

Dear Karyl,

I kept coming to CH in the 80's to work with ETAS folk and at that time I wrote a number of pieces for the Newsletter. Would you like a short article on getting students to explore the way they express themselves through their handwriting?

Yours sincerely,

Mario Rinvoluceri

THE HAND IN LANGUAGE TEACHING

by Mario Rinvoluceri, Pilgrims.

If a letter arrives addressed to my wife and me, and if I happen to be the one that opens it, I often start reading it aloud to her. Typically she will say: "read it to yourself and I'll read it later". This is partly because she does not like my inevitable editorialising but much more because she really wants to SEE the person

on the page through their handwriting. For her the handwriting is as important as the voice of a person is to me.

This article invites you to do some exercises with your students which involve them finding out about their own and their classmates' handwriting.

1. Choosing the appropriate handwriting

Give the students the following lines to copy out in their own handwriting:

" If I raise an iron bar I shall not feel the difference if a fly either lights on it or leaves it. If, on the other hand, I am holding a feather, I shall feel a distinct

difference if the fly were to settle on it. The same applies to all the senses: hearing, sight, smell, taste, hot and cold. “

(M. Feldenkrais: Awareness through Movement, Arkana, 1990)

Ask the students to work in groups of four and to read each other's copied texts. Their task is to decide which of the four handwriting styles best expresses the Feldenkrais lines. Tell them that they will be asked to justify their choice. Ask each group to stick their chosen text up on one wall of the classroom. One person from each four explains to the whole class why they chose that particular handwriting.

The students' conscious focus in this exercise is on handwriting but, in fact, without being specially aware of it, they are doing intensive reading. To ask which hand-writing best fits the text begs the question of what the text means and what the students feel about it.

2. Role reversed writing

Ask the student to pair off with some one not sitting next to them but tell them not to move. They establish the pair by eye contact or by speaking.

Ask each person to write two sentences about how they are feeling right now.

Tell the pairs to exchange their sentences and ask each person to copy out what the other has written.

Now ask them to copy out the same two sentences, but this time imitating the other person's handwriting. Suggest that before writing they look at the handwriting carefully with a view to noticing:

- how big or small the letters are
- how the letters slope, or don't slope
- how particular letters are formed
- how many breaks the writer makes within words
- how large the spaces left between words are
- how hard the writer presses on the pen or biro

Now ask each student to write a single A 4 page letter to their partner. They are free to write about whatever they wish. (Sometimes they feel like writing about the strange experience of imitating their partner's handwriting)

When most people have written about half a page tell them to stop writing. Ask them to stop immediately, even in the middle of a word.

They now exchange unfinished letters and continue the letter, as the other person writing to them. They have to flip into the other person's mind set writing to them. Ask them to write the first few words in the other person's handwriting but then to revert to their own.

When both partners have finished their letters they come together to read and talk about the two letters.

(The idea of gaining insight by stepping into another person's shoes comes from the work of Jacob Moreno in psychodrama and is also widely found in other therapies that derive from psychodrama like Gestalt and NLP. For more about oral role-reversal

work in language teaching see John Morgan's section in *The Recipe Book*, ed Lindstromberg, Pilgrims Longman, 1990 and Bernard Dufeu's *Teaching Myself*, OUP, 1994.

I have used role-reversed letter writing early on in a group to help the students to get to know each other a bit and I have also used it well into the life of a group to allow for much deeper exchanges.

3. Speed copying

Choose a couple of paragraphs from your coursebook text, but choose them from a unit three or four beyond where the class have reached. It is worth checking that the paragraphs contain significant new grammar the students have not yet covered.

Tell the students they are going to have a copying race to see who can get the two chosen paragraphs down fastest. To get the students into a 'speed mood' ask them to get up and run on the spot for 30 seconds. Join them in doing this and also in the speed copying that immediately follows on the running.

Offer a small reward to the first finisher!

Give time for people to say how they felt about being asked to write fast.

Do not say anything about the grammar in the two paragraphs copied. The benefits from this lesson will be reaped when you and the students get to this unit in the coursebook in a couple of weeks time. In an unconscious sort of way they will already

have an acquaintance with the new grammar before you go into it. We need to find many more ways of helping students to do this kind of peripheral learning.

Let me explain: the conscious focus in this exercise is on fast writing, but as this is going on the mind is soaking up meaning and inevitably coping with the grammar.

4. Handwriting moods

Ask each student to think of a person who has annoyed them and to bring the scene to mind clearly. Ask them to remember where the situation happened and what the feelings were. Tell each person to write a paragraph about what happened or to write a paragraph addressed to the annoying person. Suggest that the students use their handwriting to express the feelings they harbour towards that person.

Ask the students to bring to mind a person who delights them and to remember a situation when they were happy to be with that person. Ask them to write a paragraph about or to the person in which they use the handwriting to express their feelings.

Group the students in threes to compare the paragraphs. Ask them to see how much a person's handwriting changes with the change in their mood and feelings.

5. Correcting homework

I don't know about you but I sometimes have to screw up my courage to get homework marked. I find that anything that reminds me that I am really looking at the work and thought of another human being helps me.

A great help in this context is to notice the way the student handwrites and then to react to it. On good evenings I try to do one or two of the following things:

- use the same coloured writing instrument as the student in marking the work
- use a pen of the same texture as the student, eg a biro if they use a biro
- correct large handwriting with large handwriting and small with small
- notice the pressure the student writes with and go along with it
- notice which way the wind blows the student's letters and try to write at roughly the same inclination as the student.

To do all of the above would be too much and would lay me open to the charge of playing the monkey with the student. To do one or two of the above things helps me concentrate on the student as a person and helps me feel close to him or her. On the page it makes my bits of handwriting a lot less obtrusive and invasive.

Next day, in class, I feel more aware of students whose work I have marked in this observant and respectful state of mind.

In the EFL literature I have read in the past few years there are few references to handwriting and the way it expresses the person. At best you seem to find encomiums of Japanese handwriting and comments on the difficulties Arab and Iranian

students face in this area. My hope is that article will set you thinking and experimenting with exercises round handwriting, just as my imagination was fired by Simon Marshall's interest in this area. He set me on this trail with a short activity he did with Pilgrims trainers in July, 1994.

If you do come up with exciting new things, why not write them up for this magazine?