

### **7.3.3. Diary Research in Classroom Contexts**

Bailey (1990) defined a diary study as “a first person account of a language learning or teaching experience, documented through regular candid entries in a personal journal and then analyzed for recurrent patterns and salient events” (p. 215). Diaries of classroom contexts can produce useful data on a range of aspects of the second language learning process. These include individual learners’ and instructors’ insights into their own learning

and teaching processes, their self- and other-comparisons, decision-making processes, the process of development (or not) over time, attitudes toward classroom learning and teaching, the use of strategies, and the recognition and use of feedback. Diary studies have the additional advantage of time sensitivity. Because most diary research is longitudinal, it can illuminate how perceptions develop over time. However, as discussed in chapter 6 on qualitative research, there are also some drawbacks to the use of diaries, including the highly subjective nature of the data.

In classroom research, some structure can be provided for the diary entries. It is increasingly the case that instructors ask learners to keep diaries as a part of coursework (and even course assessment), for which the goal is enhancement of pedagogy. The diaries might be required to address specific points, including how well the learners have followed specific lessons; what is enjoyable, easy, or difficult about the instruction; and their reactions to the instructor and other learners, as well as to specific classroom activities and group and pair work.

Instructor diaries are also common in educational research, and explorations of language instructor diaries are becoming more common in the second language research field. For example, Bailey et al. (1996) used instructor diaries to investigate the role of language-learning and -teaching beliefs in decision making by student instructors. An examination and comparison of the instructors' diaries indicated that conscious examination of long-held beliefs about language learning helped to shape pedagogical decisions, and that student teaching was experienced differently according to the student instructor's gender, educational background, and language-learning experiences. In general, instructors' diaries have tended to focus on classroom experiences, perceptions about student reactions and learning, and instructional decision making (and decision changing) for which the method matched the goals of the research.

Diary research represents a significant expenditure of time, both for those who write the diaries as well as for the researchers who analyze them. When embarking on diary research, it is important for diary writers to schedule regular times for writing. The quality of the diaries can also be enhanced if the researcher includes guidelines for the range and amount of writing expected per entry or provides sample questions that the writer may want to consider for each entry. Diary writers should be encouraged to keep a notebook, mini audio recorder, or personal digital assistant with them to jot down insights as they occur and transfer them later to the diary (or leave them on tape/disk in the case of oral diaries). They should also be

reminded to include examples to illustrate their insights in the diary entries and can be asked to include their own questions about teaching and learning that occur as the research progresses.

Bailey's (1983) survey of journal studies and discussion of her own journal describing her learning of French illustrated such phenomena as the role of self-esteem in second language learning, operationalized as competitiveness and anxiety, as in the following quotations:

I feel very anxious about this class. I know I am (or can be) a good language learner, but I hate being lost in class. I feel like I'm behind the others and slowing down the pace .... (pp. 75-76)

Today I was panicked in the oral exercise where we had to fill in the blanks with either the past definite or the imperfect. Now I know what ESL students go through with the present perfect and the simple past. How frustrating it is to be looking for adverbial clues in the sentence when I don't even know what the words and phrases mean. I realized that the teacher was going around the room taking the sentences in order so I tried to stay one jump ahead of her by working ahead and using her feedback to the class to obtain confirmation or denial of my hypotheses. Today I felt a little scared. I'm so rusty! (p. 74)

The analysis of diary data involves a careful and thorough search for patterns in the writing or tapes in order to find recurrent themes of interest. When reviewing the data, it is important to be conscious of one's own beliefs, experiences, and orientations to the question of interest and how these may influence interpretations both of individual diary entries and of the emergent patterns. When diaries from several participants are included in the research, it is important to note not only how many times a phenomenon is noted, but also by whom it is noted. This will help researchers to avoid seeing the experiences of only a few participants as being reflective of the experiences of the whole. Similarly, the salience of the phenomena in the diary entries should be considered in order to prevent decontextualized over- or underemphasis of the previously mentioned points.