

Diary Insights of an EFL Reading Teacher

Apreciaciones de un profesor de lectura en lengua inglesa
escritas en un diario de clase

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It is often argued that classroom diaries are subjective. This article explores the diary insights of a foreign language reading teacher. The inquiry was based on the following research question: What do the diary insights really evidence about the teaching practices of a foreign language reading teacher? As a research method, a case study was implemented. Five instruments were used to collect data: diary of the teacher, observations, questionnaires, tests, and focus groups. Given that motivation, interaction, reading improvement, and the application of reading strategies were supported by the research instruments, it would seem that a diary can be objective.

Key words: Diaries, diary insights, reading in English, support.

A menudo se argumenta que los diarios de clase son subjetivos. En este artículo se exploran las apreciaciones que un profesor de lectura en inglés como lengua extranjera registra en su diario. La indagación se basó en la siguiente pregunta de investigación: ¿Qué apoya realmente las anotaciones de diario acerca de las prácticas de enseñanza de un profesor de lectura en lengua extranjera? Como método de estudio se implementó el estudio de caso. Se utilizaron cinco instrumentos para recolectar la información: diario del profesor, observaciones de clase, cuestionarios, exámenes y grupos focales. Dado que estos instrumentos de investigación incidieron en la motivación, la interacción, la mejoría en lectura y en la aplicación de las estrategias de lecturas, se podría concluir que un diario puede ser objetivo.

Palabras clave: apoyo, apreciaciones de diarios, diarios, lectura.

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Introduction

Researchers debate the usefulness of diary studies in learning or teaching languages (Bailey, 1991; Bailey & Ochsner, 1983; Brown, 1985; Long, 1980; Schmidt & Frota, 1986). Concerns involve the diarist's subjectivity in keeping a diary, the amount of time the diarist devotes (time-consuming), the inconsistent way to track ideas, and the lack of general conclusions.

The purpose of this article is to explore and support some diary insights made upon reflection by a foreign language teacher in a reading course for graduate students. This article begins with the literature review and examines the characteristics of diaries, reading, motivation, and interaction. Then, the methodology, the context, the course, participants, and the research instruments are presented. Finally, findings are described and the conclusions, implications, and limitations are given.

Review of Literature

Diary

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)

McDonough and McDonough (1997) argue that diary studies are helpful in language contexts as they support qualitative and quantitative information. Diarists can also have an introspective and retrospective view of their teaching or learning process. Russell and Munby (1991), and Palmer (1992) argue that diaries may provide a rich source of data in order to understand teachers' practices. When teachers read their diaries they become conscious of what they know and really do and they reflect on their role as teachers. As a result, they may become critical (Bailey, 1990). There are two types of processes for reading the diary: primary (also called direct or introspective) and secondary (also called indirect or non-introspective). In the first type the diarist is the person who reads and reflects about the learning or teaching process. In the second type, an outsider reads and interprets the diarist's entries about his/her learning or teaching process (Curtis & Bailey, 2009).

Characteristics of Diaries

Curtis and Bailey (2009) state that teachers or learners usually keep hand-written diaries; however, they can also be audio-taped. The authors argue that this technical form could be time-consuming due the transcription it may need. Instead, a word processed diary is a good option because having electronic information facilitates the data analysis. The authors also argue that diarists can use figures in order to represent ideas pictorially and such figures guide to identify issues such as interaction, motivation, and participation, among others. In the same vein, diarists can use their mother tongue or second language to record their ideas. When learners have a low proficiency level they face difficulties in making entries. A good option is to combine the mother tongue and target language to lessen students' difficulties. Conversely, keeping a diary becomes a very good option with which to practice the target

language when learners have an intermediate or advanced level.

On the other hand, there are drawbacks to diaries. Schmidt and Frota (1986), and Seliger (1983) support that the nature of diaries is to keep a subjective perception of the diarist's experiences leading to subjectivity. Moreover, it could be difficult to categorize and reduce data when diarists do not have a consistent way of keeping a diary. Nunan (1992) even questions if the conclusions made by a single subject can be extrapolated to other settings. However, Curtis and Bailey (2009) suggest the idea to keep diaries with subjective and objective issues. Diarists may have entries that describe feelings or ideas that they had in a specific moment of the class, or they can also have facts of a specific issue that support their entries. As a result, it would be useful to have factual records as well as subjective ones in order to obtain a precise picture of the teaching or learning process. The authors suggest the following elements to consider when keeping a journal:

- Keep a detailed chronological record of the entries
- Include the day, date, and time of each entry
- Include also information about number of students and their seating arrangements
- Write a summary of the lesson
- Include handouts and assignments in the diary
- Write thoughts or questions to be considered later (p. 71)

Other elements can also be included: The objective of the diary is to record or develop ideas instead of correcting or crafting; the language could be personal rather than academic or formal; the writing style has to make sense primary to the diarist, not to the outsider.

Diaries can be used as an assessment tool. Brenneman and Louro (2008) argue that diaries provide teachers a critical view of how individuals conceptualize and apply an issue in the process of learning. Diaries tell teachers about insights into individual student's language processes when teachers

keep track of each student. In fact, diaries support anecdotal evidence of what learners do, understand, and misunderstand in a language class. Thus, the teacher can use it to verify and give an account of the learning process.

Reading

Reading is a complex process in which the reader has to comprehend the text. Alyousef (2005) states that reading is an "interactive process between a reader and a text which leads to automaticity or (reading fluency). In this process, the reader interacts dynamically with the text as he/she tries to elicit the meaning" (p. 144). However, there are two important elements that the reader needs to possess: linguistic knowledge and background knowledge. The former refers to the awareness about the language, such as grammar or vocabulary structure. The latter involves the familiarity the reader has with the reading content. Cassany (2006), González (2000), Grabe and Stoller (2002), and Weir (1993) support that the reader also needs a cognition process because she/he has to predict, interpret and memorize information in order to decode the message.

Foreign language readers have to make a bigger effort to interact with texts because they might face grammar or vocabulary difficulties (Cassany, 2006). Thus, the role of the teacher becomes crucial, as foreign language readers need to be guided to overcome those difficulties.

Reading Models

Aebersold and Field (1997) state that there are two essential models in reading: bottom-up processes and top-down processes. Bottom-up processes involve readers building the text beginning from small units (letters to words) to complex ones (sentences to paragraphs). In the top-down processes readers have to integrate the text into their existing knowledge (background knowledge). Grabe and Stoller (2002)

ask language teachers to use both processes with students in order to have successful readers.

Reading Strategies

Reading strategies help learners interact with the readings and different authors highlight the importance of applying them in language learning settings (Chamot, Barnhardt, El-Dinary, & Robbins, 1999; Hosenfeld, 1979; Janzen, 2001; Lopera, 2012; Mikulecky & Jeffries, 2004; Osorno & Lopera, 2012). When students are trained to use reading strategies they know what to do when facing troubles with readings (Block, 1986). Language teachers can use simple reading strategies such as previewing, predicting, guessing word meanings; or complex ones such as inference and summarizing. Janzen (2001) proposes five classroom activities to work with the reading strategies:

- Explicit discussion of the reading strategies and when to use them
- Demonstration of how to apply a reading strategy (modeling)
- Involvement with the reading in terms of reading aloud and sharing the process while applying the strategies
- Discussion of the activities in the classroom
- Practice with the reading material of the course (p. 369)

Arismendi, Colorado, and Grajales (2011); Block (1986); Carrell (1998); Lopera (2012); Mikulecky and Jeffries (2004); and Poole (2009) have explored the application of reading strategies with students and their findings support their usefulness for learners.

Motivation

Motivation plays an important role in foreign language as it engages students in an active involvement to learn (Oxford & Shearin, 1994). Chen and Dörnyei (2007, p. 153) state that the function of motivation is to serve “as the initial engine to generate learning and later functions as an ongoing driving force that helps to sustain the long and usually laborious journey of acquiring a foreign language.” Brown (2001) divides motivation into intrinsic and extrinsic. The former helps students engage in the

activities for their own sake in order to satisfy internal rewarding such as learning, curiosity, or personal fulfillment. On the other hand, extrinsic motivation goes externally in order to avoid punishment or to satisfy reward such as good scores, prizes, or money.

Interaction

Brown (1994) states that interaction is the main part of communication in which people send, receive, interpret, and negotiate messages. The author suggests that language learning classrooms should be interactive even from the very beginning. The role of the teacher is crucial in order to prompt interaction in the classroom as she/he has to be a guide, a moderator, or a coordinator in the classroom. In the same vein, students also have to participate individually or in groups when the teacher asks them to do it. When these two agents give their parts, the results are more positive in the process of learning.

Finally, when teachers observe and record issues such as interaction, motivation, and application of reading strategies in their diary, they are better equipped to analyze, assess, and reflect upon their students’ processes. For the purpose of this paper, all these elements were taken into account.

Method

This study followed the principles methodology of a multiple case study (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 1998; Tellis, 1997; Yin, 2003) as the team of researchers¹ wanted to support the teacher’s diary insights in a foreign language reading comprehension course. Researchers used the grounded approach when they categorized the data (Freeman, 1998). The following research question guided their inquiry: What do the diary insights really evidence about the teaching practices of a foreign language reading teacher?

¹ It is worth mentioning that the author of this paper was a member of the team of researchers.

Context

Universidad de Antioquia (Medellín, Colombia) asks graduate students to certify reading proficiency in a foreign language when getting specializations.² Students have two options: to certify by either attending a classroom course or by taking a proficiency test. Students were given a third option in 2007 when the EALE (Enseñanza y Aprendizaje de las Lenguas Extranjeras = Teaching and Learning Foreign Languages) research group designed a reading course in English in a web-based distance format. In 2009, EALE decided to carry out a research project³ in order to compare the effects of a web-based course to a face-to-face course. The study of the teacher's diary is derived from this research project.

Participants

The Teacher

The teacher was part of the research team and as well as a full-time professor at *Sección Servicios*,

Escuela de Idiomas (School of Languages). He had ten years of experience teaching foreign language reading comprehension courses for both graduate and undergraduate students.

The Students

There were 27 students (17 women and 10 men); they were between 20 and 51 years old. Students were in the first semester of different specializations in Law: Process Law, Constitutional Law, Family Law, Administrative Law, and Social Security Law. Only one student dropped the course.

The Reading Comprehension Course

The name of the course was English reading comprehension for graduate programs (*Competencia lectora en inglés para posgrados*) and its main goal was to guide students in the use of different types of reading strategies in different types of readings. Students attended the course Tuesdays and Thursdays from 6 to 9 p.m. The course lasted 120 hours and was divided and organized into five different units as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Organization of the Reading Comprehension Course

Unit	Name	Topics
1	Word and their meanings	Dictionary use, parts of speech, cognates, affixes, word meaning in context.
2	Reading strategies	Prediction, skimming, scanning, and graph interpretation.
3	Development of reading skills	Sentence structure, topic, main idea, and referents.
4	Text organization methods	Cause and effect, comparison and contrasts, description, narration, argumentation, and classification and categorization.
5	Critical reading	Fact and opinions, tone, and arguments.

² *Especialización* (specialization) is a two-semester graduate program and the main objective is to update students in their academic fields.

³ There were six full-time teachers, one advisor, and three undergraduate students in teaching foreign languages on the research team.

Data Collection and Analysis

Other research instruments accompanied the diary in order to triangulate data (Ellis, 1989). The different sources of information helped researchers compare and validate the data issues encountered in the diary. There were a total of five instruments used to gather data: diary of the teacher, questionnaires, observations, tests, and focus groups. Each instrument is explained below.

Diary of the Teacher

The teacher recorded all his reflections and observation about the teaching process of each class session in order to construct a critical view (Bailey, 1990; Jeffrey & Hadley, 2002). The teacher kept the diary in English and took about two hours for each class to write each entry electronically. It took him about five months to finish the diary. It is worth stating that he was aware of and had experience writing the diary for research purposes.

Questionnaires

Students completed three questionnaires: evaluation of the course and the teacher, reading strategies and motivation, and self-evaluation. There were multiple choice questions and open questions for completing each questionnaire.

Tests

Two types of tests were used on students: before and after the pedagogical intervention (2 tests—pretest and posttest), and different tests for each unit of the course. Regarding pretest and posttest, each test contained two readings texts, each with 13 multiple choice questions (the readings and questions simulated standardized tests like the Test of English as a Foreign Language, TOEFL). Students had to interact with reading topics such as inference, scanning, analyzing topics and main ideas. In the different tests of each unit, the teacher designed short readings that

aimed at evaluating the topics of the unit. There were multiple choice questions as well as open questions on the tests.

Observations

Researchers observed ten class sessions. They examined issues such as teaching, behaviors, learning strategies, interaction, and participation in the classroom (Brown, 2001).

Focus group

Students had a focus group session (Dendinger, 2000) at the end of the course in order to discuss their learning experience. Researchers prepared some open questions regarding interaction, application of reading strategies, vocabulary improvement, and positive and negative aspects of this course. The session was audio-taped.

Findings

Researchers mixed both primary processes and secondary processes to read the diary (Curtis & Bailey, 2009). All the data were transcribed and researchers read and labeled the data individually. They then shared and discussed some important ideas in groups and coded the data in order to have categories. Finally, consensus was obtained through data triangulation (Freeman, 1998). Researchers translated some excerpts from Spanish to English in order to use them as support.

Researchers validated some diary entries made by the teacher in order to support objectivity. Four main topics emerged from the diary: motivation, interaction, improvement, and the application of reading strategies. The findings are explained below.

Motivation

The teacher reported that students' motivation was mainly extrinsic, as they needed to fulfill the reading requirement in order to register for the second

semester of their law specializations. Researchers could support this reflection in the focus group, as some students commented on the need to fulfill the requirement (see Sample 1).

Although students' motivation was mainly extrinsic, researchers noted that students gained intrinsic motivation during the course. Students' perceptions changed positively toward the course and satisfaction was perceived. This issue is supported by the students' comments in the focus group (see Sample 2).

Another motivational factor was participation. Students' participation was a constant in the course leading to a positive attitude. Learners were willing to participate in the exercises suggested by the teacher. The teacher and observers noted this motivational issue, as shown in Sample 3.

On the other hand, the teacher observed that students looked tired due to their work load. Students were tired because they worked during the day then finished up the day attending the course (see Sample 4).

Sample 1. Support of Motivation

Teacher entry in the diary	Support (focus group)
As all the students who registered for this course they are in the course because they needed to continue in the graduate program, they are not in the course because they wanted to learn how to read in English.	I felt a little bit forced to take the course due to the language requirement for the second semester. I didn't like English but I had to take the course.

Sample 2. Support of Intrinsic Motivation

Teacher's entry in the diary	Support (focus group)
Most of the students' attitude is quite positive, they wanted to understand what they were reading, they didn't want just to complete the exercises for obtaining a grade, they really wanted to take the opportunity to improve their English language skills and they are realizing this course (no matter is mandatory or the hours) may be a good possibility for doing it.	I had phobia to study English but this course has changed my mind. I not only accomplished the requirement but also learnt and advanced.

Sample 3. Support of Participation

Teacher's entry in the diary	Support (observations)
I have perceived a very positive attitude from students in terms of doing the exercises, paying attention to class explanations and participating in class.	Students are willing to participate.

Sample 4. Support of Tiredness

Teacher's entry in the diary	Support (observations and focus group)
Students being tired of a long day of work may not have the same attitude towards the class and they may not be very willing to complete and to participate actively in all the activities designed for class.	Students look tired. The course was programmed at night and we were tired.

Interaction

There were three types of interaction: interaction among students, interaction between the teacher and students, interaction with the material. In the first interaction a sign of cooperation was perceived among students. Students worked together in order to do a reading activity assigned by the teacher. Students interacted themselves confirming answers, checking understanding, discussing issues and, usually, working in pairs or groups. Researchers noted that students helped each other. This was validated by researchers in the observations, as shown in Sample 5.

There was constant interaction between the teacher and students. The teacher asked the students to answer some questions about an exercise. In the same vein, students asked the teacher different questions when they had doubts about the exercises or the readings (see Sample 6).

Finally, students interacted with the materials. The teacher asked the students to read texts and complete the activities designed by him. Researchers noted that students interacted with the readings because they discussed the content and the answers based on the readings (see Sample 7).

Sample 5. Support of Interaction Among Students

Teacher's entry in the diary	Support (observations)
I believe some of the cooperative work in the classroom really was effective mainly because I could notice how students were discussing the topics of the texts they were asked to read.	Students work and participate among them.

Sample 6. Support of Interaction Between the Teacher and Students

Teacher's entry in the diary	Support (observations)
They did a lot of questions and they were always asking for the teachers' approval.	Students asked questions to the teacher.

Sample 7. Support of Interaction with the Material

Teacher's entry in the diary	Support (observations)
I could notice how students were discussing the topics of the texts they were asked to read, they also interacted on the questions and the possible answers they needed to complete.	Students discuss academic issues, they give their points of view about the exercise and the answers of the readings.

Sample 8. Support of Application of Reading Strategies

Teacher's entry in the diary	Support (self-assessment questionnaire)
During this unit, I could notice how students were actually doing a good job on understanding information from different types of text. While I collected information from students' class tasks, I could notice very good answers to...I could say that students have improved their reading comprehension skills.	At the beginning of the course I did not know much vocabulary, but now I have noticed that I can understand the readings. The course guided me to understand the readings.

Improvement and Application of Reading Strategies

Researchers observed that students had learned and applied the reading strategies taught in the course and this led to reading improvement. Students also evidenced that they had learnt, as can be read in Sample 8.

Another source that supports improvement was the assessment of units. The tests of the units support that students improved and applied the reading strategies. When the teacher corrected and evaluated the tests, he wrote comments like "it was a good exercise, congratulations" or "although the answers to the exercises were ok, you did not provide very precise answers." Moreover, the teacher quantitatively reported the scores on the tests (1 to 5, with 5 being the highest) and researchers validated that most of the scores ranged from 3.5 to 4.8.

Table 2. Statistical Analysis of the Pretest and Posttest

Statistics	Tests	
	Pretest	Posttest
Number of observations	26	26
Minimum	2,000	7,000
Maximum	11,000	10,000
Median	6,000	9,000
Mean	5,654	8,885
Variance (n-1)	5,595	0,506
Standard deviation (n-1)	2,365	0,711

Finally, another source that supports improvement was the test results. Students improved considerably when researchers statistically compared the results of the pretest and posttest administered. Statistics support that students improved in reading as the mean increased greatly (see Table 2).

Limitations

Guiding and encouraging the project, the teacher was part of the research group. If the teacher had not been part of the research group, researchers would probably have had different findings. The teacher was aware of writing the diary for research purposes and this could be seen as leading. In fact, he knew the topics to concentrate on: interaction, motivation, the use of reading strategies, and improvement. Finally, the number of students was limited and researchers do not claim that findings could be generalized to broader teaching or learning contexts.

Conclusions

Some researchers have argued that people are subjective when they keep a diary (Nunan, 1992; Schmidt & Frota, 1986; Seliger, 1983). However, the findings of the research suggest that the entries of the diary can be supported by evidence provided by more objective instruments, such as tests. In fact, motivation, interaction, reading improvement, and the application of reading strategies were found in the diary and supported using different research instruments.

Researchers found that participation, attitude, as well as extrinsic and intrinsic motivation were motivational factors in the diary. Also, the academic contact among student-student, student-teacher, and student-material were supported as interactional issues in the course. Finally, findings support that students improved and applied the reading strategies. Based on the results, it seems to be that a diary is objective.

Implication

One of the findings was related to tiredness. The teacher observed that students were tired due to the fact that they worked during the day and finished up the day attending the course. The previous finding implies the need to prepare interactive classes in order to engage students to be more active in class. It is suggested that teachers ask students to work in pairs or in groups, bring topics that deal with students' interests, bring humor to class, and use a short and interesting opening activity to start a class (Dörnyei & Csizér, 1998) as these would be good options to raise motivation and avoid tiredness in classrooms.

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