to guide them in ways that reflected sound research.

My work in Belize began as a volunteer with a teacher-education project sponsored by the International Reading Association (see Winsor & Hansen 1999). The project, called Language to Literacy in Belize, provided sets of thematically related children's literature that were chosen to facilitate classroom read-alouds and other learning activities that supported children's oral language development. As my involvement continued and I spent more time in primary classrooms, I was reminded of my own years teaching kindergarten and grade 1 in the 1970s. I reasoned that the language-experience approach that I had used effectively then would also be appropriate in this context. With a few modifications, the Language Experience Approach (LEA) could be effective in meeting the Belizean children's needs, and at the same time respect the expectations of the mandated national curriculum. Together with the teachers, I set out to determine the modifications needed. As my development work continued in both Belizean and Canadian contexts, benefits emerged for all young learners, not just those who are English-language learners (ELLs). It became apparent to me that there was good reason to reconsider my past practice in light of current research on early literacy.

The instructional framework I present in this book (LEALE) is intended to help teachers provide all young children, but especially English-language learners, with rich, meaningful, and interactive literacy instruction. I have intentionally kept it non-prescriptive. It is flexible, which allows for cultural and contextual differences and leaves ample room for

teacher decision-making. It fosters the development of oral language as a foundation that supports literacy. It engages teachers and children in both collaborative and independent writing and reading, and it includes explicit word study and creative-response activities. It embodies six components, which together shape language learning so that children begin to translate their experiences both inside and outside the classroom into literate behaviours.

This book begins with a brief overview of the instructional framework and a summary of the theoretical foundations of LEALE. Next, there is a description of the six framework components, a guide to planning instruction, and some general information about assessment. The appendices give examples of instructional units, descriptions of supplementary activities that are designed to enhance children's learning, and blackline masters designed to help teachers plan and assess their students' learning.

The LEALE instructional framework I present here is built upon the many happy hours I spent with children and their teachers in the near and distant past, and in classrooms at home and abroad. It brings me great pleasure to watch and help young children grow into being readers and writers. So, too, does working with their teachers bring me much satisfaction and reward. I am indebted especially to the teachers who participated in Language to Literacy in Belize and hope that this book will prompt many rich language learning experiences for children everywhere.