

DIARY WRITING AS A PROCESS: Simple, Useful, Powerful¹

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Everyone knows what a diary is—a set of notes about what one is thinking, doing, feeling at a particular moment. But did you know there is a new way to use this common activity to promote better language learning?

As teachers we all want our students to do well. Research has shown that more successful learners are in control of their learning—they know what they are doing and what they want to achieve, they know when they make mistakes, and they know how to go about correcting those mistakes. Ah!! what a dream. We all want more students like this in our classrooms and in our self-access centers.

Successful learners are aware of the process of learning and how their efforts affect the outcome of their learning. Diaries can help build this awareness and can allow us as teachers to help learners improve the process. Diaries can help the learner begin to monitor his/her own progress and give the teacher some idea of the ways learners address their problems. It can also provide an opportunity for the teacher to scaffold, that is, to suggest other ways to address a problem for the learner to try out and/or note patterns of problems or solutions that the learner has.

Problems can include both cognitive and affective factors. Writing a diary can increase the learner's awareness of the strategies he/she uses and enable him/her to consider the appropriateness of the strategies used to address problems. Finally, when shared with a peer or a teacher, a diary can allow the peer or teacher to make suggestions about alternative ways to solve problems or to identify patterns (or problems and/or solutions) the learner may have overlooked or not be fully aware of.

SAMPLE DIARIES

A look at a few diaries can illustrate how diaries can illuminate the learning process.

Diary 1

Here is a short passage from a diary written by an American student studying Hebrew who reports on the strategies she uses to study:

While driving in the car on a long trip, I repeated the past tense using the root I knew well and

¹ Guidelines. 2003. 25:2:10-14.

then began using other roots with which I wasn't so familiar. It helped me get used to the sound of those words. When I had a question about anything (i.e. the spelling of the root), I consulted my husband.

In this short passage, this student reveals five strategies (or ways) that she used to learn grammar (a) she started with something familiar, (b) she repeated the familiar root out loud, (c) she tried to expand her knowledge by trying out less familiar roots, (d) she asked for help when she needed clarification, (e) she considered why the strategy worked for her “It helped me get used to the sound of those words.” What is missing in this excerpt is a discussion of whether there might be other strategies that work as well or better for her. By writing the diary, the learner can become aware of what she/he does, consider why it works or not, and then make that process available to a teacher or a peer for more suggestions.

Diary 2

In another diary, a learner reveals how her emotions interfere with her learning:

I need to find a better way to retain information that I receive orally. I don't hear well, so I tend to tune out often. To further the problem, once I get frustrated, I have gotten into the habit of letting that take over; I tune out even more.

This learner is focusing on a problem she has—learning through oral presentations. She further notes that she has not found a good solution and that her emotional reactions compound the problem. In writing the diary, the learner can become aware of what is hampering her learning. By sharing these problems with the teacher, the teacher can suggest possible solutions such as other ways the learner can get the information besides orally or can help the learner address her frustration and habit of tuning out by suggesting some relaxation or focusing techniques.

Diary 3

In yet another diary, a student of Arabic comes to recognize which of several strategies works best for her.

“We went over our homework from the previous time in class; the homework consisted of questions to which we had to write plausible yes/no answers. George read us the questions and we tried to read the answers we had put down on paper several days ago. I found this quite difficult and counterproductive... I had trouble reading and listening at the same time. If I listened, I lost my place on the page. If I read, I answered mechanically without having understood the questions. So I turned my homework paper over and just listened, creating new answers in my head or out loud if I was called upon. That worked much better.” (Rubin, J. and R. Henze, 1981, page 19).

In this diary, the learner tries out several strategies and by herself notices which one works best for her. In this case, the teacher can congratulate the learner on her ability to monitor (or notice)

her problems and to evaluate which strategy(ies) work best for her. This student not only finds a strategy that works for her but also is able to explain why she was having this difficulty.

“I guess the unfamiliarity of the script creates an either-or situation for me: if I’m trying to read, I can do nothing but read.” (Rubin, J. and R. Henze, page 19)

Thus, diaries can help learners become aware of their own learning process if teachers encourage them to (a) identify what problems they have, both intellectual and emotional, (b) describe how they address these problems, and (c) consider whether their strategies work for them and (d) state why they work or don’t work. Once learners have written their diaries, teachers (or peers) can offer praise (no criticism, please), ask questions about whether the strategies worked and why, and make suggestions about other strategies (solutions) to a learner’s problem (s).

DIRECTIONS FOR DIARY WRITING

Diaries can be written as often as possible, preferably at least once a week. Since the goal of the exercise is not to practice the target language but rather to focus on the learning process, diaries can be written in the target language or in the learner’s own language; the choice is up to the learner. Also, any comments should address the process, not the language. Language corrections should not be made in this exercise as this is not its purpose.

To help students begin to write their diaries, it is helpful to give them clear directions. Here are some that we find work:

Try to record your entries either during/after class. Record in your diary any thoughts about any homework reading; before, during, and after completing the task. Write your thoughts in as detailed a fashion as possible.

Your diary should include the following details:

- 1. What problems do/did you have in class or with your homework? How did you deal with these problems? How well did these solutions work for you?*
- 2. As you approach a task, what do you do before, during, and after to complete the task? (Be sure to write about a specific task, do not state what you usually do. The closer your report is to an actual text or class, the more you will understand your patterns of problems and solutions). Do you feel that what you did was useful? If not, can you think of something else that might work for you?*
- 3. Describe how you feel as you work on the assignment or in class? What did you do about those feelings? Did it help? If not, can you think of something else that might work for you?*
- 4. If this is your second or third assignment, what did you do differently, based on comments on your prior assignment by the teacher or your peers? Was it helpful? If so, why? If not, why not?*

DIRECTIONS FOR SCAFFOLDING (MAKING SUGGESTIONS)

Scaffolding is a technique which teachers can use to help learners move ahead in their understanding of the learning process. The teacher tries to help the learner move from wherever

he/she is to the next level of learning and does so by providing some sort of support.

Scaffolding can include many types of support. In general, it is a way to remind the learner of knowledge he/she already has, to bring to awareness the strategies learners are already using, or to provide suggestions which add to the strategies or knowledge of the learning process which the learner already has. These suggestions should always be couched as suggestions for the learner to try out and see if these help solve a particular learner's problem.

There are several types of support the teacher or peer can offer. It is very important not to be critical in any way, in scaffolding, the teacher or peer just tries to offer alternatives or additional ways of looking at problems and solutions.

Here are some questions to ask or things to do:

1. How did you decide on this solution?
2. Can you give an example?
3. Why did you select this solution to your problem?
4. How well did this solution work for you?
5. Did you consider any alternative solution?
6. Another possible solution you might consider would be...
7. What was your goal at that time?
8. How do you feel about the problem?
9. What did you do about your feelings?
10. Provide encouragement and reinforcement ("very nice approach")¹
11. Notice patterns of problems and patterns of problem solutions and suggest alternative approaches.

EXAMPLE OF SCAFFOLDING

To give you an idea of scaffolding, here are some excerpts from student diaries with examples of the teacher comments:

Diary Entry

Teacher/Peer Comment

1. *There were several blanks I could not fill in. It was hard to hear what they were saying because of the music and the ocean in the background.*

Try figuring out what might have been said. What do you think a fellow might be saying when he dives into the water after a girl he is trying to pick up? ² (Suggests a strategy)

2. *I was memorizing a list of vocabulary*

How did you memorize the words? (Asks for more

¹ A good reference for the ways to scaffold is: Kelly, R. 1996.

² Adapted from Thompson, I. 1995, page 50.

words for a quiz.

detail)

3. Each student said his memorized monologue. As the teacher corrected certain sentences, I wrote them down.

Why did you write them down? Did you do anything more with them (Asks for more detail, is suggesting a need for another strategy).

WAYS TO USE DIARIES

Teachers can use the diaries in the following ways:

1. The teacher can look over each diary and make suggestions.
2. The teacher can ask peers to look over each other's diaries and make suggestions. This can be very efficient for a number of reasons (a) peers can often suggest other ways to address a problem (b) peers can learn from the solutions of their fellow peers, and (c) the teacher may not have time to read all the diaries but learners can still get input this way.
3. After several diary assignments are in, learners can be asked to look through them and see what their own patterns of problems are and what their strategies for solving them are.
4. The teacher can look over the diaries and see what patterns of problems and solutions individual learners have and make suggestions.

SUMMARY

Diaries can be used very effectively to help students become aware of their learning process and to begin to reflect on new ways to address their learning problems. Using diaries in language classes is an easy and **simple** technique—everyone knows what a diary is so it is not hard to learn and to get learners to write one, though they will need the suggestions given above to focus the diary. It is very **useful** because it helps bring a learner's attention to the learning process, makes them aware of their problems, solutions, and allows them to consider the appropriateness of their solutions. By scaffolding their peers, learners can learn new strategies. And, teachers can become aware of some of their students' problems. It is **powerful** because it motivates students and allows them to begin to take control of their learning. The more experience learners have with diary writing, the better they become at it and the more reflective they become. As research tells us, expert learners are in charge of their learning and know how to change the process to suit their learning styles, language and background knowledge, and the task.

References

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