

4-1-1979

## Beginning Reading Without Readiness: Structured Language Experience

Patricia Cunningham

*Director of Reading, Alamance County, N.C.*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading\\_horizons](https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons)



Part of the Education Commons

---

### Recommended Citation

Cunningham, P. (1979). Beginning Reading Without Readiness: Structured Language Experience. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 19 (3). Retrieved from [https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading\\_horizons/vol19/iss3/8](https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol19/iss3/8)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Special Education and Literacy Studies at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact [wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu](mailto:wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu).

# BEGINNING READING WITHOUT READINESS: STRUCTURED LANGUAGE EXPERIENCE

*Patricia Cunningham*

*DIRECTOR OF READING, ALAMANCE COUNTY, N.C.*

The language experience approach has for generations been one of the tricks in the bags of versatile reading teachers. Allen (1964) emphasizes the link between speaking, writing and reading inherent in the language experience approach. Hall (1972) supplies seven statements supporting the linguistic soundness of the language experience approach.

For the majority of beginning readers, the language experience approach can be successfully carried out in a manner similar to that suggested by Askland (1973). She suggests that the writing of language experience stories and follow-up lessons include: (1) letting the child talk about the topic, (2) letting the child dictate the story to you sentence-by-sentence, (3) reading each word aloud as it is written, (4) reading the story to the child and letting the child volunteer to read the story, (5) putting favorite words in a word bank and reviewing the store of words already in the bank, and (6) reviewing and rereading the story with the child the following day before writing another story. There are some children, however, who need the experience with print and communication but who lack the basic prerequisite for success in the language experience approach as outlined above. That basic prerequisite is a minimum level of oral language facility. Wayne (not the child's real name) was one of those children. Wayne came to school lacking all the skills and understandings which forecast success in beginning reading instruction. He had not been read to nor had he observed adults engaged in reading and writing activities. He could not name the colors or shapes of common objects and certainly could not name the letters of the alphabet. He did not know that writing and thus reading progress from top to bottom and left to right and had no concept of a sentence or a word. Wayne was a child who "needed" the language experience approach to reading because it was the only approach which builds readiness rather than assuming it. Unfortunately, Wayne was also a child who could not engage in the language experience approach as typically carried out. Attempts at getting Wayne to verbalize about a topic and then dictate a story followed a predictable sequence.

Teacher: "Wayne, this morning we are going to write a story about football. See this picture I cut out of the magazine. Tell me what you see in the picture. We will just talk about it for awhile and then I will write down your story about football."

(Wayne looks at picture, smiles, looks up at teacher.)

Teacher: "Wayne, what do you see in the picture?"

Wayne: "Football."

Teacher: "Yes, you see a football. What else do you see?"

Wayne: "Men."

Teacher: "And what else?"

(Wayne shrugs his shoulders and grins.)

Teacher: "What are the men doing?"

Wayne: "Running."

Teacher: "Good. What else are they doing? What are they going to do to the football?"

Wayne: "Get it."

Teacher: (Showing signs of frustration and defeat.) "O.K. Now I want you to tell me a sentence about the picture. Tell me the whole sentence and then I will write it down for you."

(Wayne doesn't respond.)

Teacher: "Tell me about the picture. What are the men doing?"

Wayne: "Running."

Teacher: "Good, now tell me in a sentence. Tell me who is in the picture."

Wayne: "Men."

Teacher: "What about the men?"

Wayne: "Running."

Teacher: "O.K. Now I will write your sentence here."

Teacher writes: *The men are running*. She reads it several times and helps Wayne to read it. The following day she sits down with Wayne again, takes out the picture and "his" sentence. Wayne has forgotten how to read it. Her attempts to get Wayne to dictate a story about a dog are no more successful. Teacher decides language experience isn't what her professor told her it was and puts Wayne to work in a readiness workbook.

Wayne and children like Wayne *do* need the readiness and print orientation inherent in the language experience approach. The remainder of this article describes a "structured" language experience approach which does not assume basic language fluency but builds that fluency as it builds readiness and reading skills.

### Structured Language Experience

These lessons work best if carried out with a group of from three-to-five children. Children like Wayne should certainly be included in the group. Other children whose language skills are somewhat more developed but who need further language development, readiness and orientation to print should also be included. Several teachers who have used this method have discovered that all the children in the class wanted to do the special stories! Their solution was to always include the two or three children like Wayne and to allow two or three others to join the group just for the week's story. By rotating the children who joined the group, everyone had a chance to do the special stories. A bonus of including these roving children in the group was that they provided good language models for the stable children in the group.

Since school weeks and teachers' internal calendars run on a Monday through Friday schedule each language experience story spans a week's time. The unit described here focuses on a topic of interest to all children - FOOD!

Monday:

Have small pictures (cut from magazines, workbooks, etc.) of many different kinds of foods ready for the lesson. Sit down with the children in a circle and display the foods one at a time. As you display each picture, lead the children to talk about it. What is it? What color is it? Do you eat it cooked or raw? For breakfast, lunch or dinner? Is it a fruit? Vegetable? Meat? Bread? Dessert? How big would it be? Does it grow in the ground? Do you like it? are some of the questions which might be asked about each picture. At the conclusion of this first lesson (about 20-25 minutes long) tell the children that tomorrow you will let them choose one of the foods they like and write a story about foods. Leave the food pictures out somewhere so that the children can consider which one they would like to choose. (It is important to be sure you have many pictures from which to choose. For a group of five children, 15 pictures are usually sufficient.)

Tuesday:

With the children in a circle once more, review the names of all the foods. Let each child choose one he likes. (Vary the child who gets to choose first each week to avoid arguments!) As each child chooses a food, tape the picture of the food to a sheet of construction paper. Write the child's name above the food and the name of the food below it. Next, tell the children that they are going to help you write a story so that anyone who comes into the room will be able to read what food each child likes to eat. On a large sheet of chart paper, write the title "Foods We Like To Eat." Explain to the children that each person's sentence will tell what he likes to eat. Pick a child who will set a model for the rest of the children and ask him to start his sentence with "I like to eat" and then tell you what his picture is. As each child in turn tells you his sentence starting with "I like to eat" write the sentences on the chart. Put the child's name in parentheses after his sentence and leave a line between each sentence (for sentence matching later in the week). Your chart might look like this:

#### FOODS WE LIKE TO EAT

I like to eat chocolate cake. (Robbie)

I like to eat ice cream. (Carolyn)

I like to eat watermelon. (Jerry)

I like to eat peanut butter. (Wayne)

I like to eat fried chicken. (Paul)

As you are writing each sentence, read the words then let the child who

told you the sentence read it and let the whole group in chorus read it. When the whole chart is written, read it to the children and then choose other children to read it. To help each child read the chart, point to the name in parenthesis next to each sentence and ask that child to stand up and display his picture. A sentence such as “Yes, that is Robbie’s name and he likes to eat chocolate cake.” and “Yes, Carolyn is standing up because this is her sentence and she likes to eat ice cream.” will insure success for almost all children. As each child reads, move the child’s hand along the chart to help the child develop the notion of what a word is and top-bottom, left-right orientation. When each child has had a chance to read the entire chart, leave the chart and the pictures out and encourage the children to come back later in the day and read their story to a friend.

Wednesday:

Begin by looking once again at the pictures and identifying the name of the picture and the name of the child who liked that food. Then, following yesterday’s “stand up” procedure, let several children read the chart. Next, show the children some sentence strips and tell them you are going to write their sentences on the strips. No one is to say a word while you are writing but they are to try to guess whose sentence you are writing. When you finish, the child who thinks he knows which sentence you have written will get to tape that sentence under the same sentence on the chart. (This is why you left the space between the sentences yesterday!) Write each sentence on a sentence strip as the children watch. Let volunteers match the strip sentence to the one on the chart, read the sentence and tape it underneath the appropriate sentence. Continue this procedure until all sentences are matched.

When all the sentences are matched, remove them one at a time and cut the sentences into words. Mix up the words and let each child rearrange his or her sentence into the correct order. At the completion of this word matching activity, put all the words in a box. Place this box with the chart and the pictures. Encourage the children to find some time during the day and try to rearrange all the words to tell the same story the chart tells.

Thursday:

Before Thursday’s lesson, prepare mimeographed sheets by printing the story or typing it with a primary typewriter. Make at least five times as many copies as you have children in the group. Leave plenty of space between each sentence for sentence and word matching.

Begin Thursday’s lesson by having several volunteers read the whole chart. Take some time to develop some language concepts with them. Ask questions such as: How many words are in Robbie’s sentence? What’s the longest word in our story? What’s the shortest word? How many times do we see the word *I*? *eat*? *like*? *chocolate*?, etc. What word begins with a *p*? What three words begin with *c*?, etc. (Write these letters on the board as you say them, so that the children begin to associate the letter name with the symbol.) How many sentences do we have? Which is the first sentence? The last sentence?

Next, give each child a copy of the mimeographed story and let each child read it. Then, give each child the five sentences cut in strips (from another copy of the mimeographed story). Let each child match the sentences and paste the strip under the sentence on the sheet. For children who do sentence matching easily, cut one or two of their sentences into words and have them rearrange the words and then paste them under the appropriate sentence.

Friday:

Give each child another mimeographed sheet. Have them read each sentence and then cut and paste each sentence on a sheet of drawing paper. Have the children either find pictures of each food or draw each food on the appropriate page. Put the book together and write the title "Foods We Like To Eat" in magic marker on the cover. Let each child take his book and a mimeographed copy of the story home. Put another mimeographed copy of the story in each child's story folder. As the year goes on, the children will have many stories they can read and reread. Put the chart, picture and sentence-strip words together in a box and let children read and recreate the story as often as they like.

The above description of the Foods lesson describes the first experience with story writing for a group of children. As the children do several more stories and become more accustomed to the format of the lessons, the lessons described will take less time and other components can be added. Many teachers like to have the children make word banks with the words from each story as they can read to place in their word banks. (Index cards in cigar boxes work very well for this purpose.) Concrete words can be illustrated or have magazine pictures attached to help children remember them. For abstract words, the child may tell the teacher a sentence with that word which can be written on the back of the card and which also serves as an aid to recall.

Phonics lessons develop naturally from the word banks and charts. When trying to build a sound/symbol correspondence for a particular consonant, blend or vowel, children can be asked to hunt through their banks or story folders for words containing the particular letter. From these known words, phonic principles can be induced.

Conclusion:

Of course, there are infinite number of stories which can be written using the structured language experience approach. Some which have been used by teachers include:

- I like to eat \_\_\_\_\_
- I want a \_\_\_\_\_
- I wish I had a \_\_\_\_\_
- My pet is a \_\_\_\_\_
- When I grow up I will be a \_\_\_\_\_
- These people are \_\_\_\_\_
- A \_\_\_\_\_ has four legs and a tail.
- I can make \_\_\_\_\_

My animal likes to eat \_\_\_\_\_  
I want a \_\_\_\_\_ for Christmas  
\_\_\_\_\_ will grow in the garden.  
I have a little \_\_\_\_\_ and a big \_\_\_\_\_  
This is a can of \_\_\_\_\_  
A \_\_\_\_\_ can go fast.  
This is a \_\_\_\_\_

By the time a teacher has used many of these topics, the children are ready for something else. They have increased their language fluency, can talk in sentences, know what a sentence and a word are, move their eyes automatically from top to bottom and left to right, have a store of basic sight words and have confidence in their ability to learn to read. Readiness has been developed. Reading has begun. The children can now move into the basal or traditional language experience or trade books at and with the teacher's pleasure.

#### REFERENCES

- Allen, Roach Van. "The Language Experience Approach," in *Teaching Young Children to Read*, ed. Warren G. Cutts (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Office of Education, 1964).
- Askland, Linda C. "Conducting Individual Language Experience Stories," *The Reading Teacher* 27 (1973): 167-70.
- Hall, Maryanne. "Linguistically Speaking, Why Language Experience?" *The Reading Teacher* 25 (1972): 328-31.