

DIARY STUDIES OF SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION: A CRITICAL OVERVIEW

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Abstract

This overview of diary studies of second language acquisition¹ (SLA) begins with a brief discussion of the recent application of qualitative research methodology to the study of classroom language learning and teaching, and then offers a review of research findings of several previously conducted diary studies. It is argued that the major strength of second language diary research lies in its holistic, hypothesis-generating, and naturalistic characteristics, and that conducting diary studies for the investigation of second language learning and teaching in a formal instructional setting would be especially beneficial in Japan.

Introduction

One of the noticeable recent developments in SLA research has been the application of qualitative research methods to the study of language learning and teaching in classroom settings. Introspective and retrospective techniques have traditionally and extensively been used by researchers in such fields as sociology and anthropology. Influenced largely by the wide-

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spread successful use and acceptance of such research methods in those fields, SLA researchers have recently come to employ qualitative techniques, especially in second language classroom process research and classroom-centered research.² In this field of SLA studies, diary-keeping has been used as an introspective technique over the past ten years, with the aim of exploring various aspects of classroom language learning and teaching for which traditional quantitative or empirical research does not permit accurate investigation.

The purpose of this paper is to present a brief critical overview of diary studies of second language learning or acquisition. First, the application of both quantitative and qualitative approaches to SLA research, together with the strengths of qualitative approaches to second language classroom research, are considered. Then, an explanation is given of how diary studies are usually conducted, and some of the major findings of previous diary studies are reviewed. Finally, the strengths of the diary study, especially the advantages of applying the diary study to the investigation of classroom foreign language learning in Japan are considered, and some suggestions are made for future diary research.

Quantitative and Qualitative Approaches to SLA Research

The question of whether to employ quantitative as opposed to qualitative methods³ is currently a controversial issue in the field of SLA research. In recent years, there has been a marked trend toward greater use of quantitative methodology.⁴ Very few researchers seem to be willing to conduct other non-experimental, qualitative SLA studies. Ochsner (1979), discussing two research traditions, nomothetic (i.e., experimental) and hermeneutic (i.e., non-experimental) approaches to science, strongly criticizes this situation. He argues that SLA researchers need both of these traditions and therefore should "alternate between two kinds of equal research, one for objective, physical data and one for subjective, unobservable facts" (pp.

60-61). Cohen & Rosenfeld (1981) also emphasize the importance of using mentalistic techniques such as thinking aloud and self-observation in SLA studies, concluding that the combined use of both empirical and mentalistic research methods will lead us to a more complete understanding of the processes underlying SLA. A similar position is also taken by Long (1980), who proposes that future research on classroom language learning should use a combined approach so that the limitation of each research method will be successfully counter-balanced. Long argues that "a combination of methods plus some modifications in commonly used research designs is necessary if the field is to achieve its ultimate goal of testing a theory of second language acquisition with the aid of formal instruction" (p. 32).

Gaies (1983) suggests that there are three major advantages of qualitative second language classroom research. First, qualitative research allows for sufficient investigation of the learning processes of second language learners who participate little in verbal classroom interaction. Second, qualitative studies enable classroom researchers to explore and obtain important insights into learners' mental states or thought processes involved in classroom language learning experience. Third, the hypothesis-generating, not hypothesis-testing, characteristic of qualitative approaches perfectly fills the needs of second language classroom-centered research at the present stage, in which many significant variables remain to be discovered.

Discussing different research approaches to the study of everyday speech behavior, Wolfson (1986) recommends a two-pronged approach toward data collection and analysis in which systematic observation and controlled elicitation will be used as necessary complements to one another. Wolfson especially emphasizes the hypothesis-generating potential of qualitative observation in research on speech behavior:

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Because the design of an experiment or an elicitation instrument forces the researcher to decide in advance what variables will be tested and because native-speaker intuitions about the factors which condition speech behavior are so unreliable, it is safer to begin by systematic observation and to allow hypotheses to emerge from the data themselves. Then, an elicitation instrument can be developed which is sensitive to what has been found to occur in actuality, and the hypotheses which have emerged can be tested for generalizability and validity. (p. 697)

Together with the authors cited above, I am convinced that both quantitative and qualitative approaches must be used in a complementary manner – “a continued program of qualitative refinement and quantitative testing” (Chaudron, 1986, p. 714) is necessary, if we are to arrive at valid analyses and better understanding of SLA processes. In my view, the current application of qualitative approaches to second language classroom-centered research such as the use of diary-keeping for the investigation of classroom language learning processes is a most desirable trend.

Diary Studies: A Definition

A diary study in second language learning or teaching is “an account of a second language experience as recorded in a first-person journal” (Bailey & Ochsner, 1983, p. 189). The diarist, who keeps a personal record of classroom events, including feelings about and reactions to his or her own language experience, may be a language learner or teacher, but may not be the researcher himself or herself (several early diary studies, however, violate this last requirement). The diaries may be written during the classroom language lesson or after the class. They may be kept in the diarists’ native language or second, target language. Thus, the diary studies of classroom second language learning or teaching may differ

from one another in three major ways: (1) who the diarist is, (2) when the diary is written, and (3) what the language of the diary is – L1 or L2.

The process of conducting a diary study generally involves five main activities (Bailey, 1983, pp. 72-73):⁵

1. The diarist provides an account of his or her personal language learning (or teaching) history.
2. The diarist systematically records events, details, and feelings about the current language learning (or teaching) experience in a confidential and candid diary.
3. The journal entries are revised for public perusal. Names are changed and information damaging to others or extremely embarrassing to the learner is deleted.
4. The researcher studies the journal entries as data, looking for “significant” patterns and events. (An event is usually considered significant if it occurs frequently or with great salience.)
5. The factors identified as important to the language learning (or teaching) experience are interpreted and discussed in the finished diary study, either with or without illustrative data.

Diary Studies: A Brief Survey

The diary study of SLA is a relatively new field of research, and not many language learning or teaching diary studies have been published to date. Usually the papers are very long, especially when they include journal excerpts, and the research method, which is unfamiliar to many SLA researchers, needs to be more refined (cf. p. 29 below for some suggestions). Each of the diary studies, however, contains unique and noteworthy information which contributes to our understanding of the processes underlying second language learning and teaching in a formal classroom setting.

Schumann and Schumann (1977), the first diarist-researchers who published their results, examined their own second

language learning experiences in three different situations (i.e., studying Arabic as beginners in Tunisia with both exposure and formal instruction; studying Persian in an intermediate language class at UCLA; and studying Persian as intermediate learners in Iran without formal instruction). Analysis of the intensive journals kept by both authors revealed that for each individual there exist personal variables which can either promote or inhibit the process of second language learning. They identified six such personal variables affecting SLA: these were nesting patterns, desire to maintain one's own language learning agenda, reactions to dissatisfaction with teaching methods, motivation for choice of materials, eavesdropping vs. speaking as a language learning strategy, and transition anxiety. This study suggested strongly that no two persons will acquire a second language in precisely the same way. In a further examination of the journals kept in Tunisia and Iran, Schumann (1980) identified four additional personal factors which had important effects on her language learning in the target language country: these were competition vs. cooperation, the disadvantages of being an English-speaking second language learner, the role of the expatriate community in hindering a newcomer's second language learning, and being a woman language learner in Iran.

Jones (1977) also investigated her own second language learning through the diaries she kept during an 11-week intensive program of Indonesian in the target culture. Her study, which focuses on social and psychological factors, provides us with a detailed description of how such factors as language shock, culture shock, culture stress, and social distance, interacting with one another, influenced an individual learner's second language learning in the target language community. Although she experienced both positive factors (e.g., friendly attitudes towards her by her Indonesian host family) and negative factors (e.g., rejection of the teaching method and the competitive Indonesian program), she progressed quite rapidly in

the target language. In the concluding section she notes that the positive factors outweighed the negative factors and allowed acquisition to take place during the 11-week span of her language learning experience.

Bailey (1980) kept a diary of her language learning experience in a ten-week French reading course at UCLA. In her introspective analysis of the journal entries, she found that such factors as the language learning environment, teaching style, and feedback from the teacher were influential in her second language learning experiences. First, the journal reveals that the social environment as well as the physical environment (e.g., seating arrangement) affected her classroom language learning — that her attitude toward learning French improved as the social climate in the class improved. Second, the journal indicates that the teacher's democratic teaching style, especially her openness and willingness to treat the students as her social equals, positively influenced her language learning and contributed to her increasing enthusiasm for studying French. Third, the journal includes many references to her success with the language, her discomfort with perceived failure, and how much she was influenced and encouraged by the teacher's positive feedback to her and to her classmates. The journal also indicates that her success and positive feedback received from the teacher increased her enthusiasm for learning the target language.

In a later study, Bailey (1983) discusses the relationship between two affective factors, competitiveness and anxiety, manifested in her language learning diary of the university French class discussed above. She found that she was both highly competitive and highly anxious at the beginning, but her anxiety decreased as she became more proficient than her classmates; she indicates that the manifestations of competitiveness frequently coincided with comments about anxiety in the French classroom. After comparing and discussing ten similar diary studies in terms of the issues of competitiveness

and anxiety, she proposed the hypothesis that language classroom anxiety can be caused and/or aggravated by the learner's competitiveness when he/she perceives himself/herself as less proficient than the object of comparison. In addition, a case study conducted by Schmidt and Frota (1986), which investigated the development of conversational ability in Portuguese by one of the researchers during a five-month stay in Brazil, also includes an introspective diary study.

Unlike the diary studies summarized above in which the diarist-researcher examined his or her own second language learning experiences, Brown (1983, 1985b) analyzed the diaries kept by 36 English-speaking older and younger adult language learners who took an eight-week intensive Spanish course at a missionary training center in the U.S. The primary purpose of this diary study was to see if older adults differ from younger adults in their perceptions of important language learning factors. A close examination of the subjects' journals resulted in the identification of 76 factors,⁶ and then these factors were listed for each subject group according to frequency of mention in the diaries. Statistical analyses revealed that while the overall language learning experience was perceived similarly by both age groups, the most important factors in the language learning process were perceived quite differently.

Five Strengths and Three Limitations of Diary Studies

As a qualitative approach to second language classroom-centered research, the diary study has a number of noteworthy advantages. One crucial advantage of the second language diary study is that it provides a detailed description of "all" aspects of language learning or teaching experience. While product-oriented experimental studies allow for investigating only one or a few pre-selected aspects of the second language learning experience at one time, process-oriented ethnographic studies such as the diary study enable researchers to investigate all

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aspects of the classroom language experience over a period of time. That is, a holistic investigation of classroom language learning or teaching is made possible in second language diary research.

Another important advantage of the diary study is that it is exploratory and creative in the sense that it not only generates new hypotheses concerning SLA but discovers new variables playing important roles in classroom language learning or teaching. Thus it paves the way for further experimental investigation. Many of the supporters of diary research (e.g., Bailey & Ochsner, 1983) have recognized its significance as an investigation preliminary to more controlled, experimental research studies. In discussing the strengths of ethnographic research, Long (1980) points out its creative characteristics as follows:

Ethnographic field work is primarily a hypothesis-generating, not hypothesis-testing, undertaking. When applied to a field, such as classroom language learning, about which little is already known, it benefits from its eschewal of the “blinkers”. . . . The potentially limitless scope of ethnographic enquiry means that, in theory at least, it has the potential for (re)discovering these or other facts which appear to be important, rather than simply taking over variables identified in other (albeit related) fields, and for describing their perceived relevance in concrete settings and from the perspectives of the participants instead of that of an outsider. (p. 27)

The third strength of second language diary research is that it deals with “natural” classroom data. The diary study, when journal-keeping is not concurrent with classroom observation, especially by a non-participant, is probably the SLA study most directly tied to the natural classroom setting (although the journals of the learners in Brown’s [1985a] study have shown that the learning situation can be changed to some

extent by the diary-keeping itself). The diary study's chief virtue in this regard is that it requires little research intrusion; thus it does not strongly affect the teaching process it observes.

The fourth strength of the diary study lies in the fact that it sheds light on otherwise unobservable aspects of second language learning or teaching experience, particularly on hidden psychological variables in SLA such as affective factors (e.g., motivation), cognitive style, language learning strategies, decision making, self-esteem, and sources of enthusiasm. Also the diary study is one of the best methods for focusing on the individual learner, for discovering individual learner variables or personal variables which affect the process of second language learning.⁷ The excerpts taken from the journals kept on the same second language class by seven different learners (Brown, 1985a, pp. 128-129), for example, show that perceptions of the language learning experience are completely personal and individual. In fact, the central value of the diary study, its advocates claim, has been to "give teachers and researchers insights on the incredible diversity of students to be found even within a homogeneous language classroom" (Bailey, 1983, p. 98).

Finally, the diary study is not only a research tool, but may also be used for other practical purposes such as self-awareness, self-evaluation, self-improvement, and orientation for other learners — it can be of immediate use for diarist-learners or an aid to their second language learning. For example, Bailey (1983) claims that the act of diary-keeping itself can be therapeutic for language learners, leading them to identify and overcome factors which have harmful effects on their classroom second language learning. Many journal excerpts of previously conducted diary studies (e.g., Brown, 1983; Schmidt & Frota, 1986) also provide evidence of the learners being aware of, and considering how to solve, their own problems.

Five major advantages of the second language diary study

have been discussed above, but diary research is, of course, not without limitations. One obvious limitation of the diary study is that, like other case studies, its findings lack generalizability unless the obtained data is quantified as in the case of Brown's (1983, 1983b) diary research on second language learning in the Spanish classroom. Usually the diary study deals with an individual's language acquisition taking place in a unique environment, which makes it impossible to generalize findings to other learners and other learning environments – results may be totally idiosyncratic. However, the ungeneralizability issue, it does seem, is of little concern to most of the advocates of the diary study (e.g., Bailey, 1983). Though admitting this is the primary weakness of diary research, they claim that to attempt to generalize from the results may not even be desirable. These researchers feel that the most significant contribution of such diary studies is what they can uncover concerning personal variables involved in second language learning, acquisition, or teaching. Another limitation of the introspective diary study is concerned with the burden placed on the diarist-researcher. As Long (1980) puts it,

“Participant” diary studies of this kind involve the researcher in two related but separate tasks, keeping a diary and learning (or teaching) a second language. This is obviously a “plus” as far as their potential for revealing insights into language learning is concerned, but the divided attention resulting from the dual activity could constitute a considerable obstacle to the study of classroom processes. (p. 30)

In order to solve this problem, he suggests that the diarist-researcher enroll in a lower-level second language class so that diary-keeping will not become too heavy a burden on his/her second language learning. Moreover, the diary study also has the disadvantage of being relatively time-consuming. In comparison with product-oriented quantitative research studies,

the diary study, which is concerned with the process of SLA, requires considerable time in gathering the data and analyzing it. However, it usually takes less time in the data collection process than participant observation, another representative qualitative approach to second language classroom research.

Even with these limitations, the diary study enables SLA researchers and teachers not only to realize the complex nature of the classroom language learning process but to recognize various factors which facilitate or hinder second language learning in the classroom. Thus, language learning diaries have a great many instructive implications for language teaching; they serve to inform teachers of how to help second language learners learn more efficiently and effectively in a classroom environment.

Three Reasons for Diary Research in Japan

Applying diary research to the investigation of foreign language learning is beneficial in Japan on three major grounds. First, the acquisition of English as a foreign language (EFL) in Japan takes place almost entirely in formal instructional settings – that is, the exposure to EFL is almost entirely confined to the controlled classroom situation; in light of this fact, we can say that studies focusing on the classroom language learning process such as diary research are meaningful and worth conducting in Japan. The second reason is concerned with the present state of SLA research in Japan – very little investigation has been done thus far concerning second language learning, acquisition, or teaching both in and out of the classroom, so much still remains unknown. Given this situation, it seems highly desirable that exploratory studies such as the diary study be conducted somewhat prior to hypothesis-testing experimentation in order to discover variables and patterns affecting or governing the language learning process as well as to generate new hypotheses concerning SLA. Third, the investigation into classroom second language learning in

Japan greatly benefits from the method of the diary study. Japanese learners of EFL tend not to be good at taking an active part in classroom activities verbally, compared to learners of other nationalities such as Spanish-speaking students. As Gaies (1983) has pointed out, the diary study, not dealing with the students' verbal participation in the classroom, allows for investigating the learning process of even such "quiet" learners who seem to constitute the majority of EFL students in Japan. For these reasons, the diary study appears to be the very kind of SLA research that is needed in Japan today.

Suggestions for Future Diary Research

It is encouraging to see that the current employment of qualitative methodology in second language classroom research has noticeably involved such ethnographic techniques as diary-keeping. As has already been stated above, the diary study is a fairly young field of SLA research, and its methodology remains to be further refined. It is expected that with the gradual refinement of the method, interesting and enlightening findings which contribute to deeper understanding of the SLA process in a classroom situation will be presented in the future. For those who are interested in conducting second language diary research, I would like to suggest the following in terms of the important issues of generalizability, reliability, and validity.

The first point to note is concerned with the above-mentioned generalizability issue. It seems highly desirable, in my opinion, that the number of diarists should not be just one but several or many – that the researcher should investigate the language learning process of multiple subjects rather than doing a self-observational study of his/her own second language learning so that the idiosyncrasy of the findings would be avoided as much as possible. This does not mean, however, that I deny the enormous value and significance of introspec-

tive diary research, which provides us with fairly valid self-report data obtained through particularly keen observation which is supplemented by introspection. Further, it is also desirable that the journal data obtained from the subjects should be somehow quantified as was previously done in Brown's (1983, 1985b) research, so as to make the results more generalizable to other populations of second language learners.

The second point to be taken into account is the problem of reliability. To analyze the journal entries is usually time-consuming, and can be too subjective if done by one person; moreover, "significant" patterns and factors in second language learning experience, the finding of which is the primary purpose of the diary study, do not seem to be easily decided on, especially when the researchers analyzes other subjects' journals instead of his/her own. In order to avoid subjective judgments as much as possible or to make results more reliable, analysis of the journals should be done by at least two or three researchers. It is also important that the analysis should be done independently, and if disagreement occurs between the examiners on some point, they should consult with each other to arrive at a final agreement.

The final point concerns the problem of validity. It is related to the problem of precise description and measurement of psychological variables in second language learning, which has been a problematical issue in past SLA studies. It seems that introspective diary studies pose few problems with respect to the validity issue, in view of the fact that the diarist-researcher who observes classroom activities analyzes his/her own record of personal thoughts and feelings. It is appropriate to assume in this case that the psychological domain in classroom second language learning would be precisely described and accurately assessed. In non-introspective diary studies, on the other hand, in order for the affective dimension of language learning experience to be precisely described, it is essential and neces-

sary for each subject-diarist to write his/her comments and feelings openly and honestly. As it is a frequent occurrence that the subject-diarists, being conscious of the researcher's judgments of what they have written, will write only those things desirable or not detrimental to the teacher, institution, classmates, etc., the researcher must see to it that the journals reflect the subjects' honest and sincere expression of classroom events, comments, and feelings. To accomplish this, the researcher or teacher should try to create a non-threatening learning environment. Another effective way of obtaining valid self-report data from the subject-diarists is to make the journals confidential. In non-introspective diary research, which inevitably involves inference by the researcher, it is also necessary, in order for the psychological aspect of SLA to be precisely assessed, that the researchers' analysis of the subjects' journals should be supplemented by other qualitative techniques like questionnaires and personal interviews to gain more accurate information concerning the subjects' actual process of classroom second language learning. This process takes more time, but is surely needed in order to obtain more valid data and analysis of classroom language learning experiences.

Most of the diary studies that have been conducted to date are introspective, self-observational studies of second language learning experienced by the researcher himself or herself. Diary research with valid self-report data has made an important contribution to clearer understanding of the classroom SLA process over the past decade, especially in the area of personal or individual learner variables. This will continue. Also, I expect that more and more non-introspective diary studies involving multiple subjects, data quantification, and therefore generalizable findings will be conducted for a further exploration of the affective, psychological dimension of classroom second language learning.

Conclusion

Although there almost inevitably remains the problem of subjectivity or ungeneralizability, the diary study, as one of the qualitative approaches to second language classroom-centered research, has enormous advantages. As has been discussed above, they include its holistic, hypothesis-generating, and naturalistic characteristics, its focus on personal variables in second language learning, and its immediate use for diarist-learners. It would probably be best to consider, as Bailey (1983) and Bailey & Ochsner (1983) claim, that ethnographic research such as the diary study differs in kind from traditional empirical research, thus providing us with a different kind of information.

This creative, hypothesis-generating study of classroom language learning processes is worth conducting in Japan, where foreign language learning takes place almost entirely in formal instructional situations. Moreover, little is known about the actual process of SLA and about factors influencing classroom language learning or teaching in the context of various schools in Japan. It is strongly suggested that future second language classroom research focuses more on qualitative studies to explore unobservable, psychological aspects of language learning or teaching, and most importantly, to allow new hypotheses to emerge for further experimental investigation.

Notes

¹In this paper the terms *acquisition* and *learning* are used interchangeably, as are *second language* and *foreign language*.

²Second language classroom research may be defined as "research on second language learning and teaching all or part of whose data are derived from the observation or measurement of the classroom performance of teachers and students" (Long, 1980, p. 3).

³Quantitative research may be defined as "the kind of research that involves the tallying, manipulation, or systematic aggregation of quantities of data," while qualitative research is "any attempt to cite authorities

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or report observations, introspections, or descriptions of language or its use without in some sense quantifying the results" (Henning, 1986, p. 702). Quantitative research is also known by such names as scientific, nomothetic, experimental, empirical, and objective, while qualitative research is also known by such names as anthropological, ethnographic, ideographic, hermeneutic, mentalistic, naturalistic, non-experimental, humanistic, rational, and subjective.

⁴Henning's (1986) analysis of articles published in *TESOL Quarterly* and *Language Learning* shows that the percentage of quantitative research has increased from 12% (1970) to 61% (1985), and from 24% (1970) to 92% (1985), respectively.

⁵See Bailey & Ochsner (1983) for methodological guidelines for second language diarists (e.g., what kind of information should an acceptable diary study provide) and analytical standards for readers.

⁶Among the identified factors are time, success, materials, tests, anxiety, motivation, health, environment, memory, other learners, research intrusions, assignments, feedback, learning strategies, culture, empathy, and teacher attitudes. The factor that was most frequently mentioned by both groups was the time factor.

⁷Schumann (1978) provides a taxonomy of factors influencing SLA, which includes social, affective, personality, cognitive, biological, aptitude, personal, input, and instructional factors.

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振替・東京 1-54800

定期購読申込書

私は以下の期間USA TODAYの定期購読をお申し込みします。

※ご希望の期間に☐をおつけください。

3ヵ月/16,000円 6ヵ月/30,000円 1年/58,000円

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アメリカ中を網羅した最新情報が入ります。USA TODAYは、アメリカ唯一の全国紙。広大な国土と社会の多様性に対応する幅広いネットワークにより、その日のアメリカをリアルタイムに世界中にお伝えします。密度の濃い生きたニュースが、あなたにアメリカ在住のビジネスマンと同じハイレベルの情報を提供いたします。

ジャンル別で見やすいカラフルな紙面構成です。溶れる情報をジャンル別に整理したカラフルな二部構成の紙面。政治・経済・社会・海外・生活・世界の天気などの一般ニュース版と、スポーツ・マネー版が細かく明確に区別されています。スपीドリーに知りたい情報を把握できます。文章が短く平易なため辞書なしでも読めます。見出しや記事は、やさしく簡潔な文章で書かれていますので、英字新聞にあまり馴染みのない方でも内容が理解できます。いわば「辞書なしで読める」新聞です。

■定期購読のご案内

主要都市近郊では国内の新聞と同じ感覚で毎日(週5回)お届けいたします。

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- 法人特別割引 1ヵ月/4,000円(10部以上一括購読。詳しくはダイヤル)

お申し込み、お問い合わせ。

国際コミュニケーションズ

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