

Last Letter

Saturday immediately after course closure, August 14th, 99.

Dear Everybody,

I really felt "held" and very comfy in the tight circle we formed in the swirling crowd in Keynes bar last night. It was a geometric expression of togetherness. It was hard to break out and go home, though listening to B's voice breaking is amazing and he claims to be unaware of what his hormones are doing to him.

I asked you to tell me what course you went on last week (it will be " last week" by the time you get this.) So maybe I should share some of my participant learnings with you.

■ I was gobsmacked when P gave me her new ending to my story about the shadow on the wall: she said that after the woman's death the man told the child that the shadow was his mum. I have never had a story scooped out of my hands and totally changed by a listener just after telling it.....I experienced feelings of new anguish that the M P ending seems to call up... I experienced a feeling of exulting wonderment and I felt in a sense expropriated in my story teller role... this then gave way to a feeling that P and I were co-tellers..... and from here the technical idea of co-telling a story eg one starts and the other finishes, or as a duet all the way through..... I MUST try this. Thank you for thus enriching my story-telling repertoire.

■ I was struck by the strength of feeling people expressed on the last Friday morning about their relational contact with different speakers. Pi (North Madrid) 's immediate and reciprocated good feeling with B M P's feeling that in describing the twitching net curtains in her home village up North, S was literally describing M.P's village in Portugal. Several other people described how they humanly plugged in to one speaker more than another.

It is interesting that Samaritan B's talk was taken on an almost religious, liturgical level.

This has major repercussions when you think about teaching listening comprehension.

One understands ten times more when listening in L2 if one has some affinity with the

speaker. This can be age, gender, or personal affinity.....why, then, do so many coursebooks for teenagers have cassettes with mainly adult voices on them?

What we need is a huge variety of voice on those cassettes and the idea of individual student choice of voice to learn from is hugely important for the SUBCONSCIOUS absorption of language. A very simple exercise is when the sts listen to the same text

"voiced" by three different people. Their task is to choose the voice they like best for the text.

The same is true for letter writing- how could I have offered you a range of different voices to correspond with? This needs more thought.

■ I did one or two skilful one-to-one sessions.....the one with you, F, in which we looked at how you can write authentic, real things for your "concorso", the exam which will lead to your getting tenure. What was good there was that though I had read the material she asked me to, I did not come with a clear plan of action. I came with text knowledge and a wish to let the session grow out of our interaction. It did. Well done F and M!

■ I suddenly realised, as we were speaking about what makes you really know when you are back at home, that this exercise should be done in two halves:

At the start of a course you ask people to speak about how they know they are back home at the END OF EACH DAY.....

At the end of the course you ask them how they know they are back home after a long journey.....

This is a real development of the original exercise... as it makes it arch over the course and powerfully link the beginning with the end. In computer language it has a " zipping-up effect "

■ I was pleased with the way it was possible to develop the idea of group-useful "protagonisation", as happened when we heard about autonomous learning at Kungsbacka, when we listened to the poem read in Polish, when M told her dream to the group via my second Monday letter and when we heard what a full-time teacher does, thus realising that in Japan the Europeans among us would be deemed

part-time teachers. At these times a group member took over the group's mind and filled it with his or her stuff.

Should I have up-fronted more people? One of the criteria for doing this has to be that the group will be WITH the protagonist.... If not they derive little benefit and the experience leaves the protagonist person out on a limb.

■ The presences of R, M (all one word!), Maⁿ and F forced me to seriously question the regional stereotyping I have in my head about Italy. The concepts of a bundle of cultural attributes that typifies Northern, Central and Southern behaviours and ways of being was not borne out at all by these folk, really not at all. Thank you for forcing me to re-think. Maybe because of the way you were I did not relate to you from either a Piedmontese (my father's place) point of view, nor from a negation of such a point of view. (There are good reasons for opposing a point of view that states " Africa begins at Florence", one of my father's more obnoxious sayings).

■ Could be that Fu is partly right when she says that I have some sort of feeling for the Japanese way of being. I KNOW extremely little, but the little I have

learnt a) fills me with respect

b) makes me avid to learn more..... At 59 I am now halfway thru my teaching career and there have been one or two times before when I have been able to

somehow get into rhythm with a culture I really know very little about. Happened in the mid 70's when the Shah-padi-Shah (king of kings) sent loads of Iranians to study in UK. I came to love their swift intelligence, their contempt for English spelling, their brilliant, person-sensitive listening comp ability. I got cross with the UK reaction to them that was all through the staffroom. Taught me something about Ukishness.

I will find out a bit more about how to tune myself in to Japaneseness when I am there in the early Fall. (I prefer the US word to "Autumn")

■ I can really use some of the poems in the book you gave me, Janina, to work on with people on culture courses:

Vocabulary

" La Pologne? La Pologne?" Isn't it terribly cold there? " she asked, and then sighed with relief. So many countries have been turning up lately that the safest thing to talk about is climate.

" Madame" I want to reply, " my people's poets do all their writing in mittens. I don't mean to imply that they never remove them; they do, indeed, if the moon is warm enough.....etc....."

The above points are a few of my learnings from the past two weeks. Of course there is loads of other stuff I am not able to access as I write these lines.

There have been many moments of great pleasure for me especially, on this course in watching faces: (what follows is feeling-pictures, not accurate, scientific observation)

- I really seemed to see M's face getting younger and younger over the the last three days of the first week.
 - In the last two days of the second week, for me, E's face seemed to change colour and muscle tension.....more vivid, more relaxed, especially round the mouth-.....her feet did less tapping than earlier in the course.....
E, my fantasy is that you were being kinder to yourself....
 - On the second Wednesday, when some of you showed signs of drooping and wilting, the Menorquina energy of P felt to me like a boost rocket.

 - I thought I could feel S relating to the e-mail texts written by D with greater closeness and therefore, greater understanding than most other people in the room.
 - At supper on the first Wednesday I was suddenly made aware that R is a brilliant mimic. She role-played some Neapolitan lads trying to chat her and a friend of hers up in a restaurant in Sorrento. It was a scream, when she assumed their role.
 - Witnessing your excellence as a language learner, J was pure pleasure. You are so good it would be worth doing an NLP modelling exercise to find out precisely what is it you do to get the results you do.
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E who had minor belonging to the other Eng for Teachers group, explained the difference to me in a letter as being one of colours:
"Have you ever thought of matching people and colours? I do it unconsciously but not with everybody. I know a person for a while, and then suddenly, it comes like a lightning. Most of the people in our group are pastels, whereas in the other group they are dark rich brown and greens."

Who knows the complexity of process as you split into the two groups on the first Monday morning?

For me being in our group was an extraordinary experience of ~~strong~~ femininity. Not just because most people were women. Much more than that. There was a kind excellence of unspoken feeling, that did not need to be verbalised.

Hideo, I think we two did pretty well to stay ourselves in that sea.....

and E writes: Our group is the AIR, the other is EARTH. In our group we deal in the sphere of experience, emotions, impressions- soaring up in the skies, where creativity and imagination are necessary. With the other group I land on the solid

ground and have to prepare myself to bear the impact of landing. D [redacted] gives us the language as a ready product - learn it and use it. ☺

Let me wish you a good year ahead,

a hug,



Mario.

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Humanizing Language Teaching

Written Tuesday evening, 5.30.... for 2nd Wednesday

Dear Everybody,

I usually write to you early on the morning I see you...but today I miraculously got home early, around 4.45.

This was because an interview I was supposed to give Sab for his French website was postponed by him and because my supervisor could not see me until after six. We will do the mutual supervision by phone. I quite like it that way.....there is less to concentrate on when I am listening.....I only have to think of his pitch, his tempo,(speed) his pausing, his text construction and its rhythm..... I cannot see his body posture, his facial colour changes, his gestuality etc... Sometimes having the person there in front of you almost causes an over-load of the sensory perceptual systems, that is if you are observing them acutely and intensely.

So, this evening I can write to you free of time pressure.

There are so many things I would like to hear about from so many different people and so many things to be pleased about. You can't help being pleased when a person tells you that, after an 11 year gap since they were last in an English speaking country, they are now once again thinking a good part of the time in English. They saw a film on Sunday and heard lines from it running through their head the next morning when they woke up. This means that this person is doing well on the sub-conscious level, the only one that makes real sense when we speak of language learning.

I would love to have a letter from you, Ma [redacted] that somehow gave me some idea of what happens behind your silence in the group plenary. I am not worried by it but at the same time think that, professionally, I should try and find out what is happening behind the silence.

Pa [redacted] I wonder how your meeting with the colleagues on the Train-the Trainer course went? Can you imagine that last year a colleague and I were asked by the B Council to go to the Czech Republic and run a two week course to train people whose job it would then be to train new trainers. So I became a trainer of trainers of trainers! It is easier to think of if you think of "trainer" as a kind of footwear! Completely looney over-engineering. Teaching language is the central job and all the rest is secondary... some would say parasitical. Have you ever thought of teacher trainers as parasites?

Menorca Pi [redacted] I will do your photocopying tomorrow morning. You have been kind and only asked for a few pages.

Thank you, P [redacted] (from Madrid) for your story about the magpie (hurraca) and the gull. You remember you told this story last Friday as the one that represented you. I think you told Manola and me that this story was one your Mum often told and that it one that often pops back into your head. I have copied it for the group as I find it a very good tale.

Fr [redacted]. you gave me a bibliography to look through, one you need to put together for your exam to become a tenured teacher. I thought I might add one or two titles and do it in this letter so that there is some benefit for everyone in the group.

In the Linguistics and Language Teaching section there is a certain feeling of fustiness:

how about:

Spoken Language and Applied Linguistics M McCarthy, CUP , 1998

Exploring Spoken English R Carter and M McCarthy, 1997, CUP

In the practical books for Language teachers section I would include a huge number.. but here are a few:

Ways of Doing, by Davis et al, CUP. 1999

Letters, Burbidge et al. OUP 1996

Creative Grammar, G Gerngross and H Puchta, Pilgrims Longman 92

Musical Openings, D Cranmer and C. Laroy, Pilgrims Longman 92

The Recipe Book, ed. S. Lindstromberg, Pilgrim/Longman, 1990

Grammar Practice Activities, Penny Ur, CUP 1988?

Video, by R. Cooper et al. OUP, 1990.

More Grammar Games, P. Davis and M. Rinvoluceri, CUP 1995

Group Dynamics, Jill Hadfield, OUP 1994 ?

You can select many more from the enclosed booklist.

In the literature section I would include Language through Literature by S Basnett and P. Grundy, Longman 93.

These are a few suggestions in the biblio areas were I feel most confident.

I also feel that two books that should be somewhere in your biblio are

Teaching myself, B Dufeu, OUP, 1994 .. there is an Italian version of this which is In cammino verso una Pedagogia del Essere, Alpha & Beta, 1999

and

Affect in Language Learning, ed J. Arnold, CUP - this due out in 2001 in a Spanish translation, due out with CUP.

Yesterday morning we did a few exercises that I would like to bring back to your minds:

1. Herbert Puchta's MAKING MUSIC exercise
2. The mutual questionnaires working on verbs mostly met in the passive (in More Grammar Games and based on stuff found in the Co-Build Grammar.)
3. The Two Voice Role-play with T in the hot seat.

As you come to the end of this letter, can you please form groups of three and do the following things:

- a) explain how you experienced each exercise as a person and also what language purpose it had for you.
- b) discuss the applicability of each exercise to your own groups back home.
- c) think if you can generate other activities from these three.
- d) Discuss any ways in which this letter is technically different from previous ones and whether you could use teacher letter-writing as a way of communicating with your groups. (I first learnt the idea of writing to my students from a brilliant primary school teacher in New York.)

Cue to the three songs,

