

Learner Diaries as a Tool to Heighten Chinese Students' Metacognitive Awareness of English Learning

Carissa Young & Fong Yoke Sim

While learner autonomy research has suggested that diaries can help learners focus on their language learning, few studies have examined how learners' awareness of a foreign language heightens over time. This paper illustrates the metacognitive knowledge development of 38 English language students through diary-keeping. Analyses of 698 diary entries showed that the students began to focus more on the cognitive processes underlying their English learning. Besides, they constantly evaluated and changed the strategies they used in the accomplishment of language tasks. The authors conclude that learners who reflect upon their language learning experiences are more aware of their metacognitive knowledge. By raising their awareness of English learning, learners could gain new insights and become more autonomous.

Introduction

Learner autonomy literature has suggested that language learners have their own beliefs, opinions and concepts about language learning. They have a repertoire of strategies for various language tasks (Wenden, 1986; Nunan, 1988). This "know-how" of language learning is called metacognitive knowledge, which is referred to as "the stable, stable although sometimes incorrect knowledge that learners have acquired about language, learning and the language learning process; also referred to as knowledge or concepts about language learning or learner beliefs" (Wenden, 1991: 163). There are three main types of metacognitive knowledge: person knowledge, strategic knowledge and task knowledge. Person knowledge includes what learners know about how they process information and what they know about themselves as language learners. Strategic knowledge is the general knowledge learners have about the nature of a strategy, and how a

strategy can be used effectively (Wenden, 1991). Task knowledge refers to what learners know about the nature of language and communication, and what they need to know about a specific task such as its purpose, demands and degree of difficulties (Wenden, 1995). An awareness of one's metacognitive knowledge is referred to as metacognitive awareness. By raising their metacognitive awareness, learners become more active and independent in their learning process (Wenden, 1991; Chamot and O'Malley, 1994).

One way to heighten language learners' metacognitive awareness is to have them reflect upon their language learning processes regularly by keeping a learner diary, which is defined as "a first-person account of a language learning or teaching experience, documented through regular, candid entries in a personal journal" (Bailey, 1990: 215). Diary-keeping has been included in some learner training curricula as a self-assessment exercise (Nunan, 1988; Ellis & Sinclair, 1989; Chamot and O'Malley, 1994).

Previous work with learner diaries has shown that diary-keeping helps learners become more aware of their language learning. A study conducted in Japan examined thirty-six diary entries kept by one Japanese student while she was enrolled in an eight-week intensive English course (Matsumoto, 1989). Analysis of the diaries showed that the student became more aware of factors like praise from teachers, competition among classmates and anxiety which affected her language learning. The awareness of these "personal factors" (similar to person knowledge in this study), however, could not be generalised because of the small sample size and short period of data collection. Regarding language learners' knowledge of strategy use, Nunan (1996) asked 60 Chinese ESL students to keep a guided learner diary during a twelve-week English course. It was found that these students gradually focused more on language content and learning processes. A comparison of a few extracts at the beginning and the end of the course showed that the students could describe their strategy use more accurately and at greater length over time. However, the students' person knowledge and task knowledge development were not examined. In Singapore, Goh (1997) analysed the weekly diaries kept by 40 Chinese EFL students over a period of ten weeks and identified 63 sub-categories of metacognitive knowledge in listening. The study did not focus on

how diaries helped the learners raise their metacognitive awareness in listening.

Although the above papers have claimed that learner diaries are helpful in raising learners' metacognitive awareness, few published papers have illustrated how diaries reflect the trends of learners' metacognitive knowledge development. This paper will, therefore, illustrate how learner diaries might help Chinese students heighten their metacognitive awareness of EFL learning over time. It is hoped that the results reported in this paper would help language teachers better understand the metacognitive knowledge development of EFL learners.

Method

Subjects

This diary study involved 38 students (31 males and 7 females) from the People's Republic of China. They were 19 years old on average and had been studying English for six years prior to enrolling in an intensive English course conducted by the National University of Singapore under the auspices of the Singapore Ministry of Education. They underwent this six-month intensive English course to prepare themselves for tertiary studies. These students had classes for five and a half hours a day from Monday through Friday between December 1997 and June 1998. They belonged to two tutorial groups, each of which was taught by one of the authors and four other tutors. This meant that the students normally met each of their tutors once a week.

Procedures

At the beginning of the course, each student was given a file which contained a diary (with detachable sheets of paper) and guidelines for diary writing. They were asked to record their English learning experiences by completing the following sentences every teaching week (adapted from Nunan, 1988:134):

This week I learned...

This week I spoke English with...

This week I made these mistakes...

This week I knew these things about Singapore...
My difficulties are...
I would like to know...
My English learning plans for next week are...

The students were given guidelines so that they could document their English learning experiences within a framework and avoid giving irrelevant information (Nunan, 1996; Goh, 1997).

The students gave the authors oral permission to analyse their diaries anonymously. They wrote their diary entries on the loose sheets and submitted one entry per week to the authors. These diary entries were read by the authors and returned to the students a week later. For research purposes, the diary entries were photocopied with permission. By the end of the course, 698 diary entries had been collected.

Data analysis

The diary entries were coded for the identification of metacognitive knowledge using the classification scheme proposed by Wenden (1991). The original scheme consisted of three main categories and eight sub-categories of metacognitive knowledge. In this study, some modifications were made to classify and define the metacognitive knowledge revealed in the learner diaries. Two additional sub-categories of strategic knowledge were added. One of these new sub-categories, Possible strategies for improving skills, represents the learners' knowledge about the strategies that they would probably use to improve their language skills. The second new sub-category, Evaluation of strategy use, refers to the students' comments on a certain strategy that they had used. Appendix A shows the classification scheme developed for the present study.

The metacognitive knowledge classification scheme was used to code the diary data. Every remark that revealed a student's metacognitive knowledge of English learning was highlighted and the sub-category of metacognitive knowledge was written in the margin of the student's diary sheet. Using this scheme, the authors coded all the diary entries written by their own students.

To check the consistency of coding, both authors coded ten random samples of diary entries independently and then compared the results. To establish the intercoder reliability coefficient, the number of cases coded the same by the two authors was divided by the total number of cases coded by the authors (Scholfield, 1995). The intercoder reliability coefficient was 0.8. The authors resolved any coding discrepancies through discussion.

Results and Discussion

“Would learner diaries help heighten students’ metacognitive awareness of English learning over time?” Analysis of the students’ diary entries throughout the course revealed that their metacognitive awareness of EFL learning was clearly heightened. In the following report, the students’ names are replaced by pseudonyms. The original sentences in the students’ diaries are cited.

Person Knowledge

An examination of the diaries showed that the student-diaryists became more aware of the cognitive processes underlying their learning. Most students reported changes in their understanding of their cognitive processes of listening, speaking and vocabulary learning. The early entries mentioned many serious difficulties (as perceived by the students) but these gradually became less problematic.

These Chinese EFL students seldom used English to communicate with one another before coming to Singapore. Thus, they encountered listening comprehension problems when they interacted with the local people, whose English was different from what they had heard over the radio or in the language classroom. Qiang believed that the local people he met spoke too fast (coded by the authors as cognitive factors that affect language learning), which was an obstacle to his listening comprehension. However, at the end of the course, he found that he could process the information better as he became more familiar with the local accent (nature of language and communication).

Qiang (Week 4):

... I asked a Singapore student... He told me what I should do. But he spoke very quickly and I couldn't understand him very well. So he repeated 2 or 3 times until I knew.

Qiang (Week 20):

Compared to speaking, I made more progress in listening. At the beginning of the course, ... I had to put all my attention in listening. But now I find it is very easy for me to follow my teachers and I began to get used to "Singlish".

Similar comments were made by other learners. At the beginning of the course, Gang mentioned in his diaries that he could only understand his teachers' English. Towards the end of the course, he found that he had made progress.

Certain individuals appeared to have been influenced by affective factors that affect learning, such as interest or the lack of interest, growing confidence, shyness and nervousness. In his diaries, Rong wrote:

Rong (Week 1):

I spoke less when I want to speak or have something to speak I didn't know how to say in English.

Rong (Week 5):

When I stayed with my classmates we never spoke English...they feel shy to speak English especially making some mistakes and smiled at by other persons.

Shyness was perhaps one of the main reasons why the students were quiet in class in the first few weeks. They had to overcome problems such as "talking with strangers" (Hua, Week 4) and anxiety about "being laughed at when I couldn't express myself correctly" (Jie, Week 8). Some students believed that it was strange for a Chinese to speak to another Chinese in English (Rong, Week 5). However, even when they were anxious, they encouraged themselves to persevere. The awareness of the above affective factors led them to use new strategies to solve the problems. Strategies like creating opportunities to converse with English-speaking people (Qin, Week 1; Dong, Week 2) and practising spoken English with friends in the students' hostels (Xin, Week 1; Yan, Week 1) were reported to be useful for skill improvement.

To overcome his shyness, Rong chose to practise his spoken English with his roommate because there was no one else. Once he got over the initial awkwardness, he could see the significance of the task:

Rong (Week 7):

I have spoke English with Gang in our room. ...we both want to improve our abilities of speaking. In our room, there are only us two. We didn't feel shy.

Rong (Week 20):

Now never shy when I speak English.

The above results show that the students' awareness of the cognitive and affective factors influencing them might have positive effects on their language learning. From the diary data, it would appear that these students were able to think about the problems and became more aware of their own information-processing styles and emotional responses. They then used appropriate strategies to overcome their weaknesses.

Strategic Knowledge

Students' knowledge about strategies increased over time. Many of them used different strategies to achieve their goals or to overcome their difficulties. For some, it was a trial-and-error approach. Others might have stumbled upon a strategy. In their first diary, all of them considered memorising new words to be the principal vocabulary learning strategy. When they were prompted to think about their language learning by the guidelines, some evaluated the strategic knowledge that they had acquired and started to gain new insights into the use of effective strategies.

For example, at the outset, Hao reported memorising new words as his strategy (strategy for particular tasks). He changed his approach when he had thought about how and why he should choose certain strategies (principles for strategy choice):

Hao (Week 1):

I should keep on reciting new words.

Hao (Week 2):

I don't know what I should pay more attention to? Comprehension, new words, grammar, or sth. else?

Hao (Week 6):

I won't put the emphasis on new words. ...Because I find I can't memorise many words that I've noted down and plenty of words are not used frequently. I'll forget them soon.

Towards the end of the course, many students like Hao had a more profound knowledge about how to choose and use a strategy effectively. They began to realise that memorising words alone would not help them become more proficient. One possible reason is that diary-keeping had stimulated these students to rethink their strategy use. Their strategic knowledge developed rapidly as they moved from an EFL environment like China to a country such as Singapore, where English is widely used in daily life. They found that they should not only "learn" new words, but also "learn how to use" them. As Dong and Le wrote:

Dong (Week 2):

...if we want to learn English better, we should put ourselves into an English language environment. That means you should talk more in English, think more in English and read more in English.

Le (Week 3):

I will master as more words as possible, not only know their meaning, but also understand how to use them.

The students tried out strategies like learning new words within a framework (Jian, Week 9) or reading local newspapers (Xin, Week 1). Their regular reflection upon their learning might have enabled them to become more aware of English learning and English usage, which helped them polish up their English vocabulary learning skills.

Task Knowledge

The diaries revealed a growing awareness of tasks, especially in the areas of speaking and listening which were the major concerns for most students. In the first week of the course, the students were encouraged to listen to the radio after class. Although most of them reported listening to BBC World Service

every day, few knew how to accomplish this listening task. After Qi had listened to BBC for two weeks, he assessed the level of difficulty of this task (task demand):

Qi (Week 3):

I haven't find any progress on my listening, and I am sure that in future I must make progress, I will listen to BBC everyday.

Qi (Week 6):

I only knew the word I heard, I didn't catch the whole sentence.

When he realised his weakness, Qi paid more attention to the listening task. He checked the meaning of an unfamiliar word and thought about the nature of English learning (nature of language and communication).

Qi (Week 12):

...learning English is not like learning mathematics. When you learn maths, you can say I know how to solve this problem, that problem, but to English you can't say so.

His hard work paid off finally. Two weeks later, he mentioned his progress in listening comprehension (task purpose or significance) and the guessing strategy he used to complete the task (strategies for particular task).

Qi (Week 14):

I can know the general meanings of BBC. Though I didn't understand it sometimes, I can make sure of what they talked about. According to my experience I can imagine what happened.

Some students like Qi might not have realised that they had acquired new task knowledge. As revealed in the second half of that week's diary, Qi reported that he could understand the coverage of a football match by BBC. Until he reported it in his diary, Qi did not know that the background knowledge he had acquired was useful to his listening comprehension (task demands):

Qi (Week 14):

Last night I listened to BBC. They talked about football. To my surprise, I found it was easy for me to understand what they said. And I understood all the words almost in half an hour. Maybe that's because I know something about the football.

From that week onwards, Qi had some idea about how to understand radio English and he had a clearer focus. The significance of the task (task purpose or significance) was reported in his last diary entry:

Qi (Week 20):

Now I can know what the English speaker said, I am sure that I have made some progress in English listening.

Similar comments were found in other students' diaries although the significance of the task varied from student to student. In his last diary entry, Ji wrote, "when I first listened to BBC, I could hardly catch anything. But now, I could understand BBC partially, sometimes completely!" (Ji, Week 20). The accomplishment of a task might have given the learners some encouragement, as Wu wrote, "I find that I have been able to catch several items of news from BBC. It makes me very happy" (Wu, Week 10).

The results of the above analysis suggest that when the students in this sample faced a problem during a task, they might not find the solutions immediately. Given time to reflect on their language learning after class, they might think about the nature of language learning as well as the factors that hindered the successful completion of the task. The authors speculate that the dynamic process of reflection might be one of the factors that contributed to the accomplishment of the task.

Pedagogical Implications

At the end of the course, the students were asked to evaluate the usefulness of diary-keeping in their English learning. Most of them reflected that they could see their learning processes through diaries. Some students suggested that they should try free-writing when they had a better command of English. However, to avoid writing diaries that are irrelevant to language learning, these students suggested that teachers give guidelines for the contents at

the beginning but be more flexible about guidelines after a few weeks. Therefore, the authors recommend that from time to time teachers ask students to write on a particular topic of language learning. Topics like “How to increase my English vocabulary” or “How to overcome my shyness in speaking English” may stimulate students to reflect on and evaluate the metacognitive knowledge they have acquired.

To make full use of the learner diaries, teachers can initiate small group discussions regularly to guide students towards a greater awareness of metacognitive knowledge, clarify doubts and share experiences. During the discussion, teachers can introduce effective strategies to their students (Matsumoto, 1996), give students the opportunity to assess the effectiveness of their learner strategies (Goh, 1997), or encourage students to share their beliefs about language learning with others (Wenden, 1986). Exchange of ideas about the demands of a particular language task and ways to accomplish it may also enhance students’ awareness of the language task.

The results of this study support the arguments of Bailey (1983) and Matsumoto (1989) that affective factors determine the results of students’ learning. Positive feedback from teachers on the diaries, to a certain extent, is an important motivating factor for students to be frank and persevering in their diary writing. Teachers’ encouragement can carry students through difficult times. Teachers’ advice on learning skills enables students to think about the tasks that they are doing. In addition, teachers can gauge the intangible affective factors involved in their students’ language learning by reading and responding to the students’ diaries.

Conclusion

In conclusion, learner diaries could be one of the tools that help Chinese students raise their metacognitive awareness of English learning over time. However, since this study focused on a small group of Chinese EFL learners, the results of this study could not possibly be generalised for the population of all EFL learners. Therefore, the authors suggest that other teacher-researchers conduct similar diary studies with their own students. Besides, they could examine the effects of topical diary writing on their students’

metacognitive awareness of language learning and compare the results with those of the present project.

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Appendix A. The Metacognitive Knowledge Classification Scheme Developed for the Present Study

Type	Category	Definition	Example*
Person Knowledge	Cognitive factors that affect learning	Knowledge of the cognitive aspects that influence the perception, organisation and recall of information	<i>Some films can be understood easily but some others are different...because the actors always keep on speaking...They also speak so fast that I often cannot catch it (Wang, Week 15).</i>
	Affective factors that affect learning	Knowledge of the emotional dimensions that influence language learning	<i>I am afraid to open my mouth to speak English because I don't want to make mistakes (Gang, Week 1).</i>
Strategic Knowledge	Strategies for particular tasks	Learners' knowledge of strategies that they have used	<i>My basic strategy is to skip all the unknown words and to seek for the topic I'm interested in, then read through know about its basic meaning (Dong, Week 13).</i>
	Principles for strategy choice	Learners' knowledge concerning why they used a strategy to increase their language proficiency	<i>I began to read more newspaper...it would be good not only to enlarge my vocabulary, but also improve my ability of writing (Cheng, Week 9).</i>
	Evaluation of strategy use	Learners' assessment of a strategy that they have tried	<i>I usually looked up every new word in the dictionary...But since this week I felt that it was not very useful (Yu, Week 3).</i>
	Possible strategies for improving skills	Learners' knowledge about the strategies that they will probably use to improve their language skills	<i>Next week I will go to Computer Centre to email my friends in China. So I can do more writing in English (Jing, Week 3).</i>
Task Knowledge	Task purpose or significance	Learners' knowledge relating to why they do a task and how they appreciate its significance	<i>I think the most useful thing I've learned this week is writing skills. Through this, I acquire the knowledge 'how to chose a thesis' (Wei, Week 2).</i>
	Nature of language and communication	Knowledge of how language is used in interaction, including the differences among cultures and genres	<i>There are only 1500 basic words in Chinese. You can tell the meaning of a phrase by connecting the meaning of each word. But you can't do that in English (Xiao, Week 2).</i>
	Need for deliberate effort	Knowledge regarding when conscious effort is required in the accomplishment of a particular task	<i>I cannot cover a new word naturally...so I think I should improve my skill of it in the following days (Wen, Week 6).</i>
	Task demands	Knowledge associated with how to complete a task, and what resources are needed to perform the task	<i>Since we have learned some knowledge in class, it's a little easier for me to talk about this topic (Qiang, Week 8).</i>

* The diary extracts are cited in their original form. Students' names are replaced with pseudonyms. Source: Adapted from Wenden (1991: 49).