

# **Designing and using a Learner Journal for false beginners: self-assessment and organization of learning**

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May 1998

## **Introduction**

There are various styles of teaching, various methods of teaching, and at least two paradigms of how to go about it (the "Propositional" vs "Process" approaches). However, the ongoing debate that has taken place on the effectiveness and validity of these, has recently come to recognize other factors which can strongly influence the final result – student learning: i) the reinterpretation of the syllabus by the teacher and the learner; ii) the individual learning beliefs of the learner; and iii) the affective factors acting on the learner. Awareness of these factors has centered attention on *what happens* in the classroom rather than *what gets taught* there, and has highlighted the need to place the learner at the center of the educational process, and to provide him/her with adequate strategies to deal with: i) coping with target language rules; ii) receiving performance; iii) producing performance; and iv) organizing learning (Carver 1984:123).

Learner journals are a means of approaching this task, helping the learners to reflect on the learning process, and to make sense of their experiences, engaging students "in routine and ongoing self-assessment so that they develop a critical awareness of their language learning process. Specifically these activities can help students to:

- i) identify their strengths and weaknesses in English;
- ii) document their progress;
- iii) identify effective language learning strategies and materials;
- iv) become aware of the language learning contexts that work best for them
- v) establish goals for future independent learning" (McNamara and Deane 1995:17)

This paper is a report of a study being carried out in the Language Center of Andong National University. The primary intention when it began was to introduce 'false-beginner' students possessing deep-rooted traditional learning preferences, to the idea of reflecting upon their learning. From there it was hoped that they would see the

need to acquire alternative learning strategies which would positively affect their learning styles in general, as well as improving their performance in English Conversation Credit classes over the long term. Since the inception of the study, it has become apparent that Learner Journals, while having pedagogic problems that must be acknowledged and worked with, can be effective learning tools, not only combining self-assessment and reflective learning, but also giving the learner a chance to examine, discuss and attend to the affective variables that can be so important in the Korean context.

## Overview

### 1. Learner training

The trend towards 'student-centered learning' and 'learning-centered learning' over recent years reflects an awareness of the importance of the student in the learning process. LeBlanc & Painchaud (1985:673) observe that "It has now become a commonplace belief that to be efficient, a teaching/learning strategy requires that students have some input in the complete learning cycle" and Nunan (1988:134-5) points out that learners should develop not only their language but also "a critical self-consciousness ... of their own role as active agents within the learning process."

This focusing of attention on the individual learning beliefs, learning agendas and learning preferences of the students is not a minor item to be "allowed for" in the pre-existing curriculum, for these factors can determine the effectiveness of everything that occurs in the classroom. The learners 'know' their strengths and weaknesses, just as they know why they are attending the language class. They have in effect already conducted their own needs analysis, and have formed expectations which control what and how they learn in the classroom. This is often (as Allwright points out), *not* what the teachers teach. In this respect Allwright identifies three issues of fundamental importance in language teaching and syllabus design:

- i) why learners do not learn everything they are taught;
- ii) how learners manage to learn things they are not taught;
- iii) how learners manage to learn things they are taught. (Allwright 1984:4)

Thus different students will learn different things according to their individual learning agendas and perceptions, and will furthermore impose their own order upon any new knowledge acquired, making a pre-planned syllabus largely incidental. The importance of such individual learning preferences and learning beliefs has led educators to focus on learner training, in the belief that "to be self-sufficient, learners must know how to learn." (Wenden 1987:159). Thus many researchers (Oxford, Dickenson, etc.) have examined the area of learning strategies, arguing that "the growth of learner strategies is of positive advantage in language learning, and that the teacher can help the learner in this respect by encouraging him/her to formulate conscious plans for dealing with the task of

learning." (Carver 1984:123). From this perspective the classroom is a place in which the learner should learn how to learn, so that s/he can consciously determine the things which are learned inside the classroom as well as continuing that process outside of it.

## 2. Affective factors

There yet is another influence on the learning process – one which is receiving increasing attention, despite the difficulties in defining, manipulating and quantifying it. This is the "affect" of the learner. "Affective variables" have been defined as "those that deal with the emotional reactions and motivations of the learner; they signal the arousal of the limbic system and its direct intervention in the task of learning" (Scovel (1978:131), and are generally assumed to influence second language acquisition. They could be classified under headings of 'motivation', 'attitude to learning', 'self-esteem', 'anxiety', 'linguistic courage' and perhaps even 'cultural pressures', but however we name them, and regardless of the difficulty in examining them, most teachers would agree that they are extremely important in the learning process. Regardless of *what* or *how* we teach, our success will be severely hindered if the student is not motivated, has a negative attitude to the teacher or the classroom environment, is anxious about his/her performance, has peer pressure not to succeed, or has cultural pressure to learn in a quantifiable manner.

These consideration need serious attention, for if the learners determine what is learnt in the classroom, if their attitudes to learning are so formative, and if their emotional responses so influential, then the task for educators must be to find ways of maximizing the potential of these factors in facilitating learning. As Mantle- Bromley (1995:383) has it: "If we attend to the affective and cognitive components of students attitudes, as well as develop defendable pedagogical techniques, we may be able to increase the length of time students commit to language study and their chances of success in it."

Learner journals are a means of addressing the situation, and of doing so in a learner-centered manner, placing the subject of the study in the role of researcher. In Carroll's words, the experience of critically reflecting on their learning, and on the classroom situation makes "explicit for students the kind of processes claimed by transformation theorists to be essential to adult learning and teaching", in particular:

- \* decreasing learners' dependency on teachers;
- \* developing learners' understanding of how to use learning resources, especially the experience of others;
- \* helping learners define their own learning needs and assume responsibility for setting their own objectives;
- \* fostering learners' ability to make decisions about their learning path, thereby expanding their range of options. (Mezirow 1991)

## 3. Self-assessment

By their very nature, Learner Journals include a large amount of self-assessment, and thus share many aims and methods, such as inviting students to become part of the whole process of language learning, and to be aware of individual progress (Harris 1997:15). Oscarson's (1989:3) rationale of self-assessment procedures in language learning reflects this similarity of purpose:

- 1) promotion of learning;
- 2) raised level of awareness;
- 3) improved goal orientation;
- 4) expansion of range of assessment;
- 5) shared assessment burden;
- 6) beneficial postcourse effects.

This paper proposes that the Learning Journals latter are an effective means of combining contemporary learning theories of self-assessment, learner training and learner autonomy in the classroom hus self-assessment with Learner Journals, it has in fact been shown that the validity of learner judgements can in fact be quite high. Harris advocates the use of self-assessment in the school classroom, stating that it is a practical tool that can make students more active and can assist them with the daunting task of learning how to communicate in another language (1997:19).

## **The research**

### **1. Aims and design**

The particular Learner Journals used at the Language Center were designed with a view to introducing reflective concepts rather than with an expectation to see immediate results. Given the particular character of the Korean false-beginner who typically enters Tertiary education with undeveloped oral skills, but very powerful confidence barriers and anxieties about speaking English, the Journals were to help the students to perceive themselves as successful learners, in the belief that such a positive perception would have a corresponding effect upon their classroom performance.

It was acknowledged that the students concerned had very little experience of thinking about their learning, and that they would find it difficult to find things to write about and to discuss. For them learning meant absorbing a body of knowledge, and there was little more to say. Inviting them to assess the classes, their performance and their learning progress would therefore have little meaning without some sort of introduction to the concepts involved, and to the whole topic of learning styles and strategies. There was also the consideration that these students had never been asked to complete a Needs Analysis or a Placement Test in Conversational English, and that there was no existing information on their performance in this field. All that we had was a general perception of

"poor" abilities on the part of the students.

It was therefore decided to design a Journal which would not only invite students to assess and comment upon their learning on a regular basis, but which would introduce the topics involved and thus provide information on the possibilities and the alternatives. Self-assessment would then be able to proceed in an informed manner, and students would be able to evaluate their learning styles effectively.

The format chosen for this was the questionnaire, since it stresses the self-assessment aspect of learning, and asks the students for their opinions rather than giving them 'hard facts' to be learned. Students could work on these individually or in groups, or they could even use them interactively, using them to interview classmates. This was not seen as harming the efficacy of the study in any way, since the aim was not to collect and analyze data from individuals, but to change perceptions and to introduce the idea of learner training.

The introductory aspect of this Journal cannot be overstressed. Given the novelty of this approach to learning, it was essential to 'soft-pedal', and to be sensitive to the very affective variables which the Journal was to monitor. Accordingly it was offered on a voluntary basis, and although times were allocated to it in class (usually the final 5 minutes of each lesson), this was in effect a time for free-talking, which could also be used to make entries in the Journal. Part of this introductory nature was to make various questionnaires available to the students, and to let them explore and fill in as they felt fit. The Journal was thus to function as a learner-training tool not only in its content, but in its presentation.

The format of the Journal is from the start very structured, with nine learner-training-related questionnaires and four self-assessments, interspersed with "Weekly Self-evaluation" sheets. The whole then finishes with twelve empty "My Diary" sheets. The aim here is to help students to perform some input (filling in the questionnaire) from the outset and to gradually get them to add their own comments on the more open-ended weekly forms, finally using the "My Dairy" sheets for unprompted entries, as they become more confident and knowledgeable about learner strategies..

The first item is an introduction page, which proceeds immediately to a self-assessment, inviting the student to evaluate his/her present level of performance. From being asked to think about their present abilities (or at least to record how they perceive them at this stage) students then move on to a Learning Contract, which brings them into the process of determining what goes on in the classroom, and focuses on expectations in terms of student and teacher roles. It is probable and indeed desirable that many of these preconceptions will change during the semester, but these initial activities serve the purpose of establishing the starting points. After the first "Weekly evaluation", Questionnaires follow, each one concentrating on a different aspect of learning, and based upon similar items in the research literature on learner training:

- i) A measure of autonomy and self-direction;
- ii) Beliefs about language learning (student version);

- iii) Student needs in language learning (student version);
- iv) Language teaching – teachers' needs (student version);
- v) Strategy for language learning (SILL) (Korean version);
- vi) Student perceptions about language learning'
- vii) Learning strategies for oral communication;
- viii) Language learning attitudes survey (student version);
- ix) Learning style inventory;
- x) Self-assessment – language functions and exponents;

These questionnaires are presented in Korean and English, giving ease of comprehension for the students, since they are not comprehension exercises, and since the content is more important at this stage. Oxford's SILL then appears completely in Korean. After this, the questionnaires are in English only, and take on an aspect of being English-learning tasks as well as learner-training exercises. Once students have worked through these and have talked about the items together, they are ready to apply the ideas to their own situation. At this stage the aim is not to evaluate the students' responses, but to elicit them.

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