

# The Use of Learning Autobiographies in Language Learning

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## ABSTRACT

This article addresses the issue of learner training through the use of learner diaries. The diary is defined as form of reflective autobiography in which learners consider and scrutinise about their learning conceptions making them explicit. Learning autobiographies are part of the whole repertory of reflective techniques which helps with the development of learning skills: reflection on the learning process or on learning styles, reflection on one's own motivation or on one's personal skills. The writing of the diary is found to contribute greatly to learner development due to the reflection that takes place in its writing. There are many benefits for students writing a diary, but here we concentrate on its contribution in the development of metacognition, in particular the role of reflection and awareness of learning strategies and metacognitive knowledge. A case will be made for the role that reflective awareness plays in getting individuals to reorganise or restructure their knowledge.

## Introduction

Diary studies have for long played a central role in the social sciences. In education, however, researchers have been rather slow to see the potential of autobiographical material and other personal reports on learning (Powell, 1985). This is more even so in the case of research in Second Language Acquisition.

However, over the last twenty years, diaries have become progressively more common in Second Language Acquisition research, especially in the area of learning strategies. These diaries have normally been written by applied linguists and language teachers who wanted to have an introspective account of what was going on during the process of learning a foreign language, in some cases the sixth foreign language (Schumann and Schumann, 1977; Bailey, 1983, Schmidt and Frota, 1985). These and others wanted to investigate issues not accessible through outside observation. These studies and others provide valuable insights into social, psychological and affective aspects of language development.

Diaries or journals have also been used by teachers as an instrument for methodological reflection under the umbrella of Shön's (1983) conception of the teacher as a reflective practitioner. Teachers in preparation or practising teachers produce individual written accounts of their classroom experiences and their

subsequent reflections on the teaching/learning process. The underlying objective is that teachers articulate their approach to teaching and define good teaching. McDonough (1994:58) also mentions the use of diaries by language learners that are asked to record their impressions and *reactions to classroom tasks, preferred activities, and language development*.

In my experience with learning autobiographies I have become increasingly aware that diary studies can help us gain access to prior learning experiences in order to derive insights from them. These insights will assist us in coming to terms with our approaches to learning and, more generally, in developing our grasp of the enormously complex and dynamic relationship between learning and teaching.

### **Background to the Study<sup>1</sup>**

From 1990 to 1992 I taught English at I.B. “Padre Poveda” in Guadix (Granada). There I started to implement a learner-centred programme<sup>2</sup>. The goal was to develop students capacity to learn autonomously. One of the instruments that was supposed to contribute to the preparation of learners for autonomy was the “learner diary”. Originally, learners had to answer routinely to four questions: 1.- What have you learned today? 2.- Who have you learnt it from? 3.- How have you learnt it? 4.- How did you feel? As these were open-ended questions, it was believed that they would guide and encourage learners to examine the process and content of learning.

It had also been agreed with learners that diaries should be read by the teacher for different reasons: a) the feedback they would provide on methodology used in the classroom; b) they would help the teacher identify individual difficulties; c) they would also give the teacher the opportunity to help the learner improve the entries of the diary, suggesting new areas of reflection; d) the teacher could, also, make suggestions as to what actions the learner should undertake to improve language learning, and recommend which areas to concentrate on, for example.

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<sup>1</sup> I must point out that I have only recently become acquainted with most of the authors I quote in this article. My practice was not derived from any carefully designed theoretical position, but was based upon beliefs which were highly context dependent, basically derived from my own perceptions of what was going on in my lessons. As it can be inferred from this text, I operated with hunches about what might work and did not have any problems to abandon or modify procedures which were perceived as unsuccessful as a way of achieving the established educational purposes.

<sup>2</sup> See Jiménez Raya (1994) for a detailed description.

After spending a few months reading the logs produced by the students, I felt that something was wrong with them. Students' entries were monotonous, repetitive. The information contained in the diaries was of no interest either for the teacher or for students themselves, and there was no improvement as they, supposedly, gained experience in its writing. Furthermore, there was no reflection involved, just routine answers to the four questions. Suggestions indicating my worries about the diaries were made individually and to the class as a whole with no positive effects on the entries of the diaries. The purpose for which the diary was intended was far from being even modestly achieved. I then realised that all I had read and heard about diaries had nothing to do with the diaries my students were producing. So I grew in dissatisfaction, although I was becoming more skilled in analysing the dynamics of teaching and learning. My reaction was to ask learners for their opinion on the usefulness of keeping a diary. I immediately found that they were also disappointed and that they also considered the writing of the diary almost a waste of time. However, they continued keeping them because it had been agreed so, and had become a course requirement.

It must be mentioned that the diary had originally been conceived as a learner development instrument. As an instrument that was to help learners to become more effective by contributing to the development of a conscious awareness of their cognitive abilities, to obtain insights into the process of language learning and develop their personal strategic behaviour and metacognition. It was also the tool that would help them achieve a higher degree of autonomy as it would facilitate the planning of their actions, the identification of their problems and the evaluation of their learning. In other words, the keeping of the diary would help learners *learn how to learn* and progress in the acquisition of autonomy. For, what can be done in the classroom to help learners develop learning competence when a teacher has to teach a foreign language to thirty-five students in just three periods a week?

Consequently, the whole approach to the diary had to be changed in the light of the poor results and non-existent benefits it was producing. The original idea of the diary was theoretically well-conceived, but the practical approach to it was misguided. After a long classroom discussion, in which we discussed the kind of shift that was necessary to make the writing of the diary a profitable activity for them and, why not? for the teacher as well, it was agreed that, if we wanted to make the diary something more creative, the first thing that had to be done was to eliminate the questions, so that students would work harder. In other words, they would strive more in their reflection and writing, and in so doing, the diary would become a really profitable activity. They would, then, not be satisfied and

feel that they had complied with the requirements just giving a routine answer to the different questions. The questions, from that time on, were to serve as a kind of skeleton for the body of the diary, but the diary should become a “free composition,” a non-structured first person report of the learning experience; the questions could be used but as indications on what kind of information to include.

Once the diary was no longer constrained by the four questions, it became a much more useful instrument. By means of the diary, after the new format was introduced, learners involved were encouraged to reflect and consider their reasons for learning English as a foreign language, their learning experience, the strategies they used and their usefulness, as well as their beliefs and reactions to language learning in the classroom and outside. As I hope to demonstrate by the end of this paper, it became an instrument that heightened learners’ awareness of their own learning and helped them gain control over their learning; it helped the teacher to get to know the different individual learners and to identify their specific problems. Moreover, the diary was to become a direct form of communication between learners and teacher as it promoted genuine dialogue and understanding between both parties. Students, in most cases, used the form *you* to address the teacher, others, a minority, used the third person. When reading diaries I would always write my reactions to their comments as well as suggestions for improving the entries of the diary.

It is important to comment that entries became richer regarding content, and their extension increased considerably from two or three lines to an average of fifteen. Compared to the routine answers found in the original format, the entries became more varied; information, impressions and comments about all the different aspects of the learning/teaching process started to be included. Nevertheless, we have to admit that they were not *always gems of ethnographic investigation* (Bailey, 1990:217). One day students would inform about the activities done during the lesson or at home, another they would concentrate on readers, for instance; the following day they would write and reflect on how they go about learning vocabulary or write about group relationships. Thus, covering the different aspects that would normally be included in a learner training syllabus. One of the essential features of successful reflection, in my opinion, is the need for learners to have the freedom to make a choice for themselves on what to mull over.

Before I finish this section I would like to add that journals were kept by two BUP3 groups. The number of students involved was, then, fifty-six. The frequency with which these students wrote their journals was three times a week, that is, one entry per lesson for the whole academic year. Some of these students,

though, had already written a journal in the previous year (BUP2). It must also be stressed that originally the journals were not intended for research purposes. It was *a posteriori* when I became aware that the information they contained was worth studying.

### **Journals and Learning How to Learn**

It is generally acknowledged that the most successful approach to learner training in the classroom can just be one based on information, questioning and reflection in order to create a conscious awareness of different possibilities, obtain insights about learning processes and about oneself and others as learners. This is also a question of providing opportunities in which students can try out the new strategies suggested in different contexts. I go along with Carl Rogers (1969) when he maintains that effective learning can only originate from a learner's unique experience and that the only learning which significantly influences behaviour is self-discovered, self-appropriated learning (Kirschenbaum & Henderson, 1990). Students need to be empowered with opportunities to create and reflect upon personally-meaningful activities and strategies for learning rather than simply being exposed to teacher input on ostensibly "effective" strategies. The diary should facilitate the entrance into a critical dialogue with themselves, their actual performance, and their instructor.

This is even more important and relevant when we talk of learning how to learn. By definition learner training is based on the unfortunate assumption that what the learner does is not the best way to tackle learning. To a certain extent, it is assumed that learners are inadequate at learning. For this reason, learner training can sometimes offer a severe challenge to students' existing beliefs about learning (metacognitive knowledge), strategies and skills, and even to motivational dispositions and affectivity. For this reason, then, the implementation of learner training is likely to bring about an internal conflict in the learner if it is not implemented carefully, showing respect for that particular student's manner of going about learning. It is a time in which the learner might lose motivation and give up learning, labelling it as too risky and difficult. However, if it is implemented taking into consideration learners' point of view the effect is just the opposite, learners will become highly motivated, as they will perceive that the teacher is really concerned with easing learning, trying to help them.

The journal/diary is conceived as a form of critical and reflective autobiography of a subject as a learner that allows them to record their thoughts, feelings, achievements, reactions, problems and attitudes, as well as their

impressions about different elements and aspects that are part of learning a foreign language such as methodology, materials, teacher, etc. In the writing of the diary the individual learner is expected to conceptualise his own learning processes and beliefs focusing on what he does to tackle a learning task and how he feels. Thus, the learner is elevated to the position of explorer, who uses writing to discover how he goes about learning English, providing in this way a means to reflect upon the basis upon which he interprets learning English as a foreign language. Writing, according to Gide (quoted in Solas, 1990), changes us as it leaves us, modifying the movements of our lives. Writing is the first step in observation and reflection. We can, therefore, maintain that we are concerned with self-discovered learning how to learn, which has the advantage of taking as a starting point the learner's self-concept<sup>3</sup> and beliefs. It is learner-centred learning how to learn.

All the different activities a teacher uses in the classroom to promote language acquisition implicitly reflect a specific way of processing information, that is, they try to imitate the cognitive activity taking place in the learner's mind. Obviously, the teacher is confident that these activities will determine the degree of learning and that the learner will extract the implicit cognitive assumptions and transform the input into actual learning, in Willing's (1989: 26) words *a little more than merely one-off experiences*. What goes on in the learner's mind during the processing of a given information is called a learning strategy. Strategies of one kind or another are always present in the different activities we propose to students, and what is more important, learning strategies are always present whenever we try to learn something. The problem, according to Wittrock (1986), is that teachers seem to lose track of the mental events taking place when learning and concentrate their efforts on the planning of the sequencing and transmission of content rather than on the way in which students actually deal with the content. By not stressing learning strategies students are discouraged from developing and exploring a wealth of strategies, thus limiting students' awareness of their cognitive capabilities. Ultimately, learners need a greater awareness of the strategies they use so that language input can effectively be assimilated and transformed into a real acquisition or ability.

Guiding students to explore effective strategies for acquiring, storing and using the language will demand that as teachers we are first and principally aware

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<sup>3</sup>Self-concept is a global term that refers to the whole of the perceptions and conceptions about ourselves which constitute our personal identity (Williams and Burden, 1997).

of different techniques for teaching and testing, but also of ways to learn. This knowledge should perhaps start by questioning our own classroom practice, reflecting critically on how we ourselves behave as learners, for if we are not aware of the strategies we use, it becomes almost impossible to develop these strategies in students.

If, as it is generally believed, the most successful approach to learner training is one in which we can raise awareness by questioning and informing of different possibilities, it is vital that the students develop an understanding of their own learning processes and those of others. Understanding of cognitive processes is more likely to occur when we are required to explain or elaborate our position to ourselves or to others, the need to explain, i.e. to put into words what we know or think we know, can act as the push needed to make us evaluate, integrate and elaborate knowledge about cognition in new ways.

### **Rationale**

According to Kelly's theory of personal constructs each individual learner brings his own system of personal constructs to bear on the learning enterprise. New knowledge, from this paradigm, is assimilated to the current system of constructs. In 1954 Kelly and Howard urged that students be asked for their own perspectives about learning. They noted that:

"in this manner, we first pay heed to the person's perceptions, and we do not hamper initiative to the degree that may occur when an arbitrary standard is imposed from above." (Howard & Kelly, 1954: 402).

Exceptions and personal constructs are not always explicit, most times conceptions of learning are held implicit, but they still mediate learning and achievement. To "pay heed to the person's perceptions" we must, first, help this person make them explicit. Explicitation can and, in fact, should occur in diary writing. This is, we must admit, a hard task, because of the cognitive complexity of retrospective reflection. This retrospective reflection necessary in the writing of the diary demands effort and concentration, the degree of difficulty is even higher for the subjects involved: 16 years old adolescents. On top of this another extra difficulty must be added, this has to do with the language in which the diary was written. Many teachers would argue that if the purpose is to help learners become more effective and gain control over their learning by learning how to learn, it would certainly be more effective if done in the mother tongue, because they are more proficient in the language. This higher level of proficiency can undoubtedly contribute to deeper reflections. Although I was aware of this

position, I decided that the diary should be written in English because the ultimate goal was to facilitate the learning of English as a foreign language. My task as a teacher was to help them develop their communicative competence in English, while trying to make that task easier by helping them to learn and to think about learning. Writing the diary in English would definitely contribute to both purposes, as Antonio, to quote one of the examples, spontaneously writes in his diary:

“The diary helps us to increase our vocabulary, to understand our mistakes when the teacher corrects them. And it also increases our imagination.”  
(Antonio)

As I have mentioned before, in learner training there is the unfortunate assumption that the learner does not normally undertake the most profitable steps regarding learning. In the context where this experience took place the aim was to develop learner autonomy. Learner autonomy implies a radical break away from normal school teaching. The goal of keeping a journal was to encourage learners to assume responsibility for their own learning. At this age learners have already assimilated institutionalised learning; some authors even maintain that the strategies they used naturally have been deactivated by the schooling process (Brundage and Mackeracher, 1980). Assuming responsibility for learning requires learners to become as strategic and aware of learning processes as possible, so that it becomes feasible to restructure mental schemas and some of their beliefs about the process of language learning and teaching as well as their self-image as learners. As Wenden (1991) also suggests:

“without an internal change in consciousness to accompany expertise in the use of self-instructional techniques, true autonomy is not achieved” (Wenden, 1991:49).

We would not achieve much if students continue associating learning English with learning grammatical rules, or passing pages of the textbook, a belief that is more common in the Spanish situation than would be desirable.

The aim of diary writing, then, was to facilitate the development of learners' awareness by enabling them to identify areas of potential difficulty, conflict or success, and by making explicit their own personal constructs thus gradually assuming conscious control of the process. Because it is only when the learners know what they are actually doing that they can become autonomous and learning can take place.



In addition, contemporary educationalists urge that recognition be given to the perspectives of the people principally and directly engaged in classroom interaction, i.e. teachers and learners. What both parties do is directed by what they think (Wittrock, 1986; 1987). It is important, therefore, to clarify their thoughts and beliefs, and, because they are the only witnesses to their own beliefs and conceptions, it is essential to do so in their own terms. Two main streams in the study of thinking have emerged in the last decade, both share a cognitive component (Huber & Mendl, 1984). The psychological stream, the one we are concerned with, pays especial attention to how learners process information.

### Diaries Analysis

There are obviously many different aspects to be analysed in first person accounts of a learning experience, but for obvious reasons of space and time, we are going to concentrate, although superficially, on what I consider the most outstanding contributions of diary writing, namely, at the levels of learning strategies and metacognitive knowledge. Nonetheless, in a recent project (1993), I have analysed the content of fifty six diaries<sup>4</sup> from four different perspectives: a) Metacognition, b) Cognitive strategies, c) Socio-affective strategies, and d) Beliefs and evaluation of autonomy and learning how to learn. We must warn that learning and learning how to learn are extremely complex and difficult to measure because of their multifaceted nature and complexity. This was basically a descriptive study in the sense that Seliger and Shohamy assign to the term “descriptive”, using qualitative and quantitative elements<sup>5</sup>. In this study, which we are using as a basis, journals were analysed following the procedure recommended by Bailey (1983, 1990), beginning with an account of the diarist personal learning autobiography. The initial database was then analysed to try to identify patterns and significant events and those strategies and related attitudes and beliefs that appear to be relevant in language learning. These were, then, discussed and interpreted.

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<sup>4</sup>This number of diaries is one of the counterarguments towards criticisms to diary studies. The latter have been criticised in terms of external validity. Critics question how conclusions based on data from a single subject can possibly be extrapolated to other learners. In my opinion, fifty-six subjects give us the possibility of establishing pretty safe generalisations.

<sup>5</sup>Qualitative research is heuristic and not deductive since few, if any, decisions regarding research questions or data are made before the research begins. Descriptive research can be heuristic or deductive. While technically, qualitative research is also concerned with description, descriptive research as a type or category of research refers to investigation which utilizes already existing data or non-experimental research with a preconceived hypothesis (Seliger and Shohamy, 1989: 116-117)

The period of data collection covered 9 months - the length of an academic year, although, as I have said before, journals were not written for research purposes, but for pedagogical ones. Data analysis consisted of coding the data deductively using the classification of learning strategies proposed by Chamot, Küpper and Impink-Fernández (1988), and inductively by identifying the categories which emerged from the data. The initial coding of the data was further refined by subsequent readings of the data. As I read, I jotted down the ideas and concepts which seemed to be embedded in the data. These made up the categories and their content. The information was then analysed and discussed. In any investigation into the development of learning expertise there is almost always an evaluative element involved, particularly when we consider how we feel about ourselves in relation to any particular field of human endeavour. This paper analyses further some of the data.

This mode of enquiry into human learning has drawn upon an intellectual tradition which is radically different from the behavioural tradition which concentrates on the theory and practice of behaviour modification (Powell, 1985), namely cognitive psychology. As Solas (1992:219) puts it:

“...they provide a theoretical and methodological antidote against massive doses of objective “reality” which are conveyed to the public on the wings of empiricism.”

Diary studies aim at giving contemporary form to the ancient art of hermeneutics (Howard, 1983), that is, the progressive penetration of the meaning of text through progressive refinements of interpretation. According to Abbs (1974), the discipline of autobiography is mainly an inward and creative discipline centred on the related acts of reflecting on and recreating the personal past.

### **Reflection and awareness of learning strategies and metacognitive knowledge.**

Reflection can be considered as an active process of exploration and discovery according to the aforementioned criteria. Learning records as an awareness raising activity are intended to bring the strategies learners normally use to their attention. This approach deals mainly with the strategies used as they function within language-learning activities by debriefing or retrospective accounts.

“I usually study all the vocabulary in a very curious way, because I don’t really study them. When I’m copying the words from the reader, and I look them up

in a dictionary its meaning, and in other dictionary its pronunciation, after doing this work, the words with its pronunciation and translations have remained in my mind: For it, only a few days before the exam I only must have a review of it..” (Alejandro)

Reflection is, according to Boud, Keogh and Walker (1985) necessary at different stages of the learning process.

“... at the start in anticipation of the experience, during the experience as a way of dealing with the vast array of inputs and coping with the feelings that are generated, and following the experience during the phase of writing and consolidation.” (Boud et al., 1985:10)

The reconstruction of the learning experience as an aim is an essential aspect in the reflective process. To achieve this aim it becomes necessary for students to describe their learning experience and mull over the attitudes and emotions that impinge on their comprehension of the phenomenon (the learning of the foreign language). On the basis of this reflection, it is then necessary to decide whether to internalise the new knowledge or behaviour as in the following example:

“...We saw a photocopy about learning vocabulary. It was interesting, because it tell us how to study vocabulary. Then we did some exercises, we had to study lists of words. The teacher didn't give us much time. We did an exercise about forgetting and remembering vocabulary. There were some ways to reach this. For example; writing the vocabulary in sections: words I firmly know, words I have forgotten..... Other was writing of the word you want to learn. I learnt that if you study vocabulary not by memory, but if you think of an image, a story, or write a picture is easier. Anyway, I prefer the traditional form: writing a list of vocabulary, perhaps some day I'll change.” (Silvia)

Diary writing helps learners to recapture their learning experience, think about it, mull it over and evaluate it. The experience is made up of the different things that happened and how the learner perceived them. One of the important contributions of writing is that it provides a certain objectivity to the learning experience. The distancing effect that takes places when writing can facilitate the occurrence of potential learning. The writer himself becomes an observer and can interpret reality from the perspective of an outsider. Writing can help to clarify the initial experience, as it focuses the learner's attention on what actually happened initially. The recapturing of the initial experience can be used as a basis for continuing reflection.

“...when I find these words (or expressions, sometimes), first, before looking it up in the dictionary, I try to guess the meaning; it’s useful specially when I try to guess the meaning of a set phrase or a word that is composed with two other words, for instance “fingernail”. So I can keep it in my memory more easily. When you discover the meaning of something guessing it, you feel happy and stop to think: What a great imagination I have”, and that way, it’s easier to keep in your memory.” (David)

It seems clear that learners are unlikely to invoke strategies demanding time and effort, such as inferencing, if they believe that the strategies will not make any difference. Without high self-esteem and a tendency to attribute success and failure to their level of effort, David and the rest of the learners are unlikely to initiate and persist at strategic activity. According to Nyikos and Oxford (1993), successful application of learning strategies is dependent on awareness of: 1) one’s current strategy use; (2) the wide range of alternative strategies that might be helpful; and 3) the circumstances under which a given strategy can most effectively be applied. Such awareness can undoubtedly be gained through retrospective accounts of one’s learning experiences with specific reference to the learning process. The more aware learners are, the more likely they will be to use task-appropriate learning strategies that will help them overcome their limitations, and the more likely that these strategies will assist in processing, retrieving, and using new language information.

Awareness is also essential because if a student does not notice that he is not learning, he is unlikely to seek strategic remedy. If a student has an illusion of comprehension (Glenberg et al., 1982) he will not engage in additional learning activity. Access to knowledge is thought to be fostered when students know about a subject. Verbalisation appears to be the best means for achieving this purpose. Discourse plays a vital role in promoting student understanding and reflective awareness. According to Piaget (cited in Lockhead, 1985) the act of verbalising is directly connected with bringing the subconscious to consciousness. It is the process of formulating thoughts and analysing cognitive activity into communicable representations that is most important in becoming an object for reflection. Through verbalisation, learners’ thoughts become an object for reflection, when they are required to explain, elaborate, or defend how they go about learning. The burden of explanation is often the push needed to make them evaluate how they learn, or elaborate strategic advice in new ways. It, thus serves as an impetus for students to rework their ideas, leading to changes or reinforcement in the way they learn. The diary, as the following quotation

indicates, does help students to check comprehension at different levels and to develop awareness, especially at the level of cognitive functioning:

“One of my difficulties today was that I didn’t see very well the mistakes and I thought that they weren’t. And for it I made that my mates also failed.”  
(Alejandro)

Monitoring as a cognitive activity is identified in the literature on information processing as essential for the appropriate functioning of the central executive (Iran-Nejad, 1990; Kluwe, 1987; Brown, 1987). Self-regulation is achieved through monitoring. Monitoring allows the individual to determine the state of ignorance and enlightenment (Wenden, 1987), it helps to establish whether comprehension has taken place or not, what and why one does not understand, and whether the knowledge we have allows us to perform a given task. In this case, it helps Silvia to become more aware of the value of specific strategic behaviours and strategies in general, leading eventually to more durable and general strategy use. Awareness contributes to the student’s ability to access learning strategies when needed. An example of this statement can be seen in the following quotation from a diary:

“Then my group did a listening exercise about description of people. It wasn’t very difficult but it wasn’t easy. We could answer the questions because we understood the important words for the exercise and as you say we mustn’t worry if we don’t understand all the words. We also used the pictures to guess the meaning of some things.” (Silvia)

As a matter of fact, conscious knowledge of intellectual functions has been considered to be the hallmark of mature cognition (Flavell, 1979, 1984). Conscious attention to learning is a prerequisite for metacognitive monitoring, in our case this conscious attention is brought about by writing about learning. According to Garner (1990), students who are not presented with means for reflective thought are missing the opportunity to hear and produce cognitive words and develop the habit of thinking, what will influence their developing theories of mind. In fact, we can assert that the journal encouraged learners to examine their personal development in possibly a more holistic, integrated, systematic and detailed way than ever before.

Metacognition represents self-knowledge about cognitive states and processes. It refers to both awareness and control aspects of cognition. When learning, this knowledge can play various roles in strategy selection,

implementation and monitoring activities. According to Borkowski et. al. (1987), metacognition is largely responsible for the initial decision to be strategic because one of its components, knowledge about strategies, produces an understanding that learning will improve if sufficient effort is put forth in strategy selection and deployment. By definition an abundance of metacognition presupposes an abundance of cognition.

Most readers will have already noticed that one of the main contributions of the diary is precisely at the level of metacognition. In a quantification undertaken in 1993 of the different types of strategies mentioned in ten diaries kept by the students, I found that from a total of 3,106 references to strategy use 49.61% were metacognitive, 30.07% were cognitive and 20.31% were socio-affective strategies.

The relevance of metacognition has already been mentioned above, as Wittrock (1986, 1987) maintains, what we do is directed by what we think. For instance, Silvia, one of the students involved, considers that learning grammar is the most important thing in learning a language:

“First of all, I think the most important thing to learn English is the Grammar, I always say it, because if you know this, I’m sure you have a good English base.” (Mónica)

On the contrary, David writes:

“I think that studying grammar lessons is not too useful, because when you are talking to somebody and you have to remember the grammar unit while you’re speaking, the conversation would be too slow, I think. So it’s better to practice, but that’s only my opinion.” (David)

Although, David shows some modesty when he says that it is only his opinion, he would definitely not learn much English if the focus had been on learning grammar. These two quotations are, in fact, showing two different leaning styles. In this case, as students were working in an autonomous scheme, David could concentrate on practising the language while Silvia on deductive learning without neglecting practice, as grammar rules seemed to be a useful crutch. It is obvious that learners are not blank slates. they possess a great deal of informal or naive knowledge that influences learning in virtually all domains. With this reflective endeavours learners are making explicit how they go about learning as well as their beliefs. In other words, they are developing their metacognitive abilities, that, had they not been asked to write a diary, would, in

the best of the circumstances, only have been done sporadically. In fact, I am beginning to suspect that there is no other way to promote reflectivity in such a productive way. What one must measure is to what extent writing about learning contributes to improvements in learning efficiency. This is at the time being a difficult task because of the impossibility to isolate the specific contribution of the diary. Furthermore, at the time of the experience I was not concerned with isolating the individual contributions of the different activities used. My concern was to improve my performance as a teacher and to make learners more effective and autonomous, something I can guarantee happened.

As we can see in some of the quotations, the diary permitted its users to reflect on a given strategy and the learning task with two potential consequences: new specific strategy knowledge accumulated about the strategy on-line regulation and monitoring skills about strategy effectiveness were enriched. Strategies and metacognitive awareness maximise the learning process. In fact, awareness has implications for control. I would like to point here that Kurtz and Borkowski (1984) demonstrate a link between strategic thinking and motivational orientation. There is then a connection with attribution theory, in these quotations from journals we can see that the normal tendency is to attribute success or failure to the actual causes and to strategic effort. In fact Borkowski, Johnson and Reid (1987) suggest that motivational beliefs - particularly those relating to causes of success and failure- should be considered part of metacognition. They also suggest that metacognitive states are more than information states. Borkowski, Johnson and Reid (1987:166) argue that *they contain affective and motivational components*, for example, self-attributions about achievement that can *energise or hinder the use of a strategy or skill*. Motivational dispositions that are strategically grounded will allow for the kind of flexible, mindful involvement in the learning process characteristic of the empowered student<sup>6</sup>. The following quotations are clear examples of this:

"I revised the units about *so* and *such* and *enough* and *too*, I studied it when I was in 8º, then I read other grammar units which I haven't to study for example I revised the units about infinitive or -ing, they were very interesting. I noticed that I sometimes make mistakes that I could avoid if I had a look at the

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<sup>6</sup>Biggs and Rihn (1984) suggest that motive dispositions are likely to facilitate the acquisition of additional strategies - providing the strategies are perceived as congruent with the dispositions. Apparently organisation and awareness factors interact in complex ways to influence dispositions.

grammar book. (Silvia)

“As a whole I’ve enjoyed the class, but I find our work a bit difficult. I think that if you promise yourself to do a good project it’s very difficult. This can be possible with an active attitude in the class and interest in learning” (Alejandro)

Any kind of learning is, above all, a personal, individual act, and should remain a personal, individual affair. The aim of learner training is to help the individual student to explore consciously the wide range of effective alternatives at their disposal; to consolidate and systematise those strategies that best suit his or her learning style and the task at hand; and, as Galloway and Labarca (1990:151) indicate, *to experiment within his or her stretching zone, moving from deliberateness and discomfort to ease and automaticity with some new strategies*, making informed decisions about the rejection of different paths. For this purpose, strategies alone are not enough, attitudes knowledge and motivational dispositions are also necessary.

## Conclusion

As the discussion has pointed out, learning autobiographies are not intentionally narrative texts, nor are they purely descriptive or discursive, though they show features of these three. It is a text centred on the expression of experiences lived by the author, therefore the themes should be varied. It can also be characterised as an idiosyncratic text in which the author’s personal constructs are manifested. It places a primary emphasis on learner self-reflection, and it is the catalyst for the promotion of self-managed and self-initiated improvement in learning efficiency. In my experience, the writing of a learning autobiography involved students in a conscious and reflective elaboration of their educational lives, including personal and “professional” experiences. Therefore we can conclude that an effective diary should not just be a collection or litany of all the events in the course of their lives as students, but an elaborate discussion of the steps undertaking when facing a learning task.

Learning is facilitated emotionally as well as cognitively, especially learning how to learn. Learner training (self-training) through the use of the learning autobiography is free from any emotional threats or challenges. The diary emphasises a whole person view of the learner as the reflection it gives place to includes the processing of cognition, attitudes, feelings and values of the experience. The diary prompts an exploratory self-conversation that permits the negotiation between learners themselves and learners and teachers. Thus a diary can be defined as a form of autobiography of a subject as a learner in which



he/she retrospectively analyses through the use of reflection how he/she went about learning, discusses about beliefs and comments about the emotional reactions that he/she experimented in order to become a more effective learner.

In the context in which the diary was used it became a key and indispensable instrument in empowering learners for autonomy as it made learning more accessible to scrutiny and reflection and more available for decision and change. Diaries enabled students to reflect on their changing ideas and attitudes as they proceeded through their course of study. Before I conclude I would like to quote Main (1985) when he writes:

“Students who are encouraged to undertake reflection of this kind may not become more “organised” students but they are likely to become students who are aware of the demands on their time and aware of the way in which study fits into their personal lifestyle. To that extent they will be more confident students at the end of the day. Confidence probably relates as much to success as does effective study method.” (Main, 1985:95).

Guiding students to explore effective options for learning the language, using the language, and enjoying the language will demand that as teachers we are first and foremost aware not just of ways to present and test materials, but of ways to learn. This knowledge must begin by suspending conceptions of ourselves as teachers to reflect critically on ourselves as learners, for if we have no notion of the strategies we ourselves use we can hardly promote any on the learner.

Finally, it can be concluded that students participated in problematizing and critically examining their learning, discovering new strategic orientations to the task of learning a foreign language, and exploring applications of their new knowledge. With the use of the diary students can become active refiners and restructurers of their strategic repertoire rather than passive recipients on input.

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