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Charles L. Smith
Oklahoma State University, Stillwater

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DEVELOPING STORY-TELLING SKILLS WITH LANGUAGE-EXPERIENCE STORIES

Charles L. Smith

COLLEGE OF EDUCATION, OKLAHOMA STATE UNIVERSITY, STILLWATER

The language-experience has been recommended and utilized to a great extent as a preparation for formal reading instruction as well as an approach to the teaching of beginning reading itself. The ideas expressed by the student are written in his/her own words which in turn become the reading material. The student's language maturity is related to his/her success in learning to read. The language development of the student indicates to a great extent the level of reading material which the student is capable of understanding at that time.

When building a suitable story with the language-experience approach, the teacher becomes aware of the student's language development. This situation provides the teacher with an opportunity to build the student's story-telling ability. The teacher is able to encourage the student to express himself verbally, to expand his use of language, and to use language creatively, thus increasing listening, speaking, reading, and writing abilities.

Much has been written about the extent of the beginning reader's vocabulary and its relationship to learning to read, but little has been said about the larger language units of sentences, paragraphs, and whole stories.

Although the use of the student's oral language in language-experience stories is comparatively easy and straightforward, to extend and increase the understanding in the use of language necessitates some type of construct for the teacher. The framework which follows is presented for use with language-experience stories, to foster the expressive language abilities of students. The examples are taken from actual experience stories dictated by children who have been motivated with pictures.

LABELING

The student responds to the pictures by giving single words, word clusters, or phrases with no complete sentences, consisting mainly of these types:

Names of Objects (such as cat, elephant, tail)

Identification of Actions (such as drink, run, play)

Descriptive Word Groups (such as black cat, in the car,
run fast, short tail)

Labeling is especially beneficial in preparing students for future reading instruction by means of word recognition and concepts.

SENTENCE DEVELOPMENT

Complete sentences are used to express thoughts and may vary from the bare minimum to highly developed and complex.

Basic Sentences

Sentences of this kind are short and contain only essential words, as illustrated in the following:

Kevin was playing ball.
The dog is laying down.
The truck is big.
This is Sam and Melissa. They are happy.

Expanded Sentences

Expanded sentences are more fully developed by the addition of descriptive words and phrases, such as those given below:

Motorcycling is an exciting sport.
The player with the white shirt had the ball.
The next day Bill and his horse reached a log cabin
on the very top of a snowy hill.
Once there was a magician at the carnival.

Connected Sentences

Ideas which are usually expressed in simple sentences are joined to form compound sentences, sometimes with compound subjects and predicates. Overuse of "and" is often apparent here.

The horse swung around and I went flying.
A tooth fairy came and got the tooth and gave her some
gum and candy and money.
The lightning hit something, but we didn't know what.
The water tanks blew up and water raced down the
building.

Complex Sentences

Ideas are related by formulating sentences of greater complexity with dependent clauses, indicating sequence, causes, effects, conditions and other relationships. Some examples are:

By the time everyone was out and safe, almost the whole
building was burned up.
George stepped back and talked to the coach to see
what was wrong.
When the parents came home, they have a little surprise
for the little boy.
The little boy is upset because the vet is going to
put his favorite dog to sleep.

STORYTELLING

Stories are presented in narrative form and may include a variety of sentence forms. Characters, setting, time, sequence and relationship are developed more or less. Several examples

are given here.

Simple Storytelling or Picture Description

A story is given which includes characters, actions and situations. The narrative is usually limited to a description of the picture being observed or the emotional response to it. This may be the type of story most often obtained from the student with the language-experience approach, as illustrated in the following:

The Happy Dog

The dog is laying down.
The girl is jumping.
The fence is laying down.
The water is moving.
The leaves are on the ground.
The girl has a dress on.
The girl is asleep.

Kevin

Kevin was playing ball.
Kevin was playing with Bill.
They were playing baseball.
Bill got hit in the face.
Bill had a fight with Kevin.
They were not friends anymore.

A Boy Finds a Dog

The boy had a wreck in his bicycle.
He was going too fast.
He skinned his knee and it hurt.
A dog came by and felt sorry for him.
The dog licked his face.
The boy laughed and took the dog home.
The boy kept the dog.

Complete Storytelling

The storyteller uses the picture as the inspiration to create a fully developed narrative, extending the story beyond the situation portrayed in the picture. Other settings can be added, new characters are sometimes introduced, descriptions may be more extensive, and a plot is well developed.

Here is the beginning of one story, which was followed by a complete plot too long to include here:

There was an old building, and some cats lived in it, that was built a million years ago. It had bells by most all of the windows. At the bottom was an old, old flag. These people went to an old town and they saw all these old buildings and most of them were falling down. So they knocked down a lot of buildings. They built new ones to replace the old ones, and cellars and stores, and gas stations, and a courthouse and a part of my home.

Creative Storytelling

Motivation by the teacher is needed in order to develop interesting and creative stories. Imagination must be stimulated to produce exciting stories. Encouragement freely given will produce many varied words and expressions; interest and meaning will result as sentences are joined and expanded. Teachers need to help students focus attention on more detailed descriptions of characters and settings. They need to see how carefully chosen words can create the mood of the story. The reader's interest must be secured with the first sentence. Folk tales and children's books provide abundant examples of creative storytelling. Students often rely on "once upon a time" as an opening sentence, but they can think of other openings which are not so commonplace. Beginning a story with such realistic sentences as the following gets the immediate attention of the reader, who anticipates a daring episode:

Motorcycles are powerful. They're fun to ride. They're real dangerous.

The framework of the preceding page is proposed as an organization for story-telling as utilized with language-experience charts. Even though pictures have been the motivational device, this procedure can easily be adapted to writing about personal experiences. Charts in which the recording of content learning from field trips and experiments in science and social studies can also be used for developing language abilities.

This framework can aid the reading teacher in recognizing the level of a student's oral language development, and may become a basis for furthering student growth. One should follow an integrated approach, i.e., give attention to all of the language elements—vocabulary, sentences, and stories. Awareness of the student's strengths will lead to improvement in other elements, as experience adds to ability. While words build to sentences and sentences into stories, central learning goals should be wider vocabulary acquaintance and adequate sentence construction. Likewise, appropriate expansion of sentence uses should be included in story-telling.

Perhaps the teacher who uses language-experience stories to make reading a successful venture for the student can also assist in promoting creative use of oral language which will continue with creative writing. Even more valuable may be the fostering of creative expression which leads to an appreciation of well-written literature.

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