

HANDWRITING AS A MEANS OF COMMUNICATION AND IDENTITY OF EACH NATION

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Abstract: The article presents the fundamental element of the identity of each nation, which appears to be handwriting. The basic structure of Czech handwriting is explained. The written form is presented as a part of literacy, or more precisely reading literacy. The article refers to the differences of joined-up linear handwriting, according to which handwriting is taught in the Czech Republic.

Keywords: handwriting, joined-up linear handwriting, literacy, reading literacy, national identity, shape elements.

One of the basic requirements and objectives of the current education in the Czech Republic (also referred to as CR) is to teach pupils to read and write perfectly. This does not involve more reading and writing skills as essential means of communication but particularly acquiring reading literacy, which is inseparably related to writing literacy. In this respect, literacy as such is considered.

According to the Dictionary of Education [5] literacy is: *'...a competence of an individual to read, write and count acquired usually in the initial years of school attendance. This is 'a basic literacy', which constitutes a prerequisite not only for further education but also for self-realization in the society.'*

Writing has been subject to historical development. Each newly created civilization wanted to leave their legacy. The simplest form of recording was writing as it had been preserved for centuries. However, the forms of writing were not unified and each civilization created their own characteristic writing. Various forms of writing include the quipu, a specific form of writing of the Indians, hieroglyphic, cuneiform or pictographic writing. Some of the preserved written relics indicate that writing developed

through time, became simpler and more professional.

To a large extent, current handwriting was influenced by Roman handwriting, from which Roman capitals developed. Roman capitals had a significant influence on the development of Latin handwriting, which is still used today in certain variations. The final developmental stage of Latin handwriting was Carolingian miniscule from 9th century AD.

With respect to Carolingian miniscule we must not forget that this completed the shape system of two alphabets – small and capital alphabet – as used today. This fact is referred to by Václav Penc in his book published in 1961 [4]. In spite of the invention of letterpress printing around 1445, handwriting and hand copying was still significant. There were increased demands on the speed of book copying, and to achieve this requirement, the handwriting was slightly slanted to the right so that scribes could see it. Another change was the links between the letters, which eliminated interruptions between strokes and allowed scribes to be faster.

Handwriting reflecting these changes is called cursive and originated in the Renaissance period. *'Renaissance cursive immediately precedes our current handwriting [4].'*

Latin handwriting, i.e. shapes used today, was introduced in schools in 1849. The model of contemporary handwriting has its roots in penmanship types of 19th century. In 1932 there was an educational reform in Czechoslovakia and handwriting was changed to single linear instead of shadow. In 1950s this type of handwriting

was modified by Václav Penc, who created new handwriting shapes, which are still used today with almost no changes [4]. For the last time, this handwriting was modified in 1970s.

Figure 1. Current shapes of letters and numerals [6]

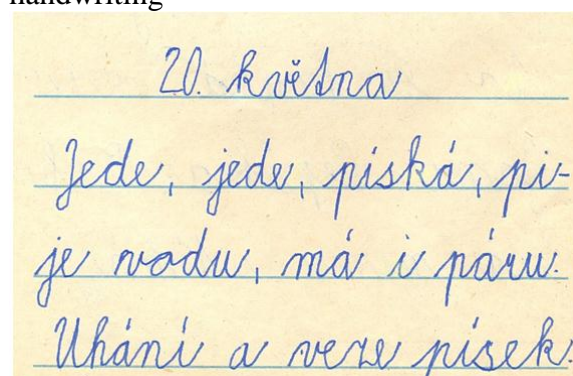


The result of the methodology of elementary writing in the Czech Republic is joined-up linear handwriting. Linear handwriting is a type of linked handwriting, which is specific and differs from handwriting used in Anglo-Saxon countries. As mentioned above, joined-up linear handwriting is historically based on the development of Latin handwriting in Europe. We are aware of the fact that Czech handwriting differs from the surrounding countries except Slovakia. The requirements applicable to pupils in Czech schools are legibility and correctness of handwritten words and sentences according to a specific standard. Rather than strict observance of the standard, emphasis is put on legibility and appropriate writing pace. In this respect, quality as well as quantity-based features of handwriting can be assessed. Quality-based assessable features of Czech joined-up linear handwriting include letter shape, letter size, proportionality and even direction of letter size, density and rhythmization of handwriting and layout of written records. Quantity-based

handwriting features include speed, which is expressed by the number of letters written during a period of time, usually one minute.

One of the most remarkable characteristics and differences of Czech joined-up linear handwriting is the shape of letters and numerals. The shape can be classified into 10 groups according to typical features. The first group includes letters with **upper loops** (e.g. e, l, b, f, 1, 4...). The second group is typical of the so-called **upper, lower and combined slanted loop** (e.g. i, u, m, n, v). The main shape of the third group is the **left curve** (e.g. C, Č, E, CH, 6...). The **closed oval** is a typical feature of the fourth group of letters (e.g. o, a, d, 0, 9). The fifth group includes letters with the so-called **lower loop** (e.g. j, p, g...). The sixth group is typical of curves with special cases of **snake-like shapes** (e.g. I, J, H, K, 8, 4...) – a typical feature of joined-up linear handwriting. The seventh group is represented by the **vertical snake-like shape** or **wave with a spiral** (e.g. P, B, R, T, 8, 3, 5...), where the left and right curves are connected. The **wave** is another basic handwriting shape (e.g. L, D, Z, Ž, 7, 2 ...) and makes up the eighth group. In this group of shapes the wave is joined with the right and left curve (e.g. S, L,) and with the wave. The ninth group consists of **individually ordered** letters (e.g. r, ř, s, š...). The tenth group includes **Roman numerals** (I, V, X, L, C).

Figure 2. Illustration of handwriting



Author's portfolio

Apart from letter shapes, a typical feature of Czech (Slovak) handwriting includes links between letters. Except the first grade in which the speed of handwriting is not monitored because the handwriting habit is not sufficiently automated, an average number of letters per minute (as mentioned above) is specified for each grade. According to Křivánek and Wildová [2], in the second grade pupils produce approximately 20 letters per minute, in the third grade 30 letters per minute, in the fourth grade 40 letters per minute and in the fifth grade around 50 letters per minute. Quantitative assessment is only approximate and is not strictly observed due to individual particulars of each individual.

An important part of training of writing in the Czech Republic is intrinsic pupil motivation in elementary school. In the Czech Republic pupils start school at the age of six. Training of elementary writing goes hand in hand with elementary reading. These two activities cannot be separated. The methods used for training of writing and reading in elementary grade are designed for developing common skills used in both activities.

'As in other countries, emphasis is placed on reading and writing literacy of pupils. These are abilities to use writing or reading as means of lifelong learning and to develop communication skills as possible sources of spending leisure time as well as overall personality development'. [7]

Successful and problem-free training of writing skills requires a number of skills that are developed within pre-primary education, i.e. in kindergartens. Graphomotor skills in children who start elementary education in elementary schools should be at a certain level. One of the requirements for successful acquiring of writing is to observe correct hygienic writing principles. These principles are included in the analytical-synthetic method used in training of elementary reading and writing.

Appropriate hygienic and working habits in teaching elementary writing are of a critical importance for further balanced development of a child and serve as a form of prevention against various orthopaedic disorders that could develop in children as a result of an incorrect sitting position.

'Obviously, it is more effective to adopt correct writing habits than to relearn incorrect stereotypes. This takes much more time compared with acquiring correct habits from the teacher. By systematically reminding pupils of hygienic principles and constantly repeating and correcting those pupils who do not observe these principles, pupils acquire neat, even and linear handwriting.' [1]

The character of written relics signifies the level of the culture of a nation. It is an expression of a nation's identity. For these reasons each nation protects its intangible wealth in the form of documents that can be surely preserved for future generations.

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