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Something old is new again: Revisiting language experience

To access and build students' prior knowledge, the author suggests trying an old approach.

Children in today's classrooms in the United States come from myriad backgrounds educationally, linguistically, and culturally. Some children enter school with several years of preschool supported by rich experiences with literacy and a broad base of knowledge. Others arrive at school speaking a language other than English, although many of these English as a Second Language students have had a rich linguistic and cultural experience (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Most children come to school understanding how to learn based on their specific culture, while still others attend school with little or no preschool experience, limited home literacy experiences, or little broad-based knowledge. Many children arrive at the doorstep of education with a cultural schema, that is, an organized knowledge of the world based on their previous experiences (Anderson, Osborn, & Tierney, 1984).

The essentials of knowledge that each child brings to school are increasingly more varied, and the teacher is challenged to provide effective reading instruction to ensure that every child learns, especially when many students do not come to school knowing how to listen, decipher nonverbal messages, and follow directions independently (Shade & New, 1993). Students who for one reason or another come to school without all the necessary tools to begin the complex task of learning to read will depend on the attunement of a highly qualified classroom teacher who can make use of what they do bring: their cultural schemas.

Research on literacy learning clearly shows that the processes of reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing, and thinking develop simultaneously as learners become literate (Cooper, 2000). Language arts methods recommended today capitalize on the fact that all aspects develop together, even—or especially—for high-need students with varied schemas. These students benefit from using multiple processes to build connections and increase schemas. Using a variety of approaches to teach language arts allows teachers the discretion to select variable methods, and the concept of a balanced approach evolves as a reasonable solution for these students (Snow et al., 1998). A balanced approach includes direct and explicit instruction, as well as extensive opportunities for reading and writing; any approach that incorporates these tenets can be viewed as a viable balanced method. The Language Experience Approach (LEA) then becomes a viable method for a teacher to reconsider and select.

Vygotsky was clear: The task of education and cognitive development is to connect abstract, schooled, scientific concepts to those of everyday life. In the common practice of teaching, new and prior knowledge arise only within the narrow boundaries of the classroom. Children's broad base of knowledge and experience comes from everyday life, not the classroom. Expanding and building on the prior knowledge of students who come to school with limited experiences is essential (Tharp, 1999) if children are going to comprehend and learn. Anderson, Reynolds, Schallert, and Goetz (1977) told us that comprehension occurs when readers access information they already possess on a topic and relate what is known to what is being read.

This article will describe a reading lesson in which I, the classroom teacher, successfully built

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and expanded children's knowledge, enhancing both their language and literacy by using a modified version of LEA. The LEA lesson was modified at my discretion for the particular children in my classroom. For example, I chose to put the literacy experience at the end of the series of lessons rather than at the beginning. I made that decision based on my previous experience of seeing children, taken to see or do something, who did not know where this *something* fit into their world. It is my belief that we can best organize an experience for children by providing the background knowledge and linking it to what they know.

John-Steiner (1985) reminded teachers that immigrant children in highly structured classrooms functioning in the target language do not find their language learning efforts adequately supported by context. This results in limited opportunities for the language learner to connect familiar activities with new expressions. If interest in school-related topics is raised, encouraged, and supported by context and connected to experiential topics, then high-need students will become engaged in learning.

Research supporting a balanced approach to teaching, as well as one that capitalizes on previous or prior knowledge, points to success. LEAs capitalize on a student's prior knowledge and have long been considered part of the concept of whole language. Whole language becomes difficult to define when considered by many of its proponents as a philosophy rather than a specific method (e.g., Altwerger, Edelsky, & Flores, 1987; Goodman, 1986). Whole language does share many of the same components as LEA—both stress the importance of connecting the oral to the written, both avoid the skill-based type of instruction offered by many basal readers and opt for children's literature, and both focus on the meaningfulness of language. Where language experience departs from whole language is in its focus on the production of charts or written recordings. Stahl and Miller (1989) reported in their research that whole language or LEAs did not produce anticipated positive effects; however, their research did not examine the capacity of language experience to boost the ability of students to make connections nor did it take into consideration the effect of children's writing. Schickedanz's (1990) review of the Stahl and Miller research found comparisons misleading; for instance, performance of students in kindergarten was compared to that of first graders. Furthermore, no attempt was made to look into longitudinal data, nor to obtain baseline data prior to instruction, which is certainly important when working with English-language learners. In addition, the research did not separate the newer (i.e., whole language) from the older and more traditional (i.e., language experience) versions of language experience. Finally, the authors compared the effects of whole language and language experience to approaches using basals without consideration for writing. A language experience unit designed to incorporate all components of language arts has merit in the search for a solution to meeting the needs of our most needy students.

Could an LEA be the classroom teacher's avenue for accessing and developing prior knowledge on a new topic that requires the class to have a certain base of knowledge before moving deeper into the subject matter? While teaching on the Texas/Mexico border in the 1950s, Van Allen (1982) conducted his conclusive research on a method designed to meet the needs of a diverse group of learners. Finding that these children generally lacked background information in school knowledge, Van Allen began to develop LEA lessons around the experiences of these children. Van Allen found great initial success and continued to work with his premise: What I can think about, I can say. What I can say, I can write or someone can write for me. I can read what I have written or what someone has written for me. I can read what others have written. Van Allen developed LEA as a means to support young learners by building prior knowledge, vocabulary, skills, and strategies simultaneously while engaging the learner in meaningful reading and writing activities (Weaver, 1988).

Classroom teachers can use LEA techniques to introduce lessons to the entire class where differentiation and accommodation are the norm. An LEA lesson can entice children to learn to use language in meaningful ways through an approach that conceptualizes rather than simply defines key vocabulary.

Theory to practice

Teachers are encountering more and more children coming to school with diverse backgrounds, languages, and educational experiences (Short & Echevarria, 2004). Teachers in need of a logical

way to proceed might consider building a common background or schema about a topic. My method was to choose a major theme or topic from a curriculum guide that supported the goals and objectives of the unit. I spent time developing the necessary background knowledge, accessing prior knowledge, and helping children make connections. What is most important is to identify what you believe the children already know and then invent means to connect that knowledge base to the new knowledge so that understanding results.

I developed the lesson referenced in this article to meet the needs of an exceptionally diverse group of third graders. Their Title I school was located in the suburb of a large city in the mid-Atlantic United States. (Title I is a federally funded program for at-risk students in the United States.) The class had 20 students, and more than 50% of them were non–native-English speakers. Based on the local Title I standardized test as well as teacher reports, 75% of the class was performing significantly below grade level. As I began introducing a unit in science about plants, it became obvious that the prior knowledge possessed by these children was as diverse as the students in the class. Some children lived in the city and didn't know where fruits and vegetables were grown; they only saw them in the grocery store. Other students in the class shopped with their families in ethnic supermarkets filled with exotic fruits and vegetables. Some recalled the fruits and vegetables they had grown on plots of land before immigrating to the United States. Not only did the students not know about plants in general, but also they could not generate the names of many plants.

How could a science unit about plants be presented to these children with the anticipated results of meeting some preset outcome or standard when their prior knowledge was so varied and their language arts skills differed? Helping children become increasingly fluent and independent readers, writers, and talkers is an important role for primary classroom teachers. The ability to communicate with one another is an essential skill whether a child speaks English or some other language. Language competence (i.e., the ability to express oneself in sentences) develops in classrooms where genuine communication and a wide variety of listening and speaking activities are encouraged (Sealey, 1996). Good teachers incorporate these types of activities in their daily lessons. In this case, I selected the topic of the grocery store to bridge prior knowledge to new knowledge and build the necessary schema for maximum comprehension on the topic of plants.

Goals of a language experience lesson for elementary school students

The content goal of this lesson was to provide a link from knowledge the students previously had acquired on the topic of fruits and vegetables to facts and concepts in their science unit on plants, thus broadening their understanding. The language goal was to take each student's background word knowledge and connect it to academic vocabulary by using the tools of literacy—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—enabling each student to express him- or herself clearly in the classroom. While these goals are not unlike many in elementary education content areas, I believe that they are achieved only when the teacher consciously helps students develop the skills and strategies necessary to link previous knowledge to the topic under study. The materials selected and used for this lesson must be actively related to the respective worlds of the children in the classroom in order to engage the attention of all. As a culminating activity, the children took a walking field trip to the local grocery store. This project demonstrated a successful connecting of the abstract, schooled, "scientific" concepts of our textbook to those of everyday life. As a result of the lesson, children would be able to do the following:

- connect prior knowledge that is localized in the home culture with what they needed to learn,
- learn to read and identify topic-specific vocabulary words,
- use designated vocabulary words in a sentence that demonstrates mastery of the definition,
- learn the names and attributes of the fruits and vegetables that they have studied,
- use the new vocabulary to create sentences that demonstrate contextual understanding,

- explain the new information that they added to their prior knowledge, and
- apply the vocabulary facts and concepts during a field trip to the local store.

The following lesson outline was designed to provide an example of how LEA can be implemented and used in a classroom of children exhibiting many different levels of needs and skills. It is a multifaceted developmental process that takes into consideration how prior knowledge enhances oral language competence, word identification skills, vocabulary, and strategies needed by young learners. My plan for discussion is divided into schema building and vocabulary introduction, vocabulary knowledge and oral language development, using new vocabulary in context to construct and write sentences, and writing a short paragraph.

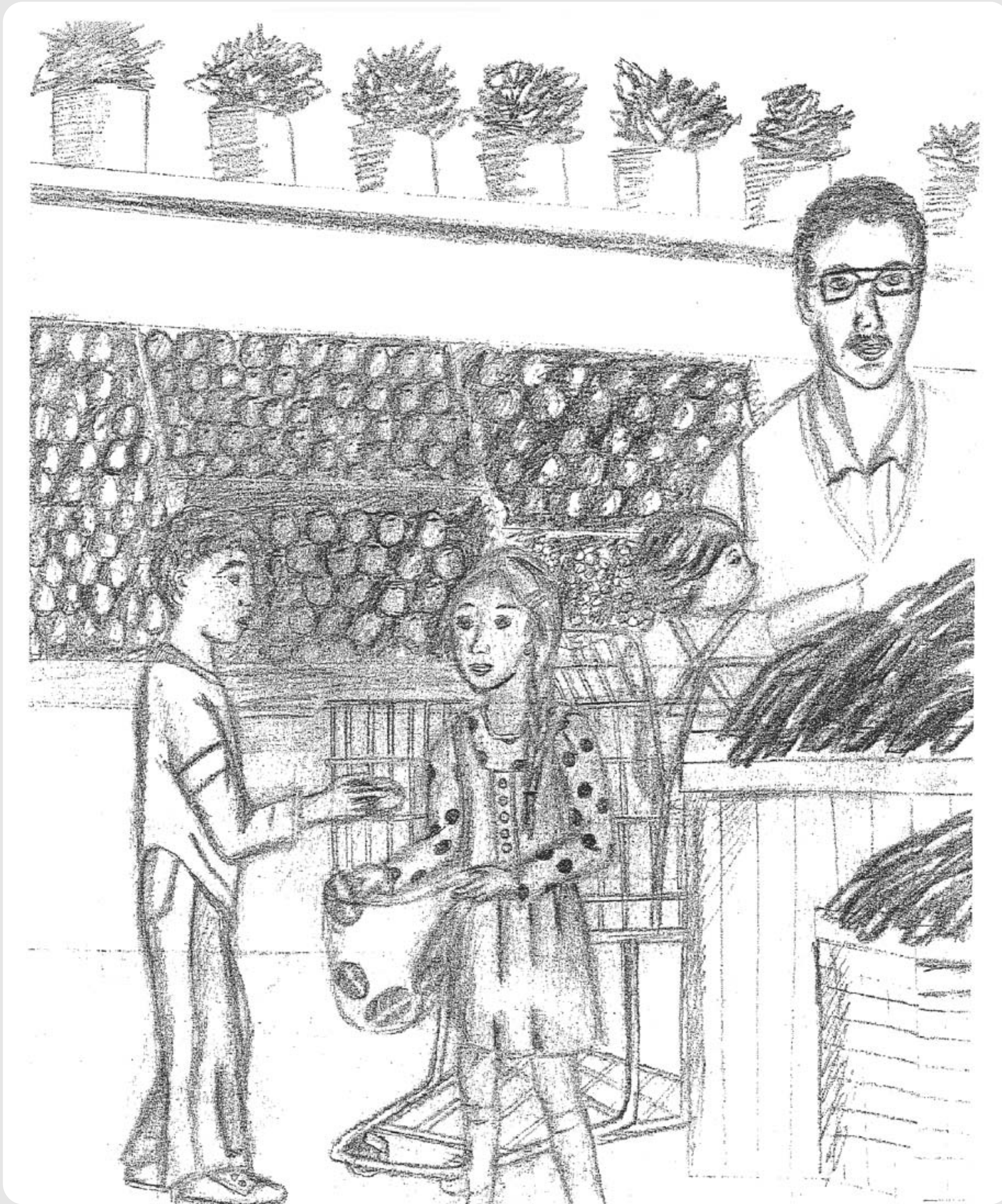
Schema building and vocabulary introduction

The lesson began when I introduced a stimulus picture prompt of a man pushing a baby in a shopping cart through the fruit and vegetable aisle of a grocery store (see Figure 1). Like any picture stimulus or prompt, the discussion it inspired produced the information the teacher needed to determine the class's overall knowledge of the subject matter. The picture also included a boy and a girl bagging some produce. I divided the prompt into four subtopics: the store, the man and baby, the boy, and the girl. This was done to make it easier for the students to be able to refer to specific objects in the picture. Each of the subtopics was represented by a cutout from the stimulus picture. I had a preselected set of vocabulary cards that were color-coded to the four cutouts from the picture. While the vocabulary was preselected for this introductory lesson, it would be motivating for the children to provide additional vocabulary once they understood what they would do with the words. As each topic was introduced, the teacher modeled a sentence while pointing to the items in the picture (e.g., "In the store I see many fruits like oranges and apples").

The store. As a means to investigate the children's prior knowledge about a grocery store, "the store" was the first topic. This main idea and topic took into account that there are many different types of grocery stores. I asked children to focus on the store in the picture and compare what they saw with what they knew. This was followed by questions such as, Who wants to tell me what they see? Is this like the grocery store you go to with your family? What do you have in your grocery store? How is it different? How is it the same? These questions became important in helping my students build and scaffold their varied knowledge about grocery stores. For example, one little boy in the class explained that the fruits that looked like green bananas were plantains. He continued to educate the class on how his mother cooked them for his family and how good they were to eat.

As the topic of the store continued, I asked if someone could use the word *store* in a sentence. I repeated the student's sentence (e.g., "The store has much fruits"). When necessary, the student sentence was restated and then clarification was sought (e.g., in this example clarification was sought as to which fruits were in the store). The students would then repeat the sentence while I pointed to some of the fruits (e.g., "The store has many fruits like oranges, bananas, and apples"). A surprise for me was that the time spent modeling the use of *many* instead of *much*, as well as the discussion about which word to use, engaged the children and did not discourage their participation. As children began to name the fruits and vegetables, I produced the vocabulary cards with the target word on one side and the corresponding picture cue on the other. This cue is a strategy students can use to assist them in being able to decode a word. There is no one strategy for students to use; they need numerous strategies that they can easily recall and apply. Strategies are essential tools that can be explicitly taught to children. Once learned, strategies can be modified and altered to fit many other learning situations by a skillful teacher who consciously shows a child how to use or alter them. The target word was taught within the context of the topic to ensure that the meaning was understood. In some cases, children also shared the name of that fruit or vegetable in their own language. One child was surprised that a *manzana* (Spanish for *apple*) came in so many different colors. As discussion about word meaning progresses, connection making continues. Next, I would ask the children how they could remember this word when they saw it again. I would take suggestions and

FIGURE 1
Stimulus picture presented at the beginning of the lesson to help in accessing prior knowledge



Note. Adapted from "Mathematics Is a Family Affair" by Lulu Delacre, published in Scholastic's *Teaching and Computers*. Copyright by Scholastic Inc. Used with permission.

translate that into suggesting word study strategies that could help the child recognize the word, spell the word, use the word in writing a sentence, or apply it in context. For example, when the word *banana* was introduced, I explained how the word could be broken into syllables: /ba/ /na'/ /na/. The selection of the strategy to use with each word was dependent on the word being taught, and was an opportunity to reinforce phonemic awareness and phonics skills. The vocabulary card with the picture cue on the back was then placed in the pocket chart that hung below the store sign cutout for later visual reference.

By the time the lesson was over, the students had been exposed to the names of many fruits and vegetables, some new and some familiar. The first time I taught this lesson to a group of third graders, the discussion of the fruits and vegetables occupied two full class periods. The stimulus picture served to encourage all of the children to share what they knew based on their prior knowledge. The conversation that resulted from this sharing served to expand prior knowledge and connect it with new knowledge.

The man with the baby. After the store introduction and lesson, I introduced the next topic, the man and baby. The students were asked to look closely at the stimulus picture and say what they saw. The responses confirmed the high language and literacy needs of these third graders. A student might offer, "The man he pushing the baby in the cart." I might reply, "Yes, the man is pushing the baby in the cart." This particular part of the picture produced a great deal of conversation. The students began to comment on whether their fathers would go to the grocery store and whether the father would take a baby. The resulting conversation created a comparison of what they knew from their own world and what they saw in the picture. As with the store, I introduced the preselected vocabulary as each word entered the discussion. Modeling sentences for the children and encouraging practice was again a major part of the lesson. The focus then turned to learning word strategies using multiple methods determined by the word itself: for example, *avocado* was easily taught by breaking it into syllables; *peach* on the other hand was more easily taught by helping the students see the word *each* in *peach* along with discussion of the /ea/ sounds. Vocabulary cards belonging to the topic discussed were placed in the pocket chart that hung below the cutout prompt.

The boy in the store. The children again focused on the stimulus picture and were asked to talk about the boy. The class decided to name the boy in the stimulus picture—some saw the boy as "Juan" while others called him "Kim." Naming the characters allowed the class to personalize the story as well as identify more closely with the picture. Many of the children began to understand the procedures being used in the lesson and that context provided the model to participate. Children raised their hands and the additional effort needed to create a good sentence became noticeable. As the children volunteered to describe what they saw and knew in the picture, the key vocabulary could be taught and reinforced, sentences could be modeled, and word strategies introduced. The new vocabulary cards hung in the pocket chart below the picture.

The girl in the store. By this point in the lesson most of the students had the procedures in their mind and eagerly provided a sentence, listened for the model, and practiced the sentence. The students again personalized the picture stimulus by naming the girl—"Maria" or "Lisa" appeared to be the most popular choices. The word strategies still presented the most difficult challenge, but the vocabulary cards provided necessary cues as reinforcement for the new vocabulary. Once again, the vocabulary cards were hung in a pocket chart.

Vocabulary knowledge and oral language development

Upon revisiting the lesson, the students looked at the picture stimulus and the four cutouts. The vocabulary cards had been removed to provide an opportunity to find out what words the students remembered. I spent several minutes reviewing the previously presented material, and then I pulled out several small stacks of sticky notes. I explained that each student would be given a sticky note that had on it one of the vocabulary words that they had been working on that week. I moved around the room giving everyone a sticky note, making sure that each was given a word to fit his or her ability. I asked them not to share their words, but to look at them

carefully and try to figure them out. Adequate time was given to the students to look at their word and decide where the word would fit best—with the store sign, the man and baby, the boy, or the girl. This thinking time was an opportunity to make use of a strategy. I then instructed the students to get out of their seats and place their sticky note around one of the cutouts on the board. The resulting graphic organizer is shown in Figure 2.

The rationale behind having the students place their sticky notes up at the same time is simple. In this way the students could participate without the feeling that anyone was watching them and waiting for them to make a mistake. Having given each student a word that I felt they should be able to identify, I could observe the difficulty or ease with which specific students accomplished the task. With all of the words up, I continued the lesson with the store cutout and reviewed each vocabulary word, pronouncing each one. Next, the students who could make up a sentence using some of these vocabulary words did so. The class proceeded through all of the sticky note vocabulary, creating sentences. These oral language exercises helped students develop correct sentence patterns. Once they began this process the feeling of success seemed to spread until all the students had a turn.

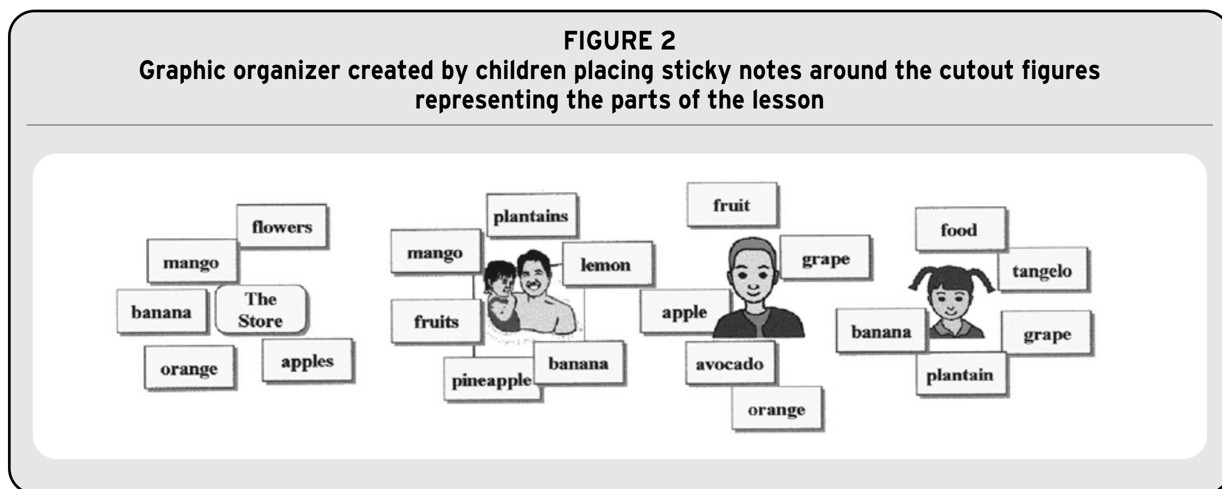
Using new vocabulary in context to construct and write sentences

As this part of the lesson began, I organized the class into four cooperative groups. Each group had as a goal to make a sentence using the preselected vocabulary that referred to one of the cutouts. As the classroom teacher, I assigned the class members to cooperative groups of students with varied abilities (Cochran, 1989). Following a cooperative learning model, each student in the group was assigned a different role based on his or her ability to be successful. The following is a sample group composition.

- Student 1. Due to his skill as a writer, he was given a long strip of cash-register tape to use as a sentence strip and a marker to use to write the group's sentence.
- Student 2. This student is a good speaker, and so was handed some vocabulary cards and given the job of creating a sentence that used those words as well as making certain the sentence was in order.
- Student 3. Because she was a good speaker, she read the sentence to the group.
- Student 4. Being less skilled, this student underlined in the sentence each word that corresponded to one of the vocabulary words.
- Student 5. This less confident student was in charge of hanging up the sentence and leading the group in reading it to the class.

It is important to remember that the tasks required varied abilities and afforded each student an opportunity to participate. Students worked in their groups and wrote sentences using long strips of wide cash-register tape instead of commercial

FIGURE 2
Graphic organizer created by children placing sticky notes around the cutout figures representing the parts of the lesson



school sentence strips. After the students completed writing their sentences, they practiced reading them. Each group of students read its sentence together in front of the class.

Writing a short paragraph

After the students read their sentences, the sentence strips were taped to the board in the front of the room (see Figure 3). I introduced a lesson on how to make all of these sentences work together in a paragraph. An introductory sentence was added as part of a group writing process, and the sentences were edited to fit together. The spacing of the sentence strips on the board aided in the editing process. A concluding sentence was added and the completed paragraph was then ready to be read and copied on paper by each student.

Using language to make meaningful connections

When I first used this lesson, the students followed this activity with a walking trip to the local grocery store. Upon returning from the trip, the students worked in their groups again and wrote sentences about what they saw. Students can compose these sentences about their experience in journals or on large sheets of paper that can be hung in the back of the classroom with photos taken on the trip. While it may appear that this lesson tried to accomplish a great many things, it must be remembered that the children who need a lesson of this type are having difficulty in school and can benefit greatly from constant modeling.

When teachers are working in classrooms with students of varied backgrounds, taking another look at the LEA can offer a teacher an opportunity to create meaningful connections. Creating such a lesson entails additional preparation, especially when you incorporate all aspects of the language arts. When the processes of reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing, and thinking are integrated, students have opportunities to build needed background knowledge about information that they need to know. These language activities for the classroom multiply resources in ways that are not possible when students read one story after another and try to answer questions related directly to those stories (Van Allen, 1982). These activities provide students, especially English-language learners, the opportunity to rehearse speaking and talking before they read and write. As students progress, LEA enhances their self-concepts by letting them see that their stories are important enough to be written down and displayed, giving authenticity to their work. Finally, these activities can be stored where students can revisit the vocabulary in meaningful context and

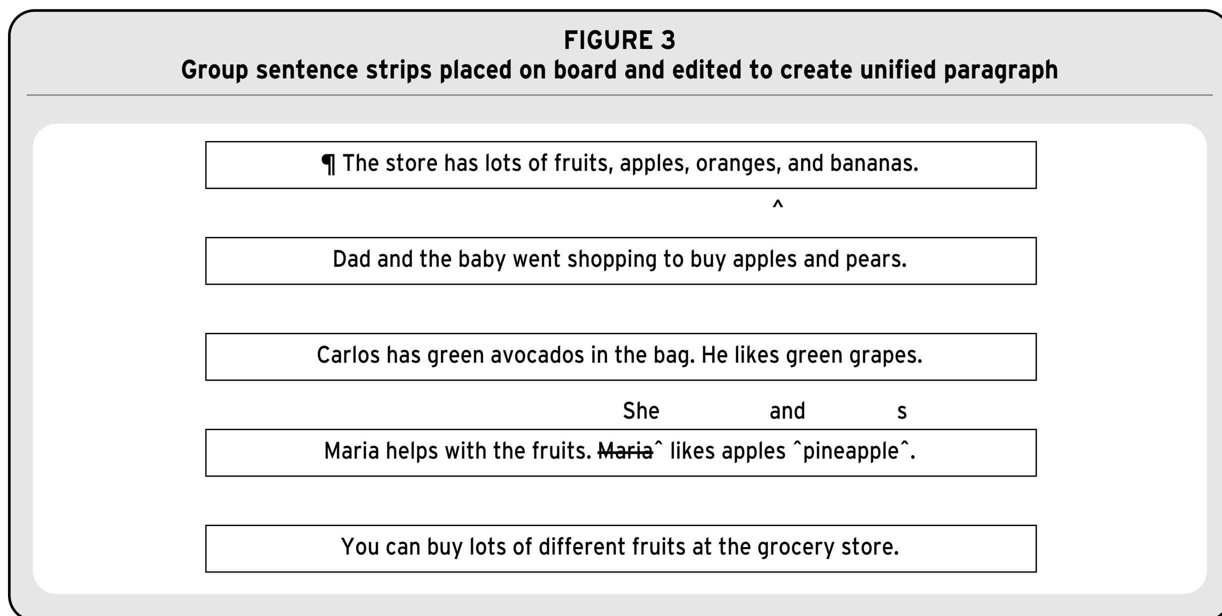


FIGURE 3
Group sentence strips placed on board and edited to create unified paragraph

obtain needed practice. An LEA offers the classroom teacher the flexibility to select the appropriate skills and strategies needed by the diverse student populations of today.

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