

Changes in Learner Autonomy by Means of Journal Writing: From the Point of View of Learners

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Abstract

Recently, many language teachers have encouraged learners to record their learning experiences. Journal writing not only provides a chance for learners to practice using the target language, but also results in increased awareness of their learning processes. This qualitative study investigates learners' self evaluation reports about their experience of journal writing and seeks to discover whether journal writing produces any changes in their attitudes towards learning with respect to learner autonomy. The reports are viewed from the following three perspectives: self-initiative, self-awareness and self-evaluation.

近年、多くの外国語教育者が学習者に対して自分達の学習経験を書かせている。学習日記は学習者に目標言語を使わせるだけではなく、彼らの学習意識を高める効果があると指摘されている。本研究では、9ヶ月間取り組んだ学習日記に対する学習者の自己評価レポートを、三つの側面（自発性、自己意識及び自己評価）から質的に分析し、学習者自身の自律学習に対する意識変化を検証した。

Introduction

Recently, many language teachers (Barfield, 2003; Burton & Carroll, 2001; Casanave, 1993; Carroll, 1994; Duppenenthaler, 2004) have encouraged learners to record their learning experiences through journals in their target languages. Journal writing not only provides a chance for students to practice using the target language, but can also be a valuable tool to foster learner autonomy, since reflecting while writing on their learning experiences in class and outside of class will strengthen their understanding of what they learned, make them aware of their weakness of language learning, and encourage them to continue their self-learning (Carroll, 1994; Cresswell, 2000; Matsumoto, 1996; Ho & Richards, 1993). However, while there is a lot of research written from the point of view of teacher, there are fewer reports on the changes that students may or may not undergo when keeping journals over an extended period of time. This study investigates students' own opinions about journal writing and seeks to discover whether journal writing produces any changes in their attitudes towards learning. They are viewed from the following three aspects: self-initiative, self-awareness and self-evaluation.

Literature Review

Several studies have shown that if learners write regularly, in authentic ways, their writing fluency will be strengthened and retrospective analysis will help them raise awareness of their own learning (Brown, 1994; Matsumoto, 1996; Yang, 2005). Learning journals and diaries are one means of organising this kind of regular practice, and they help learners self-monitor, self-assess and reflect on their learning processes (Cotterall, 1995; Nunan, Lai & Keobke, 1999; Usuki, 2001). Still, being able to reflect

well is quite difficult for many learners. For example, Lor (cited in Benson, 2001) monitored the writings of 12 students who wrote 10 or more entries in reflective journals. She found that the students involved did not find it easy to reflect on their learning, and often needed the teacher's help in deciding what to write. For the most part, 'their journal entries were neither well integrated nor transformative' (Benson, 2001, p. 207).

Learner autonomy is defined by Holec (1981) as 'the *ability to take charge of one's own learning*' (p. 3). In the Japanese EFL learning context, 'reactive autonomy' advocated by Littlewood (1999) seems more suitable (Ford, 2000). In reactive autonomy, learners organise their resources autonomously to reach a goal that has been set. This is the kind of autonomy which 'does not create its own directions, but, once a direction has been initiated, [*for example, by the teacher or the curriculum - YT*], enables learners to organise their resources autonomously in order to reach their goal' (Littlewood, 1999, p. 75).

The first step towards this ability to organise one's activities autonomously is to become aware of one's own learning processes. Guided journals can help students to do this. Rather than emphasising the importance of simply writing journals regularly, we would help our students better by guiding them in such a way as to provoke deeper reflection, and providing opportunities to discuss the processes of learning that arise from their experiences. No matter whether their feelings are positive or negative, conscious reflection is a good start to autonomous learning. As Benson (2001, p. 207) points out, 'reflections upon positive feelings can confirm the learner's sense of the rightness of a plan. Negative feelings about learning experiences can become occasions for deeper reflection leading to changes in plan'.

My Practice

Therefore, in this study, after assigning semi-guided learning journals (Appendix 1) for an academic year, students' self-evaluation reports with provided questions (Appendix 2) were collected in order to help students reflect on changes of their learning attitudes explicitly. I assigned these learning journals to 27 sophomore college students, in the Kansai area, whose major was business. These were low-intermediate proficiency level students (as measured by the university's internal placement test¹). The students had 2 classes of English per week, and I asked them to write learning journals once a week as part of homework outside class. The topic could be about anything connected with the usage of the language or they could use the hints that I provided to guide their journal writing (see Appendix 1). I collected their writings (on loose leaf paper) at the beginning of each class, gave my comments on the content and returned them the following week. As the focus was on reflection, I seldom corrected mistakes as long as the mistakes did not interfere with the meaning. Occasionally I showed them some good examples of entries that other students had written in order to demonstrate what they were capable of writing and to help them build their confidence.

At the end of the academic year I had collected 558 journal entries and 25 final reports. The students' final reports evaluating their changes by means of continuing learning journals provide the main data for this study.

Research Questions

My reading of the literature, and my previous classroom research in this area of teaching had given me good grounds to believe that awareness of the process was

¹ The placement test in this university has been administered since 1999. It has been revised several times and it includes 100 questions-50 listening questions and 50 reading questions. Cronbach's alpha reliability of the version used in this study is .77.

important for language learners, but that facilitating the development of this awareness required a great deal of support from the teacher. I therefore wanted to seek answers to the following questions, in order to put these beliefs to the test:

- a. To what extent did the guided learning journals help students to become aware of their learning processes and organise their resources autonomously in order to reach their goals?
- b. In what ways did the students perceive that they had changed as a result of the journal writing?

In order to address these questions I designed an end-of year questionnaire to help students to evaluate the experience. I didn't want to rely on a simple multiple-choice questionnaire because I wanted to allow students to reflect on the experience in a deeper way than that. On the other hand if I simply asked them to write an evaluation of the journal writing experience they would have had great difficulty. Therefore I created an open ended questionnaire addressing these questions. My previous research (Yang, 2007) had suggested self-initiative, self-awareness and self-evaluation are the most important factors to influence their autonomous learning; I therefore tried to construct the questions using these factors as a framework, while at the same time leaving them free to express their opinions in their own ways. This balancing act is not easy and leaves the questionnaire open to the charge of leading students to pre-ordained answers. Nevertheless, the responses were varied enough to suggest that students were not overly constrained by this structure.

To analyse the data, I took these three factors as the framework and picked the following evidence from their self-reports.

Analysis of Learners' Reports

In a previous study (Yang, 2007) it was found that Japanese college students were weak in terms of self-initiative and making plans. The study also found that they were poor at reflecting on the content of their learning and on the learning process. For example, they did not make plans for their study and did not know how to efficiently make use of their time for English study. Finally the study found that they were poor at changing their learning methods, regulating their learning materials based on their needs, and were not skilled at creating a good study environment for themselves. In the following section, I will discuss the results of the present study in relation to these factors by analysing students' reports about how their attitudes had changed as a result of the journal writing during the year.

Self-initiative

After writing in their learning journals for two semesters, more than 10 students mentioned that they were motivated to learn English voluntarily. Here are some of their comments. (All of the following excerpts in this article were originally written in English and no correction is made).

Excerpt 1

I came to like writing better than before, because I felt happy when I could write sentences without a dictionary although they were easy expressions

Excerpt 2

My study habits were changed by writing journals in the long term, because they raise my enthusiasm in English study, and I learned to enjoy studying English in a lot of ways which different from before.

Journal writing is a good stimulus to encourage students' to stay actively involved in their English language learning, excerpt 3 and 4 are good examples.

Excerpt 3

While I wrote my journals, I realised that I forgot many words. So I began to pick up the word book I used in high school to review words and phrases I learned.

Excerpt 4

I think the learning journal was effective and significance in learning English because by writing this compulsory, I always needed to think about I should do English things in my mind.

Self-awareness

Yang (2007) indicated that the students in the study were poor at reflecting on the content of their journals, nor were they skilled at adjusting the content to satisfy their individual learning needs. However, by means of sticking to journal writing for nine months, many students appear to have begun to make tentative steps in this direction, as the following comments indicate:

Excerpt 5

Writing journals made me think about my study. When I think about my study, I have to think the way of studying English and study it harder.

Excerpt 6

I understood my weakness which was lack of ability in speaking and listening English. I think journal gave me a good chance to make the most of my English ability. And I sought to overcome them by plugging a homework every day.

Excerpt 7

Thanks to do learning journals, I learned more English words than before I started it.

The above examples showed us that after realising their weakness, students came to think more about how to overcome their shortcomings and make plans for outside learning. The learning journal provided an opportunity for self-analysis since it gave students a chance to reflect on their obstacles and achievements (Usuki, 2001). In short, the opportunity to reflect encourages learner involvement.

Self-evaluation

Students also showed that they were developing the skills to evaluate their learning progress, when they expressed satisfaction on the realisation that they could write longer sentences and were able to express their ideas more fluently.

Excerpt 8

My later journals are longer than the first writing, but the time is shorter than before. So it means I can write more fluently than before. I am very happy about it.

Excerpt 9

I realised that my English ability declined badly. I didn't study English much last year. I thought I need to study English every week.

In this section, students' perceptions towards their learning have been summarised from three aspects. After journal writing for over nine months, it is clear that most students exhibited more self-initiative and management of their learning, more awareness of their weaknesses, more ability to find suitable learning methods, and became better at evaluating their learning efficiency objectively.

Discussion

In the author's previous study, the students were comparatively poor at exercising self-initiative, making plans and at being flexible. One of the possible reasons was that in the past their teachers have generally provided the plans and set goals for the students. It has been reported that it is a common practice in Japan for teachers to be concerned with demonstrating their authority, and for students to accept passively their teacher's instruction in an unquestioning and unchallenging manner (Palfreyman & Smith, 2003; Benson, Chik & Lim, 2003; Usuki, 2003).

However, many researchers (Oxford, 2002; Takeuchi, 2002; Shimabayashi & Okada, 2004) indicate what is done outside the classroom is more important than what is taught in the classroom. One of the differences between high proficient learners and low proficient learners in Takeuchi's research (2003) concerns the use of metacognitive strategies, specifically setting goals. According to his research, highly proficient learners are good at making plans and scheduling their self-study effectively while less proficient students are not. Thus, whether students are able to make plans, continue with those plans, and be flexible enough to adjust their learning activities would seem to be very important in autonomous learning.

Although the learners in both this study and the earlier one were generally motivated and exhibited a desire to strive to master English, they were not well equipped with study skills and learning strategies, so they needed considerable teacher support, guidance and advice in order to allow them to begin to develop as autonomous learners.

Bearing these things in mind, we may understand how the small changes of students' learning attitudes occurred. Journal writing gave the students the opportunity and the freedom to think about their learning, and this reflective role encouraged them, in consultation with the teacher, to voluntarily set goals, make their learning plans, design and evaluate their self-study, and to select and utilise appropriate methods and effective strategies to achieve their objectives.

Conclusion

This paper, based on students' own opinions about journal writing, describes some of the changes that took place in their attitudes about learning and their views on the benefits of journal writing. The results of students' evaluations indicate that weekly journals help students reflect upon their learning experience and achievement, functioning as an instrument for self-initiative, self-awareness, and self-evaluation (Matsumoto, 1996). However, these are just findings from a small-scale study. Future research would benefit by being expanded to a larger scale with wider variety of participants. In addition, because of the existence of individual differences, it is important to remember that journal writing is not the only way to encourage students' autonomy. Portfolios and other projects which allow students to produce a variety of text-types and give students greater freedom should also be considered.

The Author

YANG Tao has been a teacher in China and Japan for many years, and she is presently enrolled in the PhD program for Foreign Language Education at Kansai University (Japan). Her research interests include journal writing, autonomous learning and learner development.

Appendix 1

What Can You Write in Your Learning Journals?

(Original in English)

At the end of each day (or once or twice a week) write down what you feel you have learned since your last entry.

- You might want to comment on what you have been doing in the classroom.
 - What did I learn today (could be a summary of the lesson)?
 - What did I understand from today's lesson?
 - I like (dislike) some activity we did today, and why?

- You might describe what your thoughts and feelings were about what you have done each day, or about something you have seen, or something that you have heard.
 - Introduction on a foreign movie, a book, a song, a foreign friend (mail pals)
 - a trip where I use English
 - experience of using English outside of classroom

- You might want to describe something which you found difficult to understand, or some situation where someone else misunderstood you.
 - culture difference
 - different English

- You might want to say something on your self-study at home
 - a good TV program you recommend
 - a good way to improve English speaking/listening/reading/writing
 - self-study at home

- You might tell us your dreams in the future
 - go abroad
 - get a higher score of TOEFL/TOEIC/EIKEN
 - find a job using foreign languages

Appendix 2

Self-evaluation Report on Journal Writing

Student Code _____ Name _____

1. Is learning journal useful for you? 役に立ちますか? どんなところ?
 2. Is learning journal a burden for you?
強制的に宿題として書かせるのについての意見? 好き、嫌い、負担になった?
 3. Do you think you changed a lot by writing journals?
最初に書いたときと今 (9ヶ月後) と比べたら、自分自身はどこかが変わりましたか?
- Are you able to write fluently? 流暢に書けるようになった? Do you study more while writing journals and learning record? Do they change your study habits in the long term? 勉強時間が増えましたか? 学習習慣が変わりましたか?
- Do you think you are motivated by writing journals?
もっと英語の勉強に対してやる気が出た?
4. Are you able to control your study well by filling in learning records and writing journals?
書くことによって、自分の弱いところを分かって、勉強にもっと自己管理ができるようになった? 計画を立てて、コツコツやることとか?
 5. Are you able to find some learning methods which are suitable for you? Are you able to find good learning materials and use them for self-study?
自分に合う勉強法を見つけた? 授業外、自分に合う教材を使って勉強できるようになった?
 6. Do you think writing journals encourage your learning?
学習日記が書いて、勉強の励みになっていますか?
 7. Are you able to take actions after you wrote to work hard next week?
“来週頑張るわ”と書いた後、実際に行動をとりますか?
 8. Are you able to concentrate on your English study? How?
自分の勉強にどのくらい集中できますか?
 9. What kind of comments you would like to have from the teacher?
Journalを提出して、どんなCommentsをもらいたいですか?
文法の間違いの直し? 先生の意見、感想? 評価してもらいたいですか?
 10. Do you want your classmates to read your journal entries? Why or why not?
クラスメートに見てほしいですか? なぜ?
 11. Would you to continue writing your learning journals? Would you like to continue keeping learning records?
この授業を終わっても、Journalを自分で書き続けたいですか?
 12. Would you like to recommend learning journals to the students who will take the same class next year?
来年同じクラスを受ける人に学習日記をお勧めしますか?

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