

## STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING PENMANSHIP

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### Abstract

It was observed that defects and inaccuracies in writing shorthand are at least as important a factor in failure to read notes as other. These defects and inaccuracies are not normally due to haste, tension and pressure in writing but also of poor penmanship. Good penmanship is a sine qua non for distinct and accurate shorthand outlines. It is in the light of the above that this paper discusses strategies for teaching and learning of penmanship. The paper identifies large class as one of the problems militating against the teaching and learning of penmanship. An advocacy for employment of more shorthand lectures is among the solutions proffered.

### Introduction

Shorthand is an abbreviation, symbolic writing method that improves speed of writing or brevity as compare to a normal method of writing a language. The main objective of shorthand instruction at any level is to enable students take a dictation at a speed, which enables the accurate recording and transcription of notes into mailable letters and reports at a rate consummate with an acceptable range of office standard.

Unfortunately, students' performance in shorthand transcription has been woeful over the years. Many researchers have been conducted on the probable causes of students' poor performance in shorthand. Poor penmanship has been identified as one of the causes of students' inability to correctly transcribe their shorthand outlines (Steward 1981; Uduma 1986; Nwaokolo 1991 and Udemuzue 1991).

Penmanship is one of the shorthand sub-skills that have to do with writing of accurate, distinct and proportionate outlines. Other sub-like include reading of shorthand, writing shorthand dictation a speed, understanding principles such that outlines can be formed with high level of automaticity, transcription etc. According to Leroy (1971), penmanship and accuracy of outlines are closely interrelated. Unless proper construction is observed by the writer, outlines often become indistinct and unreadable, and transcription is either held up or completely stopped. Penmanship is an important aspect of shorthand that has long been neglected by teachers and students. In a research conducted by Kanu (1991), in two higher institutions in Imo State, he found out that 74% of the students indicated that they were not taught the art of penmanship. Similarly, Steward (1981), expresses that teachers' contribution to high failure rate in shorthand, ranges from inappropriate teaching technique to non-teaching of important aspects of shorthand such as transcription and penmanship. The most unfortunate thing is that many shorthand teachers do not even know what penmanship is all about not to talk of teaching it. Some do teach it without knowing they were into penmanship. This paper therefore, attempts to bridge this gap in knowledge and to make a modest contribution on the when, what and how to teach and learn penmanship.

### The Important of Teaching Penmanship

Any examiner will tell (and any teacher knows) that a serious part of the burden of marking lies in coping with the illegible, ill-formed, scrawling handwriting of many students. It would seem then that on setting out to teach shorthand, the teacher starts with an initial disadvantage. Research findings revealed that for students to read the notes back without hesitation, they must legible outline. According to Leroy (1971), the development of a good penmanship style reinforces not only a student's knowledge of shorthand theory but also his ability to take rapid dictation and to produce mailable copy at a rate commensurate with business expectations.

Admittedly, the largeness or smallness of notes will not affect a students' ability to take rapid dictation. But not to "tinker" with student's proportionate size and joining of his vowels and constants and the proportionate lengths of his consonants and blends is inviting an increase in non-productive time in deciphering notes during transaction. Hen-scratched notes and reliance upon memory or

content are poor substitutes for well written correct outlines. In her classical contribution, Anderson (1971) wrote that:

Authorities today generally agree that penmanship drills as such are not necessary - that the students' shorthand writing will manifest the same characteristics as their longhand writing. However, not so frequently recognized is the fact that authorities who advocate slow, easy dictation at the beginning and close of each class period are in effect emphasizing the important of good penmanship, (p. 5).

### **When to Teach Penmanship**

Some experts like Leroy (1971), suggested that teaching of penmanship should commence, about second week of instruction. This writer is of the view that teaching of penmanship should commence from the first day of shorthand lesson. In any skill what happens at the start of the learning process is very important. This view corroborates that of Canning (1971), as he said that "in the early stages, at least, if we leave too much to the choice of students, the results are fairly certain to be bad". He went further, to state that the principle of penmanship must be established as soon as the students begin writing for the first time. If correct habits are not immediately formed, then modification later will present serious, sometimes seemingly ineradicable, difficulties. It is far easier to establish correct writing habit at the beginning than to correct bad writing habits later.

### **Use of Pen or Pencil**

In arguing in favour of the use of pen, Canning (1970), stated that penmanship demands a pen not a pencil. He further went to say that a good pencil is better than a bad pen, but a good pen is so vastly better than a good pencil. It is not so easy to acquire a neat style of writing by the use of a pencil as it is by the use of a pen. Those who argued in favour of the use of pen said that it is faster in action, more legible in product, safer in use and more permanent in impression. The argument on whether pen or pencil should be used is immaterial. Pen or pencil, what is important is that is that one writes accurate, distinct and readable outlines. The students would do well to accustom himself/herself to write either with pen or pencil or both. On holding the pen or pencil or both. On holding the pen or pencil, there is only just sufficient grip exerted to prevent it from dropping on the table. The pen or pencil has to be good one and a spare within reach.

### **Notebook**

Students should be taught how to use shorthand notebook earlier in the lesson. Shorthand notebook is preferable in hard cover. It should be smooth but opaque, just wide enough not to carry the forearm too far out of visual and muscular control. The line per page should be on 'A - 1/3 to allow the easy writing of the best size of shorthand outline. Shorthand notebook must have margin. Spiral bound notebook that is flipped upward is better than one flipped sideways. If notebook that is flipped upward is being used, writing is done on the side of the paper until it is flipped up. The writer should sit in front of his/her work and should have the notebook parallel with the edge of the desk or table.

Notebook, of left-handed students will slant in the opposite direction from that of the right-handed students. When this is noticed, the teacher should interfere as little as possible.

### **What to Teach Size of Outline**

Most students write too large. Too much hand movement and paper shifting is time wasting and highest speed can rarely be developed with as size of shorthand that allows ten or fewer outlines per notebook line (exclusive of margin). Very fast writers generally have 10 or more, even up to 20 outlines per lines.

### **Touch**

Lightness of touch is the most important single attribute of a good penmanship. Unnecessary pressure should not be exerted on the pen or pencil while writing.

### **Shape**

There are two fundamental curves, shallow as in M, N, NG etc and circular as in SH, L, F etc. This distinction must be made from the start and maintained throughout the training. Similarly, the direction, slope and straightness of straight strokes must not be in doubt.

### **Uniformity**

Students often overlook the need to make all strokes of normal length of equal size. Uniformity

in size is a valuable penmanship aid to easy writing.

### **Continuity**

Students must be taught to write outline as single continuous movements with rapid changes of direction and with scarcely perceptible halts as direction is changed.

### **Sinai! Circles, Hooks and Loops**

When circles, hooks and loops are begun, care must be given to their penmanship. Circles must be small and complete; hooks round and open, and small loops flat but of correct length.

### **Large Circles, Hooks and Loops**

The danger to be prevented is that the large circle of hook will be taken as a license to make the stroke itself bigger.

### **How Penmanship should be Taught**

#### **Facility Drill**

Students should under the teacher's supervision, copy shorthand outlines from shorthand plates. The essence of the drill is that a line of shorthand is copied from swiftly, accurately and attractively written outlines and repeated a second and third time at increasing speed.

#### **Copied Dictation**

The teacher should at a speed, which just enables the slowest students to keep abreast with a hand struggle. Have the writing done on alternative lines, so as to allow for free copying which, should be critically reviewed for penmanship.

#### **The Teacher's Personal Attention**

The early stages in the development of a good penmanship style are best practiced in the classroom under teacher's supervision. Penmanship practice does not lend itself well to homework until the principles have been fairly well established by the students. The teacher's blackboard. The teacher can attend to students in groups 5-6 students.

#### **Display, Emulation and Competition**

As always in teaching, the good effects of example should never ignored. Good notes should be attractively display with their good qualities clearly indicated by arrows and captions. A penmanship competition arouses great interest.

#### **Constraints to Effective Teaching of Penmanship**

In teaching shorthand generally and penmanship in particular, the teacher is confronted with these major problems:

##### **Large Class Size**

Shorthand like any other skill subject requires a small class size. Unfortunately, in the Colleges and Higher Institutions, one gets a class size as high as between 100-150. Under this circumstance there is little the teacher can do with regards to paying individual attention to students. **Problem of Time-tabling**

There is hardly enough space in the time-table to provide for the required lecture and tutorial periods for shorthand because of other competing courses.

##### **Excess Workload**

Teachers are not keen in splitting their shorthand classes into groups because of excess workload they are carrying.

#### **Recommendations**

The following are recommended as solutions to the problems identified:

1. The teacher-student ratio of 1:20 for skill subjects are recommended by the Federal Republic of Nigeria (FRN, 2002), should be maintained. This can be achieved by splitting shorthand classes into groups of twenty students
2. As a result of the above, more classrooms should be provided and more shorthand teachers employed. For instance, a class of 80 students can be handled by two lectures, each having' two groups of 20 students each. That should be enough workload for the lecturer per semester. With more classroom spaces, the two lecturers can handle their classes simultaneously.
3. Students just do not imitate textbooks outlines, but they have the tendency to imitate the teachers. For this reason penmanship should become an integral part of everyday teaching and learning.

#### **Conclusion**

Only exceptional student will be able to develop the manual dexterity and accuracy of penmanship required for first-class speed notes without planned and purposeful training. Not only

should penmanship exercises be regularly and systematically performed, but also the reasons for them must be explained, understood and from time to time re-emphasized.

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