Diary Studies: Their Potential to Explore Learner Perspectives on Second Language Learning

Takako Tanaka

Introduction

There has been an increasing amount of qualitative research conducted in the field of second language education (SLE). In parallel, there are various definitions of qualitative research proposed (e.g., Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Merriam, 1998). A shared understanding of the term can be, as Denzin and Lincoln (2003) state, that “qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (p. 5). Put simply, this type of research assumes that all knowledge is relative, that there is a subjective element to the world, and that holistic, ungeneralizable studies can be justified.

This paper will discuss potential strengths and limitations of one type of qualitative research inquiry, diary studies, in order to get insights into learners’ own perspectives. After explaining what a ‘diary study’ entails, I will consider its benefits and limitations, with reference to relevant scholarship. I will be drawing on diaries that have been commissioned by researchers. And I will argue for a multi-method approach to studying texts such as diaries, and then conclude with recommendations for further work in the field.
2. What is a “diary study”?

A diary\(^1\) is “personal, with oneself as an addressee, long-term, and may also be relatively unbounded in the kinds of facts it records, at least within the broad area with which it is concerned” (McDonough & McDonough, 1997, p. 122). The study of diaries in second language research dates back to the 1970s. Since then, this type of research inquiry has been popular among researchers in this field, seeking in-depth information about individual differences, learner strategies, and the personal learning experience of language learners. (cf. Bailey, 1991, for review)

Bailey (1991) draws a clear distinction between ordinary diaries used by second language learners and those involved in “diary studies.” She argues that a learner’s diary alone does not allow for a “diary study” as the diary itself typically provides nothing more than raw data. In order to be considered data proper for a diary study, the data must itself include an analysis. In other words, the diary must be a personal, self-reflective text made available for reflection and analysis. Also, any given diary study is made public, contributes to a growing body of “different insights into the largely unobservable processes of second language learning and teaching” (Bailey & Ochsner, 1983, p. 191). Therefore, a diary study can be defined 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, 1991, p. 215).

In the field of SLE research, diaries fall into two categories: self-study diaries, in which the researcher is also the diarist, and commissioned diaries, where the researcher analyzes diaries written by other language learners\(^2\)
(Kasper & Rose, 2002, in press). They are mostly used in the following three ways. First, diaries are used to understand second/foreign language learning from the learner’s/trainee’s point of view (e.g., Peck, 1996; Tsui, 1996; Parkinson & Howell-Richardson, 1990). Second, they serve researchers interested in various language learning-related issues, such as the perceptions of language learners and the social aspects of language learning (e.g., Maguire & Graves, 2001). Also, diaries are beneficial tools for the diarists themselves, as they reflect on their own learning processes (e.g., Bailey, 1983; Campbell, 1996; Lowe, 1987; Schmidt & Frota, 1986). These studies have shed light on the understanding of a wider range of affective and environmental factors which other studies on language learning have not highlighted before. Diary studies give us a unique body of information about the language learners and particularly about their perspectives on affective and instructional factors which influence the process of their second/foreign language learning.

3. Benefits of diary studies

As briefly described above, diary studies provide beneficial information for language teachers, language learners and researchers in the field. Here I will focus on some benefits of commissioned diary studies, which are particularly significant for teachers and researchers if they are to realize how diary studies can be helpful for understanding learners and their learning process.

The most important advantage which diary studies can provide may be that “diary entries can provide insights into processes of learning which would be difficult, if not impossible, to obtain in any other way” (Nunan,
In other words, diary studies “allow us to see the classroom experience as a dynamic and complex process through the eyes of a language learner” (Bailey, 1983, p. 98). In addition, diary studies enable us to see the diversity among learners even within a homogeneous class (Bailey, 1983). Indeed, more comprehensive data can be obtained concerning psychological, social, and cultural factors in language learning through the eyes of the learners. As Allwright and Bailey (1991) rightly state, diary studies provide us with data that neither observations nor questionnaires produce. Also, diary studies allow potential kinds of data to emerge that may not have been part of the researcher’s initial plan. In addition, if the diary studies are conducted for a lengthy period, the data derived from sequential diary entries will be of great use in understanding the developmental changes that take place for learners. Moreover, researchers and learners may document various factors which either benefit or impair to the learner’s experience of language learning. Furthermore, diary studies are better suited for research that is hard to capture quantitatively and that is constantly evolving, or which is complex in its social structure, such as motivation, a learner’s goals and identity (e.g., Lantolf & Genung, 2002).

In sum, diary studies can provide researchers with new insights into second/foreign learning, as well as raise questions about the processes and variables involved. At the same time, the act of keeping a diary itself may raise learners’ awareness of their own learning. Furthermore, combined with discussion of the journal entries with other diarists, as shown in Peirce’s (1994) study, this offers a great opportunity for the diarists involved to reflect on and look at the issue from different perspectives. The studies reviewed in O’Malley and Chamber (1990) show there is considerable potential to investigate the learning strategies and learning preferences of
second language students.

4. Possible limitations

Although diary studies can contribute much to the field of SLE as described, there are several potential limitations. Here I will focus on some controversial issues surrounding diary studies.

A first possible limitation is the nature of diary data, and how that data is interpreted (Nunan, 1992). Put simply, the question is: “[T]o what extent do the diary entries realistically reflect what was really going on at the time the recordings were made?” (Nunan, 1992, p. 123). Indeed, we can never know if the diarist hides, revises or even makes up information either intentionally or subconsciously. That is, we can never know what parts of the diarists’ mental processing are actually open to investigation (Bailey, 1991). In this regard, Bailey claims that

those language learning processes which learners actually choose to write about are potentially a smaller group than are all the conscious processes which learners might write about, and this subset of conscious processes is presumably smaller than the entire range of language learning processes is presumably smaller than the entire range of language learning processes, both conscious and unconscious, which influence SLA. (p. 80)

Related to the previous limitations, subjectivity is another potential weakness of diary studies. Data derived from diaries lack objectivity and are subjective because that data is based entirely on the diarists’ perception
of their experiences (Bailey, 1983). In this regard, diary studies are subject to all the limitations associated with other forms of self-reporting since the data obtained from the diary entries are produced by the diarist, recording and reflecting upon his or her own experience. Despite this, the information gathered can be rich. For each learner has his or her own personal history, replete with values, beliefs, rights and obligations, and that history actively transforms his/her world by choice and does not merely conform to some standard or other (Donato, 2002). Therefore, I believe this subjectivity is unavoidable because:

[a] diary study is not descriptive in the sense of providing a dispassionate, intersubjectively verifiable account of second language learning or teaching; its whole point is to capture the subjective perspective of one or more participants on their language learning experience (Kasper & Rose, in press).

Another weakness that could be attributed to diary studies is that they fall short of most of the requirements of external validity³ (Bailey, 1991), which is sometimes called generalizability. The importance of external validity is widely recognised in the research field, and it means “the extent to which the findings of a study can be generalised, or applied, to other (external) situations” (Allwright & Bailey, 1991, p. 49). Diary studies do not lend themselves to quantifiable measures. Therefore, the issue of generalizability also becomes an unavoidable concern as diary studies usually involve a limited number of participants and do not provide quantifiable data. Yet, I argue that generalizability is not a relevant concept to apply to the study of diaries because it is based on a quantitative paradigm. Some have
5. A proposal for a multi-method approach

Although the aforementioned criticisms may have some legitimacy, they may not devalue the benefits of diary studies. However, these limitations need to be contextualized in order to fully understand their relevance to diary studies. In fact, most of the criticisms derive from quantitative paradigms, which are controlled, objective, generalizable, outcome-oriented, and assume the existence of ‘facts’ which are somehow external to, and independent of, the observers or researchers (Nunan, 1992). However, there is no “absolute truth,” and all data are interpreted by researchers who are themselves also subjective. Therefore, as Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991) claim, quantitative and qualitative perspectives should be viewed as complementary rather than competing concepts. In a similar vein, Denzin and Lincoln (2003) suggest that, “the combination of multiple methodological practices, empirical methods, perspectives, and observers in a single study is best understood, then, as a strategy that adds rigor, breadth, complexity, richness, and depth to any inquiry” (p. 5).

With regard to the sole reliance on diary data, Kasper and Rose (in press) comment that “[t]his is all the more regrettable as studies combining dairy data with other quantitative measures can potentially shed light on the relationship between subjective learner experiences and performance (or
other objective) indicators of second language development.” Although early diary studies depended exclusively upon the diary itself as data (e.g., Bailey, 1983), some recent studies have tried to incorporate multiple perspectives, combining qualitative and quantitative methods (Campbell, 1996; Peck, 1996).

In the field of diary studies, none of the multi-method diary studies explicitly addresses the problem of data triangulation (Kasper & Rose, in press). Among them, Block (1996), whose study is explored below, is one of the few researchers who employ a multiple-method approach by appealing to the notion of triangulation, incorporating perspectives from teachers, learners and researchers.

In this study, Block compares a teacher’s proposal for a lesson and the learners’ perceptions of the same. The study was conducted at a specialist language school in Barcelona, Spain. The participants in the study were six students and their teacher, Ann. All the participants were asked to keep an oral diary reporting their reaction to five questions addressing how each participant perceived classroom events. The oral diaries constituted only one part of the study. In addition, Block himself took part in the project as an observer of the classes, in order to triangulate the data. It was found that there was the gap between Ann and Alex, one of the learner participants, in terms of time utilization, practice tests, vocabulary and grammar exercises, and administration and procedure of the long-term project. Still other gaps existed between the learner-participants themselves. By listening to voices from both the teacher and the students, the findings suggest that what teachers assume to be happening in a class may not correspond to what students perceive. Block concludes that the analysis of pedagogical purposes is not solely the domain of teachers. Also, teachers need to continuously
communicate with learners, as they are constantly attempting to make sense out of classroom instruction. Thus, by employing diary studies of teachers and learners combined with observation, in-depth data are obtained.

6. Some advice for diary study researchers

The process of diary keeping is extremely time-consuming; therefore, it requires considerable commitment on the part of diarists. Thus, researchers should be cautious in implementing diary studies. I will offer some advice for researchers to manage possible (ethical) limitations at the various stages of conducting commissioned diary studies, as, for example, those suggested by Bailey and Ochsner (1983):

1) The diarist(s) provide an account of his or her personal language learning experience.

2) The diarist(s) systematically keep(s) a record of events, details, and feeling about the current language-learning experience in a confidential and candid diary.

3) The journal entries are revised for viewing by outside parties including clarification of the meaning and ethical consideration such as participants’ anonymity and confidentiality.

4) The researcher studies the journal entries, looking for patterns and significant events.

5) The factors identified as significant to the language-learning experience are interpreted and discussed. (p. 190)

Although diary studies are “[t]he least prestructured of all types of self-report” (Kasper & Rose, 2002, p. 112) and are participant-directed, at
stages 1) and 2), researchers conducting commissioned diary studies have to make a decision about how much they will structure the diary studies. This will depend upon factors such as the purpose of the research. Once the researchers decide the degree of control, details of guidelines should be provided in advance regarding the substance, form, the language to use, and the timing of entries.

Two of these factors are worth further consideration: the language of the diary entries and the timing of entries. In deciding which language to use, it is important to give the diarists a choice since it is very much related to the learner’s sociolinguistic situation and linguistic preference. However, learners’ language proficiency has to be considered in using the second language, which may be detrimental to the amount and quality of the report. Another crucial issue is the timing of entries. Seliger (1983) raises the question of how much time should elapse between the events themselves and the recording of those events. In fact, as Fry (1988 as cited in Bailey, 1991) points out, “[w]ith the retrospective data, all the problems of cognition in introspective data are magnified by the lapse of time between the event and the reporting it” (p. 160). The timing of journal entries should be given much thought.

At stage 3), as Clandinin and Connelly (1998) claim, the ethical dimensions of researcher-participant relationships are highlighted in personal experience methods. Researchers should assure confidentiality in the fullest possible way, and participants’ privacy should be protected with the utmost care, since participants will be revealing personal information about themselves in writing diaries. Anonymity of the participants should be assured so as to avoid any misunderstandings or conflicts among the participants. So far as “clarification” of diary entries is concerned, the
entries should be analyzed and participants should be asked to cooperate in verifying the interpretation in order to ensure that their meaning is accurately represented.

At the stages 4) and 5), three key features suggested by Allwright and Bailey (1991) are to be taken into account in analysing diary entries: frequency of topics mentioned, distribution of topics mentioned across the several writers, when multiple diaries are examined, and saliency (i.e., the strength of the expression with which a topic is recorded). Also, researchers are advised to keep in mind that the diary entries do not constitute a total picture of the mind of each diarist, and that both the diarists and the researcher are biased because of their subjectivity.

7. Concluding remarks

Diary studies can provide valuable insights into dynamic and complex classroom experiences from the learners’ point of view. Although this type of research inquiry has its own weaknesses, what it can offer outweighs its limitations. In order to complement its weaknesses and enhance its benefits, I strongly recommend that diary studies be combined with other data sources, incorporating other methods, depending upon the purposes of the research in question. If all these considerations are taken into account, diary studies will surely make a significant contribution to the field of second language education, and will alike benefit learners, teachers and researchers.
Notes

1 The terms, “logs,” “journals” and “diaries” are typically used interchangeably, but some scholars distinguish them. For example, Holly (1984) considers “logs” as records of factual information, “diaries” as a kind of subjective text, and “journals” as an amalgam of the two, containing both ‘subjective’ and ‘objective’ data. However, as McDonough and McDonough (1997) claim, in practice such distinction is not clear, and therefore, in this paper I will use the terms interchangeably.

2 McDonough and McDonough (1997) distinguish the two types of diaries as “pedagogic” diaries, which are kept by learners in classrooms or trainees and “expert” diaries, which are kept by language specialists such as researchers, and teachers who are learning a language.

3 Lincoln and Guba (1985) contend that this terminology used in quantitative research should be replaced in qualitative research. For “validity”, they suggest ‘transferability’ as an alternative, meaning the degree to which the results of a qualitative study can be transferred to other contexts.

4 Kasper and Rose (in press) report that self-studies tend to rely on a single-method category, whereas commissioned diary studies employ a multiple-method type of investigation.

References


Diary Studies: Their Potential to Explore Learner Perspectives on Second Language Learning

(pp.188-198). Rowley, MA: Newbury House.


Merriam, S. B. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in a


