My Name in Maya Hieroglyphics

Target Grade Level: middle school/high school foreign language students

Background:
This activity focuses on the basic phonetic combinations used in the hieroglyphic writing of the ancient Maya. It does not address the pronunciation of modern, spoken Maya languages. Instead, it focuses on how epigraphers and archaeologists develop and use syllabaries to interpret the meaning of Maya hieroglyphic texts in codices, painted ceramics, and monumental iconography.

From the FAMSI website at: http://www.famsi.org/mayawriting/mayawriting.htm

FAMSI
FOUNDATION FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF MESOAMERICAN STUDIES, INC.

Maya Hieroglyphic Writing

Brief Note about Maya Hieroglyphic Writing

Numerous features distinguish the Maya from other cultures of ancient Mesoamerica, but one that has attracted explorers, scholars, and enthusiasts for centuries is Maya Hieroglyphic Writing. The calligraphic style and pictorial complexity of Maya glyphs are like no other writing system.

While the decipherment of Maya hieroglyphs has been advancing rapidly in the past few decades, differing opinions of whether or not Maya writing was either a number of simple word-pictures or a sophisticated phonetic system stifled decipherment for years. Indeed, it was only in the mid-twentieth century following a breakthrough by Mayanist Tatiana Proskouriakoff that epigraphers (or glyphic experts) could finally agree that Maya Hieroglyphic Writing was a fully functional system based on phonetic signs.

While our system is also based on phonetic signs, in comparison to Maya writing our system seems much simpler. All of our words are formed from various combinations of only 26 signs—that list of letters we call an Alphabet. By contrast, all Maya words are formed from various combinations of nearly 800 signs, and each sign represents a full syllable—so that list of signs is called a Syllabary, not an Alphabet.

Twenty-six signs versus hundreds of signs? Sounds impossible? Not really. As can be seen in the Syllabaries below, while one sign of our alphabet can represent only
one sound, Maya writers could select from many different signs to represent one sound. For example, there are at least five different signs that could be chosen to represent the Maya syllable ba. Please note that these syllabaries only include about 100 of the nearly 800 possibilities.

In each syllabary presented, sounds are formed by combining a particular consonant with one of the five vowels: a, e, i, o, or u. If a Maya writer wanted to describe the act of "writing" (or tz'ib' in Maya) the scribe could select from several different signs to convey the sounds. For example, this combination might be chosen:

\[
\text{tz'í} + \text{b'i} = \text{tz'ib'}
\]

For an idea of different ways that different Maya artists wrote the same syllables, we include Syllabaries drawn by various contemporary scholars.

Syllabary of Glyphs by John Montgomery

A-M N-Y

Dictionary of Maya Hieroglyphs by John Montgomery
An online dictionary of Maya glyphs with phonetic transcriptions, "T" numbers, definitions and sound recordings.

A Maya Syllabary
After N. Grube & S. Martin 2001:82 Notebook for the XXVth Maya Hieroglyphic Forum at Texas

Syllabary from Reading the Maya Glyphs
by Michael D. Coe and Mark Van Stone

Viewers are urged to investigate several books by notable Mayanists.

Dictionary of Maya Hieroglyphs by John Montgomery, please visit: Hippocrene Books.

How to Read Maya Hieroglyphs by John Montgomery, please visit: Hippocrene Books.

Reading the Maya Glyphs by Michael Coe and Mark Van Stone, please visit: http://www.thamesandhudson.com.
Objectives: The students will:
1. Learn how to use syllabaries to create compound Maya glyphs.
2. Discuss ways in which epigraphers and archaeologists can use various combinations of syllables to decipher the messages left from the past.
3. Experiment with 3 different syllabaries provided through the FAMSI website to create phonetic name glyphs for their names.

Teacher Preparation:
Check out the FAMSI website to learn more about the syllabic written language of the ancient Maya. Links from the FAMSI website to other sites on the web, such as Mesoweb, will provide more ideas for integrating basic epigraphy into the classroom. The introductions to the books listed on the FAMSI website as well as those included in the additional resources list below should provide a well-rounded, general overview needed for integration into the primary and secondary school settings. These resources will also provide a more extensive treatment of the subject of Mayan epigraphy and linguistics for those interested in delving into the topic. Then, have the students bring one small school picture (or current picture) of themselves into class for the activity.

Materials Needed:
- PowerPoint projector and screen
- Access to the World Wide Web
- Paper
- Magic Markers
- A school picture of each student in the class

Procedure:
1. Bring up the FAMSI web page devoted to Maya hieroglyphic writing on the PowerPoint projector. If students have access to computers in the classroom, they can access the website, examine the syllabaries and even practice drawing name glyphs on the PC or laptop. If all the students do not have access to computers, the pertinent syllabaries can be copied from the website and pasted into a PowerPoint presentation or document file and/or printed format. If teachers do not have access to this technology at school, the syllabaries used here can be printed from the websites included in this workshop and copied to overhead sheets for classroom use.

2. Introduce the students to the concept of the syllabary by explaining the differences between phonetic syllabic hieroglyphic writing and contemporary alphabetic languages like English or Spanish.
Take note: The phonetic/syllabic component of the writing system is consonant-vowel (C-V). Because of this, final syllables in words are always spelled with vowels on the end, but words in Maya don't always end in vowels. The final syllable of a word usually includes the vowel from the second-to-last syllable, this is a way of reinforcing the previous syllable's vowel.

The Maya also don't use all of the same sounds we do. For example there is no "j" sound in Maya. Therefore, the name Jessica would be pronounced ye-si-ka. Since the last syllable ends in a vowel, you don't have to reinforce the vowel from the syllable before. Names that end in consonants, David for example, are a little different. The closest approximation to David I can come up with would be tza-bi-ti, (pronounced tza-bit).

3. Show students the 3 different syllabaries created for ancient Maya glyphs provided by the website. These are not the only ones out there. Clearly, there are many interpretations of this complex language and many combinations of syllables to choose from when creating words phonetically.

4. Have students try to combine the syllables whose pronunciation sounds the closest to the syllables in their names using the different syllabaries.

5. Have the students try to write their names glyphically at least three times in different ways using magic markers and construction paper. Once they have decided which combination of syllables they like the best, have them draw the preferred name glyph large enough so that it is readily visible. Cut out the name glyphs and post them on a bulletin board in the classroom.

6. As a final "test," collect all the pictures brought in of the students and redistribute them so that no student has their own picture. Then, have each student attempt to locate the name glyph on the bulletin board that corresponds to the picture they hold based on their knowledge of how to use the syllabaries. This is epigraphy! When they locate the glyph, post the picture within the glyph and everyone can enjoy their new hieroglyphic image!

7. If you do this activity in a Spanish class and the students have Spanish names, have them translate their Spanish name into Maya glyphs as well. If they have their Spanish names displayed on their desks, have them draw their glyphic Maya name to display along with the Spanish name.
8. If this activity is done in combination with the painted manuscripts or stela exercises, have the students integrate their chosen name glyphs into these iconographic representations of their personal histories.

**Discussion Topics:** (could be discussed in a foreign language)
1. What's in a name? How did the classic Maya peoples identify themselves? (Pertinent to this may be a discussion of Maya naming traditions)

2. What are the challenges epigraphers face in deciphering Maya glyphs?

3. How does syllabic glyphic writing differ from pictorial or alphabetic writing?

4. What are the main Mayan languages spoken today? Quiché, Yucatec, Cakchiquel, Lacandon, Itzá, etc. What is their relationship to the language spoken by the ancient Maya peoples?

**Vocabulary**
- *Syllabary* - an "alphabet" used for syllabic writing systems.
- *Glyph* - a word used to describe the symbols used in non-alphabetic writing systems.
- *Epigraphy* - the study of hieroglyphs
- *Pictorial writing* - also called logographs, writing that uses images that mean what they depict.

**Additional Resources:**
Coe, Michael D.

Stuart, David

**Websites**
http://www.famsi.org
http://www.mesoweb.org
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