

A Practical Introduction to Early Literacy

Have you ever met a young child who was able to read at the primary-grade level or above before entering kindergarten? Many teachers and tutors of young children have seen such a child. Do you believe that most very good readers in the intermediate grades and above were early readers? Indeed, according to research done by Durkin (1966), a number of early readers maintain their initial reading advantage into the intermediate grades. However, some children who enter kindergarten having limited emergent literacy skills learn to read very easily and well and are excellent readers in adulthood. I was an example of this type of child. When I entered school, family members were cautioned not to teach any beginning reading skills, since teachers believed that reading instruction belonged solely in school. Fortunately, today both teachers and family members understand that all students, including those with special needs, benefit from as much exposure as possible to emergent literacy skills.

This chapter opens with a pre-assessment device for early childhood teachers and tutors to ascertain their views about early literacy. Completing this informal device before reading the chapter will help you evaluate your present understanding of emergent literacy.

The chapter then briefly describes the early literacy experiences that have the most influence on school reading success. Behavioral objectives are used to summarize early literacy experiences that are appropriate for pupils with special needs, with average linguistic aptitude, and with above average linguistic aptitude. Next the chapter provides a rationale for developing literacy skills in early childhood reading programs, explains whole language instruction, and suggests elements of whole language that can be used by the same three groups. The versatile language-experience approach (LEA) and its place in early literacy programs is explained, as are the elements of the approach that can be used with children of varying abilities.

This chapter should give you a comprehensive understanding of the elements of early literacy that are crucial to subsequent success in reading and writing.

PRE-ASSESSMENT FOR TEACHERS AND TUTORS

Decide whether each statement is *accurate* (true) or *not accurate* (false). Evaluate your answers after you have read the chapter. The answers are on page 319.

- ___ 1. There is no single point in a child's life when literacy begins; rather it is a continuous process.
- ___ 2. Learning to read always should occur before learning to write.
- ___ 3. Scribbling, letter strings, and invented spelling are considered valid ways to write and spell in early literacy programs.
- ___ 4. Reading to young children should begin at the age of about two.
- ___ 5. Word boundaries are the "white spaces" between words.
- ___ 6. A child who does "reading reenactments" is considered to be reading in a rudimentary sense.
- ___ 7. A few children can read at the second-grade level or higher when they enter kindergarten.
- ___ 8. Some children entering kindergarten have never had a book or story read aloud to them.
- ___ 9. Most kindergarten children receive adequate rest and nutrition in their homes.
- ___ 10. Kindergarten children can learn how to use a computer keyboard.
- ___ 11. Each early literacy program must proceed at the child's own pace and help the child to master skills in which he or she is weak.
- ___ 12. Whole language is a totally prescribed early reading program.
- ___ 13. Predictable books are valuable for all types of pupils in early childhood programs.
- ___ 14. "Bookmarks" is an excellent whole language strategy to use with above average young children.
- ___ 15. Thematic unit teaching is the cornerstone of using whole language with young children.
- ___ 16. Language-experience dictation is especially useful for young children with special needs.
- ___ 17. The only early reading knowledge that a language-experience dictated story teaches is capital and lowercase letter names.
- ___ 18. The language-experience approach (LEA) enhances the creativity of the young children who use it.
- ___ 19. The major limitation of using the language-experience approach (LEA) is its lack of sequential skill development.
- ___ 20. Most kindergarten children with special needs use scribbling and/or letter strings in place of conventional spelling when writing.

A BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF EARLY LITERACY

The *emergent* or *early literacy philosophy* states that there is not a point in a young child's life when literacy begins; rather it is a continuous process of literacy learning that begins in infancy. The early literacy philosophy states that children have a great deal of prior knowledge that can be built upon. This prior knowledge mainly is the result of all the experiences to which the child has been exposed. Morrow (1997) is representative of all of the researchers who have studied early literacy, and she has written the following generalizations about it:

- All literacy begins in some form from infancy on and proceeds at each child's own rate and in his or her own way.
- Most young children begin to read, write, and spell before school entrance. This includes children with special needs, although their progress may be more limited.
- Learning to read and write is a difficult task for many children.
- However, it may be quite easy for a linguistically gifted child and extremely difficult for a child with special needs.
- Learning to read, write, and spell effectively takes many years, even for a linguistically adept child.
- Ability in written language always is based on competency in oral language and may reflect it.
- Reading to children beginning in infancy is the *single most effective predictor of primary-grade reading achievement*. Reading to young children should take place daily and be pleasurable both for the reader(s) and the child. It often is called "lap reading," since the young child usually is held on the reader's lap while listening.
- Scribbling, letter strings, and invented spelling are considered acceptable ways for a young child to write in early stages of development.
- All literacy develops most effectively in lifelike situations at home and in school. Thematic unit teaching is an important element in making school learning meaningful and practical.

In the past, traditional early childhood and kindergarten programs mainly emphasized readiness for reading experiences that were not particularly educational and were often not even primarily reading related. Unstructured play and rest time also were stressed much more in past early childhood programs than they are today.

However, contemporary preschool, kindergarten, and primary-grade classrooms reflect many of the same types of experiences and materials that are found in homes that have stressed early literacy skills. Research has found that early readers, writers, and spellers have not had anyone trying to teach them literacy skills (Durkin, 1966). These children learn beginning reading skills by asking family members and friends about letters, words, and numbers. They also have parents, grandparents, siblings, and friends who model reading and writing. Often such homes have an older brother or sister who reads to younger children or plays school with them.

Early literacy programs provide lifelike and challenging literary experiences for young children. They help young children extend and refine their early literacy skills. These programs do not wait for children to “naturally” grow into reading, writing, and spelling.

The Most Useful Early Literacy Experiences

The most useful early literacy experiences are often also the cadre of experiences to which young children should be exposed in school. Many of these are discussed in greater detail in later chapters of this book. They include the following:

- Listening to books of various kinds—nursery rhymes, poetry, and other material—on a regular basis is the experience most related to subsequent school reading achievement. Unfortunately, some children, including those with special needs, enter preschool or kindergarten without ever having had any of these read aloud to them. This is true across socioeconomic groups.
- Observing family members and other adults who value reading for pleasure and information. Having good reading models is considered the second-most-important experience influencing subsequent primary-grade reading achievement.
- Taking trips and including a discussion both before and after to encourage the development of vocabulary. Although the trips obviously differ depending on circumstances, here are several examples: a zoo, a pet store, a forest preserve, a wildlife preserve, a veterinarian’s office, a park, a shopping mall, a toy store, or a circus.
- Having a *print-rich environment* in the home or the classroom and answering questions about letters, words, numbers, and colors. Children exposed to a print-rich environment may learn the following concepts about print:
 - Print is different from pictures;
 - Print on a page goes from left to right and from top to bottom;
 - A capital letter differs from a lowercase letter;
 - Print is found in many places in the environment and may contain different types of information;
 - Adults read types of print in different ways—aloud to children or silently to themselves—reading has many uses and purposes;
 - A book has a title, an author, and often an illustrator;
 - The white spaces between words in print are called “word boundaries”; and
 - Anyone who is physically able can produce print with various tools—a computer word-processing system, a pen, a pencil, or crayons.
- Listening to a mass market book and then doing a *reading reenactment* (pretend reading) of the book. A young child should be encouraged to use pictures to facilitate in the reading reenactment; the child’s version of the book should be welcomed, even when his or her words do not match the book.
- Playing school with an older sibling or friend is a very effective and motivating way for a young child to develop all emergent literacy skills.

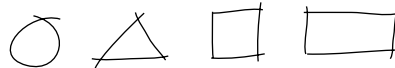
- Dictating language-experiences stories and books to an adult who then transcribes them in the child's own language patterns. The adult helps the child to read the material back, stressing left-to-right progression, letter names and letter sounds, important sight words, and the concept that reading is primarily talk written down.
- Participating in all kinds of art and construction activities.
- Participating in all types of rhythm activities.
- Participating in dramatic play, such as having a make-believe veterinarian's office, or dramatizing a portion of a book that has been read aloud.
- Watching videotapes, DVDs, computer software, pictures, demonstrations, scientific experiments, dioramas, and other types of media.

EARLY LITERACY EXPERIENCES AT KINDERGARTEN ENTRANCE

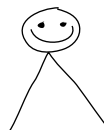
By the beginning of kindergarten, children at various levels may demonstrate competency in the following early literacy skills. As soon as a child has mastered any of these skills, the skill can be checked off, and instruction and practice in the next set of skills should begin.

A. Children with Special Needs

- Listens to a story read aloud with a short attention span and some distractibility.
- Can give limited answers to lower-level (literal) comprehension questions about a story read aloud.
- Has been to interesting places in the immediate neighborhood such as a park, a grocery store, or a pet store.
- Can recognize his or her own first name in print.
- Can print his or her own first name somewhat correctly.
- Can count correctly to about 10.
- Can recognize and name the basic colors: *red, green, blue, black, white*.
- Understands that the print in books is different from the pictures.
- Understands that print can be found in various places such as books, television, and product labels.
- Understands that print is different from scribbling.
- Participates in art activities at a basic level and usually colors and cuts in a fairly messy manner.
- Displays low-level hand-eye (motor) coordination. For example, the lines on geometric figures may appear like these



- Can draw a person somewhat like this:



- Usually uses a restricted oral language code: short sentences, limited and imprecise vocabulary, nonstandard grammar, and/or a nonstandard dialect.
- Can use scribbling or a few letter strings in place of standard spelling.
- Understands some simple purposes for writing such as a letter to a friend or relative or a grocery list.
- Can correctly recognize and identify five or fewer lowercase letter names.
- Can correctly recognize and identify five or fewer capital letter names.
- Can identify one or two common words: *STOP, dog, cat, play, run*.

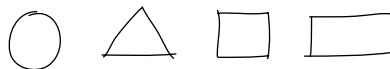
EARLY LITERACY EXPERIENCES AT KINDERGARTEN ENTRANCE (continued)

B. Children with Average Linguistic Aptitude

- Can listen to a story read aloud with attention and comprehension.
- Can answer lower-level (literal) comprehension questions about a story that has been read aloud.
- Can do a simple reading reenactment (pretend reading) of a story that has been read aloud.
- Can retell a very simple story (three or fewer main parts) that has been read aloud in correct sequence.
- Has been to interesting places in the neighborhood and understands and can use some of the specialized vocabulary of those places: a shopping mall, a toy store, a local zoo, a lake, etc.
- Can recognize and correctly print his or her own first name.
- Can count correctly approximately up to 20+.
- Understands that print on a page goes from left to right.
- Understands that a book has a title (name).
- Understands that a capital letter is different from a lowercase letter.
- Can correctly identify at least eight to ten lowercase letter names.
- Can correctly identify at least eight to ten capital letter names.
- Can correctly identify approximately five common sight words such as *STOP, dog, cat, Christmas, play, run, mother, jump, ice cream.*
- Can play school with an older or same-age child.
- Can dictate a simple language-experience story about a personal enjoyable experience.
- Can attempt to read his or her own language-experience story with adult support.
- Enjoys participating in simple art activities and cuts and colors fairly well.
- Can draw a fairly detailed picture of a person.



- Participates in spontaneous dramatic play such as playing house or playing store.
- Understands the purpose of a computer and can play simple computer games.
- Can recognize and name the basic colors and can recognize a few color words: *red, green, blue, black, white, brown, orange, pink, purple, yellow.*
- Displays fair hand-eye (motor) coordination; i.e., the lines on geometric figures may appear this way:



Name: _____ Grade: _____

EARLY LITERACY EXPERIENCES AT KINDERGARTEN ENTRANCE (continued)

- Knows the name of and can draw a circle and a square.
- Can generally sit still about ten to fifteen minutes, usually pays attention when actively involved in an activity, and usually is fairly well behaved.
- Uses fairly good oral language with sentences containing six to eight words, adequate vocabulary to express him/herself, and acceptable grammar with some overgeneralizations such as “goed” or “runned.”
- Can use random letter strings with some invented spelling such as: *J rn t sl* for *Joe ran to school*.
- Can provide the correct sounds for a few consonant letters.

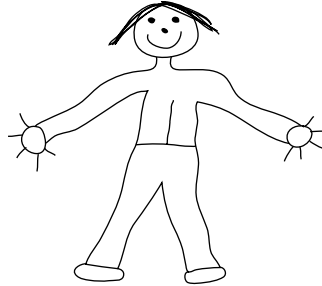
C. Children with Above Average Linguistic Aptitude

- Enthusiastic about listening to a book read aloud to him or her. Very good comprehension including affective (emotional) skills and pays very good attention.
- Can answer both lower-level and higher-level comprehension questions about a book that has been read aloud.
- Can do an accurate and motivated reenactment of a mass market book that has been read aloud to him or her.
- Can retell a simple story or mass market book in correct sequence.
- Has been to interesting places and understands and uses some of the specialized vocabulary terms of the place: a zoo, a theme park, a museum, a planetarium, a wildlife preserve, an airport, a national park, etc.
- Can recognize and print his or her own first and last names.
- Can correctly count to approximately 50 to 100.
- Understands that print on a page goes from left to right and top to bottom.
- Understands that a book has a title, an author, and perhaps an illustrator.
- Understands that there are word boundaries (“white spaces”) between the words in print.
- Can recognize and identify most lowercase letter names.
- Can recognize and identify most capital letter names.
- Understands that print can be found in many different places in the environment.
- Can identify 20+ common words by sight: *STOP, dog, cat, mother, father, play, run, ice cream, school, jump, cow, happy, funny, TV, he, she, Christmas, you, one, sun*.
- Can identify colors and some common color words: *red, green, blue, yellow, black, brown, white, orange, pink, purple*.
- Enjoys playing school with an older sibling or friend.
- Can dictate and successfully read back a language-experience story.
- Is able to learn several important sight words from each of his or her language-experience stories.
- Enjoys participating in challenging art activities; colors and uses scissors very well.
- Enjoys participating in rhythm activities.

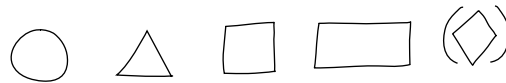
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EARLY LITERACY EXPERIENCES AT KINDERGARTEN ENTRANCE (continued)

- Can draw a detailed picture of a person.



- Can lead and participate in both spontaneous and planned dramatic play situations such as a veterinarian's office, television newsroom, grocery store, etc.
- Can use a computer for simple word processing of his or her written stories and for playing appropriate computer games.
- Displays good hand-eye (motor) coordination. The lines on geometric figures may look like these:



- Knows the name of and can draw these geometric figures: *circle, triangle, square, rectangle, and perhaps diamond.*
- Displays attention span of 15+ minutes, usually pays attention, is not easily distracted, and is usually well behaved if sufficiently challenged.
- Uses elaborate oral language with complex sentences, fairly precise and interesting vocabulary, and good grammar with a few overgeneralizations such as "*buyed*" or "*boughted.*"
- Can use invented spelling to convey his or her thoughts: *i wil be getin a puppy in t fl* for *I will be getting a puppy in the fall.*
- Can read and understand simple predictable book such as *Is Your Mama a Llama?* (Guarino, 1989).
- May be able to read simple books at the first-grade level or higher.
- Can provide sounds for many of the consonants and vowels.

THE RATIONALE FOR DEVELOPING EARLY LITERACY SKILLS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS

When young children learn early literacy skills in their home and in early childhood programs, they are more likely to be successful in kindergarten and the primary grades. Family members, family friends, and preschool teachers are very important in helping young children develop beginning reading and writing skills.

As demonstrated by the checklists in the previous section, young children's early literacy skills and exposure vary a great deal. Some young children enter kindergarten already reading at the upper primary-grade level or above, while others are not able to recognize a single alphabet letter. Some children have been read aloud to daily since infancy, while others have never heard a book or a nursery rhyme read aloud. Some have already traveled extensively before kindergarten entrance; others never have been farther away from their home than the immediate neighborhood. In addition, a number of young children do not receive adequate nutrition and rest and may spend much of their time watching television programs, including those that are not designed for young children and may be harmful for them.

Children who have had little exposure to early literacy activities and/or have special needs of various types may not be ready for beginning reading and writing instruction in school and may fall further and further behind unless a teacher, tutor, volunteer, family member, or friend makes a concerted effort to help them.

Experienced and caring kindergarten and first-grade teachers usually are able to compensate for a child's inadequate literacy experiences prior to school entrance. However, this may be especially difficult in classrooms in which there are a large number of "at-risk" children. Kindergarten teachers may need help from a teacher's aide and parent and community volunteers. First-grade teachers may also receive help from a Reading Recovery teacher who has been trained in an intervention program for "at-risk" first-grade children.

A well-trained, motivated kindergarten teacher can help a child with special needs learn the important early literacy skills by working with each child at his or her present level and proceeding at the child's own pace. The strategies and materials in this book should help a teacher, tutor, or family member do this effectively.

All young children, including those with special needs, deserve a kindergarten or first-grade reading and writing program that enhances their present strengths while compensating for their weaknesses. Such a program should provide instruction and reinforcement in beginning reading skills (including letter names and letter-sound relationships), beginning writing skills, beginning spelling skills (including invented spelling), and oral language development, as well as improving the child's sense of self-worth. Usually this becomes some variation of a whole language program, along with the language-experience approach and meaningful skills instruction emphasizing both phonic analysis and comprehension skills. Later sections of this chapter illustrate such a program.

WHOLE LANGUAGE AND ITS PLACE IN EARLY LITERACY INSTRUCTION

Whole language is a complex construct. Here is one simple definition:

Whole language is a philosophy that includes using relevant literature and writing and meaningful, practical, cooperative experiences in order to help students develop motivation and interest in learning.

Whole language emphasizes child-centered learning and unifies all curriculum areas. It also emphasizes that no person becomes truly literate without being personally involved in literacy.

Crafton (1991) has identified six principles that exemplify the whole language philosophy. The following is my own adaptation of these principles, with examples.

Principle 1—Oral and Written Language Develop Whole-to-Part

The concept of whole-to-part literacy development has its beginning in what is known about how children learn to speak. From birth, young children deal with language wholes. For example, family members communicate whole meanings and encourage their young children to speak in whole words and sentences, not in letter sounds. Small pieces of language in isolation confuse young children, but they understand the relationships in whole sentences and conversations.

This whole-to-part principle contrasts with the “skills approach” to teaching reading. In a “skills” program, the names and sounds of isolated letters are stressed.

Strategy: If this principle is to be adopted from the beginning stages of early literacy, children need to read and write texts that have the characteristics of real language. They should read intact mass market books, dictated or written language-experience books, learning skills such as phonic analysis and structural analysis in the context of real books when there is a need for these skills, and use invented spelling until they learn spelling skills when they are needed in actual writing.

Principle 2—Language and Literacy Are Socially Constructed

Reading and writing are not solitary activities, but socialized learning events. Even when a person reads a book alone, he or she is having a conversation with an author. Writing, of course, is a dialogue between the writer and one or more readers. In addition, after a child has read a book alone, the child is motivated by opportunities to share his or her interpretations and reactions. Young children find it rewarding to read a book with a partner. (Book clubs are based on this premise since readers read a selected book and then share their understanding and views about it.)

Strategy: Students need opportunities to learn from their classmates as well as from their teacher or tutor. Whole language encourages collaboration and cooperation and greatly stresses the value of students learning and thinking together. Since talk is very important to learning, a whole language classroom may be a little noisy, but it always should be well managed. Whole language encourages children to think together and to expand on each other’s ideas. Cooperative learning groups, interest groups, needs groups, mini-lessons, and “buddy” groups all are encouraged.

Principle 3—Literate Behavior Is Learned Through Real-Life Use

When young children use language in the home, they always have a definite purpose. For example, they ask for their favorite toy or a glass of water, or tell a parent that they love him or her. Language in the school always should have the same definite purpose and goal. Learning phonic analysis in isolation is not purposeful for young children, while reading an interesting mass market book such as *There's a Nightmare in My Closet* by Mercer Mayer is.

Strategy: Children need to learn to use language for many real-life purposes. They should read and write books and stories, children's newspapers, simple poetry, environmental print, and picture books, and simple chapter books. Literacy is authentic when the child has a real personal investment in it. Teachers and tutors can help children to read and write for real purposes right now.

Principle 4—Demonstrations Are Important to Learning

Teacher or tutor demonstrations show children various elements of word identification, comprehension, writing, and spelling. Whole language emphasizes the *process* of reading and writing rather than the *product*. Teachers and tutors should share their best strategies for good reading and writing. They also should do what they request their pupils to do. For example, if children are going to write a thank-you letter, the teacher or tutor should also write a real thank-you letter.

Principle 5—All Learning Involves Risk Taking

In the past children in the primary grades were expected to read orally in a word-perfect manner. However, now beginning readers are encouraged to take risks in their reading, writing, and spelling. They are encouraged to substitute a word for an unknown word, while they are reading, if the substituted word makes sense in context. They are encouraged to guess the spelling of unknown words while writing.

Young children are encouraged in risk taking when they are learning to speak. Approximations of correct words are celebrated and encouraged. Similar approximations of correct words while reading and while spelling likewise should be celebrated by teachers, tutors, and family members.

Principle 6—Learners Must Take Responsibility for Their Own Learning

According to the whole language philosophy, children must take responsibility for their own learning. This concept assumes that all children are natural learners and want to learn. Very young children take responsibility for learning to speak. Children can take responsibility for their own early literacy by choosing mass market books to read for pleasure or information and choosing writing topics. Teachers and tutors should allow students to direct their learning as much as possible. This means allowing students to take appropriate risks and proceed at their own pace. They should be helped to understand that it is *their own* learning.

Since whole language is a philosophy and not a teaching approach, a variety of elements typically may be found in a whole language classroom. Some of these are

- Whole-to-part reading and writing;
- Collaboration among children;
- Risk taking;
- Authentic or “real” learning experiences;
- Teaching and learning that emphasize *process* not *product*;
- Student-involved discussions, demonstrations, multi-media, and experiments;
- Student, not teacher, ownership of learning;
- Learning experiences that stress reflection and evaluation;
- The teacher or tutor acting as a *facilitator*, rather than a director, of learning;
- A child-centered and child-regulated classroom, where as much as possible the children select the topics of the curriculum and the means by which they are learned;
- All students are active participants in their learning;
- Skills are taught in the contexts of books, stories, paragraphs, and sentences, not in isolation; for example, phonic worksheets and workbooks normally would not be used;
- All elements of literacy (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) are emphasized, because a literate person is one who can use them all;
- Thematic unit teaching is typical and usually the theme is taken from the content areas of social studies or science, and all listening, speaking, reading, writing, and spelling activities are based on it. Some common themes are our neighborhood, community helpers, school helpers, animals, zoo animals, the reasons for recycling, our city (town), the rain forest, and cultural differences in our classroom;
- Literacy instruction takes place throughout the day with large blocks of time being set aside specifically for literacy;
- Commercial materials such as basal readers or phonic materials do not dictate the curriculum so materials are used as a means to an end, not an end in themselves;
- Different classroom organizational patterns are used, such as whole-class instruction, small-group skills instruction, needs groups, interest groups, mini-lessons, “buddy” groups, cross-age groups, and cross-grade groups. The groups generally are short-term and very flexible, meaning that young children can easily move from group to group; and
- All of these cueing systems are stressed in whole language programs:
 - Semantic (meaning) cues
 - Syntactic (grammar or word order) cues
 - Graphophonic (visual/phonic) cues
 - Combination (a combined system such as using both meaning and phonic cues)

WHOLE LANGUAGE AND CHILDREN WHO HAVE SPECIAL NEEDS

Several elements of whole language seem to be especially useful with young children who have special needs. Here is a brief description of them.

Print-Rich Environment

All preschool, kindergarten, or primary-grade whole language classrooms should have many examples of functional print available for children to look at. This print should be placed so that each child can associate the words with what they represent. As an example, a *desk, chair, table, window, door, book, floor,* and/or *rug* can be labeled so that the children can associate the abstract symbol with the concrete object, thus giving meaning to it. Although a print-rich environment is most associated with the whole language approach, it also is useful in any early literacy program.

Big (Oversized) Books

Big or oversized books are very much identified with early childhood early literacy programs. Big books are often used in the *shared book experience* described later in this section. Big books measure from about 14 by 20 inches to about 24 by 30 inches. Some of the simpler big books are best for children as young as two or three, while others can be used through the third-grade level. Although they can be used in a whole-class setting, they often are most effective in a small-group setting. The teacher or tutor usually places the big book on an easel so that all children can see it easily.

NOTE: Whether reading from a big book or a normal-sized book, the adult should genuinely enjoy all books that he or she reads aloud to young children.

Big books are very effective because their size makes it easy for children to see the print and pictures clearly. As the teacher or tutor runs his or her hand underneath the print, children can easily notice the word boundaries (“white spaces”), target letters and words, the differences between print and pictures, and left-to-right progression. Many big books also are *predictable*, making it easy for children to try to read along and to perhaps learn some letter names and sight words.

NOTE: Not all big books are predictable, and those that are not probably will be difficult for young children with special needs.

A teacher or tutor can make a cassette tape recording while he or she is reading a big book aloud so that pupils can listen at a later time while looking at it. Big books as well as all mass market books should be reread a number of times to young children if they are to be used most effectively. When children seem to be enjoying a big book (or any book), it should be used with them for several days. The adult can leave big books on a chart easel or some other appropriate place so that children can “play school” with them or look at them again.

A number of companies are currently publishing big (oversized) books. A list of some of them can be found in Appendix I.

Shared Book Experience

The *shared book experience* helps students learn concepts about print, such as that reading goes from left to right and top to bottom and that sentences are made up of words and words are made up of letters. The shared book experience is very similar to the *lap reading* or bedtime story reading during which a family member reads to a child. A

shared book experience can use a big (oversized) book or, perhaps less effectively, a normal-sized picture book.

Before a teacher, tutor, or family member reads to a group of children or to one child, he or she should introduce the title, author, and illustrator of the book and have children make predictions about the book contents from its title and cover. The adult also can activate the children's prior knowledge and help them set purposes for reading, such as learning about the theme of the book, getting to know the characters, or simply listening for pleasure. As the reader shares the book, he or she should move a hand under the print to emphasize left-to-right progression and teach that printed words represent concepts. A shared book reading should be *interactive*, encouraging the children to make numerous predictions, share comments, and ask questions.

As a book is read aloud for a second or third time, have children try to read familiar phrases or predictable parts along with you. This is the main reason that the shared reading usually should feature big or normal-sized books that are predictable.

Here is one set of guidelines for following up on a shared reading experience:

- Read the book aloud and have children try to read the predictable parts with you.
- Read one line of the book aloud and have the children together repeat the line of print.
- Read most of each sentence in the book, leaving out one important word in that sentence and have children try to supply the missing word.
- Have children try to read the entire book along with you. For this, it is more important to select a *predictable book* for the shared reading experience than a big book.
- For follow-up activities the children can do any of the following:
 - Dramatize the book.
 - Illustrate the book.
 - Construct a puppet based on the book.
 - Look at a videotape of the book.
 - Listen to a musical version of the book.

Predictable Books

Predictable books are very useful with students who have special needs. Predictable books have repetitive language patterns, thus allowing children to guess (predict) the next portion of the book.

Predictable books can make use of rhyme, repetition of words, phrases, sentences, and refrains, as well as such patterns as cumulative structure and turn-around plots. Predictable books encourage children to make predictions or guesses about words, phrases, sentences, events, and characters that may be found next.

Here is a brief description of various kinds of predictable books:

- *Chain or circular story*—The plot is structured so that the ending leads back to the beginning.
- *Cumulative book*—Each time a new event occurs, all the previous events in the story are repeated.

- *Familiar sequence*—This book is organized by a recognizable theme such as numbers, colors, or days of the week.
- *Pattern stories*—The basic scene is repeated with some variation.
- *Question and answer*—The same or similar questions are repeated.
- *Repetition of phrases*—Word order in a phrase or sentence is repeated.
- *Rhyme*—Rhyming words, refrains, or patterns are used.
- *Songbooks*—A familiar song with predictable elements such as repetitive phrases are the basis for the book.

All books become somewhat predictable when they are read repeatedly to young children, as should be the case. Since fairy tales may be familiar to many children, they may be considered predictable, as may mass market books if they have very good plots and familiar topics. Books that contain pictures that exactly parallel the print often are predictable, especially if the children can see the pictures as the book is being read.

Here are several suggestions for using predictable books with children who have special needs:

- Select books that you very much enjoy.
- Begin with books that have clearly defined patterned language such as *Bright Star*, *Bright Star*, *What Do You See?* and gradually move toward books that have less clearly defined patterns.
- Read the title and show the picture on the cover to the children. Ask: “What do you think this book might be about?” Help them use the title and cover picture to make predictions about the book’s content. Many children with special needs as young as the age of four should be able to look at the title and cover of a predictable book and make predictions about its content. This should occur before listening to the book and later before doing a pretend reading (reading reenactment) of the book.
- Read the book aloud. When you come to a predictable line, encourage the children to read the line with you. Show them where the line is located in the print.
- However, be sure to allow the story lines and rhymes to carry the meaning of the book. Do not stop at points in a predictable book that interrupt the flow of patterned language since that will damage the book’s value.

A list of recommended predictable books of various types can be found in Appendix II.

WHOLE LANGUAGE AND CHILDREN WHO HAVE AVERAGE LINGUISTIC SKILLS

In addition to the strategies that work for children with special needs, several whole language strategies may be especially useful with children who have average linguistic skills. Some of these are explained here.

Thematic Unit Teaching and Collaborative Learning

Thematic unit teaching and *collaborative learning* are the heart of every whole language classroom. Most teaching and learning in whole language classrooms occurs in child-selected and child-organized thematic units. Thematic unit teaching presents skills from all the content areas using a single unit topic.

Thematic unit teaching relies on collaboration among children and between teacher or tutor and children. Children work cooperatively with each other and with an adult(s) in researching their own selected objectives. Children participate in various kinds of collaborative learning, including cooperative learning groups, “buddy” or partner groups, needs groups, interest groups, and with cross-grade or cross-age reading partners. Keep reading for more detail on these forms of collaborative learning.

Cooperative learning group—This kind of group usually consists of two to five or six children with different reading abilities. Each child participates in those tasks in which he or she is able and then shares what was learned with others in the group or class. As much as possible, this group is child-directed. As an example, if a cooperative learning group in third grade studies the topic “The Importance of Recycling,” several children might read simple trade books on this topic; others might research it on the World Wide Web; while others might draw some simple recycling illustrations or diagrams. In addition, children could watch videotapes or DVDs on recycling.

“Buddy” (partner) reading—“Buddy” reading takes place when two children decide to be reading buddies for a period of time. Each child then reads a copy of the selected book either silently or orally. When one buddy needs help, either in word attack or comprehension, he or she can ask the buddy. The buddies can have different or similar reading abilities.

Needs groups—These usually are short-term groups formed so that a teacher or tutor can present or review mini-lessons on important reading, writing, or spelling skills that one or more children need to learn at that time.

Interest groups—These groups are formulated by the children depending on their unique needs. The teacher or tutor rarely has input into the formulation of an interest group. These short-term groups are disbanded when the interest(s) that the group was formulated to research are finished.

Cross-age and cross-grade reading partners—In this type of grouping, an older and a younger child work together on selected reading skills. The partners may be an older child who has reading problems and a younger child who either is reading on grade level or has reading problems, or two children with similar reading levels who are in different grades. Since an older student, even if reading disabled, is often a better reader than a younger reader, an older student can experience success and enhance self-esteem by working with a younger child.

The *themes* should develop from young children’s actual life experiences and should interest them. In true whole language instruction, young children themselves select all the topics that they study. However, the teacher or tutor usually has to provide some direction, especially with very young children. Sample topics include *zoo animals*, *animal babies*, *animals that can be children’s pets*, *community helpers*, *different kinds of rocks*, *cowboys and cowgirls*, *spending the summer at a lake*, *our immediate neighborhood*, *the farm*, *protecting the environment*, *dinosaurs*, and *the veterinarian’s office*.

Thematic unit teaching in early childhood usually is based on the content areas of social studies or science or (less commonly) on one of the following: one book, the books written by one author, or one genre of literature.

Unit teaching helps students make connections between listening, speaking, reading, and writing, as well as among the content areas. An early literacy unit always should be developed around a genuine theme or core idea.

Message Boards

Message boards emphasize the social and authentic aspects of whole language. A classroom bulletin board can be designated as the class message board. When children enter a classroom at the beginning of a school year, they should find a note that the teacher, teacher's aide, or tutor has left for them on the message board. Tell children that all messages must be signed and that they must not hurt any child's feelings. Personal messages from a teacher, tutor, or classmates help children to understand that they are valued members of the class.

Mailboxes

An early childhood teacher or tutor can construct *mailboxes* and provide each child with a designated space for his or her mailbox. Mailboxes can be constructed from cardboard dividers. At the beginning of the school year the teacher, teacher's aide, or tutor places a short letter in each mail slot. The teacher, tutor, and children then discuss how the mailboxes will function in the classroom. Children should be encouraged to write letters at any free time during the school day. Stress that all letters must be signed and be written with an awareness of other children's feelings. Assign children the job of being sure that the mailboxes have an adequate supply of notebook paper, personalized stationery that the children have made, and envelopes.

Mini-Lessons

Mini-lessons are brief discussions or demonstrations of some aspect of reading or writing, designed to highlight the kind of thought or procedure in which a good reader/writer might participate. Mini-lessons are developed from a teacher's or tutor's observations of the reading or writing skills in which children are weak. Very briefly, here is the basic procedure for using mini-lessons in early childhood literacy programs.

1. When teachers or tutors observe specific missing skills that are causing children difficulty, a mini-lesson may be appropriate. In reading, these may be sight word vocabulary, phonic analysis, word structure, use of context clues, literal or higher-level comprehension, or oral or silent reading fluency. In writing, they could be spelling, use of correct grammar, or writing content.
2. Teachers or tutors should design a brief lesson(s) to present and/or review one aspect of the learning activity. Mini-lessons should be concise and emphasize only one reading or writing strategy. On the average, mini-lessons last about five to ten minutes.
3. A mini-lesson begins with the teacher or tutor helping students notice the observations that lead to instruction. For example, a mini-lesson on phonics can focus on the use of the schwa (ə) sound.

4. After the mini-lesson, children can be asked where they see an opportunity to use the information from the lesson in their current reading or writing. For example, third-grade children could be asked to write down all the words containing the schwa (ə) sound from a short reading selection.
5. After the reading or writing time, the teacher or tutor asks: Did it help you? Will you use this strategy again? When do you think this strategy will be the most useful for you?
6. When mini-lessons are a regular part of the curriculum, children should participate in planning the lessons.
7. Mini-lessons should be repeated throughout the school year as teachers observe a need for them.

Me Boxes

Me Boxes are collections of items that reflect the interests, prior knowledge, personal experiences, and family background of their owners. When children are encouraged to share aspects of their own lives, they can more successfully read and write material that reflects their interests.

To begin using this strategy, the teacher or tutor brings a small box filled with his or her personal items to share early in the school year. The items should reflect the teacher's or tutor's unique interests, experiences, family, hobbies, or mementos that have special significance. For example, I might put the following in my Me Box: a small stuffed dog, a book that I have recently read, an artifact from my trip to Kenya, a pine cone from northern Wisconsin, and/or a picture of me walking with my dog. Then the teacher or tutor takes each item out of the Me Box and talks about why each is significant.

Subsequently the teacher or tutor asks the children to bring their own Me Boxes to school. Shoe boxes are easy to obtain and work well. Each child shares his or her Me Box with the class. After all the Me Boxes have been shared, have each child dictate or write a story or a description about the items contained in the Me Box. Although not all the items contained in a Me Box have to be included in the story or description, the more complete the list is, the more predictable the material. After the children have shared their stories with the rest of the class, display the Me Boxes with the writing placed under each box.

Here is a story that accompanied a Me Box constructed by a third-grade boy. It contained two small stuffed dogs, photographs of his dogs playing ball, a baseball, and a rock from his collection:

This story is about me.

My name is Ben, and I am in third grade at Heartland School.

I have two dogs that are named LeRoy and Ellie.

LeRoy is a yellow lab and Ellie is a black lab.

I really like to play ball with them at Birch Lake in the summer.

I like to play baseball in the summer too.

I have a big rock collection.

WHOLE LANGUAGE AND CHILDREN WHO HAVE ABOVE AVERAGE LINGUISTIC SKILLS

Along with the strategies described so far, several whole language strategies seem very useful with children who have above average linguistic skills. The descriptions in this section have been adapted from Crafton's book *Whole Language: Getting Started . . . Moving Forward* (1991).

Literacy Celebrations

Literacy celebrations reinforce the positive experiences that go with reading. They have two purposes:

1. Praising the meaning-making process by calling attention to higher-level thinking.
2. Presenting children's interpretations or discoveries.

Process celebrations can be classroom displays that emphasize in-process thought such as several drafts in writing. *Culminating celebrations* take place when classmates join a child to praise his or her reading or writing progress.

Bookmarks

Bookmarks encourage children to write their responses on small pieces of paper while they are reading. Children using bookmarks can write down difficulties and continue reading, knowing that they will later be able to talk about these difficulties with their teacher, tutor, or classmates.

The teacher cuts notebook paper, construction paper, or tag board into strips about two inches wide. Then he or she models this strategy by showing the children sample responses to reading, written on a bookmark. Each child is given several bookmarks to use while reading self-selected materials. If two children are reading "buddies," they can write comments on a bookmark(s) together.

If they wish, children can share the comments they wrote on the bookmarks with the teacher, tutor, a group, or the entire class. If the teacher or tutor would like, children can hand in the bookmarks to help the teacher understand which strategies the children may need to learn or review. The teacher or tutor also can answer questions or comments directly on the bookmarks.

Here is a bookmark that was written by a second-grade child with above average linguistic skills after she read *The Tortilla Factory* (Paulsen & Paulsen, 1998).

The Tortilla Factory

How did the yellow corn seeds know when to start to grow?

I didn't understand how the workers know when to pick the corn.

Is eating corn tortillas good for a person?

I never ate tortillas. What do they taste like?

I would like to make tortillas here at school sometime.

Do the farm workers from Mexico get paid very much for picking food like corn?

Exit Slips

Exit slips are an easy way to help children think about what they have learned and to determine areas that need additional study. Exit slips may be used after any learning experiences or at the end of a school day. Reading teachers and tutors can use the following strategy with above average readers in the primary grades:

- Talk about the importance of decision making, such as what to include in a letter to a friend or relative, what to wear to school on a particular day, or how to ask a friend or relative for help in solving a simple problem.
- Give one 3-inch by 5-inch index card to each child.
- Ask each child to write down one thing that he or she has learned (in the day or during the learning experience) on one side of the index card. Have the child write down one question that he or she still has. Encourage children to ask any question that seems meaningful and relevant to them.
- Collect the cards and examine them.
- Choose several questions to use the next morning. Questions can be answered either orally or by writing on each child's card, or other children can be encouraged to answer them. Selected questions can be used for future study or to help a teacher or tutor choose topics for future mini-lessons.

Book Talks

Book talks can be used to emphasize books that other children might like to read for fun. Children can give book talks anytime when they have read books that they want to recommend.

A book talk in an early childhood program may include any of these elements:

- A favorite part of the book;
- A favorite character in the book;
- The most interesting incident in the book;
- A retelling of the most important events, being sure not to give away the ending;
- How this book is like or different from other books that the child has recently read; and/or
- Why the child would or would not want to read another book by the same author.

Before using book talks, the teacher or tutor should explain why book talks are helpful. Children can give book talks to a small group, large group, or the entire class. If a child wants to, he or she can make brief planning notes for the talk. A child also can construct advertising posters or develop a simple costume to wear while giving the talk.

Observation Journals

Observation journals are a useful strategy for above average readers/writers. To keep an observation journal, children follow this basic procedure:

1. Children and teacher or tutor choose an area of social studies or science they would like to directly observe. Classroom pets are useful for this purpose, as are classroom plants.
2. Teachers or tutors tell children that they will be involved in original research as they make observations, conduct simple experiments, ask questions, and then use their observation journals to record their discoveries.
3. The class brainstorms questions they might want to investigate. Children and teachers divide themselves into small groups based on common prior knowledge and interests.
4. The small groups are given ten to fifteen minutes to begin their investigations. They observe, discuss, and record observations.
5. After the observations, group members meet to formulate new questions or refine previous ones in preparation for the next observations. At this time, groups may want to suggest experiments to help answer their questions. They use their journals to plan the experiments and to record explorations.
6. Children are encouraged to analyze their observations and to draw conclusions.

Here is an example from a second-grade student, using invented spelling.

Our tertl lives in a glas bol.

There is a rock in the bol for him.

He likes to et flies.

Wen I hold a ded fly in my fngrs for him, he stiks his nek up and gets it from my hand.

He has lived in our room at skol for a lon tim.

THE LANGUAGE-EXPERIENCE APPROACH (LEA) IN EARLY LITERACY PROGRAMS

The *language-experience approach* (LEA) is an excellent way for young children to learn and review letter names, letter sounds, sight words, word structure, and comprehension skills and to understand the concept that “reading is primarily talk written down.” LEA dictation can begin as early as the age of three for a child who has good linguistic aptitude, and somewhat later for students who have less competency in oral language development. LEA was primarily researched and written about by the late Roach Van Allen, professor emeritus at the University of Arizona, under whom I studied in the 1960s. At that time, Allen was speaking and writing about the language-experience approach in much the same way as it is used today. According to Allen (1976), LEA is mainly based on the following philosophy:

What I think about is important.

What I can think about, I can say.

What I can say, I can write or someone else can write it for me.

I can read what I have written or what someone else has written for me.

The language-experience approach is a very effective way of teaching and practicing letter names, letter sounds, sight words, word structure, context, and comprehension. Students usually can read their own LEA dictated charts and stories much better than they can read any other print materials.

Here is a brief description of how to use LEA dictation to improve early literacy skills:

1. Provide the child or children with a highly motivating experience so that they will have something interesting about which to dictate. This opportunity can be provided in the home, in an early childhood program, or in kindergarten or early first grade. The dictated stories are very motivating since they reflect the children's own unique experiences. Here are some motivating experiences:
 - A trip to a pet store, a zoo, a wildlife preserve, a humane society animal shelter, a library, an airport, a grocery store, a toy store, a shopping mall, a park, a post office, a doctor's office, a hospital, a dairy farm, a grain farm, a peanut factory, a dairy, a candy factory, or a fire station, among countless others. The unique attractions of each community can be the basis for a dictated language-experience story.
 - An art or construction activity such as constructing a simple puppet, making construction paper flowers, finger painting, making a kite, furnishing a simple playhouse, making paper umbrellas, constructing a Valentine, making a May basket, making a paper turkey, making a construction paper snowman, or formulating a simple collage, among many others.
 - A cooking or baking activity, including deviled eggs, making butter, bread, edible alphabet letters, cookies of various kinds, frosting cupcakes, vegetable soup, jam or jelly, muffins, fudge, peanut brittle, or lasagna.
 - A visual or aural activity, such as watching a videotape, viewing a DVD, observing experiments, watching demonstrations, listening to a book being read, or listening to an audiotape.
2. Have an interesting preliminary discussion with the children during which the motivation for the LEA dictation is discussed. As an example, the teacher and children can discuss a zoo trip in detail using correct vocabulary and stressing the order in which the different animals were seen.
3. Have the child or children dictate the language-experience chart (on large chart paper) or the LEA book (on regular or oversized paper) trying to motivate the children to dictate in complete sentences. If you want, an LEA story can be transcribed in a blank book. (Blank regular-sized and oversized books can be purchased inexpensively from Bare Books, Treetop Publishing Company, 220 Virginia St., Racine, WI 53405, and from most teachers' supply stores.) Do not structure the dictation or else the LEA chart or book will reflect the language of the adult instead of the child or children. Most reading specialists believe that the exact language patterns of the child or children should be used, including a nonstandard dialect, but any offensive language should be changed. If a child's

language patterns are changed, he or she may feel rejection, since that is the only language that he or she has.

4. Once the story or stories are dictated, here are some guidelines for using them:
 - Read the experience chart or story aloud several times, placing a hand under each word as you read it, being sure to stress one-to-one oral language and written word relationships. The reading teacher or tutor also can stress left-to-right progression by moving a hand in a sweeping movement under each sentence as he or she reads it aloud.
 - Present and/or review several beginning reading skills from each chart or story. In addition to letter-name identification, letter-sound relationships, and sight word identification, other skills that can be stressed are concept of words and word boundaries, beginning word structure, and use of context (meaning) clues.
 - All of a child's stories can be bound into a "book," reread several times, and then sent home with the child to read to family members or friends. The LEA charts can be duplicated for other children in the class to read. The charts can be kept on a chart holder and reread a number of times as a class or a group.
 - Each child can illustrate his or her dictated stories, using such varied art media as watercolor paints, finger paints, tempera paints, chalk, markers, crayons, colored pencils, or construction paper cutouts. The dictated and illustrated stories can be bound into a teacher-made, child-made, or pre-made book and laminated. The books can be fastened with spiral binding (available at printing stores and office supply stores), three large rings, yarn, staples, or other means. The books should be as attractive as possible so that other children and the child's family and friends will want to look at them. Making them attractive also indicates that the teacher or tutor, as well as family members and friends, values the child's thoughts.
 - Each published LEA book can be put in the literacy center or library corner of the classroom for children to look at and read. Often young children, including those with special needs, find child-dictated or child-written books among the most interesting materials they want to examine and read, if possible.
 - Each child in the latter part of kindergarten or first grade can make a *word bank*. A word bank is a collection of all the words that the child has found interesting and useful from individual and group LEA charts and stories. The child, if he or she can, or the teacher, tutor, or family member, prints each word on a piece of tag board about 1 inch by 3 inches with a dark-colored marking pen or crayon. The child then files the words in a large brown envelope, a shoe box, or some other appropriate container. The child should review his or her word bank words on a regular basis, use them in an oral or written sentence, and then return them to the word bank. The word bank can be used along with a classroom word wall as an easy-to-find source for the spelling of commonly used and meaningful words.

Here are some words from an LEA story about a deer that observed a young child and his dog one summer day: *dog, deer, watched, backed, walked, again, afraid, and bark.*

The preceding steps in LEA dictation of both experience charts should be modified depending on each child's abilities and interests and each teacher, tutor, or family member's preferences. Here are two LEA stories dictated by first-grade children:

My Dog and a Deer

My dog and I live in the big woods.
We went for a walk by our house one day.
We saw a beautiful deer in a yard by our house.
The deer looked and looked at my dog and me.
We walked by him, and he just watched us.
As we were by him, he backed up a little.
He looked some more at us.
We walked closer again, and he just watched us.
Then he backed up a little again.
We walked closer again, and he just watched us.
After a while, he slowly walked away from us.
The deer didn't seem afraid of us at all.
My dog didn't bark at the deer one time.

The Black Bear

My dad and I were driving on a road in the woods one day.
All of a sudden, we saw a big animal coming out of the woods.
Then we saw what it was.
We were surprised that it was a big black bear.
He ran right across the road in front of our car.
We're lucky we didn't hit him.
The bear was running very fast.
I'm glad that we were in our car.
I wouldn't have wanted to meet that bear if we were walking.

Some LEA resources can be found in Appendix III.

THE LANGUAGE-EXPERIENCE APPROACH FOR CHILDREN WHO HAVE SPECIAL NEEDS

Some elements of the language-experience approach are especially well-suited to children who have special needs.

1. To motivate children with special needs to dictate a language-experience chart or story, a teacher, tutor, or family member can use the following experiences successfully:
 - A trip to an interesting, challenging place with many opportunities to discuss what is expected beforehand and what was seen on the trip. Some places of interest are a pet shop, a zoo, a toy store, a farm, a railroad train ride, and a fire station.

- A simple art or construction activity in which *process* instead of *product* is stressed. Some examples include finger painting, making a simple puppet such as a stick puppet using tongue depressors and construction paper, making a construction paper snowman, building a snowman outside in winter, “dressing up” to play house, and making a drawing in instant pudding.
 - A simple cooking or baking activity with a two-step or three-step recipe perhaps using rebuses (pictures). Here are examples: frosting pre-made cupcakes; baking prepared refrigerated cookies; spreading peanut butter, jam, or jelly on bread; dishing up ice cream; and mixing up precut vegetables or fruits to make a salad.
 - A simple visual or aural activity like watching a videotape, listening to a picture book or simple chapter book being read aloud, or looking at some motivating pictures.
2. Children with special needs can participate in a simple preliminary discussion before dictating a brief, language-experience chart or story if the discussion is somewhat structured by a teacher, tutor, or family member. Some special-needs children may have to be motivated to participate in such a preliminary discussion, since their oral language skills may be somewhat limited.
 3. Children with special needs can participate to some extent in language-experience chart or story dictation. However, they often may not participate in whole-class dictation. In a small-group dictation, each special-needs child may be asked to contribute one sentence for the chart. With some help, each child can usually do this. It often is more difficult for a special needs child to dictate an entire language-experience story or book since he or she often may have quite limited oral language skills. If this is the case, the following may help:
 - A highly motivating initiating experience;
 - A language-experience book with only one dictated sentence per page;
 - Trying to record the child’s exact oral language as much as possible; or
 - Using a pre-made teacher-constructed book or commercial blank book for the transcribed story. Many special-needs children cannot construct their own experience books.
 4. These are the skills that a special-needs child usually can learn from a dictated experience chart or experience book:
 - Left-to-right progression, by watching the teacher, tutor, or family member’s hand move left-to-right under each sentence;
 - Letter-name recognition and identification, especially of initial consonant sounds;
 - Several simple motivating sight words from the chart or story;

- Beginning concept of word boundaries; and
 - Fluency practice through rereading each transcribed experience chart or story a number of times.
5. A dictated language-experience story or chart can be illustrated using crayons, markers, or finger paints. These seem to be the simplest for such children.
 6. The teacher, tutor, or family member can print one or two easy, meaningful words for inclusion in each child's *word bank*.

THE LANGUAGE-EXPERIENCE APPROACH FOR CHILDREN WITH AVERAGE LINGUISTIC SKILLS

Some of the elements of the language-experience approach seem especially useful with children who have average linguistic skills. These experiences should be an extension of the elements summarized in the previous section.

To motivate children to dictate or write (using letter strings or invented spelling) a language-experience chart or story, a teacher, tutor, or family member can use the following experiences successfully:

- A wider range of places may be appropriate for trips: a wildlife preserve, a zoo, an airport, a railroad train station, a police station, a fire station, a dairy farm, a grain farm, the post office, and a local sporting event.
- A simple art or construction activity that stresses *process* more than *products* may work. A few examples are watercolor or tempera painting; making a fairly complex puppet such as a sock puppet using an old sock, red felt for a mouth, and a sewing machine; constructing a kite; constructing a playhouse out of cardboard boxes; making a May basket; making a simple collage; and making crayon etchings with fall leaves.
- A cooking or baking activity with a simple recipe, perhaps using rebuses (pictures). Here are some possibilities: making butter, deviled eggs, vegetable soup, edible alphabet letters, and baking cookies, muffins, or scones.
- A visual or aural activity, including the examples given above for children with special needs.

Children with average linguistic aptitude usually can participate quite effectively in a brief preliminary discussion before dictating (most likely) or writing (using letter strings or invented spelling) a language-experience chart or story with only minimal structure by a teacher, tutor, or family member. Many children with average linguistic skills use standard English with mostly correct grammar with the exception of some overgeneralizations such as “*runned*” or “*goed*.”

Children with average linguistic skills usually can use a language-experience chart or story dictation effectively. They often are able to participate in whole-class, small-group, and individual dictation. They usually enjoy small-group and individual dictation the most. The story or book always should be transcribed exactly as it was dictated, including nonstandard language patterns.

It is usually most efficient to use a pre-made teacher-constructed or commercial blank book. However, a child with average linguistic skills can construct and illustrate an experience book with help from an adult or classmate(s) if he or she wants.

Here are some additional skills beyond those for children with special needs that a child with average linguistic aptitude often can learn from a dictated experience chart or story:

- Letter-name recognition and identification of consonants and vowels;
- Recognition and identification of some sight words that are found in the language-experience charts and stories;
- Concept of word boundaries (the “white spaces”) between words;
- Beginning understanding of simple suffixes such as “s,” “ed,” and “ing”; and
- Motivation to read his or her own language-experience books or those of his or her classmates.

A dictated or child-written language-experience chart or story can be illustrated in more ways by children with average linguistic skills. Some additional options are markers, colored chalk, watercolor paints, tempera paints, and construction paper cutouts.

An adult or the child can print several important words for inclusion in the child’s *word bank*.

THE LANGUAGE-EXPERIENCE APPROACH FOR CHILDREN WITH ABOVE AVERAGE LINGUISTIC SKILLS

Here are elements of the language-experience approach that prove to be especially useful with young children who have above average linguistic skills. These experiences are an extension of the elements discussed in the two previous sections. These elements are the highest level of the language-experience approach and should be the goals for all children, if possible.

The following experiences can successfully motivate children who have above average linguistic skills to dictate (less often) or write a language-experience chart or story using invented spelling:

- A trip to an even wider range of locations, including a planetarium, a museum, a children’s discovery museum, a television station, a theme park, a hospital, a candy factory, an airport, a trout farm, a fishery, and a weather station.
- An art or construction activity that emphasizes both *process* and *product*. For these children, *product* can be important, but should never receive excessive emphasis. A few additional examples for this group include making a quite complex puppet such as a papier-mâché puppet head out of Styrofoam, a cardboard neck tube, instant papier-mâché, poster paints, and white glue; constructing a make-believe veterinarian’s office; making snowflakes out of white construction paper; constructing a make-believe grocery store; making a collage; and origami.
- A cooking or baking activity using somewhat more complex recipes. Here are several examples: baking bread, baking a birthday cake, cooking a Thanksgiving dinner, cooking lasagna, making pizza, making fudge, and making peanut brittle.

- A visual or aural activity such as these: watching an educational videotape or DVD, listening to a mass market book being read aloud, viewing demonstrations, and observing scientific experiments.

Children with above average linguistic skills can participate very effectively in a preliminary discussion before dictating (less often) or writing a language-experience chart or story using invented spelling with very limited or no help. Most children with above average linguistic skills use standard English with mainly correct grammar.

Children with above average linguistic skills can participate very effectively in language-experience dictation. However, they may more enjoy writing an entire language-experience story or book independently using invented or traditional spelling. Although they may want to use a pre-made teacher-constructed book or a commercially available blank book for a written experience book, most such children prefer to construct their own experience book, entirely independently or with minimal help.

The following are additional skills that a child with above average linguistic skills usually can learn from a dictated, or more commonly, written language-experience chart or story:

- Letter-name identification of all the upper- and lowercase alphabet letters;
- Letter-sound relationships (phonics) of the consonants and, to a lesser extent, the vowels;
- Identification of a number of the words that are found in his or her dictated and written experience stories and books and those of his or her classmates;
- Understanding of the use of sentence context in which a word that makes sense is substituted for an omitted word in an experience chart or story;
- Ability to fluently read his or her own language-experience stories and books and those of classmates; and
- Strong motivation to read his or her own language-experience books or those of classmates.

A dictated or child-written language-experience story or book can be illustrated in several different ways by children with above average linguistic skills. Additional media appropriate for these children include watercolor paints and cloth, among others.

The child with above average linguistic skills can print several important words from his or her charts and stories in his or her *word bank*. Later the child can use the words from the word bank in the following ways: alphabetizing, classifying, and reviewing them for later immediate identification.

