

To Martin Eayrs ELT News and Views  
Buenos Aires  
CC Damian  
cc Basil  
cc Simon  
cc Patricia Cabral / [REDACTED]  
cc Ann Aljabar  
cc Sheila and Peta /CAE plus to Nicky in Ankara  
cc Bernard Dufeu  
cc Judy  
cc Anne Conybeare OUP

Please fax to PATRICIA

FAX [REDACTED]

Dear Martin,

I enclose a piece on letter-writing that might be of interest to your readers.

Outside my window it is snowing!

¿Te lo puedes imaginar?

MARIO ( Rinvolucri )

LETTERS IS\* FUN

by Mario Rinvolucri, Pilgrims, UK.

Fifteen years ago I would never have thought of getting my students to write each other letters. Why should they, when they see each other regularly in class and when they anyway belong to an oral telephone culture?

In the mid nineties all that is changing thanks, in part to E-mail and Internet. Youth culture is just about entering the phase when people talk to each other as happily through a keyboard as over the phone. This sea-change makes it much easier to create a culture of communicating through writing in a language classroom.

If students have to take exams that include a written part it is useful to get them writing to each other across the classroom. This allows them to practise the written language with an addressee, communicately. Most students find it much easier to write TO some one than just to write into the air ( or to a teacher armed with a red pencil )

The rest of this article offers you three ways of getting students write to each other in class.

#### 1. Swap Letters

Ask each student to partner off with somebody sitting some way away from them. They do not move over and sit with their partner.

Ask each student to write their partner a letter that should be one page long. Tell them the content can be anything they feel like writing about.

When most students have written about half a page tell them to stop writing, even if they are in the middle of a word!

They then swap letters with their partners.

Each student finishes the letter to him or herself trying to take on the mood, voice and style of the partner.

Finally ask the partners to get together, read both letters and discuss the experience.

This idea comes from Jacob Moreno's psychodrama and is simply an example of classical role reversal pressed into service as a writing exercise. Neuro-Linguistic-Programming folk would call this "Second Position" writing as they delight in giving old practices new names.

## 2. The Handwriting Mirror

Ask each student to write down a single sentence describing exactly how they are feeling right now.

Ask each student to check the time and write a second sentence about how s/he was feeling at exactly this time yesterday.

Ask the students to swap their two sentences with some one in a different part of the room.

Tell the students to copy out their partner's first sentence.

Tell them to copy out the partner's second sentence, but this time imitating the other person's handwriting. Tell them to notice spacing, letter slant, letter height and how heavily or lightly the other person writes.

Ask them to write a letter to their partner that, for the first two lines, imitates the partner's handwriting.

The pairs get together, read the letters and comment.

Mirroring another person's handwriting is a powerful way of paying attention to them, of coming closer to them and of thinking about them in a more empathetic way. The idea of handwriting copying I learnt from one of my most generative Pilgrims colleagues, Simon Marshall.

## 3. Time Travel

Have you noticed how interesting it can sometimes be to read a letter that some one wrote to you a year ago? It can take you back to that point last year.

Why not get similar time travel going in your classes?

Ask your students to line up in first name alphabetical order. Ask the A's to pair with the Z's, the B's with the X's etc...

Tell the students to write a letter to their partner that will be delivered this time next month. They may write about what they choose, but the letter MUST BE in English. Tell them you are there if they want help with words or grammar.

Give them envelopes to put the letters in.

Take in the letters and store them for a month.

Watch the faces of your students as they open these "old" letters!

Should any of these ideas interest you and should you want more ways of creating a writing climate in your class, have a look at LETTERS, Burbidge, Gray, Levy and me, which Oxford University Press are bringing out in May-June this year.

If you want to work with us at Pilgrims, Canterbury, UK, to improve your language or to strengthen the thrust of your methodology please get in touch with Patricia Cabral of TOGETHER, whose Buenos Aires fax number is 54-1-3113966.

\* In E-mail writing and informal letter-writing native speakers play with language very freely and since I am writing to you about letters I feel happy with the grammatical latitude of this title. It allows me to feel closer to you than had I written: LETTERS ARE FUN.