



A Mosaic of Words

Using Photo-Narration to Support All Learners

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That was a cool picture when I got it [referring to his photograph of a cake]. It got cake and it's a little disgusting.

—Matthew, Age 3

I loved my pictures.

—Nayla, Age 3

This article describes collaboration between three university professors and six preschool teachers who used photo-narration and the Language Experience Approach (Stauffer 1970; Labbo, Eakle, & Montero 2002; Wurr 2002) to support the language development of young children.

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The Language Experience Approach

For more than a century, educators have used children's personal experiences as a basis for language and literacy instruction (Huey [1908] 1968). The Language Experience Approach (LEA) draws upon the important link between experience and education; it extends the practice of scribing a child's discussion to using the child's narrative as the text for reading instruction (Wurr 2002). Using these stories, a teacher can engage the child in discussion about important text features as well as invite the child to reread and possibly revise the stories.

Research has shown that LEA is a developmentally appropriate method for gathering the words of young children (Allen 1968; Clark & Moss 2001). When using this method, children's language is a response to teachers' supportive questioning. This approach also demonstrates to children that anything that can be said can be written, and anything that can be written can be read or said.

Important conversations with teachers and child-produced records (in our project, photos) can extend children's knowledge of the world around them.

LEA supports children's concept development and vocabulary growth while offering many opportunities for meaningful reading and writing. Important conversations with teachers and child-produced records (in our project, photos) can extend children's knowledge of the world around them while building a sense of classroom community (Nessel & Dixon 2008).

In this approach, children are actively involved in planning, experiencing, and responding to their scribed words. LEA can be used in any situation to clarify

for children the link between oral language and print. The steps we took in this project are described in "Suggestions for Using the Language Experience Approach."

A diverse school

This photo-narration project took place in a culturally and linguistically diverse preschool. The teachers were interested in learning how to better meet the needs of all the learners through an investigation of culturally responsive teaching. The preschool classes included native-born children, foreign-born children, and children with special needs. Each classroom included dual language learners. All families participated in the project, including 14 families representing nine countries and 15 languages. Teachers sent home a letter describing the project, which included all the children in the six classrooms.

It was this diversity that prompted the teachers to request assistance from us, three professors of education with expertise in literacy, early childhood, and educational psychology. After considering the preschool teachers' stated needs, we suggested that a yearlong project using photo-narration might help them make meaningful connections with all the children.

Photo-narration is a process in which a person takes photos and then describes the photos to another to illuminate his or her world for the listener.

Photo-narration is a process in which a person takes photos and then describes the photos to another to illuminate his or her world for the listener (Clark-Ibanez 2004). In this case, children described the photographs they took to their teachers.

The project begins

Teachers gave each child a disposable camera. To introduce the cameras to the children, our preschool colleagues devoted one circle time to teaching the children how to take photographs. The teachers read aloud a Big Book about visual perspective (*Look, Look, Look*, by Tana Hoban) and shared important photographs from their own lives (homes, children, pets, and so on). After discussing the photographs and learning how to use a camera, the children practiced pressing the button on a camera by taking turns with a small book titled *Diego and Click Take a Pic!* by Lara Bergen. This children's book is in the shape of a camera and includes a square opening (viewfinder) and a red button to click to pretend taking a photo.

At the conclusion of circle time, each child received a take-home baggie containing a disposable camera and a second parent letter. In this letter, teachers reminded

Suggestions for Using the Language Experience Approach

1. Choose a focus that is related to the children's lived experience. In our project, the children's photos of their world provided a wealth of conversational opportunities.
2. Ask children to share their thoughts using gentle questioning that invites the child's ideas rather than seeking answers.
3. Listen actively and provide wait time for the children to formulate their ideas.
4. Record the children's language. Use the children's own words, matching what they say with what you write. This demonstrates important print concepts.
5. Vary the type of record you create. LEA stories can become individual or class books, bulletin board signs, or illustrated posters. We carefully archived the children's stories in individual photo albums.
6. Revisit the stories often!



Courtesy of the authors

families about the purpose of the camera activity and the importance of making sure that the children chose which items to photograph. The letter also included a list of suggested subjects children might wish to photograph—family members, possessions, rooms, pets, food, and so on.

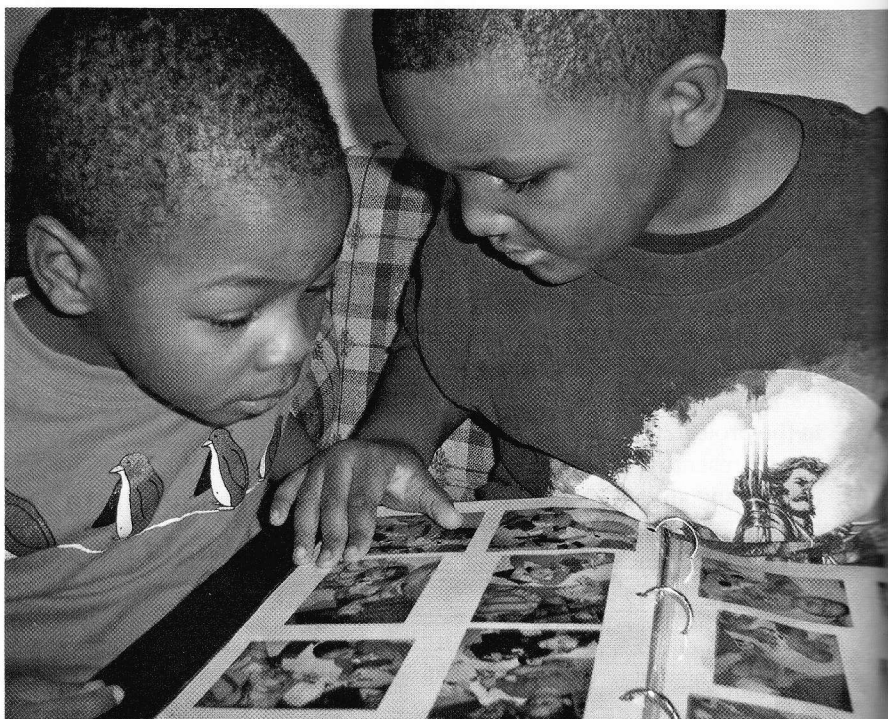
We used disposable cameras instead of digital cameras for several reasons. First, we wanted the children to feel free to take the cameras anywhere to photograph their world. Second, given that the children took photographs for about a week, the cameras needed to be portable and replaceable in case of an accident. We encouraged the children to take photos of anything they wanted.

When the children returned the cameras, we professors had the film developed and placed the photos in small individual photo albums. The teachers then asked each child to “choose three photographs to talk about.” They marked the photos with small stickers to help the children remember their selections. After the children chose three photos, the teachers had one-on-one conversations with each child to talk about the those pictures. These chats took place in a quiet hallway at a small table while we professors observed. A substitute covered the classroom.

All the discussions took place in English; however, dual language learners used a variety of verbal and nonverbal techniques to communicate about their photos. For example, one child simply pointed to items within the photo and looked intently at the teacher. Other children labeled the subject(s) of the photo, and many children recounted what they were thinking about when they took the photo. Many described the photo and the context with elaborative descriptions. We digitally recorded the narrations and transcribed them (parents had consented to this).

The children and their teachers revisited each of the three favorite photos three times over a period of approximately four months. Each time, the teacher and child created a new story, resulting in a total of nine stories for each child. True to the Language Experience Approach, the teachers listened to each story and wrote down the children’s words exactly.

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Language experience story examples

The preschool teacher began by asking the child about his or her photos. The teacher encouraged the child to talk about the subject in whatever manner was comfortable (standing, sitting, touching or holding the photos, and so on). The dialogue included several components. First, the child described the details of the photograph. Second, the child usually ascribed personal meaning to the contents of the photo. Third, the teacher listened intently to the child. And fourth, the teacher asked a few questions to invite the child to expand on the subject. As the child spoke, the teacher neatly printed the child’s words on an index card. When the child was finished, the teacher and child reviewed the dictation and read it together. The teacher placed the index card in the photo album under the appropriate picture.

These stories and the photos that inspired them were important, and teachers treated them accordingly. This approach supported children’s concept development and vocabulary growth, offering many opportunities for meaningful discussions and sharing. We took great care to protect the photo albums. Of course, the children eagerly talked about their photos with their teachers and classmates, but the albums were stored carefully at the end of each day.

The following are samples from the stories of the dual language learners. These examples reveal complex sentences, embedded questions, and rich descriptions.

A child from Cambodia is looking at her photograph of an aquarium.

Story 1: That's Crabby. Why did Daddy put Crabby in there? I'm glad it's not in my room.

Story 2: That Nibbles. He was born from the big goldfish. And there are two crabbies. It's my brother's room.

Story 3: That's Little Nibbles. That's Goldie. I don't know that name, but it's a crab.

A child from India is looking at a picture of herself holding a balloon.

Story 1: This is me with my balloons from my birthday.

Story 2: That's a balloon. It's bouncing. That's me. You know what? That's my playroom.

Story 3: That's a balloon, but there are more. I blow balloons up this big (*child gestures with her arms*). It's a princess balloon.

During sessions, some children commented about the teacher writing down what they said. We noticed this in particular with dual language learners.

A child from India is looking at her photo album.

Teacher: That's great. Let me write down all these great words. So you said, "This is my brother pretending at the computer, and I am pretending I am the man."

Child: Those are very long words for that (*pointing to some words in the story*).

Teacher: That is a very long word. You are right.

Child: And these are long words too (*pointing to several more words in the story*).

Conversations about the photos enrich all children's language

Early childhood teachers want to understand each child and family. They seek to understand each child's family relationships, cultures, routines, and traditions and intentionally search for ways to assess each child's development.

As dual language learners described their photographs, we saw the power of the photos to strengthen each child's voice (Keat, Strickland, & Marinak 2009). If *voice* is the capacity to convey a message from one person's mind to

another's, then the child-taken photographs provided the dual language learners with "microphones" that enhanced their ability to have their messages understood. Teachers heard the children's diverse voices in many ways.

First, the photographs helped the child focus the teacher's attention on a subject the child had selected. For example, one child, a dual language learner, patiently answered the teacher's questions about a photo for a few

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Suggestions for Listening to the Voices of Diverse Learners

1. Lean toward the child to indicate interest.
2. Look the child in the eye.
3. Continue to listen quietly for a few moments after the child stops speaking to give the child thinking time.
4. Repeat the child's words slowly to let the child know that you heard.
5. Create a space in your mind that is empty of your own assumptions, so you can hear each child's way of understanding the world.



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minutes and then stated, "I want to talk about that one now." The child directed the teacher's attention to a specific item and provided evidence of his social development as he noted the complexities of sharing: "This is mine that is actually Patrick's too. . . . Patrick always likes to play with this . . . but you have to shake it up first, and then you put it on the shelf." Another dual language learner said to the teacher, "Wait—that is my favorite," then explained several details that were important to him in a mini-story: "This is me. That is my mask. That is my costume for Halloween. I lost the mask; I had it, but now I can't find it."

Twenty years ago, Vivian Paley (1989) and the children in her classes taught us that "children have much to teach us if we will but stop and listen" (p. 136). The children's strengthened voices conveyed messages about the world from the children's points of view.

The photos also evoked stories about the persons and pets the children loved, belongings they considered important, and activities they enjoyed. One dual language learner, who had spoken infrequently the previous year, carefully selected photographs and reported his feelings about each one: "I liked the instruments. I just like the instruments! That's Spunky. I love Spunky!" As the children described their affection for their pets, homes, and families, the teacher who listened sensitively could pick up details about each family's culture. "Suggestions for Listening to the Voices of Diverse Learners" provides a few suggestions we found helpful.

All too often, a familiar scene takes place in diverse classrooms. The teacher is working hard to bring a child who is a dual language learner into the class conversation. She attempts to engage the child, and the child responds with a smile and silence. The teacher's intent to care for and nur-

ture the whole child is there, but something is in the way. Often the assumption is that the child's limited language skills are getting in the way of the teacher connecting with that child. However, is that the only obstacle?

Our investigation explored this very question. Armed with their photos and the teacher's attention, children taking part in this project received the time and space necessary to build the connections that helped them to begin sharing information about their lives. Though spending one-on-one time with children is always important, it was photo-narration and LEA processes that helped teachers connect with dual language learners. For example, a teacher explained her enhanced understanding of one child's home experiences: "I learned a lot about him. I learned that he loved helping his mom in the kitchen. I mean he had his own apron and his own set of miniature utensils. They must do it often, because they had all the stuff. If he spoke fluent English, I would have known all that much earlier."

During the project, we saw important connections that led us to take a closer look at the power of photo-narration. One of the most important connections voiced by the preschool teachers was that photo-narration gave them a view of the child's world. It provided new insights into how to connect with children from whom they felt disconnected. This "virtual tour" of the child's home, as one teacher called it, offered a glimpse into the child's world that was otherwise unknown and might have sometimes been misinterpreted. As one teacher noted with passion, "I can relate to a child on a more personal level when I am 'allowed' to see into parts of the child's world through the eyes of a camera—things that I probably would have never seen." Here are a few suggestions for connecting with diverse learners that emerged during debriefing conversa-

Photo-narration provided new insights into how to connect with children from whom they felt disconnected.

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tions with our preschool colleagues: (1) be aware of your own assumptions; (2) listen actively—don't fill in the silent moments; and (3) be open to surprise.

Teachers' reactions

In debriefing meetings with us during and after the project, our preschool colleagues noted that they learned more about all the children, particularly the dual language learners, than they initially had sought. They concluded that all children found the Language Experience Approach meaningful and loved having their words written down. In the children's conversations, we found evidence that the preschoolers (a) shared their words, (b) demonstrated conceptual development and complex language, (c) recognized their words represented in print, (d) knew that the photos inspired their words, (e) corrected teachers when they did not transcribe their stories correctly, and (f) taught the teachers what was important to them (Nessel & Dixon 2008).

Photo-narration using the Language Experience Approach proved powerful and revealing for everyone involved in this collaboration. Perhaps two of our preschool colleagues captured conclusions better than we as researchers ever could:

Once the cameras were sent home, I couldn't wait for them to come back so that the photos could be developed. I found that the children were just as excited as I was. It was such a great learning experience. I was able to meet with the children and listen to what they said as they went through their pictures. The camera was used as a tool to get a glimpse of their world outside of preschool. I really felt like I had a mini home visit with each of my students. The one-to-one time was so valuable for me, to let the children know how special they were and how interested I was in hearing what they had to say. Children who were quiet or those with limited English had a safe and meaningful reason to use their words. It was a great way to open up the lines of communication and conversation.

— Colleen

The cameras were a success. Needless to say, all the children loved setting out with their own camera. The dual language learners did indeed find more language when they were talking about their pictures. The children would gather around each other to inspect, compare, and talk to each other about the photos.

— Paula

Conclusion

At the conclusion of the study, the parents who were immigrants, contrary to the fears of the researchers and teachers, voiced how the children's being invited to take photos of the home communicated that the school valued them as a family. When asked about the process, they talked about their joy with the school and with teachers being so interested in their lives, even though they came from different cultural backgrounds.

By using photographs selected by the children and carefully recording their stories, the teachers began to hear the voices of their diverse learners (Clark 2007). As Alison Clark and Peter Moss (2001) so eloquently suggest, listening revealed the true mosaic of the children's lives. Any early childhood teacher can use the Language Experience Approach and photo-narration to support the language and literacy development of all young learners. In our project, however, it proved especially powerful as a group of dedicated preschool teachers sought to connect with the dual language learners in their classrooms.

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