

The possibility of diary as a research tool

—For learners' motivation—

森 明智
Akitomo MORI

1. Introduction

In any English class, all English teachers will expect motivated students. Although in reality, teachers occasionally have to face some uninterested, intractable, or even defiant students. And in those cases, what can teachers do? Perhaps some teachers apply strict rules to control the class. I don't deny this approach. It surely will show some good results. But are there any other ways to manage the class? Are there any ways for teachers to know learners' inner aspects and motivate them?

In this study, I examined the possibility of diaries and journals to understand what was actually happening in learners' minds. And, to find out whether diary is useful as a research tool or not, I selected one of my English classes. I selected this class, because initial atmosphere of this class was not good, rather obnoxious. However, this atmosphere was improved gradually and at the 10th lesson, almost all of students succeeded in making presentation about their own conversation scripts in English. Details of this class are discussed in chapter 3.

In this try, I kept diaries of me and journals of learners. At first, I didn't intend to use learners' journals as a material for research. But they influenced the improvement of motivation in the classroom so much. Hence, I decided to include learners' journals in this research. Through this research, I noticed some important points concerning the usefulness of diary as a research tool. They are as follows.

Usefulness of teacher's diaries

1) Diaries help a teacher notice his/her own standpoint and bias about English

Learning.

- 2) Diaries help a teacher attain the holistic view of class and find next strategy.
- 3) Diaries help a teacher check if his/her own behavior and language were appropriate or not in each class.
- 4) Diaries help a teacher clarify the long term view of the class.

Usefulness from learners' journals

- 1) Learners' journals help a teacher to notice learners' own impressions about previous English Learning experiences
- 2) To notice learners' interpretations of whole classroom including teacher
- 3) To understand the contents of the lesson from learners' daily life

Therefore, two types of diaries, meaning teacher and learners, are discussed in this research. Details are described in Chapter 4.

2. Definition, purpose, and procedure of Diary Studies

2.1. Existing diary studies

Diary as a research tool is well known in English language teaching studies. But it doesn't mean there is a clear united definition of diary studies. McDonough and McDonough (1997: 112-130) explained diary in English language teaching study from three aspects. They are (1) Being rich both qualitatively and quantitatively (2) Being self evidently subjective and introspective (3) Being retrospective and reflective. (1997: 124)

Nunan (1992: 118-124) also mentioned diaries as a research tool and defined merits and demerits of diaries as research tool. Merits of diary study Nunan argues are close to what McDonough and McDonough (1997) argue. He cites some diaries of English Learning and points out rich insights into some of the psychological, social, cultural factors implicated in language development. (1992: 123) However, he also discusses the criticism against diary study. The issue is about the validity of diary as a research material. It is concerned with a doubt such as "How conclusions based on data from a single subject can possibly be extrapolated to other language learners". (Nunan 1992: 123) This phrase points out the weak point of diary study. Diary studies are usually conducted on a small number of research subjects. Therefore, its conclusion cannot be validated enough to be applied to the whole popula-

tion.

Richards and Lockhart (Richards, C. and C. Lockhart, 2005) discuss almost same points. They argue two purposes a journal serves.

1. Events and ideas are recorded for the purpose of later reflections
2. The process of writing itself helps trigger insights about teaching. Writing in this sense serves as a discovery process.

They also suggest the possibility to “share diaries of teachers” to know what is going on in each classroom. (2005: 7-8)

2.2. Some features of past diary studies in the field of English Language Teaching

Current aspects of diary as research tool can be defined like as follows;

- (1) Diary as a research tool is subjective one and rich in quality. It serves as retrospective and reflective material. Also, it points out that diary study belongs to category of qualitative studies, and that there is a contrasting category of quantitative study.
- (2) At the same time, its validity can be always doubted. The reason is the feature of diary itself, which means its subjectivity. Diary cannot be recognized as objective material compared to other research tools.

In other words, diary study is useful to know psychological or emotional aspects of that author who is just one teacher or learner. Diary can provide quite rich text for the analysis about how the author felt about language learning and language classes. However, its validity is always doubted, because one diary is written by one person. Namely, one diary sporadically cannot make objective explanation what is going on in a lesson or classroom of author.

3. Subject and Purpose of this study

3.1. Research settings

The settings of research are as follow;

Place: Nagoya University of Arts and Science

Course: “General English” (“Sogo Eigo” in Japanese) This is compulsory class for them. All of students took this English class without any concern of their

own interest.

Course objective: General objective is to increase reading and writing skill.

Students: 29 (10 males and 19 female) in 2nd grade in this university

Students major “Art Design”

Teacher: Present author

Teacher’s teaching experience: 2 years’ teaching experience in this university

Period of this research: From April 14 to June 23, 2006

Textbook used: No textbook was used. Instead, some movie scenes were used and some other activities were done.

English learning background of learners: All of them had gone through 6 years of English learning experience in junior high school and high school. In the first year of this university, all of them took “English Communication” class by two native English teachers for one year. I didn’t check their initial English skill when I started this class, but their actual English skill cannot be regarded high.

3.2. First impression of this class

I chose this class as the subjects of this research deliberately, because the initial atmosphere of this class was far from good and I thought such a class must be appropriate to see whether diary study is effective or not to motivate learners.

Every teacher would explain the contents of lesson and the evaluation system at the first class. I surely did it. But from this moment, some students did not pay any attention what I was saying. Around half of the students were chatting and talking, ignoring what I was saying, fiddling cell phones, and some female students were doing make-up, eating snacks, reading magazines during first explanation time.

3.3. Procedure of research

3.3.1. Diary and Journals

For the duration of this research, teacher kept diary and learners kept journals for ten weeks.

(1) Teacher’s diary

Teacher kept a diary in English after each class for ten weeks. It took around one hour or one and half hours for the teacher to write one diary. Each one is around 200~300 words.

The main contents of the dairy are 1) my impression about the lesson, especially whether my pre-planned strategy was good or not, 2) approximately, how many students were involved in the task, 3) how much enthusiasm was felt from their behavior.

(2) Learners' Journals

Basically, all learners wrote down journals quite freely in their first language, described whatever they felt about the class. No regulations or questions were put for journals of learners. Each journal was written in 5 or 10 minutes. Their main topics were 1) whether lesson was interesting or not, 2) how they felt about teacher or friends, 3) things not related to lesson.

At the end of each lesson, journals of learners were collected.

3.3.2. Initial reason why diary and journals are chosen in this research

I decided to keep my own diary after each lesson as data. There are two reasons for this decision.

First reason is about merit of diary study. In this research, I did have a specific purpose in the class, which was to motivate learners. And motivation of learners is quite psychological and internal aspect. So I thought that strategy based on diary or journals could be appropriate way to accomplish this purpose.

Second, I do not think there is any severe rule to separate learners' diary and teachers' diary in previous diary studies. As far as I have investigated, past diary studies were based on only from one side, which means learner or teacher. Also, basically only one diary is used as a research tool in one lesson. But I cannot see any specific reason for this tendency. In this study, I decided to try to use diaries from both sides as research material for one class.

3.4. Processes of research

3.4.1. Specific Linguistic purpose of this class

I set the specific linguistic goal of this class as "To represent their own conversation in English", because in my thought, this goal would not be accomplished without learners' own motivation.

3.4.2. “Four Stages” in Diary Research

I classified this research into four stages. First is “Beginning stage”. Second is “First crisis and overcoming stage”. Third is “Increasing motivation stage”. Fourth is “Second crisis and presentation stage”.

In each stage, I found some aspects about motivation in the classroom from my diary and learners’ journals. Details of these data will be discussed in Chapter 4. But some processes for this achievement of goal must be disclosed at first.

(1) Diary Study in the Beginning stage (From April 14 to April 21)

At this stage, first impression and initial atmosphere I gained in this class were mainly written in teacher’s diary and learners’ journals. As I mentioned, my first impression for this class was not good. But through diary of myself and journals of learners, I had come to understand that both teacher and learners have various and different images of English Learning class from experiences of previous classes. Each one of members in this class, including me, has some expectation and apprehension for the current class. At this stage, I managed to understand the importance to find out past experience and past impression of English of learners and teacher. More minute analysis is done at the next chapter.

(2) Diary Study in the First crisis and overcoming stage (From April 28 to May 12)

At this stage, a kind of collapse in the class was written in my diary and learners’ journals. It was the third lesson and I did make some groups in the class and tried to let them do discussion and presentation about one English song. But there was barely discussion within members of group, and almost all of them were just chatting and doing make-up, scribbling, and sleeping. Some of students were trying to do the task only individually.

So, I stopped all tasks and talked to all of them about my feeling calmly and let them write down journals. Because I thought those kinds of situation cannot be a lesson any more. And surprisingly, I came to know most of students like English and three of students even said they were so satisfied with the content of the lesson. This was the first time I understood that there is a difference between learners’ motivation and their actual behavior. This means that many students will answer positively if they are asked whether they have motivation to learn English. However, it does not mean they will act that way. Nothing other than journals told me

this point. Some journals said “I like English”, or “I like the content of this lesson” or “I like movie, so I like this lesson” and so on.

From this result, I speculated that the atmosphere of the class is not dependent on motivation or English skill of each learner. It may depend on mutual trust or mutual understanding between classroom members, including teacher. In other words, there may have been not the atmosphere leading learners to participate to the activity.

Based on this speculation, I made all students do “Introduction of friends” next week. “Self introduction” is quite common activity in English Learning. In case of “introduction of others”, all learners have to make pairs and have to make questions for the partner. In addition, I set the rule that one has to introduce his/her partner in front of other members at least one minute. It will be understood easily that they have to know many things about partner to talk for one minute, and they did it.

Every learner did this and finished introduction. Each presentation was finished with applause. Journals of this lesson showed 100% of learners felt the lesson quite interesting and satisfying. After this lesson, the atmosphere changed dramatically. I somehow overcame first crisis.

(3) Diary Study in the Increasing motivation stage (From May 19 to June 2)

In this stage, the atmosphere of class changed and learners began to focus on activities in the class, and those facts were written in teacher's diary and learners' journals. In this period, I had them express their own daily life in English as much as possible. One try is like this. I let them write what they did on the previous day. Next, I taught them some common English backchannels, like “Uh-huh”, “And?”, “Really?”, “That's great” or “That's too bad”, etc. Then I let them make pairs and start conversation beginning with “Hey, how was yesterday?”.

In this situation, partners could reply easily, because they had own memos about what they did on the previous day. This try gave them a kind of confidence, because they did understand they could make their own English conversation about their own daily life, not the conversation in the textbook or teacher made.

(4) Diary Study in the Second crisis and presentation stage (From June 9 to July 23)

At this stage, I came to think that I should let learners make presentation about their own daily life based on positive impressions of learners' journals. At first, I

planned to let learners speak their own conversation in front of others. But, I myself think this type of presentation makes learners nervous. No one can deny that speaking in front of people is not a common experience. Rather, it is rare experience. In addition, presentation can be boring because the purpose of this lesson is "To represent their own conversation in English". It is easy to understand our own daily conversation is not always so interesting.

Therefore, I made some alternatives. First, I made it available to make presentation by "cartoons" Every line in the cartoon must be English, but learners can make their own drawings quite freely. Second alternative is to make presentation, using puppets. This alternative had some merits, because, whole audience would see puppets, not the person speaking, and puppets themselves are so nice and cute. Third alternative is to speak in front of other learners.

Then, learners made groups of two or three, and select one from these three alternatives. 12 groups were there, and 11 selected cartoon presentation, and one selected puppets presentation. I set the presentation day and made learners start the preparation.

I set the presentation day at June 16. But at that day, 5 students were absent! And about ten students came late. Then I found out only three groups had finished their preparation for presentation and other groups had not. I decided to postpone the presentation day to June 23. I thought I should scold students. But my diary showed me the way at this stage.

I was keeping diary and basically checking my own saying and behavior in the classroom. At the first crisis, my patience was at the limit too. But I tried to understand my students and communicate with them. It means teacher himself/herself has to show how to behave and speak as a good communicator in the classroom. My diary told me again this point at the second crisis. So, I decided not to give up or punish students and waited them to prepare for the presentation. Next week, 11 groups had finished their presentation successfully. For presentation of cartoons, I let students take turns to read each cartoons by groups. Learners' satisfied feelings and excitement filled all their journals. One group could not make presentation, but members of this group wrote that they should have participated the lesson more, in their journals.

4. Data analysis and Results

4.1. Usefulness from teacher's diaries

4.1.1. To notice his/her own standpoint and bias about English Learning

The first thing that I noticed from my first diary was teacher is nothing but one biased person. In my first diary, I did write down my first plan of the lesson and what kind of reaction I got from learners, and how enthusiastic they were in the classroom. I set the goal of this class as "To represent their own conversation in English" and did not use any textbook but used movie and did some other activities. These decisions at the first lesson had not come from my current learners. I did these things just because they went well at the previous classes. I cannot deny there may have been more successful way of teaching or better strategies. If another teacher has come, he/she must have taken another way of teaching and materials.

Therefore, diary tells teachers that they are always just influenced by past latest experiences. Teachers should not forget this point, especially at the beginning of the new class. Even if some teaching strategies went well in the previous classes, it does not guarantee there will be same results from other classes.

Then this point leads to another point. If teachers are just biased, and influenced by past experience, teacher has to watch the current class quite carefully and must not stick to his/her own strategy or way of teaching. Past strategy does not always succeed. If something goes wrong, like learners are not enthusiastic, or not intrigued by the task, teacher has to seek the cause of it, and make some changes swiftly. Diary can give teachers logical way of thought. It means the idea of teacher is just one led by previous experience and impression.

4.1.2. To attain the holistic view of class and find next strategy

By keeping diary, teacher can see what was original purpose of that lesson, and what was problem in the class. In this research, there were some occasions when some strategies didn't work. But these moments are especially important for teachers to check his/her own strategy.

In this research, I went through two moments when atmosphere of class was quite low and devastated or close to collapse. It is quite easy to blame learners for low motivation in the classroom. But by keeping diary, teacher can see what was original purpose of that lesson, and what was problem in the class. So, it will clari-

fy what teacher should do next.

This aspect of diary was quite meaningful at the first crisis moment. Facing the deteriorated atmosphere, I was so close to give up. But diary told me my initial purpose was to let my students represent their own conversation in English. And that atmosphere and learners' journals taught me that there might have not been enough mutual trust and mutual understanding between learners. How can they make discussion without mutual trust or understanding? So, according to previous diary and learners' journals, I came up with an idea of introduction of others.

4.1.3. To check if his/her own behavior and saying were appropriate or not in each class

More importantly, keeping diary means to check the specific attitude or saying of teacher in those crucial circumstances. I will discuss the effect of teachers' behavior or attitude to the class from viewpoint of learners' diaries later. But teacher should not forget all learners are watching their teachers. I referred to the importance of mutual understanding among learners. This trust is indispensable to motivate learners, and same thing can be said between teacher and learners.

Keeping diary of the lesson tells teacher that he/she is just one part of whole class, and this part is really important. Because teacher is undeniably the source of "mutual understanding and trust" in the class. So, teacher must check whether his/her own behavior or saying was appropriate or not. This perspective of the diary was quite useful when I went through second crisis. At that moment, I was at the limit of my patience, but I decided not to give up playing the role to understand and trust learners. Eventually this decision bore fruits.

4.1.4. To clarify the long-term view of the class

Keeping diary will tell teachers what has been the long-term effect of whole lessons and what kind of ending is appropriate.

In this research, the atmosphere of the class was getting better. But I came to notice one thing. This class is not so bad, but around half of them are quite introvert and another half of them are quite indifferent to others. Anyway, I came to think that making presentation in front of the class might not be a good idea, and I should not force them to do that. Therefore, I proposed three alternatives. They were cartoons, using puppets and speaking by themselves, and result was clear.

Out of 12 groups, 11 selected cartoons and one group selected puppets. This result came from long-term view of class based on diary.

4.2. Usefulness from journals of learners

4.2.1. To notice learners' impressions about their previous English learning experiences

Learners' journals at the first class are the good source for teachers to know that learners mind the atmosphere of classroom so much at the first class, comparing with previous English class. In first journals of learners, some of them wrote, "I think I can study English in a good atmosphere". Or some said "So far, I can take this English lesson in a good mood". But what is this supposed to mean? It can be said they had some experiences to study English in a bad mood in the past. Otherwise, I would never have got these comments at the first lesson.

Whatever the previous lesson was, teacher should keep one thing in mind. Which means that in the new class, every learner has his/her own experience about past English class. And they compare the current lesson with previous, or other lessons. And they try to get the first atmosphere of the whole class.

If teacher tries to motivate learners, these kinds of information must be necessary. Otherwise, teacher would get unexpected reaction from new class, even if he/she thinks they are taking the best strategy. Through learners' diary, teacher would gain information about learners' impressions about previous English Learning classes.

4.2.2. To notice learners' interpretation of whole classroom including teacher

Journals of learners help a teacher to know how learners actually interpret the lesson. I gained this perspective when I went through first crisis of this class. As I described, at the first crisis moment, the atmosphere of the class was so deteriorated and divided. But through their diaries, I came to understand that learners had more eagerness to learn English than I initially had thought. About half of journals said "I think lesson is good" or "I want to keep current contents of lesson". These unexpected replies showed me another aspect. The way teacher sees the class and the way learners see the class cannot be same. Every teacher should not make decisions about the class easily. Those decisions must be done from learners' points of

view.

After the first crisis, some students let me know their impressions about teacher. Some of said “Teacher worries about us so much. But I am satisfied with the lesson. Don’t worry”, or “Teacher chose today’s material deliberately to make it easy to understand and intriguing”, or “I was surprised to know teacher has remembered names of all members in the class”.

All I did was just trying to communicate with learners, and I got some comments like this. Therefore, teacher should remember that students are watching you so carefully to see whether teacher himself/herself is a good communicator or not, even if they can’t understand the lesson or they are defiant. Learners are trying to understand how teacher thinks this class, and each member. Definitely, teacher has to prove positive attitude. So, this is the reason why teacher should always mind his/her own saying and behavior. Diaries or journals from learners can be proved to be quite useful to make these points clear.

4.2.3. To understand contents of the lesson from learners’ daily life

Learners’ journals help a teacher to know how contents of the lesson are understood by learners. In almost all journals, learners wrote their impressions about the material or topic in the lesson. They were like “I could understand movie, because I know it well”, or “I could easily discussed the topic today, because I know it well”. Teacher should not forget that one class in university or college is just 90 minutes event once a week for learners. Topics and materials should be selected from life of learners. Journals of learners will tell teacher this aspect.

5. Discussion —The efficacy of diary as a research tool—

In this study, I used both my own diary and journals of learners to investigate how useful they are as research tools.

First, my own diary was quite useful from not only psychological aspect, but also strategic aspect. Diary shows how I had been influenced by previous lesson and what kind of standpoint I take as a language teacher now. This aspect shows that what I should do to current class and what I should do next. It also shows how I was in each lesson and how I should behave next. These contents can clarify what I should do as the conclusion of the class.

Second, learners' journals were also quite useful to attain inner voices of learners. They show learners also have their own experiences and impressions about previous English class. Next, they show learners are watching teacher very carefully. Learners interpret not only knowledge of English but also teacher as a human being. Teachers should not forget he/she is a kind of role model for learners. Learners' journals also clarify these interpretations are done based on learners' own daily life. Therefore, each material and topic should be chosen deliberately not from teacher's life, but from learners' life.

Finally, I want to suggest that diary study should not be regulated as one diary from one class. And diary should not be chosen from either teacher or learner. Why these two sides cannot be seen as being related? We should not forget every lesson is mutual communication between teacher and learner. Diary study from both sides in one class will show how this mutual communication can be built up.

6. Conclusion and the future perspective of study

In this study, I mentioned the importance of mutual understanding or mutual trust for the motivation of English Learning class. In addition to that, teacher as a role model of communicator was a key point. About these aspects, we can see great works of Zoltán Dörnyei about motivation in the classroom. (Dörnyei, 2001: 28) Details of his theory are beyond the range of this research, but he suggests the importance of "building mutual trust and understanding between learners and teacher" too. (2001: 36-38) And he has already proposed many strategies for this purpose. In this study, I tried many things without knowing Dörnyei's works. But changing atmosphere and motivation of class are one of topics that should be discussed more importantly. Researches related to his strategies will be next interests for me.

7. References

- Bailey, M, (1983): *Competitiveness and Anxiety in Adult Second Language Learning: Looking at and through the Diary Studies*. In Seliger H, W, & M. H. Long (eds) 1983: *Classroom Oriented Research*. New York: Newbury House Publishing
- Nunan D, (2005): *Second Language Teaching & Learning*. Heinle & Heinle Publishers: *Research Methods in Language Learning*. Cambridge University Press
- Dörnyei Z, (2001a): *Teaching and Researching Motivation*. Person Education (2001b): *Motivational Strategies in the Language Classroom*. Cambridge University Press
- Macdrough J. & S. Macdrough (1997): *Research Methods for English Language Teachers*.

Hodder Arnold, a member of the Hodder Headline Group
Richards J, & C. Lockhart (1996): *Reflective Teaching in Second Language Classrooms*.
Cambridge University Press
Richards C. & S. Rodgers (2001): *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching*. Cam-
bridge University Press

8. Appendices

(Some excerpts from diary of teacher)

(April 14)

In previous term, I selected famous Japanese cartoons as a teaching material, and it did well. So, this time, I selected cartoons and animations as the material. So, I think that's why my learners were relax and able to enjoy the contents of lesson.

But when I watched all learners doing this task, some students had given up quite early. This must be a big issue in this class. I have to check my learner's own journals, but anyway, I have to say English skill of some learners in this class is quite low.

And, I cannot help but feel some concern. When I let learners watch the one scene of Japanese movie in English, there were some students who couldn't focus on the scene and kept talking. This is not good.

(June 2)

Today, I got an interesting experience. I found a student who was absent last week. So I said to that student that I haven't seen her for a while with her name. Then, other students asked me why I knew that girl was absent. Because they didn't know that. So, I replied that I had already memorized all members in this class, so I knew she was absent last week. Then surprisingly, other students were astonished the fact I had remembered all of names in the class, and one students tried me, asking if I know her first name or not. Then I said her first name, and she was so surprised.

(Some excerpt from journals of learners)

(April 14)

"I think I can take this class in a good mood. I hope next lesson will be in the same mood, like this."

(May 12 (the day of "introduction of others"))

"I have not done this thing before, but I enjoyed. I think this is better than "self introduction"

(May 19)

"I could understand movie today. But I feel it is so fast."

(May 26)

"The movie scene of today was selected to make it easy for us to understand. So, I

think that is good.”

(June 23)

“To express what I want to say in English is interesting. And I think this kind of task should be included in high school English class.”