

Professional Development Through Individual Diary Writing

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Question:

Are diaries useful as a research tool? To investigate this question, devise a framework for keeping a diary on the strategies you use for (choose one):

- a) Motivating your students or
- b) Explaining grammar or
- c) Correcting errors

Having kept a diary for at least a two-week period, report and discuss any difficulties you experienced and assess the value of this technique as a research tool. You may include extracts from your diary as an appendix if you wish, but the bulk of your assignment should consist of your report and evaluation of the process.

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1. Introduction

According to Pring (1999), research involves objective and systematic gathering of information. A diary as a research tool is purposeful in that it records personal or professional progress while providing insights and discoveries through self-reflection. Diaries, also called journals, logs (Day, 1993; McDonough and McDonough, 1997) or field notes (Diaz-Maggioli, 2004) are a personal account of events, usually written in a narrative manner. Diaries allow for teacher self-reflection and a better understanding of teaching can be gained through this critical reflection (Richards and Lockhart, 1996). Learning to assess one's teaching methods and outcomes is a valuable tool in professional development. Diaries allow reflection or introspection in a way that is unique to any other form of teaching and learning research (Hubbs and Brand, 2005; McDonough and McDonough, 1997; Richards and Lockhart, 1996).

To assess the significance of diary writing as a research tool, I kept a diary on pre-determined student motivational strategies. These new strategies included English names for students, a participation grade based on a point card system, and progress grade postings (see Section 5). These strategies were examined as the basis of my diary reflection and led to discoveries about myself.

This process of diary keeping for an individual action research project was valuable; however, limitations with diary keeping and issues with using a diary as a research tool became evident. Strong issues of objectivity and validity could be better resolved through combining diary writing with other research methods. "Self-directed professional development" needs reinforcement through a bond with others (Diaz-Maggioli, 2004, p.99).

2. Literature Review

With extensive literature available on diary-writing and diaries as a research tool, I linked the topics focusing on diary writing as a reflective tool, diary methods, diary writing difficulties, and the validity of research based on reflection. My diary focused on my pre-established student motivational strategies, particularly the use of English names, participation cards, and progress grade sheets (see Section 5). Thus, student motivation in the Korean context is also addressed.

2.1 Diary Writing as a Reflective Tool

Experience does not guarantee learning. Rather this experience must be explored,

tweaked, and questioned to transform to knowledge (Dyke, 2006). Experience lacks the reflection needed to reach personal insight. Some critics claim the concept of 'reflection' is loosely used and too often regarded as 'just thinking' (Knight, 2002). A diary becomes a learning tool when reread and scrutinized for patterns (Jeffrey and Hadley, 2002). Dyke (2006) further claims that learning is achieved when working with those patterns to re-evaluate the recorded experience. Whereas keeping a diary is a way of recording experiences, it is reflection on action that leads to deeper understanding and change (Dyke, 2006; Pring, 1999).

McDonough and McDonough (1997) point out the value of introspective research for teachers as an appropriate research method. Diaries are a means to better understanding teaching and learning behaviors and practices. According to Proffitt (1975), "experiences that would otherwise be intangible and therefore too elusive to grasp thus become accessible to us so that we can work with them" (cited in McDonough and McDonough, 1997, p.135). These authors argue that writing down subjective experiences makes them tangible.

2.2 Ways to Keep Diaries

Teachers can keep personal diaries of events in class to later reflect on them. Diaries can be multi-functional; documenting events for future reflection, or analyzing thoughts and decisions (Burton, 2005). Personal diaries are insightful and aid personal professional development. As already noted, diaries provide for reflection on the events recorded, however, Day (1993, p.88) argues that "reflection is a necessary but not sufficient condition for learning." Day (1993) also claims confrontation by self [or others] is needed to challenge and enhance professional development. In this sense diaries allow for reflection that can lead to a questioning of teaching methods and behaviors which ultimately are vital to positive change.

Diaries can be a component of collective research such as collaboration or action research. A diary shared by two or more colleagues allows collaboration through this shared medium (Gebhard and Nagamine, 2005). There is an appeal for collaborative critical analysis with capabilities beyond the individual. Gebhard and Nagamine (2005) elaborate, noting that it creates a relationship with teachers who have similar sensitivities and this relationship helps our development as teachers. Additionally, diaries in action research are crucial when accompanied by observations and peer dialogue. Action research is a practical research approach encompassing specific

inquiry in a cyclical process (Burns, 1999; Díaz-Maggioli, 2004; Richards and Farrell, 2005). Broadly, it enhances reflective practice and professional development.

2.3 Problems and Issues with Diary Writing

It is argued that ‘bias’ and ‘perspective’ are important in keeping research dependable and credible (McDonough and McDonough, 1997), hence diary reflection calls into question issues of subjectivity and objectivity. Bias can occur with research involving diary writing since in reflective self-inquiry and evaluation the inquirer is in conflict as both the object and subject of the study (Jopling, 2000). The overlap of the researcher and the subject could see personal feelings integrated into the research and not objectively suspended. Jopling (2000) claims feelings of ‘impartiality’ are in conflict with opposing feelings of ‘self-regard’ and self-denial. Writing impartially about what occurred can be difficult on account of having personal bias and not seeing reality with detachment. This addresses the question of what one remembers occurring in the classroom verses what is really happening. Richards and Farrell (2005) suggest using video recording or lesson transcripts to recognize differences between ‘subjective perceptions’ and ‘objective reality.’

Creating distance from the experience, according to Regan (2007), could promote better understanding and an objective analysis. ‘Temporal distance’ as a process, allows feelings and experiences to be more tangible to attain their full meaning (Regan, 2007). Jopling (2000) addresses ‘stepping back’ as a way to detach from research and allow more objectivity but argues this detachment is misleading in giving a sense of independence and the first person perspective is still problematic. “The appearance of disassociation is not reliable” (Jopling, 2000, p.64).

Assumptions and beliefs can be made objective by being publicly available for viewing and criticism (Pring, 1999). Conversely, Jopling (2000) contends that the findings can be largely inaccessible to anyone but the diarist. Pring (1999) agrees that relevance is an issue but points out that, though diary case studies are unique in context, sharing experiences can still relate to others in similar situations. Objectivity in self-reflection is still debatable and requires further investigation.

2.4 Validity of Research Based on Reflection

Arguably, ‘validity’ is an issue in research based on diary writing. In qualitative research, validity may be subjective but nonetheless deals with the accuracy and means

of assessment (Winter, 2000). The role of validity is paramount in studies, such as action research, which pertain to 'knowledge *use*' (my emphasis) in a specific context. Its 'transformative' nature allows for changes and constant retesting (Burns, 1999). Of the five validity criteria discussed by Anderson et al. (1994, cited in Burns, 1999, p.160-162), process and dialogic validity specifically involve diary writing and reflection.

'Process validity' involves questions of 'dependability' and 'competency' of the research (Anderson et al., 1994, cited in Burns, 1999, p.160-162). It focuses on bias and accountability issues, requiring different, objective, perspectives to examine findings. Burns (1999) suggests monitoring researcher bias to help combat this issue. However, if diary writing is a sole endeavor, the question then becomes 'who is the monitor source?'

'Dialogic validity' involves critical peer review to help assess the 'goodness' of the research (Anderson et al., 1994, cited in Burns, 1999, p.160-162). With the goal of publication, the value of the work requires dialogue with peers. As an individual action research tool, the diary ignores the need for outside sources; thus compromising its validity.

2.5 *Student Motivation in the Korean Context*

Korean university freshman attend a compulsory, weekly English Conversation class. Only worth a single credit, the class seems to do little to instill a motivation to learn. This makes teaching a challenge for those who see student motivation as important to language acquisition (Brown, 2000; Norris-Holt, 2001). As the conversation course is mandatory for graduation, the primary motivation is to pass, not to actually learn.

At Korean universities, the first year is generally time for social networking, especially within majors. With a new level placement test at my university, teachers must work against this social norm. There is seldom intrinsic motivation to learn English, so the teacher must rely on extrinsic and instrumental motivational methods. Simply defined, intrinsic motivation pertains to a desire from the individual while extrinsic motivation results from outside factors (Harmer, 2001). Instrumental motivation is an example of extrinsic motivation, as the purpose of language acquisition is to meet a school graduation requirement (Norris-Holt, 2001).

Extrinsic pressures, such as parental expectations, major social obligations, and prior

sentiments toward English and language learning, impact student motivation in our classes (Brown, 2001). These issues are part of each student's hierarchy of needs and thus each student is motivated differently (Brown, 2000). Though teachers have little control over extrinsic factors, they can create and maintain a comfortable learning environment, give students a sense of control over their learning, and build a positive relationship. These are only a few of the 'ten commandments' used for motivating learners (Dornyei and Csizer, 1998, cited in Brown, 2001, p. 81).

The pre-selected motivational strategies examined through my diary were based within a Korean context. My knowing the students' names could help motivate them to be less anonymous and receive recognition (Brown, 2001). A 1995 Canadian study on the communicative approach in South Korea discovered that students are accustomed to a classroom structure where participation is discouraged (Li, 2001); so I implemented a point card system to encourage participation. As Korean students largely feel uncomfortable about participating, teachers should reiterate its importance by making students constantly aware of their participation role (Lacina, 2001). Frequent reminders on progress help students set personal goals and can be intrinsically motivating (Brown, 2001; Harmer, 2001). Therefore, I posted grade sheets regularly to promote progress awareness and make students accountable for their efforts in class.

3. Background

As a backdrop to the diary, it should be noted that not only my experience as an EFL teacher, but also the environment within the South Korean tertiary system deserve some mention.

3.1 Teaching in a South Korean University

Our university gives foreign teachers responsibility for the compulsory freshman English Conversation classes. A fail grade means having to repeat the course; hence, the primary motivation is to pass. As the focus is on speaking and listening, student participation is vital in evaluating their progress. Each class is ninety minutes once a week. Teachers determine how they present course material, evaluate grades, and organize the classroom.

3.2 My Background to the Project

In the past I assigned participation grades to students by starting everyone at a C average and adjusting their grade according to their performance in class. Later I

implemented a student self-evaluation assessment in the form of a rubric in which students graded themselves on class preparation and other criterion. This self-evaluation was also adjusted depending on my perceptions of students' efforts. Personally, I have never felt comfortable or confident in my assessment of student participation, and subsequently modified the grade value each semester.

This semester, for the first time, our students were placed into classes by a level placement test rather than by major and I was concerned with effects on student participation. I tried new motivational techniques involving English names, participation point cards, and progress grade sheets in attempt to give students more ownership of the class as well as to make them more personally involved with and accountable for their grade.

4. Method

I created a diary framework and conducted a study on my student motivational strategies (see Section 5) and kept a diary on how students are motivated. In this study, groups of four students were in table clusters around the class. Students were allowed to place themselves in their own groups but were required to sit with a partner. After investigating alternative methods, I incorporated group action research to complement my diary. Diary writing appears significantly more impartial when a part of collaboration or action research (Burns, 1999); see Gebhard and Nagamine (2005). The diary writing was my main venue for reflection and evaluation but the group collective helped me analyse my diary and goals more comprehensively. Following the period of diary keeping and reflection, I researched on and evaluated the diary as a tool for assessing student motivation.

4.1 *Diary Framework*

I followed these general teaching journal guidelines (Richards and Lockhart, 1994, cited in Richards and Farrell, 2005, p.72):

1. Decide on audience
2. Decide on focus
3. Make entries on a regular basis
4. Review what was written regularly

Having chosen a class which allowed ample time for journaling afterward, I then chronicled changes throughout the semester. This level-one class, the lowest level, was

comprised of twenty-five freshmen. I recorded thoughts as a 'stream-of-consciousness' (Richards and Farrell, 2005) on the effectiveness of my three motivational techniques (see Section 6), as well as general observations regarding their results. I intended spending ten to twenty minutes after class writing the diary. Since the class met weekly, I reviewed my writing and goals before each class to evaluate changes in student motivation in regard to my previously mentioned modifications.

4.2 Data Collected

I wrote twelve diary entries averaging three pages in length. These records contained five distinct categories: introspection, improvements, frustrations, names, and humor. Seven of these entries were introspective about the lesson plan, changes in teaching style, and mood during class. Three times I noted how humor aided in keeping class momentum. Five entries included comments about student apathy and lack of participation. Twice I noted the lack of need for participation cards as students were sufficiently motivated without them. Three entries noted the improved participation of quieter students after the midterm. I made six entries regarding English names and how they helped me interact with and discipline students.

5. Techniques and Results

I made pre-diary changes in my motivational strategies this semester; allowing students to choose new English names, a point card system for participation, and posting periodic grade sheets. The results of changes I made to my student motivational strategies were mixed. I will consider the three afore mentioned techniques, additional teaching style changes, and other benefits that occurred. This process was then utilized to evaluate the usefulness of diary writing as a research tool.

5.1 English Names

Previously, students made a photo ID card which helped me remember fifty percent of students' names by class eight in the semester. This semester I had all students choose English names in hopes of knowing them all before class five. In my diary I noted that using English names eliminated the need for photos and enabled me to call on students more for participation while also addressing good and bad behaviors quickly. I wrote about remembering some students' names after the first class and that by the fourth class I knew almost all their names.

This was useful in personal interaction and they showed no difficulty in addressing each

other using their English names. They constantly had to spell their names and ask for spelling; thus creating a repeated learning task. In class three, through diary reflection, I noted a significant increase in student motivation owing to the use of their English names. As I was learning the names, they would correct me, demonstrating ownership of their names. I used their English names frequently in the beginning during homework review and by class three students were volunteering themselves. In the diary I wrote of my fear of student resistance, but aside from students trying to choose socially inappropriate names, the process and results were successful.

5.2 Participation Cards

A new participation grading system accounted for twenty-five percent of their grade by means of accumulated points. Students received a card for responding during homework checks or answering general questions and lost a card for using simple Korean instead of English or bad behavior. As the class progressed through the semester, points were given for different behavior (see Appendix A). The cards allowed classmates to see how others were doing and also made participating game-like.

Through the diary I was able to record which groups or individuals were continually receiving the majority of the participation cards. Wanting to be fair with distributing the cards, I changed my style by walking around to encourage involvement from quieter students. I called on individual students hoping personal support would influence them to respond. Some volunteered more while others remained silent. A few students complained they volunteered but were not chosen enough. As a result, the question of fairness with teacher selection became an issue that requires further study on establishing fairness in card distribution.

I noted problems: *“What about student apathy and lack of participation? I’m afraid they don’t realize the big picture of the cards.”* Some students were too shy to speak in the class while others showed no interest in the course. I targeted these students and gave opportunities and encouragement. Despite this, these few students remained recalcitrant. After class six I wrote, *“I’ve tried to select students by table or name but they just don’t try. I don’t know what else to do. They only hurt themselves-but do they realize that?”*

5.3 Progress Grade Sheets

The sheets included student ID numbers but not their names. After each quiz I posted

their accumulative grades including their participation card points. Students were responsible for verifying their marks. Also, students could see what the highest participation card score was and self-assess. I would highlight top students to give recognition for their work.

In diary entries on progress grades sheets, I noticed students were confused about the significance of the grade posted. After posting the grade sheets at different times, I tried to emphasize the importance of the participation cards being equivalent to twenty-five percent of their entire grade. One entry noted that directly after posting the grades we had our oral homework review. In reference to students who caught on to the value of the cards, I wrote, *“it sounded like an auction with three or four tables of students shouting to be chosen. It was almost too rowdy...”*

Without being able to explain in Korean, it was difficult to ascertain if students fully understood the significance of the cards. I thought posting grades would be influential but few students tried to become more involved. It was difficult to visibly assess any correlation between posting grades and class involvement. Further studies could be conducted to examine the significance of progress grade posting.

5.4 Teaching Style Changes

The diary aided memory recall of earlier classes and recorded alternative actions taken regarding motivation strategies. I usually change the order of the lesson in the book to increase class involvement. This is especially helpful when the class energy seems low. The text used has a listening section before pair work tasks. On week five I wrote:

The speaking activities are really at students' own pace and also quite energizing. Today I tried putting it before the book listening to wake up the students. I was impressed by their enthusiasm for the task as in my previous semesters the lazy students worked through the English activity quickly in Korean so they could chat. Now, however, they know this would result in losing participation cards.

New teaching approaches and their effectiveness were noted in the diary. In previous semesters, I would review quizzes after handing them back and students rarely looked at them. This semester, we immediately talked over the answers after quizzes and students were keen to know how they did so participation was high. The following class, quiz corrections could be checked for a participation card. Both these additions

were beneficial.

I wrote about the difficulty with changing my students' learning styles in regard to lecture versus pair work and group collaboration. Several entries were about giving grammar questions to students to work through rather than presenting them directly. The diary helped me gain confidence to try more student-centered methods.

Many students actively participated during homework review. My diary writing on grammar-focused feedback helped me notice limited content feedback. By only rewarding correct answers, students were quickly discouraged from participating if they were unsure of their responses. After diary reflection, I started giving content feedback with a card and repeating the question or statement for another student to rephrase. Other students also spoke up to help each other, consequently giving peer feedback.

5.5 Other Benefits

Reflecting on my diary, trends regarding student involvement levels and class attitude became apparent.

5.5.1 Student Motivation Increased After Midterms

The midterm was a pair speaking exam. Three diary entries were made about previously non-responsive students speaking up noticeably more after the midterm. Students may have lowered their affective filters after this exam. I noted that student motivational strategies aided the overall energy and became useful in maintaining strong involvement. However, toward the end of semester the majority of students responded without card incentive; thus making them obsolete.

5.5.2 Mood and Humor in the Classroom

My mood affected the overall tone of the class, and through diary writing I realized the atmosphere of the class was established the moment I entered. Having a difficult class beforehand put me in an unpleasant mood and often carried over into this class. My mood was changeable, however, and this was visibly reflected by student behavior and participation.

Subsequently, I realized the use of humor as a motivational tool. My diary had entries about laughable blunders, jokes, and teasing that had occurred. Humor helps decrease anxieties and contributed to class learning (Chiasson, 2002). The smiles and jovial

exchanges were contagious within the learning environment. Simple occurrences of humor were understood by most students and kept them engaged. This increased the class energy and helped me recognize the benefits of humor.

6. Problems with Using Diaries as a Research Tool

Authenticity and validity became issues in my diary. I had difficulty as an observer acting in an individual reflective capacity. Both problems give reservation to diaries as a research tool. Also time commitment became a significant study limitation with diary writing.

6.1 Authenticity and Validity Dilemma

Being both the writer and the subject of the writing inherently made the experience subjective, creating a validity issue relative to diary-writing as a research tool (Jopling, 2000). By taking time between class and diary writing I was more able to objectify the moment. Unfortunately the time gap made entries less authentic. Making notes during class helped record specifics more accurately (McDonough and McDonough, 1997). However, there were gaps in my thought processes and emotions. Memory recall and, subsequently, authenticity can be obstacles for understanding journal entries (Regan, 2007). I audio-recorded a couple of my classes to listen to later and diary about, but the recordings were only partially helpful.

Research could be valid and objective by being subject to public scrutiny (Pring, 1999). Publishing diaries and sharing reflective diary research has recently become more accepted; moreover, collaborative diary research strengthens the validity issue when made public for interpretation and discussion (McDonough and McDonough, 1997). Allchin (1998, cited in Diaz-Maggioli, 2004, p.103) also advocates the public spectrum claiming "...scholarship is worthless if not shared." Still, some sources say journals produced by teachers for reflection and learning may not be valued professionally (Brown, 2005; Burton, 2005).

6.2 Self-Observation Limitation

Self-observation, or self-monitoring, can record what activities went on in the class, feelings of the teacher, student interaction, and class management (McDonough and McDonough, 1997; Richards and Farrell, 2005). However, as self-reflection is limited to the class studied, I can only generalize about my other classes, as each has its own unique dynamic. Indeed, Bolster (1983, cited in McDonough and McDonough, 1997,

p.23) contends a successful teacher must realize the uniqueness of every class while simultaneously noting similarities. Specific successes in one class do not carry into another. A separate diary for each class would lead to separately distinctive discoveries as each class is composed and taught differently. Time constraints would argue against this need. Perhaps a teacher with fewer commitments would have more time to dedicate to diary writing.

I had problems properly appraising progress. With the role of the teacher as researcher, as discussed by McDonough and McDonough (1997, p. 35), there are “difficulties of evaluating its ultimate effectiveness as an agent for either personal or instructional change.” The diary insight felt limited by my mental capabilities. While able to assess myself and discoveries, I am incapable of determining successful teaching behavior and method changes unless sharing the diary’s content. Having doubts about objectivity and validity within diary reflection I sought more impartiality by forming an action research team with two colleagues. The group kept diaries, held regular meetings, and peer observations. The process of action research led to deeper self-reflection and the peer support led to more discoveries. Moreover, collaborative action research includes a variety of data collection tools and methods making subsequent results more valid and reliable (Burns, 1999).

6.3 Diary Time Commitment

Diary keeping takes self-discipline and commitment. Work priorities, professional responsibilities, and unavoidable incidents habitually interfered with my diary writing after class. Thus, late diary entries were often less accurate than ones done at my set writing time. After class four, class three was written about through memory recall. The study would possibly have been more effective with less interruptions and better self-discipline.

7. Conclusion

Though I felt hindered by the responsibilities at university, I believe the diary was successful in understanding my student motivational strategies and led to many personal insights. Reflection is regarded as an interpersonal process that can promote changes in behavior and practice (Flowerdew, 1998). Through reflective diary writing I discovered links between my teaching beliefs and actions in class; resulting in modifications to my motivational strategies and behaviors. The diary as a form of record and reflection allowed for discoveries into my teaching styles and enabled review

of the changes I made to my motivational techniques.

The value of the diary as a research tool was difficult to assess due to self-monitoring and validity issues. By incorporating action research into my diary, a deeper sense of understanding occurred through reflection. It is argued that without peers to discuss findings with, minimal change may occur within the teachers' behaviors and actions in the classroom (McDonough and McDonough, 1997). As a solitary endeavor, diary writing is inherently subjective yet can be beneficial to the diarist. However, in my experience, it is necessary to involve an outside observer in the research process in order to objectively evaluate classroom changes.

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9. Appendix A: Participation Card Checklist

Positive Participation Points (Can receive a card for...)	Negative Participation Points (Can lose a card for...)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Answering a general class question ● Participating well with one's group (individual) ● Participating well with one's group (whole group) ● Helping a peer ● Completing an activity (individual) ● Completing an activity (class) ● Winning a game ● Helping the teacher without being asked ● Volunteering ● Recall from previous class ● Recall from during class ● Late homework completion ● Post-test correction ● Speaking loudly / clearly ● Random / Surprise ● Upgrading an activity ● Initiating English conversation with group / teacher ● High score on an activity ● Speaking when called upon 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● No book ● No pencil ● No homework book ● Speaking "easy" Korean (ex. numbers, page numbers) ● Not using English phrases learned in class (ex. bathroom, time) ● Text messaging / having cell phone on ● Groaning / complaining ● Taking too long of a break ● Swearing ● Sleeping / Dozing ● Repeatedly interrupting class (ex. speaking while teacher is speaking)