

IN PURSUIT OF LEARNING AUTONOMY: THE USE OF TEACHERS' FEEDBACK ON LEARNING DIARIES

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Abstract. Researchers have been paying a great deal of attention to investigate how the ideal learning diaries are (Porter, Goldstein, Leatherman and Conrad, 1990) and their function in second language learning (Woodfield and Lazarus, 1998). Less attention has been given to explore the relationship between learning diaries and autonomous learning, even though some experts believe that learning diaries is one of the effective techniques in supporting greater autonomy in language learning (e.g. Harmer, 2007). This article attempts to answer that gap. This article seeks to investigate the link between feedback on learning diaries and autonomous learning. Gaining insights from six students and two teachers, the findings show that there is a connection between feedback and autonomous learning. Furthermore, there is a slight mismatch between the way general and specific feedback are perceived by students and teachers. The teachers prefer to have general and specific feedback, but carefully select which points to correct. On the other hand, the students prefer to have specific feedback as they believe that it can improve their writing ability. Further research is needed to find out the types of feedback that directly promote the development of students' learning autonomy.

Key words: autonomous learning, feedback, diary.

INTRODUCTION

Holec (1981) believes that learner autonomy involves making decisions about learning, including setting objectives, defining contents and progress, selecting methods and techniques, monitoring the procedure, and evaluating the outcomes of learning. Writing journals or diaries is considered to be one of the effective techniques to encourage students to be autonomous. Harmer (2007) points out that in writing journal/diaries, students may have opportunities to express their feeling freely and to reflect upon what and how they have learned. Based on the reflection, learners may plan what they need to do next. Writing diaries seems to be a strategy to promote autonomous learning in which students choose how to plan and evaluate their learning process.

Nevertheless, writing diaries can be ineffective. As it promotes autonomy, writing diary can be "out of control". When this happens, feedback from teachers is needed. Harmer (2007) articulates many ways in responding to students' diaries. He points out that teachers may give comments on students' writing, in general or in particular entries. Hyland (2003) argues that giving feedback may promote

trust and build a positive relationship between teachers and students. Also, almost all students can feel more appreciated when teachers give comments on their work. Both parties are of the view that feedback is pertinent in improving students' writing skill.

Previous studies on learning diaries and feedback have focused on several aspects. Porter, Goldstein, Leatherman and Conrad (1990) believe that the most effective journals involve an ongoing dialogue between learners and the teacher, or between trainees and the trainer. Woodfield and Lazarus (1998) reveal how diaries can serve as an effective tool in encouraging the link between theory and practice in second language learning. Research which links the diaries and feedback has been conducted by Todd, Mills, Palarad and Khamcharoen (2001). They find that specific suggestions, positive evaluation, or supportive feedback from the teachers are highly valued by the students. However, published research has not specified the link between feedback and autonomous learning, even though learning diaries are correlated with autonomous learning. In addition, research seems to neglect teachers' points of view. Freeman and Richards (1996) assert that teachers are an important element in the effectiveness of learning process. Considering the importance of teachers and students point of views, feedback in learning diary should be ideally reflected from the insights of both parties.

This study seeks to investigate the following questions:

1. How do participants perceive feedback on learning diaries?
2. Are there any indications that feedback promotes greater learning autonomy?

This study is expected to be beneficial in these aspects:

- To find the link between teachers' feedback and autonomous learning
- To increase the effectiveness of learning diaries
- To make teachers aware of the types of feedback that could improve students' autonomy.
- To make students aware that feedback from teachers may develop their independent learning

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The participants in this study are 6 students who are currently having experience in writing learning diaries and receiving feedback from their teacher. They come from diverse nationality background: China, India, Vietnam, South Africa, and Taiwan. They are studying at the Certificate Level 3 (equivalent to the Intermediate level) in a ten-week English program. Two English teachers

also participate in this study.

Data Collection Instruments and Analysis

The data collection instrument for the students is a questionnaire (*See Appendix A*) which specifically asks about their ideal expectations of the learning diaries feedback. A semi-structured interview (*See Appendix B*) is used to explore the teachers' points of view towards the use of the learning diaries as well as their perceptions of the feedback. The data from the questionnaire were grouped into two major categories: learning diary and feedback. The data, then, were interpreted based on the general trends. All the interviews were transcribed (*See Appendix C*). The analysis of the interview data began with an initial reading of all transcripts to gain a sense of the overall data and only the data which related to the research questions were then interpreted.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Teachers' Perspective On Learning Diary Feedback

Both teachers agree that asking the students to write a learning diary is important. One teacher said that it develops fluency in writing, makes the students reflect on how successful their learning is and helps the students' motivation to learn. The other teacher believes that learning diaries give an opportunity for the students to reflect on their own learning development. Furthermore, learning diaries do not only improve the students' ability in writing, but may also broaden the students' way of thinking. One teacher further argues that learning diaries assist learners to be more independent in their learning:

It makes them perhaps grow and be more mature students, confident and possibly they will be more independent too because they can work with their own material, growing up with their own way.

In terms of giving feedback to the students, both teachers said that the points should be carefully selected. One teacher said that negotiating what points to comment on with the students would be an advantage. This is intended to encourage and give more freedom for the students to write. Nonetheless, the teachers consider that correcting the students' grammatical mistakes could not only help the students, but could also discourage the students from writing. The teachers believe that they cannot be too critical of the students' writing and do not want the students to be nervous about having a lot of correction in their writing. Hence, two key words are proposed giving feedback: measured and limited:

... measured that's what I mean that you need to be careful and give feedback is going to be

*helpful to the students but not something that they can't work on it... The other one is limited...
If I start criticising everything they write you defeat the purpose.*

Both teachers agree that the feedback would ideally cover general and specific feedback, as they are complementary. The general feedback provides encouragement and the specific feedback assists the students' writing skills:

I think the general feedback provides the encouragement. The motivation, this is effective learning. You can be warm and helpful to the students. But the advantage of specific feedback, I think really does help their language.

Students' Perspective On Learning Diary Feedback

Questions 1 to question 4 were designed to elicit students' perspectives on the link between writing a diary and autonomous learning. The data shows that 50% of the students chose neutral for Q1 and Q3. It means that half the students are not sure whether they enjoy the activity of writing a diary and whether the activity could improve their English. However, for Q2 and Q4, four of the six students reported that writing a diary could encourage them to be more creative and independent; the 2 remaining students are 'neutral' in responding to these questions.

Questions 5 to 12 were designed to draw out the students' perspectives towards teachers' feedback on their diary. The data shows that most students (five out of six) 'agree' and 'strongly agree' that the teachers' feedback is very useful and could encourage them to be better in writing (Q5-Q8). Most students would prefer to have specific feedback rather than general feedback (compare Q10 to Q9 and Q11). Most of them like the teachers to correct their grammatical mistakes (Q9). Nevertheless, there is only one student who shows consistent preference to have specific feedback rather than general feedback (Q10). Likewise, in responding to the semi-open questionnaires, some of the students' answers indicate that they prefer to have specific over general feedback. The feedback example that the students like from their teacher:

keep the verb tense consistent

The link between feedback and autonomous learning can be found from the students' answers to semi-open questionnaires that show indications that feedback could encourage them to be more independent, as shown below:

She always asking questions in my diary so the next time I write in my diary I will just answer the question. I like it because she encourages me to write more on my diary.

I like all the feedback from my teacher because the feedback is very helpful to my study.

Discussion

The results reflect the participants' points of view that a learning diary serves as a learning tool to encourage students' autonomy. As Harmer (2007) points out, learning diary is highly considered as an activity which promotes autonomous learning. However, some students still feel that writing learning diaries becomes a burden for them; they do not see the benefit of writing a learning diary. Harmer (2007) proposes some insights on how to overcome the problem. He asserts that the learning diaries do not need to be submitted weekly, it can be done once in a month. The students should also be given more independence with their learning diaries' design so that they can unleash their creativity. Furthermore, one of the teachers said that it takes times and commitment to have an emotional attachment to writing learning diaries.

The results also reveal that students prefer specific feedback to general feedback. They highly value the comments on grammar and choice of words. Similarly, the empirical study done by Todd, Mills, Palard and Khamcharoen (2001, p.358) suggests that "feedback should be related to specific points in the journal either through in-text comments or through footnotes on a separate piece of paper". However, from the teachers' perspectives, both general and specific feedback should be given because they have different purposes; general feedback encourages the students to write more and better, while specific feedback assists the students' ability in writing.

The students prefer to have teachers' specific suggestions that lead them to write better in the next entry. This means that teachers' feedback would help the students to be more independent in writing. Teachers show that they carefully choose the best way to give feedback. The teachers want the students to have freedom in writing. Hence, in some cases, they avoid giving overwhelmed specific and critical feedback. Their careful choice of giving feedback also aims to avoid discouraging the students from writing. Harmer (2007) argues that the best way to give responses to the students' diaries is to discuss with the students what feedback is the most comfortable for them. Harmer recommends that teachers should be sensitive to the differences among the students in receiving feedback from their teachers. This means that there should be a discussion between students and teachers to decide the best way to give feedback that develops students' creativity and autonomy. As Benson (2001, p. 75) argues, "fostering autonomy does not imply that we simply leave learners to their own devices, but that we actively encourage and assist them to take control of their learning in ways that will be effective in terms of goals that they have determined for themselves".

CONCLUSION

The study found that teachers and students have a similar point of view towards feedback on learning diaries. The only difference noted was in terms of their preference for feedback. The teachers prefer to give general and specific feedback, but carefully select the points to correct on. On the other

hand, the students prefer to have more specific feedback, including the correction of grammatical mistakes. The study also revealed that there is not only a connection between learning diaries and learning autonomy, but also between feedback and supporting greater learning autonomy. Both groups of participants believe that feedback is essential to successfully support the application of learning diaries. However, further research is necessary to conduct with regards to find out the types of feedback that directly promote the development of students' learning autonomy.

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