

## The Role of Writing Diary in a Classroom

Atena Haghnavaz Bazir  
Islamic Azad University, Ayatollah Amoli Branch  
[atena.haghnavaz@gmail.com](mailto:atena.haghnavaz@gmail.com)

### Abstract.

As a reaction towards the traditional methods of writing, the idea of ‘diary’ came into existence. Multiple definitions for a diary have been revealed by a widespread review of the literature (Brogoff, 1975; Bailey’s, 1990; Richards, 1992; Porter et al. 1996; Hiemstra, 2001; Johnson, 2002; Curtis & Bailey, 2009; Barjesteh et al. 2011; Zittoun & Gillespie, 2011). For instance, most authors see that a diary is usually handwritten, arranged by date for the expression of personal feelings, thoughts and experiences on a daily basis and it is not intended for publication (Johnson, 2002; Curtis & Bailey, 2009). Others look at diaries as a kind of free-writing activity where writers write without fear of being evaluated (Barjesteh et al., 2011). Still, others see it as an introspective research tool for the initiation of writing and communicating meaning (Porter et al, 1996; cited in Taqil, H. N. et al, 2015). Diaries help students to become members of the discourse community by giving them opportunities to write within it and to get responses from their teachers. These exchanges give students both a real audience within the community and a developing sense of being a member of the community (Porter et al, 1996). This paper provides an in-depth overview of diary writing and it has a close look at diary, its establishments and definition. Also different types of diary will be presented then, the researcher will outline the merits and objectives of diary and the use of diary as an introspective/retrospective tool. Finally, the functional role of diary writing to improve students’ writing ability will be reviewed according to some related empirical researches on the effect of diary writing on students’ writing.

**Keywords:** EFL, Writing, diary writing, journal, Accuracy, Fluency

### 1. Introduction.

Writing is a procedure that requires not only ideas and thinking but vocabulary, grammar and punctuation to express those ideas. Harmer (2004) believes that good writing is a complex process compared to speech. To master writing, a writer needs to master all the features related to it including a rich vocabulary, knowledge of grammar and the mechanics of writing. (Bitchener, 2008).

Although, teacher-written feedback has been seen by both teachers and students as crucial in the writing process (Goldstein, 2004; Ferris, 2002), some authors believe that it has a detrimental effect on students’ writing (Truscott, 2007; Truscott & Hsu, 2008). For example, Truscott (2004) argues that corrective feedback may have a negative effect on students’ writing fluency which might affect their overall writing. Hence, teachers need to provide indirect feedback (Ferris, 2004). Straub (1997) notes that students prefer feedback on their overall writing such as topic, organization coherence and cohesion as well as on vocabulary, spelling, grammar and punctuation.

As a reaction towards the traditional ways of writing, the idea of ‘diary’ came into existence. The word ‘diary’ came from the Latin word ‘diarium’ where ‘di-’ means ‘day’ in modern English and the suffix ‘arium’ and its modern equivalent the suffix ‘ary’ stands for ‘in connection with or pertaining to’. Thus, a diary is a daily log that records the events that happen during the day. It is updated on a daily basis, private and written for an audience of one.

A diary is a frequently kept, often daily, record of personal experiences and observations in which ongoing thoughts, feelings, and ideas can be expressed. Increasingly diaries are being used to investigate social, psychological, and physiological processes within everyday situations in many academic, vocational, and educational settings (e.g., Kacwicz, Slatcher, & Pennebaker, 2007; Pennebaker, 2004; Burton & King, 2004; Daniels & Harris, 2005; Poppleton, Briner, & Kiefer, 2008). Diaries are thought to capture “the little experiences of everyday life that fill most of our working time and occupy the vast majority of our conscious attention.” (Wheeler & Reis, 1991:340). One key benefit of diary methodology is that it permits the examination of reported events and experiences in their natural, spontaneous context, providing information complementary to that obtainable by traditional research designs (Reis, 1994). Also, diaries reduce the likelihood of retrospection as the minimum amount of time elapses between an experience and recall.

Diary, also called a journal, is a notebook where people can write anything they want such as their feelings, thoughts, ideas, or experiences. Each person may have a different reason for writing a diary. Someone is worried about forgetting most of the things they have done. Someone is afraid to talk to other people. There can be a lot of reasons. For example, some people are ashamed of their secrets or they just do not want to reveal them. All these reasons may lead to diary writing.

Some scholars such as Klimova(2015) believes that diaries can be written on a daily basis, but at least once a week And also in teaching and learning of languages it has crucial role. As Rubin (2003) points out, 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 them. And in this process teachers can help their students provided that students allow them to see their diaries, comment on them and make relevant suggestions. In their classes teachers can then employ the technique of scaffolding, a kind of support which would help students in their learning and overcoming their learning difficulties.

A diary is a first person account of a language learning or teaching experience documented through regular, candid entries in a personal journal.” (Bailey, 1990, p. 215) It is a hybrid genre positioned between ‘life narrative’ and ‘university essay’. (Crème. 2008)

In the academic context, a diary is an academic instrument that is used to record introspective reflection in first person about someone’s learning or teaching (Bailey, 1990). The teacher or student reports issues such as affective factors, perceptions, and language learning strategies (Bailey & Ochsner, 1983). Diaries are useful to obtain classroom issues and constitute a valuable tool in order to discover teaching or learning realities that are not possible to be discovered through direct research observation(Nunan, 1992; Bailey, 1990; Numrich, 1996). Goodson and Sikes (2001) state the importance of a diary: Not only is a document of this kind useful for providing factual information, it can also help with analysis and interpretation, in that it can jog memory and indicate patterns and trends which might have been lost if confined to the mind. (p. 32)

A diary is typically a notebook, booklet of blank pages, or any other source for students to record thoughts, reactions to learning experiences, and even innermost fears about a learning activity. Some learners prefer to create electronic or audio diaries. Regardless of the format, entries of daily experiences, insights, and problems often are made. Proffoff (1975) writes, “Diary writing usually involves the unstructured, chronological recording of the events of a person’s life” as they are perceived. “We have to recognize, however, that the mere fact of continuously writing entries, as is done in the keeping of a diary, is not sufficient in itself to bring about deep changes in a person’s life” (p. 87 )Another feature of a diary is being able to look back on specific days or time periods in an attempt to sort out personal feelings. Combining such features with instructor feedback, the development of something like a statement of personal philosophy can begin to take shape. In subsequent writing and reflection, the learner can begin to recognize desired or even unanticipated personal changes as they begin to surface. I recommend that learners read Christensen’s (1981) work describing how a personal diary can be used as a supplement to classroom activities.

An extensive review of the literature has revealed multiple definitions for a diary (Brogoff, 1975; Bailey’s, 1990; Richards, 1992; Porter et al. 1996; Hiemstra, 2001; Johnson, 2002; Curtis & Bailey, 2009; Barjesteh et al. 2011; Zittoun & Gillespie, 2011). For instance, most authors see that a diary is usually handwritten, arranged by date for the expression of personal feelings, thoughts and experiences on daily basis and it is not intended for publication (Johnson, 2002; Curtis & Bailey, 2009). Others look at diaries as a kind of free-writing activity where writers write without fear of being evaluated (Barjesteh et al., 2011). Still, others see it as an introspective research tool for the initiation of writing and communicating meaning (Porter et al. 1996). Bailey (1990), for example, defines a diary study as a first person account of a language learning or teaching experience written regularly and is analyzed later for recurring themes. Similarly, Hiemstra (2001) writes about learning diaries where learners record their thoughts, feelings and reactions to specific course activities.

Diaries usually focus on meaning rather than form where learners send a message about a topic of interest to them. Similarly, teachers do not correct linguistic errors but respond to the message in a meaningful way. Hence, learners have the freedom of writing without worrying about form (Bagheri & Pourgharib, 2013). Fluency, according to Brown (1994 in Patterson, 2014) is “saying or writing a steady flow of language for a short period of time without any self or other correction at all.” Mac-Gown-Gilhooly (1991) reports that when fluency was stressed over accuracy in classrooms, learners showed more signs of self-confidence and teachers noticed students writing apprehension decreased, specifically for slow learners. Students also felt better as they developed more fluency in writing and were able to generate more ideas compared to when they were corrected on form (McDonough & McDonough, 1997; Rubin, 2003). In spite of that, learners’ responses in diaries differ where some report stories while others list a number of activities.

As to research, diaries are excellent tools for language research as Nunan (1992) says that diaries can be “important introspective tools in language research” (p.118). They help researchers elicit valuable knowledge about learners “they give us access to participants voices (Bailey & Nunan, 1996:199). Learners can also get their problems solved by talking about them and teachers gain valuable insights to the language learning processes. (Peterson, 2012).

It follows that writing is an important skill especially for college students who are going through an important time in their lives where they experience change in their personality and educational career. Thus, it is crucial to find out how classroom practices affect students during their college life. One of the classroom practices that is thought to have an effect on students’ progress is ‘praise’, defined as “favourable interpersonal

feedback” (Baumeister et al. 1990) or “positive evaluations made by a person of another’s products, performances or attributes”.

. Diaries are seen as good examples of writing where students write without fear of being corrected on grammar and spelling and where their attempts are praised. Writing regularly results in fluency and improvement of writing skill. Nevertheless, Haimovitz & Corpus, (2011) report that a search through the literature has shown most of the studies done on the topic of ‘praise’ were related to children and only a few discussed the topic in relation with adults.

**2. Brief history on the use of diaries as a research tool.**

In noting that descriptive and interpretive research are particularly suited for 'investigating behaviour in context'(1992:118), Nunan asserts that “diaries, logs and journals are important introspective tools in language research,” (1992:118). McDonough and McDonough, (1997:121) concur, commenting on diary suitability: "Indeed the theme of change over time and the sense of writing about a process is one that resonates directly with the use of diaries in educational research." In spite of the advantages of diary study in researching classroom and teacher processes over time, McDonough and McDonough (p.131) note that there are relatively few studies of teachers researching their work in diary form compared with other studies of SLA. However, this trend may be changing with the advent of the online Internet diary, otherwise known as a ‘blog’.

Table 1 below lists a variety of applications of the diary in research with illustrative examples.

Table 1. Applications of diary in research.

		Author	Area Of Research
pedagogic	Learners in classrooms	Peck, S. (1996)	growth of cultural sensitivity in FL learners
		Block, D. (1996)	(oral diaries):the problem of uptake and gaps in teacher and learner perceptions of learning
	trainees	Thornbury, S. (1991)	use of teaching practice logs for trainee self-assessment and awareness
		Richards, K. (1992)	reflection on FLL as a consciousness-raising tool
expert	language learning	Bailey, K. (1983)	the role of affective issues ('anxiety' and 'competition') in LL
		Campbell, C. (1996)	prior LL experience in FLL(re-use of prior learning styles and strategies)
	experienced teachers	Ashton-Warner, S. (1963)	importance of learner-centred methods in vocabulary acquisition
		Towndrow, P. (2004)	Laptop journal exploring on-line tutoring difficulties
	teacher trainers	Bailey, K. (1996)	class-group diary and the dialogic process

**3. 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 Proff (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.

#### **4. Ways to Keep Diaries.**

Personal diaries about the events of the classroom can be kept by teachers to reflect on them. Diaries have been used as multi-functional; recording events for later reflection, or evaluating thoughts and decisions (Burton, 2005). Personal diaries are perceptive and improve personal professional development. As already noted, diaries provide 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; Dfaz-Maggioli, 2004; Richards and Farrell, 2005). Broadly, it enhances reflective practice and professional development.

#### **5. 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 versus 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.

#### **6. 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.

### 7. Conclusion.

Accordingly, diaries can be considered as a useful tool in the classroom to achieve a number of purposes. A wide-ranging list of these purposes has been given by Absalom & Leger (2011), for instance, to reflect a learner's experience in learning or as a method for pre-service teachers to reflect on their practices. On this regard a learner can use the diary to develop critical skills or analytic strategies. Learners also can use the diary as a means to improve their communication skills and develop their creativity. Diaries can be used to support planning for research and finally, diaries can be used by the teacher to find out whether students understood the concepts in the lesson.

Although, diaries get more importance in the literature not only for their different uses but mainly for the benefits and gains they may fulfill. A large part of the literature was devoted to a description of this issue. While Barjesteh et al. (2011) talks about a diary being beneficial as it makes students write more, Elbow (1998) stressed the fact that diaries should not be edited which results in increasing students' fluency. They can also use the diaries for reflection to go back and evaluate their own performance. This promotes autonomous learning where students take the responsibility of their own learning, monitor their progress and the strategies they use which will eventually result in developing their cognitive skills (Richard & Lockhart, 1996; Lagan, 2000; Marefat, 2002; Hamp & Heasley, 2006; Kirkgoz, 2009).

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