

My Experience with Reflective Diaries in the Classroom

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Introduction

I had never been the kind of person to maintain a diary. What few attempts I did make in my earlier years started out with the best intentions and convictions, but always followed the same trajectory. Daily entries would slowly degrade into “every few days”, every few days would in turn reduce to weekly, and weekly to monthly.

It wasn't just an issue of quantity either, but also quality. The earlier entries would richly describe the events of the day and my emotive responses to them. While it would be a stretch to say it made for riveting reading, there was, at least, a sense of purpose and integrity to the writing. However, in my entries I seemed progressively disinterested and flippant, clearly reflecting the growing resentment I had for the time required for the diary's upkeep. Time which, I probably felt, could have been better invested in more entertaining endeavors.

Clearly, one would not put a lot of confidence in my ability, as an English teacher, to successfully implement diary usage into my classes, nor to eventually emerge championing their utility as a tool for reflective teaching and learning. And yet, here we are.

Why Diaries?

Before examining reflective diaries and their uses, we must first have an understanding of reflective practice, which, as Cirocki and Farrell (2020) point out, is a “complex construct (p.6)”. An early, general definition of reflective practice comes from Schön (1984), who describes it as an ability to reflect on one's actions so as to engage in a process of continuous learning, while Boud, Keogh and Walker (1985) claim it involves “intellectual and affective activities” which individuals engage in to achieve new “understandings and appreciation” (p. 19). Taking the concept into a classroom context, Lyons (1998) argues that teachers undertake reflective practice by asking questions about the effectiveness of their teaching in relation to the

needs of their learners. From the learner's perspective, reflective practice can promote critical thinking necessary to analyse the effectiveness of their efforts, and decision-making skills to foster planning and continuing improvement (Rolheiser, Bower, & Stevahn, 2000). Lastly, Farrell (2015) includes in his definition of reflective practice the act of systematically collecting data about one's practice.

It is within the data collection aspect mentioned in Farrell's definition that reflective diaries come into play, as one of the possible tools of collecting said data. According to Bailey (1990), learner diaries present a “first-person account of a language learning or teaching experience, documented through regular, candid entries in a personal journal and then analysed for recurring patterns or salient events” (p.215). Saliency refers to how noticeable or prominent a particular topic or event is; these could be stated with apparent emotion or exclamation and would suggest significance. They also allow the researcher to understand both the observable context and also the internal context, such as the learners' attitudes and emotive responses to their teacher's instruction and their own learning progress (Oxford, 2011). The diary also makes for a useful reflective teaching tool, allowing the teacher to not only observe, but to take the first step in reflecting on and about their practice (Barlett, 1990).

From herein, I will discuss my experience with diaries both as reflective learning and reflective teaching tools. At the time, I was teaching in a large young learners' conversation school. The school's ethos was that English teaching should be delivered in a fun, active, and energetic manner, to appeal to the fluttering attention span of a typical child. As such, teachers were generally young with little previous teaching experience, with the ability to entertain learners held in just as high a regard as the ability to educate them. While in-house training was sporadically provided to teachers, the focus generally swayed towards company policy as

opposed to teachers' professional development. On occasion, the company would permit attendance of conferences and external workshops, but invitations were usually limited to managers or other senior staff. This was perhaps my biggest motivation for undertaking my MA in TESOL; there seemed to be no other way I could develop my professional knowledge to any significant degree.

Back to the teaching situation, I wanted to change the way my junior high classes were taught, as the school's insistence that the "fun factor" be a key component didn't always sit well with me. This seemed fine for the younger students, but it didn't always feel like an appropriate fit for my older students, namely those of middle school age. While I certainly wasn't resistant to providing a lively atmosphere in my classes, I also suspected that my students needed more than just to be entertained for an hour and wanted a more serious approach to learning. After all, several of them had the pressure of EIKEN proficiency tests and high school entrance exams looming, and this was a big motivator for them coming to my classes in the first place.

The dilemma for myself was how to identify the learning goals of the students and what type of activities resonated with them, whilst at the same time remembering the fact that we were, first and foremost, a conversation school. It seemed like a difficult balancing act, until the idea occurred to me to just have the students tell me what they thought was best for them. It was around this time that I first became aware of student and teacher diaries while undergoing my MA TESOL studies. I knew that I would need an appropriate means of qualitative data collection to gain an insight into my students' thoughts, and the use of diaries seemed to be the perfect fit.

I chose two small junior high classes wherein I would implement the diary usage. All students were aged between 13 and 14 years old at the time. My classes were team-taught, with myself acting as the lead teacher and model for English usage and a Japanese teacher of English (JT) providing translation duties and classroom support.

The students themselves were typical teenagers: shy, lacking in confidence, and difficult to elicit oral productions from. My idea was that the diaries might highlight what they enjoyed in my class

and what they didn't, as well as activities they found achievable and those they found overly challenging. At the end of every month these were collected and analysed for salient themes which might suggest areas for change in my teaching. If I could successfully make the learning progress more engaging and applicable to their learning needs, perhaps they would participate more actively in class. At the same time, I would upkeep my own teaching diary so I could honestly assess how effective my lessons had been.

The rules for maintaining the diaries were purposefully simple and clear: the students and I should write our reflections on each class, much like action logging. Action logging involves learners recording their feedback, reflections, and evaluations which are then reviewed by the teacher and used to refine teaching practice where necessary (Miyake-Warkentin et al., 2020). Benefits for students from action logging include increased attentiveness, integrated lesson review through the writing of their reflections, and having some sway in the running of the class. For teachers, benefits include knowing what does and doesn't work for their students, thereby increasing teacher confidence in their teaching efficacy, and better relations with their students (Murphey, 1993).

My students were permitted to write in Japanese and encouraged to keep entries concise and relevant. They were prompted to describe which parts of the lesson they enjoyed and which parts they did not, as well as to elaborate on any other pertinent reflections they had, such as difficulty of the tasks and their assessment of their own performance.

Students' Reflections

Over the course of five months my JTs and I reviewed our students' entries and refined our teaching accordingly. Some key findings will now be quickly outlined, along with the teachers' interventions. We established that some students wanted more conversation practice to overcome their speaking anxiety, so more time and activities were allocated to this, along with some speaking strategies to help boost their proficiency and confidence. At another juncture, it was noted that some students wanted to improve their grammatical competency in preparation for upcoming EIKEN

tests. The teachers provided for this through grammar exercises reminiscent of those found in the tests. Other examples included the more trivial, such as active warmup activities after some students admitted they were arriving to class feeling tired and sleepy after a long day at school. Generally, the students reported favourably to my interventions and my JTs and I did see some gradual improvements in their performance and engagement. These observations were echoed by Hooper (2020) who, during a yearlong tenure using action logging with his university students, noted a range of improvements and positive reactions from his interventions. Similar to my own findings, Hooper's attempts to introduce more active and communicative warmup activities resulted in a relaxed and comfortable environment, while an effort to train skills conducive for passing standardized tests such as TOEIC and TOEFL were also appreciated among his students.

Teacher's Reflections

While some useful insights into the student experience were gained, it was perhaps my own diary which was the most enlightening in the long term. By admitting my worries, frustrations, or missteps in classes, I was creating an honest inventory of shortcomings I had as a teacher and essentially committing to paper my will to remedy those shortcomings.

During my tenure with the teacher diary, there were several instances of teaching activities carried out in my lessons which I retrospectively felt could have been done better. I will detail one example here, although first a little context will be necessary. At the time, I was attempting to instil a greater degree of learner autonomy into my students by introducing them to learning strategies. Benson (1997) distinguishes three broad approaches to learner autonomy: the technical perspective, the psychological perspective, and the political perspective. The technical perspective emphasizes the use of skills and strategies for unsupervised learning, which are specific behaviours, actions, steps, and thought processes that students use to enhance their own learning (Oxford, 2003). Learner strategy instruction is beneficial to L2 learners as it helps them to become better at learning and

enables them to become independent and confident learners (Chamot & Kupper, 1989). I had decided to divide these strategies into four sets according to the four key language skills (speaking, writing, listening, and reading) and spending some lessons focusing on each skill.

Going into this project, I was slightly worried it might be too much to expect junior high students to adopt more independence in their learning. The impression I had gained was that autonomy is generally seen as a domain for adult language learning, due in most part to the fact that studies concerning learner autonomy had predominantly been focused on adult learning, as observed by Padmadewi (2016). Furthermore, as noted by Carreira et al., (2013), the majority of studies using the Self-Determination Theory, an influential theory delving into autonomy and its link to motivation, have also focused on adults and higher grades of adolescent learners.

This disposition was reflected in the diary where I had made several references to apprehension and a lack of confidence: "I didn't feel too confident about how well things would go in today's lesson" and, in the same entry, "I'm feeling bad about the choice of writing strategies" (this was because in hindsight, I felt some of the writing strategies were not very applicable to junior high students). I continued:

This is a learning experience for me and I've learnt that more thought should be given for their learning situation when training in strategy usage. As a consequence, I have to ensure that the listening strategies I plan to introduce next are a lot more realistic and helpful for middle school students.

For the next set of strategy training, listening strategies, I took a more considered approach, having learnt from my mistakes and so we see an increase in confidence and general positivity: "I was feeling more positive about these strategies as I chose them more carefully and wisely, bearing in mind my students' age". There was also an improvement in how this set of strategies was taught. Having previously relied on just verbally explaining, I had learned that a more interactive approach would be beneficial for the students. This

time, I implemented activities which would require the students to put the strategies into use:

I decided to show some strategies in use, as opposed to just explaining them (which in hindsight was an obvious idea, I feel silly for not having done this before!). So, I chose two strategies which both related to guessing the overall message from context, clues, words which are understood, etc.

The activity itself was simple but effective; students listened to a passage and had to guess the gist of what they heard using some of the strategies they had been taught. It is hard for me to imagine that without making the commitment to record my reflections and regularly review them, I would have this drive or the perception to successfully undertake continual self-improvement.

Lessons Learned

From looking back at these entries, we can see how I gradually gained in confidence and became more astute in my approach. I had learned how to better support my students' learning through the use of scaffolding, whereas previously the idea would not have even occurred to me. It appears that by disclosing my own worries and apprehensions in my diary, I could use these as incentive prompts with which I could measure my maturation as a teacher. It is very likely that without the diary, the confessions and revelations would never have materialised and, consequently, neither would my desire to challenge myself by stepping out of my comfort zone.

In conclusion, my venture with diaries was an enlightening and empowering experience. They allowed me to make my lessons more applicable to my students' needs and to foster a more relatable and inclusive learning environment. I also have no doubt that I am now a more confident and flexible teacher; one who has come to appreciate, not fear, constructive criticism and being honest with oneself.

Is a Reflective Diary for Me?

Implementing learner diaries is not going to be appropriate for all learning contexts. The reliable upkeep of the learner diary itself requires a certain level of discipline and maturity that will typically only

be found in adults or those in tertiary education. Indeed, at times it was a challenge to elicit fruitful reflections from young teenagers who, at the best of times, found it difficult to open up about their feelings. In this case, a more appropriate approach may be action logging, or even the adoption of "exit slips" (Miyake-Warkentin et al., 2020), which can be seen as a simplified variant, or precursor, to action logs. Reduced in form and only needing a few minutes at the end of class to complete, they can provide the simplest of prompts to encourage the less forthcoming students, covering elementary considerations such as what was good, bad, or needed more explanation (Miyake-Warkentin et al., 2020).

Practicality must also be taken into consideration. The larger the class, the greater the burden for the teacher to meaningfully analyse all the student diaries and prioritise the potentially larger number of salient themes which may need to be addressed. Lastly, some degree of teacher autonomy may be needed in order to make meaningful amendments to one's pedagogy. Those of us who find ourselves working towards tight syllabi or are expected to teach within restrictive institutional parameters may not have the required freedom to make the use of diaries viable.

However, I see no reason why a language teacher would not benefit from starting their own reflective teacher diary. It is not easy, at least to begin with. We naturally like to avoid inconvenient truths which might be an affront to our sense of worth or, dare I say it, our ego. This will start to change, however, when we realise that we are becoming better teachers by confronting and addressing our flaws, not by hiding from them. For those who are interested, I would offer the following advice.

First, know that it is a commitment of time and effort. As teachers, we often find ourselves with enough of a workload at the best of times, and the formal upkeep of a diary will only add to the never-ending list of things to keep on top of. One must be prepared to sacrifice some time each day to make thoughtful entries which will provide enough insight to be useful upon review.

Punctuality and timeliness are important factors, as it is essential that the entries be made at the earliest opportunity. As Ericsson and Simon

(1980, 1993) explain, one of the potential limitations of diary data is its reliability in regard to memory; information is only stored in a person's short-term memory briefly, after which it is only stored in the long-term memory and thus becomes less reliable. To mitigate this limitation, Ma and Oxford (2013) propose keeping a notebook to write down useful notes and key words directly from the short-term memory, which can later be transferred into coherent sentences within the diary. For those who have a busy class schedule where there's simply not enough time to put pen to paper after every single lesson, this is a fair compromise.

Lastly, have at least a loose plan for how often you will review your diary entries. I found that a cyclical approach worked well for my own teaching circumstances. I would review my diary towards the end of each month and have an action plan ready for the coming month. Having such a structure helps the process to become habitual and reduces the risk of missing entries.

I hope that by sharing my experience I have demonstrated just how beneficial diaries can be to our classroom. I also hope that I might have even persuaded some of you to give it a try for your own classes. With a little commitment each day, and perhaps a little courage to be honest with oneself, any teacher can learn about themselves just as I did and, crucially, learn how to become a better teacher.

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