

Knowing our students through language learning histories

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A language learning history (LLH) tells the history of a student's experiences learning foreign languages. Students can learn a lot by writing them while teachers and others can learn a lot by reading published versions. LLHs can even have an impact on administrative decisions. They often include focused attempts by students to make greater sense of their language learning experiences by noticing key episodes in their histories. These constructed, locally situated histories can help students and teachers see where students have been and where they want to go in terms of their language and personal development. Below, each author tells of their experiences using LLHs with their classes and concludes with a list of advantages for teachers, students who write them, and the rest of the academic community.

LLHは生徒が今まで勉強してきたことを語る。生徒は自分のLLHを書くことによって多くのことを学ぶことができ、他の生徒は出版されたそれを読むことにより多くのことを学ぶことができる。LLHは温故知新である。LLHは言語の学び方だけではなく、個人の人格の発展にもつながる。この記事において、まず私たちは授業でLLHを使って私たちの経験を語るだろう。次に、私たちは他の教師たちにLLHを勧めよう。最後に私たちはなぜLLHが役立つかあなたに伝えるだろう。

In the past decade LLHs have become popular tools that teachers and researchers use to help students learn more and better understand learning processes (see Bailey, et al., 1996; Oxford & Green, 1996; Oxford et al., 1996; Murphey, 1999; Murphey et al., 2005; Nunan, 2000; and Cummings, 2005 among others). Moreover, research into narrative in general and LLHs in particular will likely grow further in the

future as stories have gained a more legitimate grounding as a way to access learner understanding (see Norton, 2000, 2001; Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000 among others). For examples of student LLHs online please see Murphey (2005) and Menezes (2003), and for a teacher's LLH story online, see Green (1997).

Paul Dore's work with LLHs

I have been using LLHs with my students for 3 years. The way I use them has changed in that time because of discussions and interaction with more highly experienced teachers including Tim Murphey and Martha Clark Cummings, and in part because of the circumstances of my particular teaching situation.

Tim first introduced me to LLHs when we were working part-time at the same university. The class curriculum was entirely up to me to choose and I was always searching for new and engaging materials that fostered more 'natural/spontaneous' communication. I had non-English language majors in an elective class and the majority who were positive and motivated, had a proficiency level of English that allowed them to tackle the LLH writing task and pre-activities with relative ease. In the beginning, I distributed the LLH writing task as a one-sheet task full of instructions and prompt questions. Basically, it was used as a one-lesson activity not much different from Murphey's (1998) original assignment below:

My language learning history

Write a paper about your language learning history from when you began learning English to the present. Length: 3 pages double-spaced (about 750 words). If you like you can send it via e-mail. Some questions you may want to answer in your story:

- How did you learn English in JHS and HS?
- What positive and negative experiences did you have and what did you learn from them?
- What were you expecting before you came to the university?
- What were you surprised about in your university classes?
- How have you changed your ways of language learning since coming to the university?
- What are the things that you found especially helpful?
- What are the areas that you still want to improve in?
- How do you think your next three years will be?
- What are your language learning plans and goals after graduation?
- What advice would you give to next year's first year students?

Have your paper proof read and signed by two other classmates. Write the following at the end of your paper for their signatures: *I have proofread and given suggestions about this paper.

Signed _____

More recently, I have had students write their LLH over three to four lessons, with, for the first time this year, a final class dedicated to compiling their own class booklet of LLHs. The students in my present situation are again in an elective subject, however motivation and language proficiency are not so high. Overall, much more time and encouragement is needed for the introduction, explanation, demonstration, and correction of the LLHs.

The LLH writing task has now been divided into three parts – ‘My First Memories of English’, ‘My School Days of English’, and ‘My University English classes and My Post-graduation English Study Plan.’ Each stage is a one-class lesson with the writing task assigned as homework. Although this new way of doing LLHs was in part brought about by the language proficiency and motivational issues of my present students, I do not consider going back to using the ‘one-lesson format’ that I first started with.

Brad Deacon’s work with LLHs

In hind site, I first became aware of the potential within LLHs both for my own and my student’s development while reflecting on my language learning experiences as a graduate student at the School for International Training in Brattleboro, Vermont. Prior to graduate school I had not thought very deeply, or often at all, about my previous language learning experiences. Once I began this process of reflection, one major insight I recall noticing was the importance of testing to provide feedback for my skill level, focus my attention, and increase my motivation for sustained language learning. I enjoyed tests in school and conscious reflection helped me to notice the impact of testing on my language learning.

Realizing this allowed me to become a more self-directed learner and I asked my Japanese teacher to give me mini-tests every few lessons. I then found that I was applying myself more vigorously to my Japanese learning than I had earlier and I could notice progress more easily.

Another key step was reading about “the apprenticeship of observation” (Bailey, *et al.*, 1996). It alluded to the notion that many teachers tend to unconsciously teach in the way that they were taught as students in school. This insight allowed me to fully appreciate more on a cognitive level how my prior experiences as a learner helped to shape my present style as a teacher. Moreover, this insight would later become further enhanced by the observation of Schumann (1983) as referred to in Tarone & Yule (1989, p. 7) that,

(t)eachers should recognize the important influence of their own language learning experience on their views of the learning process in general, and also remain aware of the effect that their students’ previous language learning experience will have on their views of language learning.

Thus, my roots for considering LLHs as a tool to use with my students originated and were anchored within reflections on my own experiences as a language learner and teacher. Furthermore, my experience using reflection for my own growth suggested that this tool might help my students in a similar manner.

Admittedly, although I had noticed great value in writing my own LLH I did not immediately consider the potential utility for my students to draft, reflect on, and derive meaning from their histories too. As in Paul’s case above, my model for eventually guiding my students through this process was

Tim. As a part-time teacher at the same university, I strolled by Tim's office one day, noticed a few of his students typing on computers, and grew curious about what they were writing. They said they were putting together a volume of LLHs by their classmates. My curiosity deepened and over lunch I asked Tim to tell me more about the project. I later read the finished volume (multiple times) and decided to try out the idea with one of my writing classes. Afterwards student feedback was overwhelmingly positive and ever since I have been using LLHs to some degree in all of my classes.

On a micro level, I have introduced the idea to my speaking classes, asked them to write simple LLH mind maps, and to use these as the basis for a full lesson discussion on this theme. On a macro level I have spent a half semester guiding a detailed LLH project in collaboration with a colleague that included: brainstorming, mind mapping, drafting, editing, re-drafting, re-editing, final drafting, and publishing in booklet form the LLHs of a class of students (see Tanner & Deacon, 2005).

Tim Murphey's recent work with LLHs

I began publishing LLHs for students and teachers to read and learn from in the mid-1990s (Murphey 1997, 1998, 2005). In the summer of 2005 while teaching a group of MA students "Materials Development" at Hawaii Pacific University I found a way to work with near beginners and younger students who are not yet able to produce full LLHs.

A question came to mind: "How can we give students who are not yet advanced enough to write their LLHs the excitement of seeing their name in print after they have produced something

personal?" I had told my MA class about all the wonderful advantages for teachers and students of doing LLHs, but the student group we had available to work with was composed of new immigrant arrivals at a middle school who were at beginning levels. So, what if we gave them sentence frames to fill in and asked them to draw a picture? What if we collected all their pages and made them into a booklet with their picture on the back? We got excited just thinking about it and came up with the following for students to work with the first day:

The Story of _____ (your name)

My name is _____.

I come from _____.

My favorite subject in school is _____.

My favorite sport is _____.

I like to _____.

I like to _____.

I like to _____.

I don't like to _____.

I don't like to _____.

I don't like to _____.

When I grow up, I would like to be a(n) _____.

I think learning English is _____.

I have been in Hawaii for _____.

Draw any picture you like.

Three volunteer teachers (Chou, Lau, & Yang, 2005) from our MA class went to the school on a Friday and conducted the class with the two regular teachers. They had planned to do the above for only 15 minutes but they ended up using the whole 50 minutes because the teachers had never seen the children so active. They were asking each other the meanings and comparing their likes and dislikes and learning a lot in the process! “What’s that?” they said pointing to each other’s drawing. They were actually using a lot more English than they usually did in the class. At the end of class, the volunteers collected the papers and told the students they would see them again on Monday.

The following Monday, the three volunteers had photocopied the student’s work and made stapled booklets for each student with a front cover and back cover (with their picture on it)! The students were so surprised and once again would not stop talking. In pairs, students asked about the different people in class with new frames on the board, “His name is” Or “Her name is... .” And once again the regular teachers were amazed at the activity level.

The principle that seems to be at work here is that when we make students the subject matter of our teaching (their lives, likes, etc.) they are extremely interested and want to interact. LLHs, and similar activities, do this supremely.

LLHs advantages for teachers

Knowing our students

We see the main advantage of LLHs is in getting insight into our student’s lives, learning experiences, preferences, and why they feel the way they do about English. Most

LLHs seem to be quite honest, disturbingly so sometimes. For example, if they do not or did not like English students say so citing reasons such as a lack of feeling part of a community, not reciprocating the teacher’s intentions, or repudiating the language education system in general (readers are most welcome to read our collections of LLHs for myriad examples). Hearing such beliefs and gaining access into student’s inner thoughts about what English is or has been to them helps us to interact with them individually and to design interventions and activities that might challenge unproductive beliefs (Murphey 1995, 1996). On one level, we sometimes end up identifying with them and their anger at the system more than we do with our colleagues (Murphey 2004), which we believe helps us become better teachers. Knowing our students would seem to be a prerequisite to knowing how to teach well. How can one know what and how to teach without knowing their students first? (Well, actually many teachers do end up guessing, wrongly much of the time, which makes teaching a pretty precarious endeavor indeed!) Many other educators have stressed this notion of listening to our student’s voices in order to know how and what to teach (Bruner, 1990; Nunan, 1999).

Noticing: Success breeds success and the importance of affect

One recurring theme in the LLHs is the critical importance of success as a motivating factor for all learners. We usually have students of varying abilities and interests and it is admittedly a challenge to provide meaningful and achievement-oriented tasks that reach everyone; however,

the reverberating message in LLHs is that they need to feel successful. This has helped us to focus more widely on learner's differences and provide lessons that aim to reach all students in many ways. At times, it means providing a diverse range of tasks within the same activity or perhaps assigning additional work for the more able learners. We continually ask ourselves, "How can all our students feel successful?"

LLHs can also serve as a vital reminder of the importance of paying closer attention to the affective characteristics of our students. We notice in many of the stories a rich range of inner feelings spanning the exciting, scary, challenging, frustrating, successful, and stressful. Far from being purely a cognitive task, language learning involves an amazing array of emotions, self-esteem, and willingness to risk.

LLHs advantages for students

Just having the opportunity to express their feelings to an audience willing to listen (their classmates and teacher) seems to be beneficial for student motivation. Amazingly, enough, many students have never been asked how they liked their earlier schooling and what they thought about it. Sometimes they wax nostalgic about the good memories in their past. At other times, bad experiences are shared, joked about and put behind to move on. Talking about their experiences offers a sort of counseling opportunity, a catharsis.

Importantly, because writing an LLH draws on the student's own memories and experiences there are no complicated instructions to decipher and the students are the best source of information. They know the content already. However, often they are reconstructing events and more than a few have

commented they came to better understand their lives and what their teachers were doing through writing their LLHs.

This constructing and reflecting on their LLHs also allows them to review their learning goals and check their motivation. The following student comments provide insight into the meaning each derived from reflecting on their LLH:

- I hadn't thought about why I started learning English. After I remembered my purpose and reason for learning English, I came to want to study English.
- It was interesting for me to remember my school days. I've forgotten, but writing my LLH reminds me of a lot of experiences. For example, I remembered that I acted in a play speaking English and my effort to get good marks on tests.
- It reminds me of my will to learn English.
- If I am disappointed at learning English, once I read my LLH, I will be able to have power!!

Especially published LLHs can provide a sense of accomplishment for students and inspire them to stay motivated or become re-motivated through remembering their past successes. Many students develop a sense of confidence and empowerment through writing and sharing their LLHs. There is no denying the centrality of the teacher in the classroom, and yet a LLH is an opportunity to equalize this power balance. When students notice that their stories are the content of the class and that their voices count then the teaching-learning relationship becomes more equalized and validating for all.

Advantages for other students in class (pay it forward)

Reading each other's LLHs in class is a great bonding experience as the histories allow students to get to know each other better. They can all usually identify with each other's stories and seem to really enjoy sharing them. This can be especially important to the motivation of lower level students and creating better group dynamics. Often students model each other's good points after reading their LLHs and become near peer role models for each other (Murphey, 1998d; Yamashita, 1998). After reading each other's stories students often show this modeling with expressions like the following:

- I also like reading another student's writings. I can change and reform my way of thinking and studying English.
- *From my partner's LLH I got a new idea how to learn English.*

As such LLHs can provide a lot of inspiration to classmates, access to alternative ways of learning, and enjoyment. However, this can happen even beyond the source class of the publication. We have also had students read LLHs from other students, and at times from other countries, as guides to writing their own and they have responded positively.

At the macro level, LLHs have also been used with JHS and HS teachers to allow them to see what students say about their schooling experiences further down the road. We have used them with administrators to show how students are working and what they are saying about their present classes. At Dokkyo University, Tim was able to convince the curriculum committee to allow lower level students in the English department access to

a CBI curriculum, by highlighting the comments in a published collection of LLHs which indicated these students were not satisfied with their first year courses and needed diversity.

Conclusion

In conclusion, LLHs have provided us with access into student's worlds and helped them to gain greater access into each other's. With a clearer understanding of our students, we are able to focus our teaching more precisely both on individuals and the group. The students and their experiences have become the content of the course and this generates great motivation. Clearly, LLHs have the potential to inform and educate teachers in many ways, not only about the past but also to provide future direction. However, at their core, we must realize in the words of J.R.R. Tolkien, they are mostly just "thumping good stories." Indeed, for anyone reading a LLH, this should always be at the forefront.

Brad Deacon once began a story by saying, "Once upon a time there were three teachers in Japan who were very curious about their student's prior language learning experiences."

Tim Murphey once continued a story by saying, "So those three teachers decided to ask their students to write their language learning histories and to then publish them in a volume for the class and many others to share."

Paul Dore once concluded a story by saying, "I wonder how many exciting possibilities there are waiting for teachers, students, administrators and others to seize when they read these language learning histories!?"

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