
Research Digest

Diary Studies

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Sandy has been teaching English in Hong Kong for one year. To gain a better understanding of Hong Kong and her students, she enrolls in a Cantonese evening course. After the first few lessons, Sandy is talking with one of her colleagues about the English classes they teach. During their brief discussion, Sandy realizes that her experiences as a language learner are starting to inform her practices as a language teacher. She wants to examine this connection more closely, so Sandy decides to keep a journal of her experiences as a Cantonese language learner. At the end of the Cantonese course, she has 20 journal entries. She shows these entries to another teacher in her school whom she trusts and who has also recently completed a Cantonese course, but who did not keep a journal. After Sandy's colleague has read all of the entries, the two of them discuss the entries. Based on the discussion, Sandy and her colleague decide that they will both attend the same class at the next level, and each will keep a language learning journal. At the end of the second course, they swap journals and make notes on each other's entries. They then meet and discuss their data, identifying recurring themes in their entries as well as similarities and differences in their experiences as learners in

the Cantonese course. They are impressed by what they were able to discover through their discussions. Seeing the value of keeping and studying diaries, Sandy and her colleague eventually decide to ask their students to keep journals of their experiences learning English.

This paper discusses procedures for collecting or generating data by keeping a diary, or journal (we will use these terms interchangeably), and how to go about getting started, organizing data and presenting findings from such studies. The keeping of journals and the resulting analyses and interpretation of such data have been called “diary studies,” a form of qualitative language research which emerged in the late 1970s. Diary studies have been utilized to investigate aspects of both language teaching and language learning. They have been used as both research tools in their own right and as parts of larger research projects.

What is a diary study?

A diary study basically consists of keeping an introspective journal (the data collection process) and analyzing the patterns and anomalies that occur in the journal entries over time. According to Bailey and Ochsner (1983):

A diary study in second language learning, acquisition, or teaching is an account of a second language experience as recorded in a first-person journal. The diarist may be a language teacher or a language learner—but the central characteristic of the diary studies is that they are introspective: The diarist investigates his own teaching or learning. Thus he can report on affective factors, language learning strategies, and his own perceptions—facets of the language learning experience which are normally hidden or largely inaccessible to an external

observer. (p. 189)

As noted above, diary studies have been conducted on language learning and language teaching. In the early days of diaries as research tools, these diary entries were typically analyzed by the diarists themselves. Later, however, researchers who had not made the diary entries began to analyze data generated by language learners and/or teachers, just as Sandy and her colleague did when they analyzed each other's journals of the second Cantonese course. When the diarists themselves did the analyses, the process was referred to as "primary" or "direct" or "introspective." When the analyses were done by someone other than the diarists, the process was referred to as "secondary" or "indirect" or "non-introspective." Information about a number of published diary studies which used both primary and secondary analyses is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

Examples of Diary Studies Analyzed by the Diarists and by Other Researchers

Agent(s) of Analysis	Language Teachers' (or Teacher Trainers') Journals	Language Learners' Journals
Primary (Direct) Introspective Analysis by the Diarist(s)	Appel (1995)	Bailey (1980, 1983)
	Bailey (2001)	Campbell (1996)
	Brock, Yu & Wong (1992)	Carson & Longhini (2002)
	Cole, McCarthy, Rogan & Schleicher (1998)	Jones (1994, 1995)
	Grandcolas & Soulé-Susbielles (1996)	Moore (1977)
	McDonough (1994)	Sachs (2002)
	Matsuda & Matsuda (2001)	Schmidt & Frota (1986)
	Ruso (2007)	Schumann (1980)
	Verity (2000)	Schumann & Schumann (1977)

Secondary	Bailey (1990)	Allison (1998)
(Indirect) Non-	Block (1996)	Bailey (1983)
introspective	Brinton and Holten (1989)	Block (1996)
Analysis by	Ho & Richards (1993)	Brown (1985a, 1985b)
Researchers	Jarvis (1992)	Carroll (1994)
Other than the	Lee & Lew (2001)	Ellis (1989)
Diarist(s)	McDonough (1994)	Halbach (2000)
	Numrich (1996)	Hilleson (1996)
	Palmer, C. H. (1992)	Huang (2005)
	Palmer, G. M. (1992)	Krishnan & Hoon (2002)
	Polio & Wilson-Duffy (1998)	Matsumoto (1989)
	Tsang (2003)	Parkinson & Howell-
	Winer (1992)	Richardson (1990)
		Peck (1996)
		Richards (1992)
		Rowell & Libben (1994)
		Ruso (2007)
		Tyacke & Mendelsohn (1986)
		Warden, Swain, Lapkin, & Hart
		(1995)

Why use a diary study?

Diary studies can offer insights into processes that are not otherwise easily accessible or open to investigation and can thus provide useful information to language teachers, learners and researchers. They are based on data generated through personal written records, and those data consist of detailed notes on events, actions, emotions, and thoughts. Where the diarist is also the researcher, the analysis can include introspective interpretations of those events, actions, emotions and thoughts. Such data are useful in contexts where the researchers (who are sometimes the diarists themselves) wish to document internal processes that are not available to an outside observer.

Diary studies can be used as both independent research tools and as one aspect of larger research projects. An example of the former is Bailey's (1983) analysis of eleven language learners' commentaries about language learning anxiety. An example of diaries being incorporated as data collection procedures in a larger study is Block's (1996) investigation

of an adult EFL course in Spain. In that report, Block used observational data he collected when he visited the class, but he also included the teacher's journal entries and information from the diaries kept by several students. This combination gave him a balance of the *emic* (the insiders') and *etic* (the outsider's) perspectives.

Collecting your data

There are various methods you can employ to collect your diary study data. These include handwritten journals, word processed journals and/or audio recordings. Although in most cases diaries are written, in some studies learners have made spoken diary entries instead. For example, in a study Block (1996) conducted in Barcelona, he had learners of English make oral entries in their journals using their first language. However, if you wish to carry out a diary study and actually analyze the journal data, you will probably have to transcribe the audio recordings, or some part of them at least, in order to do the analysis. This process can be quite time consuming; therefore, we recommend that learners and teachers make written journal entries. In particular, we prefer to create word processed journal entries because having an electronic record greatly facilitates data analysis (see below).

Sometimes diarists produce a "flat" record in their diaries—a compilation of facts. Others have records of feelings without supporting evidence or introspection about the sources of those emotions. Ideally, the diary data will contain both factual records and interpretations thereof. It is also important to keep detailed chronological records of your entries, i.e., the day, date, and time at which you start the entry, and the time at which you finish writing. If you are using a computer to make your entries, you can also easily record the word count for each entry, as this information indicates the amount of data being generated.

Whether it is teachers or language learners who are keeping diaries, for record keeping and data gathering purposes, it is important to have a summary of the class information and the lesson that is being written about, including, day, date and time of the lesson, number of students, topic(s) and/or skill(s) addressed, etc. These are important details that can help another reader of the entries contextualize the content. Even if you are going to be the main (or only) reader, since most teachers work with many groups and teach several subjects, such details may serve as important contextual clues and reminders when you re-read your own entries some time later. If you are a language learner, it will be helpful to you to include class handouts and copies of assignments with your diary. If you are a language teacher, you should include both class handouts and your lesson plans.

It is difficult for language teachers not to pay attention to language! But when you are writing journal entries, it is important to focus on recording your thoughts and feelings as accurately and as completely as possible within the constraints of time and language. So, you should try to resist the temptation to stop and correct grammar, spelling and punctuation in the original diary entries. Journal entries are first-draft writing.

Likewise, for language learners—especially those who attempt to keep journal entries in the target language—the purpose of the journal is to record thoughts, feelings and actions about encounters in the target language. It is not important to worry about grammar, spelling, and so on. Of course, writing a diary in the target language can provide excellent language practice, and can help learners discover what they can and cannot confidently write. But if the diarists' limited language proficiency will not allow them to express their thoughts confidently and fluently, the journal writing can become a burden. For this reason, many language learners have kept diaries in their first language, or in a mix of their first and second languages.

Because it is easy to write a great deal about a single lesson, or even a single event within a lesson, it is important to develop ways of focusing your writing. Setting reasonable time limits for making diary entries is one way of ensuring that writing your entries does not become an overly time-consuming and laborious task.

Another useful focusing device is to pay attention to events that occur in class that may not last long (such as a brief warm-up or wrap-up task), but which you found yourself thinking about after the lesson was over. If you are a teacher, you may choose to focus your entries on an area you are working on, such as giving clear instructions. (See Bailey, Curtis and Nunan, 2001, for ideas about using teaching journals in professional development efforts.) If you are a learner, you may wish to concentrate on issues that matter to you, such as strategies for increasing your fluency or how you react to error treatment.

Many teachers present consecutive lessons, teaching one class after another, back-to-back. In such arrangements, there is not usually any time to make a diary entry until the end of the day, by which time memories may have already started to fade. One way of avoiding this problem is to make brief handwritten notes in point form on your lesson plans, perhaps using sticky note papers (Post-it notes). These notes can later be elaborated on, word processed and filed.

Getting started

As for how to go about getting started, here is an example of instructions for keeping a diary, which a researcher (Matsumoto, 1989) gave to a language learner. The student was a native speaker of Japanese studying English:

Please make daily entries in Japanese describing your classroom learning experience in the ESL program you are participating in this summer. You are asked to write about the content of your

class or learning activities, and what you thought or felt about the class and any other things which are involved in your language learning experience. Please write your comments and feelings in as much detail as possible, honestly and openly, as if you were keeping your own personal, confidential diary. Try to write your entry before you have forgotten about the class content—as soon as possible after the class. (p. 170)

Another researcher (Brown, 1985a) gave these instructions to a group of students learning Spanish:

This journal has two purposes. The first is to help you with your language learning. As you write about what you think and feel as a language learner, you will understand yourself and your experience better.

The second purpose is to increase the overall knowledge about language learning so that learning can be increased. You will be asked to leave your language learning journal when you leave the [training program]. However, your journal will not be read by the teachers at the [training program]. It will be read by researchers interested in language learning.

Your identity and the identity of others you may write about will be unknown (unless you wish it otherwise) to anyone except the researchers.

You will be given 15 minutes a day to write. Please write as if this were your personal journal about your language learning experience. (pp. 283-284)

Like Block (1996), the learners in Brown's study also made their journal entries in their first language (English).

Putting the process to work

Following are some tips you might find useful for guiding language learners or teachers in their diary keeping, based on Nunan and Bailey (2008, pp. 303-304):

1. If you are taking (or teaching) a scheduled language class, set aside time each day immediately following the class to write in your diary. If you are immersed in a target language situation (but not taking a class), set aside a regular time and place each day in which to write your diary entries. Write daily and as soon as possible after class or after your attempts to use or teach the target language.
2. Write your diary entries in a comfortable place you like, one where you won't be disturbed by friends or ringing telephones. If you are writing your diary by hand, use paper or a notebook that you like and a pen that is easy and comfortable to use. If you are word-processing your diary, make sure you are familiar with the program and that you save your entries regularly and religiously, in order to avoid the frustration of losing data.
3. Carry a small pocket notebook or personal digital assistant (PDA) with you so that you can make notes about your language experiences as they occur even if you don't have your actual diary with you. Some diarists have suggested keeping the notebook or PDA near your bedside so you can record any late-night or early morning thoughts.
4. If you are studying a foreign language or teaching a language class, the time devoted to writing about your language learning or teaching experience should be at least equal to the time spent in class. If you are immersed in the target culture, you will find you probably cannot record everything that happens in a day, so you may want to focus your diary on some particular aspect of your experience that interests you.
5. Keep your diary in a safe, secure place—a locked drawer, file cabinet

or briefcase. If you are word processing your data, make sure your files are password protected. The idea is for you to be able to write candidly without feeling uneasy about other people reading and reacting to your ideas.

6. When you record entries in the original uncensored version of your diary, don't worry about style, grammar and organization—especially if you are writing in your second language. The idea is to get complete and accurate data at a time when the details are still fresh in your mind. You can polish your presentation of the data at a later time, when you can select and edit particular journal entries for public consumption.
7. Each time you write an assertion, ask yourself why you wrote it, and what evidence you have for the statement. Some language learning journals are full of fascinating but unsubstantiated insights. Try to support your insights with examples from your class sessions, your daily interactions in the target culture, or actual language data.
8. At the end of each diary entry, note thoughts or questions that have occurred to you to consider later. Many anthropologists conducting field research keep an ideas file—brief notes on topics to explore further. Using this procedure is one way to narrow your focus somewhat during the diary-keeping process. Keeping a research ideas file also serves as a guide for future entries.

Organizing your data and presenting your findings

It is not always convenient to make your journal entries using a computer, but as mentioned above, whenever possible you should record your entries electronically, because doing so makes it much easier to work with the data later. For example, if you have word processed the diary entries, you can easily use the “search” function to find key words and phrases as themes begin to emerge. You can also use

the color highlighter function to identify related themes. For example, if the diary entries reveal three repeated themes (e.g., responses to error treatment, varying motivation levels, and attitude toward fellow learners), you can use yellow, pink and green highlighting to locate data on each of those issues. This procedure will enable you to organize the data related to each theme more easily.

As with most qualitative methods, the volume of words generated in a diary study can be somewhat overwhelming. For example, in a diary study which explored difficulties and constraints in EFL learning, Huang (2005) stated that “the original data set totaled 352 entries in English by 72 diarists in three classes” (p. 611) —much too much to put into a single research report. In reporting on a diary study, it is important to give your readers enough data from the journal(s) so that they can see the patterns you identified while carrying out the analysis. The exemplary data you choose to share should be selected because they are representative or because they are unique. Such examples from the actual journal can be included in a block quote format. In Huang’s study, when he presented the findings, just four entries were used to discuss three main findings: (1) students’ perception of difficulties; (2) their responses to linguistic difficulties; and (3) socio-psychological constraints in EFL learning. One of the keys, then, to presenting your findings in a diary study is selectivity and making the best use of clear, concise and illustrative entries.

As previously mentioned, some diary studies have been based entirely on journal entries (see, e.g., Bailey, 1980, 1983; Campbell, 1996; Moore, 1977; Schumann, 1980; Schumann and Schumann, 1977). In other cases, they have been used in connection with additional types of data, which has permitted the researcher(s) to compare the outcomes of various kinds of data collection (see, e.g., Ellis, 1989). In this sense, diary studies—like other forms of qualitative research—benefit from *triangulation*—a metaphor borrowed from astronomy, surveying and

navigation (Denzin, 1978; van Lier, 1988). In working with qualitative data, such as diary entries, *triangulation* refers to a quality control strategy, in that if “diverse kinds of data lead to the same conclusion, one can be a little more confident in that conclusion” (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983, p. 198). Diary entries can be used to triangulate with either quantitative or qualitative forms of data.

As with most data discussions, presenting a combination of quantitative and qualitative data together, as Ellis (1989) did, can give your readers a more complete picture. In Ellis’ study of two learners’ classroom learning styles and their effect on second language acquisition, the diaries of the two learners are just one of nine sets of data, including a questionnaire, results from a cognitive style test and from a language aptitude test. Even so, there are more than a dozen diary entries included in Ellis’ presentation of the findings. It is worth noting, however, that most of these excerpts are very brief, for instance, “As usual, I was quite frightened when asked questions” (p. 257).

A similar mixed-data approach was used by Allison (1998), who first presented a table summarizing the results of a short questionnaire completed by thirty-eight students. The questionnaire was based on the students’ responses to ten statements about keeping a course diary, for example: “Writing a diary helped me clarify concepts” and “Writing a diary helped me apply concepts to texts” (p. 35). The questionnaire results are followed by a discussion of “learners’ engagement with language issues” (pp. 36-39), using eight examples from students’ dairies. There is also a section on “the role of teacher feedback” (pp. 40-41) which makes use of a single but relatively long extract from one of the student’s diaries. Presenting well-selected extracts from your diaries effectively will help your readers get a feel for the experiences you are writing about.

Alternatively, some diarists have used figures to represent ideas pictorially. For instance, Bailey (1980, p. 64) provided an impressionistic

line graph to represent the levels of (1) student-student interaction, (2) interpersonal tension, and (3) her enthusiasm for learning French over the course of a ten-week term. Following an analysis of diary data from eleven language learners, Bailey (1983, p. 97) provided a figure representing the relationships between competitiveness and debilitating or facilitating anxiety among language learners who perceived themselves as either successful or unsuccessful.

Conclusion

Since diary studies rely on introspective journal entries, they can provide us with data that may reveal aspects of the language learning or language teaching experience which are difficult, if not impossible, to attain by other means. For this reason, and because of their flexibility as research tools in their own right and as elements of larger research projects, they are a particularly useful way to collect information in second language research projects. As suggested by the illustration about Sandy at the beginning of this chapter, diary studies can be effective for exploring both learning and teaching experiences, individually and collaboratively.

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