

**Introspection in Second Language  
Acquisition Research: Some Data  
from Learners' diaries**

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*This article approaches the process of second language acquisition from an introspective perspective by presenting a diary study. The diarists, teachers of English in the Basque Country, recorded significant aspects about their German and Basque learning experiences during the academic year 1991-92. The results of this diary study are presented and the important role that motivation and affective factors play in second language acquisition is discussed. Finally, the advantages of writing diaries as learning, training and research tools both for language learners and language teachers are highlighted.*

The process of second language acquisition can be approached from different perspectives and analyzed by using different methods (Larsen-Freeman and Long 1992). The main sources of information about this process come from linguistic production in the second language and from data provided by the learners about their individual characteristics and learning processes. This article intends to analyze some of the processes involved in second language acquisition by examining the information provided by learners who have reflected on their experience of learning a second language. The approach adopted here is ethnographic and is based on the use of diaries by the learners. This type of research is 'process' rather than 'product' oriented and is based on naturalistic uncontrolled observation and description without using psychometric experimental methods or control groups. Diaries and some other ethnographic methods such as interviews, open questionnaires and case studies are considered very useful tools in second language research and are very often used in classroom research (Chaudron 1988; Nunan 1989).

A diary study has been defined by Bailey as 'a first person account of a language learning or teaching experience documented through regular candid entries in a personal journal and then analyzed for recurring patterns or salient events' (Bailey 1990: 215). The first diary studies (Schumann 1980; Bailey 1980) in second language acquisition were used by professional linguists and educationalists who sought to investigate those cognitive and affective factors which

are felt to be important to language learning but which do not lend themselves readily to outside observation. These first diary studies present first person introspective accounts of the authors' language learning experiences and the analysis of the raw data for recurrent patterns. Schumann's diary study (1980) presented the following patterns:

- i. Competition and cooperation among the second language learners.
- ii. Language learning strategies such as eavesdropping and speaking
- iii. Reactions to pedagogical techniques.

Bailey's (1980) most recurrent pattern in her diary study on the acquisition of a second language is competitiveness and anxiety.

Nevertheless, diary studies pose some methodological problems regarding reliability and generalisability. The diaries are always retrospective, however soon after the lesson or language learning experience they are written. In some cases the diarists may not be able to record an exact account of the significant events and even if they seem to remember everything there may be some aspects of the unconscious which cannot be reported. Diary studies also share problems such as honesty which are common to studies using questionnaires with large samples. Writing a diary is itself a skill which some people are able to manipulate better than others in accurately transcribing experiences into words. Finally, diary studies are case studies and cannot be easily generalized because one language learner's experience will never be exactly duplicated in another's.

In spite of these shortcomings, diaries have been used increasingly in the recent years in a variety of ways, both for educational and research purposes (Porter et al. 1990). Regarding their pedagogical

value, diaries can be used both by teachers or learners in several ways:

- i. To document language learning experiences
- ii. As a part of the growing trend in Teacher Education for ‘reflection’ or self- evaluation by teachers documenting teaching or learning experiences.
- iii. As a part of ‘Action Research’ or ‘classroom research’; keeping a log of some classroom ‘innovation’.
- iv. In the form of ‘academic journals’ to ‘document students’ reactions to academic courses.
- v. On management courses and other training courses.

Apart from action research, diary studies are also an important tool in second language acquisition research at least for two reasons. First, because an introspective approach can take into account important aspects of learning processes that are generally overlooked when more ‘objective’ instruments are used with large samples. Furthermore, diaries can be analysed and then used as a basis to form hypotheses for other types of research studies.

## **1. Method**

### *1.1. Subjects and course description*

The subjects in this diary study were the authors of this article: diarists A and B.

Diarist A has English as her first language and works as a teacher trainer with Basque teachers of English. She acquired Spanish and Italian without formal instruction by living in Spain and Italy and also

studied French at school. The learning experience analyzed here is that of learning Basque in the Basque Country.

Diarist B's first language is Spanish and she teaches English and English Linguistics. She learned Basque and English combining formal instruction with interaction with native speakers of these languages. The language learning experience analyzed here is one of learning German in the Basque Country.

The data regarding the two diarists' courses are presented in the following table:

<b>DIARIST</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>B</b>
<b>LANGUAGE</b>	BASQUE	GERMAN
<b>YEAR</b>	SECOND	SECOND
<b>WEEKLY HOURS</b>	10 (average attended 6)	4
<b>TIME OF DAY</b>	3.30-5.30 p.m.	7-9 p.m.
<b>TEACHER</b>	2 native speakers	1 native speaker
<b>TEXTBOOK</b>	No	Yes (structural)
<b>NUMBER OF STUDENTS</b>	About 10	About 10
<b>HOMEWORK</b>	Yes	Yes
<b>METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH</b>	Grammar explanation followed by pair work drills. Listening from tape recorder	Grammar drills. Reading texts. Pair work drills. Listening from tape recorder

## 1.2. Process

The diarists wrote their diaries during the 1991-92 academic year. They tried to write everyday after class and they also took notes in class or during the breaks in order to remember the most important details. The diaries analyzed in this study are not completely guideless because the authors work on second language acquisition and teacher development and had also read about diary writing before starting the study.

The process used in this diary study was adapted from Bailey (1990) and involves the following five steps:

**1. Language learning history.** The diary writers explain their personal language learning history.

**2. Second language learning experience.** The diarist records his/her feelings as well as the events and details about the second language learning experience.

**3. Review of the confidential and candid diary.** The diarists prepare the public version of the diary and clarify the meaning of the entries.

**4. Diary study and identification of recurrent patterns.** The most significant patterns and events are identified after reading the entries several times.

**5. Interpretive analysis.** The elements that are considered relevant to the language learning experience are discussed as related to second language theories and research findings.

## 2. Diary analysis and recurrent patterns

The diaries were read several times and the entries were discussed by the diarists in order to pick out isolate patterns. The entries were then grouped into four categories: i) motivation and affective factors ii) classroom interaction iii) teaching method and iv) learning strategies and styles. Examples of diary entries from the two language learning experiences are presented under the headings corresponding to the four categories.

### 2.1. *Motivation and affective factors*

- I get so exhausted by the end of the day. I wish I had this class at 8.30 in the morning.
- I must find a way of practising more; the radio, tv, reading, talking to someone. Time. It's all a problem of time and motivation too.
- Back from holiday. I haven't had a class for 10 days and I don't really feel like going today. When I go abroad, Basque seems a bit of a daft language to be learning.
- The teacher talked about the possibility of doing intensive courses in Germany. That's what I need. Three or four weeks away from everything in Germany. Time to study German. Wonderful. I feel more motivated to learn. Now I need the words, the grammar, the listenings.
- As soon as I went into class (late as usual) I was told we had a test on Monday. I had mixed feelings. I don't think I'll do well on the test but it is an excuse to study.

- Even the best ones panic at times when it's their turn to answer. Minds go blank for a minute. A gabbles in Spanish. B goes red.
- Everyone speaks much better than me. I suppose I am at a disadvantage because although the other students say they don't speak Basque they have acquired so much over the years.

## *2.2. Interaction*

- There's such a difference between working adults and school kids. Kids think they have all the time in the world and do exercises in class as quickly as possible so that they have more time to look cool or chat, whereas we know that time is short and precious.
- The others establish their personalities in break when they hang out, smoke, talk and joke in Spanish. It's an effort to go and be with them because it's difficult to be 'me' in Spanish too.
- I hate writing a story with other students. Well that's what we used to do all the time last year. It is such a waste of time. We speak Spanish all the time.
- I like pair work. I like working with C. She's a good student and I can learn.

## *2.3. Teaching method*

- It would be easy to turn some of these exercises into information gaps instead of talking about the differences that both can see.
- Pavlov's dogs! We're doing the conditional but we repeat

without understanding. We remember only for the duration of the sentence, if that.

- I was glad when my teacher said ‘Prima’ (‘Good’). It is good to see that you can do something right from time to time.
- We seem to spend a lot of class time asking the meaning of different words and writing them down. I find it useless because we don’t see them often enough to learn them. Now I realize that it is very important to review.

#### *2.4. Learning strategies and styles*

- What happened to those Good Language Learner strategies? I use all the tricks, count the people in front of me and prepare my sentence in advance.
- Different people need different methods. D, for example, could learn through a system of communicative acts or situational dialogues because he picks up language that has meaning for him. E, on the other hand, likes the ‘form’ of everything.
- Please the RIGHT TO REMAIN SILENT! to do listening tasks without having to duplicate. I can understand quite a lot but I’m not ready to speak.
- I think that my English helps a lot when it comes to know how German works.

### **3. Discussion**

When the diary entries from these two language learning

experiences were analyzed and classified one of the most interesting outcomes seems to be the importance of motivational and affective factors. Motivational and affective factors are generally considered as crucial in second language acquisition theoretical models (Clément 1980; Gardner 1985; Krashen 1981; Spolsky 1989) and research studies (Baker 1992; Larsen-Freeman and Long 1992; Valencia and Cenoz 1992). Even though the diarists are very interested in learning and evaluating teaching techniques, methods and strategies, the number of entries on feelings and emotions outweigh all others. Furthermore, affective factors seem to overlap with all the other categories and the need to be good students and the worry about being left behind is felt in the two diaries. Anxiety, competitiveness, mood, motivation are mentioned time and again and the feeling that the authors expected to be doing better in their language classes is present in most of the diary entries. These affective factors have also been reported in other diary studies (Allwright and Bailey 1991; Bailey 1980; Nunan 1989):

- When it was my turn the question was *Voce e casando?* ('Are you married?'), so I said *nao*. L corrected me: *sou, sim*. I objected: *eu nao sou casando*. L said (in English), 'we are practising affirmative answers'. I objected again, I'm not married, and L said, 'These questions have nothing to do with real life' *My blood was boiling*, but I shut up. (Nunan 1989: 57)
- *I was panicked* in the class exercise when we had to fill in the blanks with either the past definite or the imperfect. *How frustrating* it is to be looking for adverbial clues in the sentence when I don't even know what the words and phrases mean. (Bailey 1980: 59)
- Today *I felt a little scared*. *I'm so rusty! I'm probably the second lowest in the class now*. I want to have the exercises

worked out perfectly before the next meeting. (Bailey 1980: 59)

A closer examination of the diarists' entries vis-à-vis motivation and affective factors reveal the following trends:

- i. Their attitudes towards the teacher(s) are quite good.
- ii. Their attitudes towards the language are also good and they find both Basque and German very interesting languages.
- iii. Their attitudes towards learning are positive; they enjoy learning the language and they really want to learn Basque and German.
- iv. Their anxiety is partly caused by the fact that they are not doing as well as they thought they would.
- v. Their motivational intensity (Gardner 1985) is low and they do not make the necessary effort to learn the language. The reasons for this seem to be the following: i) Lack of time. The diarists cannot devote too much time to study these languages, they don't have time for homework and they miss classes very often. ii) No communicative need to speak German or Basque is felt. In spite of the fact that Basque is being studied in the second language community Basque speakers are generally bilinguals and Spanish is very widely used in the Basque Country. The same is true for German, which is being learnt in a foreign language situation with no need to speak the language. iii) The diarists don't seem to have great expectations about their course outcomes. They also seem to miss communicative exercises and authentic materials and don't expect to learn the languages by doing structural exercises a few hours a week. They both seem to work harder when they have an exam or when they think about the

possibility of using the language. For example, the possibility of an intensive course in Germany means time, communicative need and expectations.

This diary study shows that the role of attitudinal, motivational and affective factors cannot be underestimated. Apart from the fact that they have been proved to influence second language acquisition (Gardner 1985) these factors can be positively modified in order to improve second language learning. More contact with the second language community, direct or through the media, could mean more communicative need and an increased desire and motivational intensity to learn the language. A language is not just a set of rules that has to be learned; a language cannot be separated from the community where it is used because it is the most important tool for communicative interaction.

Apart from the motivational and affective factors, being language learners and writing diaries were rewarding experiences for the diarists' own development as teachers. Reflecting on teaching and learning strategies and techniques from the learner's point of view was a very useful experience which could have implications in the diarists' future teaching, at least regarding the following areas:

1. The importance of motivation and affective factors has been experienced from the learner's point of view.
2. Good and bad teaching techniques have been observed and experienced.
3. The diarists have acquired important knowledge about their strong and weak language learning strategies.
4. The diarists have realized that there is often a mismatch between preferred learning style and own teaching style.

5. The diarists have worked from the individual learner's point of view sharing their class time with students they like and students they don't like. This perspective is quite different from the teacher's perception of the class as a whole.
6. Diaries have been useful to find out that language learning is quite idiosyncratic and different people have different cognitive styles although there are also quite a lot of common features shared by all learners.
7. Writing a diary has been a way of dealing with the frustration and anxiety that a language learning situation can sometimes produce; a way of 'letting off steam'.

Diary studies are important for second language research because they analyze feelings, reactions and emotions that are seldom analyzed in other types of research studies. The use of diaries as teaching and teaching training tools in language courses and teaching training programmes also presents several advantages. Writing a diary can help to consolidate learning and can also be useful as a fluency writing exercise when done in the target language. Diary writing is also an awareness raising experience that builds confidence and creates learner involvement. Diaries can also be used as tools to renegotiate syllabuses and can create interaction among the students or between the students and the teacher who can get feedback from his/her teaching strategies and practices.

Diaries can also help teacher students and teachers in pre-service or in-service courses because they help to clarify thoughts and to refine a personal philosophy of education and they also give a chance to link theory and practice. Diaries are a useful tool for on going self evaluation and an opportunity to link ways of teaching to ways of learning.

There are, of course, some problems associated with writing diaries, the most evident being that they are very much time consuming and also the fact that this type of writing only suits certain people, the reflective, introspective type. Nevertheless, the benefits of diary writing and diary studies as pedagogical and research tools for students, teachers and researchers are felt by the authors to make the attempt worthwhile.

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