# Making a Difference with Diary Study Self-Reflections

Brian Wojtowicz

## 1.1 Introduction

After teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) at a private university in Japan for one year, I began to contemplate how to better adapt my lesson activities to produce optimal learner second language (L2) output. As a starting point, I decided to focus on one particular Four Skills Communicative English course in hopes of researching how to improve as an EFL teacher with specific attention being paid to lesson activity selection.

By using a diary study in conjunction with a student feedback questionnaire to explore the idea of improving as an EFL teacher through introspective self-reflection, I aimed to answer the following two research questions:

1. What can a diary study reveal about the teacher's and students' attitudes towards the importance and educational value of a variety of lesson activities?

2. How did a teacher diary study in conjunction with student feedback questionnaire responses affect lesson activity selection and influence teacher self-improvement

Ultimately, this research attempts to explain how a teacher diary, used as a tool for documenting introspective self-reflections on lessons, might be able to assist teachers in better understanding their students' perspectives on EFL lesson activities; consequently, helping students become better language learners, which in turn could result in teachers becoming improved or more successful teachers.

## 2.1 Diary studies: a general overview

Diary studies have only been used as a qualitative research data collection method since the late 1970's (Bailey & Curtis, 2009: 68; Bailey & Nunan, 2009: 292) but they have gradually become more popular over the years (Burns, 2009: 118; McKay, 2009: 230; Nunan, 1992: 132). Bailey and Ochsner's (1983) definition of a diary study is widely referred to when defining the term diary study in regards to applied linguistics research (Bailey & Curtis, 2009: 68-69; Bailey &

Nunan, 1996: 197; Bailey & Nunan, 2009: 292; McKay, 2006: 67; McKay, 2009: 228). They define a diary study as follows:

> A diary study in second language learning, acquisition, or teaching is an account of a second language experience as recorded in a first person journal. The diarist may be a language teacher or a language learner-but the central characteristic of the diary studies is that they are introspective: The diarist studies his own teaching or learning. Thus he can report on affective factors, language learning strategies, and his own perceptions-facets of the language learning experience which are normally hidden or largely inaccessible to an external observer.
>
> (Bailey & Ochsner, 1983: 189)

Introspective thoughts written or recorded retrospectively do not alone constitute a diary study, but rather, diary entries must be analyzed later for salient patterns to be regarded as valid qualitative research evidence (Bailey, 1990: 218). The diary data analysis distinguishes a diary study from a regular diary because, through analysis, diaries become research instruments. The publication of the research results transfers the diary details from private to public (McDonough & McDonough, 1997: 126).

Diaries, in general, usually document gradual or eventual change; therefore, a diary as a tool for educational research is optimal since both learners and teachers change and develop for better or worse during their time spent in classrooms (McDonough & McDonough, 1997: 121). By documenting and reflecting on one's own teaching, a diary study could assist teachers with personal professional development because "diary-keeping is arguably one of the ways in which teachers can get closest to their own work and hence, via critical reflection, to researching it" (McDonough & McDonough, 1997: 131). From consistent patterns and repetitive events documented by diarists, isolated factors that seem crucial for improving L2 output can be identified; moreover, a substantial amount of data needs to be collected before adequate analysis and interpretation of the data can be carried out (Nunan, 1992: 120).

Numerous procedures and a variety of guideline recommendations exist for diary study management and Table 2.1 below summarizes some of the key factors Bailey (1990: 215-226) explains are required for conducting a pertinent and meaningful diary study.

*Table 2.1*: **Diary Study Important Factors Summary**

| Topic | Important Factor |
|---|---|
| Purpose | ● To document language learning experiences.<br>● To document student teachers' academic learning experiences regarding their course training.<br>● To document language teaching experiences. |
| Method | ● Hand written, typed, or voice recorded (audio or video) and later transcribed for analysis.<br>● Time spent recording the diary entries should equal time spent in the lessons being reflected on. |
| Content | ● Need to be regular, candid, and recorded as soon as possible after the lesson studied or taught.<br>● Must be reflective, detailed, thorough, critical, and emotionally inspired.<br>● Positive and negative aspects should be mentioned. |
| Style | ● Meticulous attention to grammar, spelling, punctuation, and organization should be disregarded since swift content recollection is of most importance. Diary entries can be perfected for publication after the research has been completed. |
| Evidence | ● Comments should be supported with examples from the lesson reflected on and relate to actual language data collected in the lessons. |

## 2.2 The value of introspective data collection

Introspection can be defined as "the process of observing and reflecting on one's thoughts, feelings, motives, reasoning processes, and mental states with a view to determining the ways in which these processes determine or influence b ehavior" (Nunan, 1992: 231). Introspective data collection originated in the field of cognitive psychology and has been adopted, albeit controversially, by the field of applied linguistics. Introspective data collection and analysis are quite relevant in that they can "reveal and capitalize on one's own observations as a language learner, user and teacher, for the potential benefit of one's own teaching" (McDonough & McDonough, 1997: 194). Introspection as a research data collection method is extremely valuable and appropriate for applied linguistics research since introspective techniques "can provide better insight into the thought processes and mental states of teachers and learners than other applied linguistics research techniques" (McKay, 2009: 234).

## 3.1 Diary study purpose and details

The purpose of my research was to focus on my own self-improvement and professional development as a teacher through introspection by writing post lesson self-reflective comments about class activities I felt were either, successful or unsuccessful, interesting or uninteresting, and educational or not educational. My initial intention of this research was to reflect on the lesson activities I used during the first semester and, by simultaneously comparing my introspective diary comments to student questionnaire responses about lesson activities, I could augment or abandon lesson activities that were problematic or unsuccessful and continue to use or create new lesson activities that directly related to concerns both teacher and students had regarding areas of EFL acquisition they felt needed improvement. I then intended to use the information discovered from the diary study to better prepare my second semester lesson activities. Lesson activity relevance and importance was often measured according to the level of communicative output produced by the students during the various lesson activities.

## 3.2 Diary study target class information

My research was done at Himeji Dokkyo University in Hyogo, Japan. I chose my first year Communicative English class, which consisted of six students, three male and three female, all of whom were Japanese nationals and Japanese native speakers. They were considered mid to high intermediate level students (level 3 of 5 levels according to the university's level classification guidelines); furthermore, first year student class placement was based on TOEIC Bridge (an English proficiency test used in Japan) test score results. The class met three times a week for the duration of ninety minutes per lesson at forty five lessons per semester. Classes were held Mondays at 10:40 am, Wednesdays at 9:00 am, and Fridays at 10:40 am.

Diary entries focused on all types of lesson activities with primary focus on lesson activities fixating on communicative output. For the various types of lesson activities used in this course please refer to the student questionnaire in Appendix I. Lesson activities that were used in the "Assigned Project" section were usually one of the following: Oral Book Reports, Oral News Reports, or Power Point Presentations.

## 3.3 Diary entry procedure basics

The diary entries used in my research spanned from June 15th 2012 to July 30th 2012 for a total of 17 entries. Almost all diary entries were written immediately in my office after the lesson or at least on the same day but at a later time. Research shows that diary entries are more insightful when recorded as soon as possible after the class has been taught because the diarist's reflective thoughts, ideas, observations, and opinions about the class are more specific and more easily recalled (Bailey, 1990: 220; Bailey & Nunan, 2009: 303). Bailey (1990: 220) strongly suggests that the time spent writing diary entries equals the time spent in the class under observation; therefore, most of my entries tended to be about one to one and a half typed pages and took roughly over one hour to complete. Appendix II shows an example of my first diary entry.

## 3.4 Feedback questionnaire procedure and purpose

At the end of each lesson the students filled out a feedback questionnaire (Appendix I) on the class activities they participated in that day. Firstly, as a class, we went through the list of activities together so everyone checked off the same lesson activities on the questionnaire to ensure that all students were aware of how the activities were classified for that lesson since some activities required multiple categories to be checked. After that they indicated which of those activities they thought were most interesting, least interesting, most educational, and least educational with a brief explanation for their choices. Lastly they were encouraged to write any comments either in regards to what they felt they had learned that lesson, or about any concerns they had about the lessons. Since my research focused on introspective self-reflection about lesson activities, I required factual data about students' opinions pertaining to the specific class activities I used each lesson. From this data I could better approach my research questions, which sought to know if my students and I had similar or different opinions about the importance and educational value of the various class activities utilized in my lessons for the purpose of not only achieving successful and interactive L2 communicative output, but also improving in ESL reading, writing, listening, and speaking.

## 4.1 Diary study details

The diary entries composed were introspective self-reflections written about my reactions to the classroom activities and the general conduct of each lesson. After recording my personal thoughts about each lesson, I then made intuitive assumptions about the student responses to the questionnaire. Following that, I then read over the student questionnaires and commented on the results in my diary entry for that day. In my first diary entry, displayed in its entirety in Appendix II, I began by mentioning my diary study goal:

> My goal is to find out what activities students enjoy and find most educational by having them answer a questionnaire at the end of each class. By examining the results after I write my diary response to each lesson I can see if we have similar thoughts as to what worked or failed in regards to lesson activities. My main intention is to shape next semester's classes based more on the results of their surveys. I can focus attention on what students feel they want to improve upon most.

By outlining my intentions for the diary study, I could more dexterously restrict my introspective recollections to primarily focus on occurrences and observations relating specifically to each day's lesson activities. This helped me from straying off topic too much.

Even though I had just written in my first diary entry that I wanted to use the diary study to help myself prepare better quality lessons for the second semester, by the end of my first diary entry I had already begun contemplating how to augment forthcoming first semester lessons:

> So in the next few classes in order to respond to the feedback I will try giving some Listening advice and make sure to include some more listening; however, I don't want to focus too much on listening since all students take special listening classes once a week.

From this first diary entry, I had already decided to alter from my original plan since I noticed two concerns from the feedback immediately. Not only was there a specific comment from a student about wanting to improve listening, but there was also an expressed concern about needing more vocabulary. This second concern resulted in the following comment in my diary:

> I will recommend Vocabulary books for them and explain some vocabulary study techniques. I think I should talk with one of my co-workers because he focuses on vocabulary so he might have some helpful ideas.

After writing my first diary entry it became obvious to me that the diary would be an effective tool for personal development as a teacher because I was immediately benefiting from my initial entry in that I was motivated to promptly respond immediately to some of my students' concerns.

Even though a diary study's main focus is on post diary analysis where salient patterns and events can be recognized after the diary has been completed (Bailey & Nunan, 2009: 293), it is impossible for the diarist to not become aware of repetitive key events, problems, or concerns while the diary study is ongoing. In my research, where the intent was to explore lesson activity selection through the use of a diary study and student questionnaires to become a better teacher for my Communicative English course, I was the researcher, diarist, and teacher of the class under observation; therefore, I not only recognized, but also acted upon key events, problems and concerns that arose during the diary study.

## 4.2  Salient patterns discovered during the diary study

Certain patterns started to become noticeable shortly after the onset of writing my diary entries. The patterns that emerged were probably heavily influenced by my responses to repetitive comments made on the student questionnaires. Students began to write comments about their own weaknesses and strengths. By reading their comments, I could use my diary entries to keep track of the frequency students mentioned areas they wanted to improve upon. Rather than wait until the semester was finished to use the diary to better prepare for second semester lessons, I decided to amend my lessons while the diary study was in progress. I felt that the best way to help students would be to act sooner, rather than later.

## 4.3  Recurring concerns about listening and vocabulary

As the semester progressed, the questionnaire responses continued to reflect concerns and comments about Listening and Vocabulary. Even though my initial research intention was to focus on the communicative activities, I felt a need to address the student concerns about Listening and Vocabulary since the ultimate purpose of my research was to become a better teacher and by dealing directly with problems students were encountering in my lessons, as expressed in their questionnaire comments, I believe I was directly helping them improve their English skills, thus being a better teacher.

Table 4.1 below displays all the actual Listening and Vocabulary comments written by the students for question #6 on the questionnaire. Even though the actual question is "What do you feel you learned today?", I explained to the

students that they could also write any general comments or concerns about their lessons in this section.

*Table 4.1*: **Student Comments about Listening and Vocabulary**

| Date | Listening | Date | Vocabulary |
|---|---|---|---|
| 6/15 | I'm not good at listening. I want to be able to listen well. | 6/15 | I need more vocabulary. |
| 6/18 | I should learn more listening skill. | 6/22 | I can't solve vocabulary practice well. |
| 6/25 | Man's talking very fast so I can't hear perfect. | 6/22 | Today's lesson was little difficult for me! But I memorized new vocabulary. |
| 6/27 | In this class, Listening is most difficult. | 6/27 | Every class I learn new words. It's very good for me. |
| 6/27 | Textbook listening is very hurry. I couldn't hear. | 6/29 | I learned new many vocabularies. |
| 6/29 | Textbook listening was difficult. The speakers are faster and faster recently. I couldn't listen to some words. | 7/2 | I make word card. I know new many vocabulary. |
| 7/2 | I try to listen this text book CD. I can listen English well now! | 7/6 | I haven't enough vocabulary. |
| 7/23 | Textbook listening was difficult for me. | 7/11 | I don't have vocabulary. |
| 7/25 | I can listen to English well, better than before. | 7/18 | I learned new words today. I have to remember the words. |
| 7/25 | Textbook listening is difficult for me. | 7/18 | I don't know many words. |
| 7/25 | Listening is hard for me. | | |
| 7/27 | I think textbook listening was difficult for me. | | |

As Table 4.1 shows, nine out of the seventeen classes had comments about Listening (twelve total comments) and eight of the seventeen classes had comments about Vocabulary (ten total comments). Of the twelve Listening comments, only two (7/2 and 7/25) were positive in that they mentioned how the student thought his/her listening had improved. As for the Vocabulary comments, five of the ten comments were positive in that they reflected that the student felt he/she

had improved in the area of Vocabulary, or they felt they had learned new words.

Interestingly enough, both of the classes with positive comments about improved Listening skills were classes where I gave comments about ways to improve Listening or gave a thorough explanation to the in-class listening activity answers. My diary entry for the July 2nd class shows that I gave students detailed advice for improving their listening skills:

> After completing the listening task, checking answers, and reading the transcript, I gave a fairly lengthy explanation on how to better improve their listening at home. I explained that they needed to review the listening activities we do in class. Listen at home and read along with the transcript. I confirmed that they all had a copy of the text listening CD. I did not say it was homework but rather it was a method they could try (shadow reading/listening) to improve their listening.

During the July 25th class I took extra time slowly going over the listening activity so students could understand the answers better, as shown in this brief diary entry blurb for that day:

> This was followed by a listening activity in the text. This was a little difficult since they had to listen for full sentence answers. This activity went as usual so I made sure to go over the answers slowly so that students could understand the answers better.

Even though I only mentioned the topic of improving students' Listening skills three times in my diary entries as an area I wanted to focus on in the second semester, I did mention concerns about Listening in eight of my diary entries.

Of those seventeen research classes, eleven classes had Listening activities checked off as an activity on the questionnaire; therefore, eight of the eleven classes featuring a Listening activity garnered a comment from me in my diary about me noticing difficulty with Listening or wanting to help students become better listeners. It could be perceived that my heightened awareness of, and attention to, weakness in Listening activities was influenced because of the questionnaires and diary entries commenting on the questionnaire results.

Vocabulary Practice was checked off as a class activity ten times; however, this is not an accurate reflection of the amount of times vocabulary assignments were done as class work or an additional activity both in and out of class since, as the semester progressed, I developed additional vocabulary tasks, especially in conjunction with the Oral Book Reports and Oral News Reports. My interest in developing additional Vocabulary based activities might have been influenced by my diary entries repeatedly mentioning about student concerns regarding Vocabulary. There were sixteen comments from twelve different diary entries

which discussed the Vocabulary activities or concerns about Vocabulary.

By creating new Vocabulary exercises to coincide with preexisting class activities, such as the Oral Book Reports and Oral News Reports, I was actively influenced by content of my diary entries. Since I was becoming aware of some student concerns about areas of weakness or areas they felt they needed to improve in, I was able to address their concerns immediately and notice if my attempts to create new activities that involved additional exposure to new vocabulary made a difference in their learning. Regardless of the success or failure of these newly attempted Vocabulary assignments, I was making an effort to alter my teaching activities so that the students could be given a chance to try and strengthen areas they believed needed improvement.

## 4.4 Post diary entry examination results: general findings

The post diary analysis of the diary entries revealed a few repetitive and salient patterns regarding class activities, reactions from students, and reactions from the teacher. Three topical areas found in the diary entries that warrant discussion were: pair work favorable to group work, student questioning difficulties, and improving teacher feedback.

## 4.5 Pair work versus group work

I repeatedly mentioned in my diary that during my lessons group work involving four or more students together in one group for discussion lagged in comparison to pair work or small groups consisting of three students. I also expressed a desire to abolish large group activities for two key speaking activities I developed specifically for this communicative class: Oral News Reports and Oral Book Reports. These two activities focused on interactive communication and I initially chose to have the students discuss their reports together in one big group involving all students (a maximum of six students was possible); however, as I augmented these activities throughout the semester, the diary entries revealed that I felt a desire to terminate group work in favor of pair work. I initially chose group work for these activities because the communicative output should have focused on opinion exchange and H.D. Brown (2001: 186) explains that group work is ideal for opinion exchange activities. Group work is crucial for communicative lesson activities because it promotes class cohesiveness (Dörnyei & Murphey,

2003: 62-63) and it generates interactive language exchanges (Brown, H.D., 2001: 178). Post diary analysis was not required to reveal that I thought group work was less successful at producing substantial communicative output than pair work, but the analysis highlighted some repetitive and insightful comments made about my views towards pair work being a successful communicative activity method in comparison to group work; furthermore, my diary analysis also revealed my reluctance to terminate group work.

The topic of pair work and group work was documented in twelve of the seventeen diary entries. In six separate diary entries I made comments about pair work and three people group activities resulting in successful communicative output from the students. The diary extracts provided evidence that pair work and three people groups were successful in that the students were productively engaged in conversation. When there was lack of progress it seemed to be due to content or topical disassociation rather than grouping arrangements.

Six of the comments made about pair and group work distinctively related to the Oral Book Reports and Oral News Reports. The first diary entry mentioning the Oral Book Report activity was on June 20th. This was the fourth of six Oral Book Reports the students had to complete. The diary comments show that I felt presenting orally in one large group consisting of all present students was not successful in that there was very little spoken output in the form of discussion. The following quote is from the June 20th diary entry and shows my hope to improve the Oral Book Report activity:

> With two more Oral Book Reports due I might try something different with the groupings since group work does not generate any worthwhile authentic discussions. One idea I have is to pair up the students, student A reads his/her report and Student B takes notes, asks questions (not just copy the information word for word) so that Student B understands the report's content. They will have to ask verifying questions so I'll need to review this style of conversation before the next Oral Book Report is due on July 6th. After that, Student B will tell the class about Student A's book report and afterwards Student A can add any additional information. This could work well so I think I'll give it a try.

The first diary entry commenting on the Oral News Reports was on June 25th and it is similar to my June 20th diary entry:

> I originally had the idea that the Oral News Reports could generate discussion but this rarely happens. I encourage questions afterwards but like the Oral Book Reports they are usually followed by silence unless I repeatedly prompt them. I have started assigning students to ask questions afterwards. I might do as I plan to do with the Oral Book Reports and have students converse in pairs rather than in one big group. I think I'll try this next time they do an Oral News Report, if

anything it might be a trial for what to expect from the book reports if they are also done in this fashion···Maybe by pairing students up they can communicate better?

Both of these diary entries mention a plan to try pair work in replacement of group work for the next time they were to do these activities. During the remainder of the semester the students had three more Oral News Reports; however, on all three occasions I did not try the activity as pair work and each diary entry on these three days reiterates my desire to try pair work the next time the activity was to be done.

Initially I had planned to do two more Oral Book Reports; however, the students only did this activity once more during the semester due to time restraints and having an excessive workload at the end of the semester. As with the Oral News Reports, my attempt at pairing up the students rather than doing the activity as a group assignment was abandoned. The diary entry for the day of the Oral Book Report, July 6th, states the following about the decision to not follow through with the original plan to attempt pair work:

As mentioned before, they deliver their Oral Book Reports in one big group. After the report is read the students are supposed to ask questions but this doesn't work out too well so I started assigning at least one person to ask a question so that everyone gets to ask at least one question. I had initially wanted to try something new this time where the students get paired up and then discuss their review to only one other person. That person would then ask questions and need to understand the main idea of the other person's book report because the listener would then tell the class about his/her partner's book report rather than their own. I abandoned this idea since there were only five students today.

My inability to follow through with changing the activity from group work to pair work is a salient pattern of concern that was revealed in the diary study's analysis stage. This hesitancy to act on my ideas to improve an activity could be regarded as counterproductive because I continued using an activity setup which I believed to result in unsuccessful communicative output from the students. Each time I failed to try the new lesson modification idea in class, I reasoned in my diary entry that having an odd number of students in the class would make pair work less manageable than with one large group. The diary study revealed that I needed to have more confidence in my lesson activity ideas and rather than postpone some ideas, my students might have benefited more from my lessons if I had implement the changes I was contemplating.

## 4.6 Students having difficulty asking interactive questions

Another area of concern that is noticeable in the diary analysis which also relates specifically to discussion and speaking centered activities (Oral News Reports, Oral Book Reports, and Power Point Presentations) is student reluctance to ask insightful or topical questions when they are supposed to be active listeners.

The repetitive concern expressed in these diary entry comments divulge an area I probably need to focus on improving with these students. Rather than abandon the Oral Book Report, Oral News Report, and Power Point Presentation activities next semester, I have identified an area associated with all three activities that I feel students need improvement in; therefore, in between semesters I can concentrate on exploring possible methods to help students become better and more comfortable at asking questions when they adopt the role of an active listener.

## 4.7 Lack of teacher feedback and appraisal evident

Diary entry analysis revealed an aspiration to provide students with more detailed, specific, and regular feedback on their progress in class and on certain lesson activities. Five diary entries showed that I was influenced to change my teaching behavior regarding student feedback during the classes while conducting the diary study. The June 15th and June 18th entries show that my concern is solely about how best to provide grammatical feedback. However, in the July 2nd comment I remark that I had hoped to motivate the students more by providing them with encouraging feedback that directly praised them and identified areas of their communicative abilities that I thought were successful that lesson. This sentiment is further reflected on July 13th, after their power point presentations, because I make a note to myself to be sure to write up some detailed appraisal comments mentioning the strong and weak points from their presentations. In my diary entries on July 13th and again on July 18th I associate confidence with success and express a concern to inform students more regularly about their progress in class. The July 18th entry saw me follow through with my plan to give written feedback reports to the students. Giving regular candid feedback to students was identified, through my diary entries, as a crucial component that my lessons lacked.

## 4.8 End of class student feedback questionnaire analysis

Specific analysis of the regular class feedback questionnaire results revealed that students always found at least one activity to be "Most Important Educationally" since, of the seventeen lessons involved and seventy four total questionnaires completed in the study, not one student ever wrote "Nothing" for this category. Another interesting point is that the "Least Interesting" category received a "Nothing" answer 44 times, and the "Least Important Educationally" question received a "Nothing" answer 54 times. The numerical statistics are flawed in that the totals per category don't add up to 74 since some activities fell into two or more categories and students' choices crossed between categories. Table 4.2 shows how often each activity was selected as "Most Interesting", "Least Interesting", "Most Important Educationally", and "Least Important Educationally".

*Table 4.2*: **Feedback Questionnaire Category Frequency for Lesson Activities**

| | Most Interesting | Least Interesting | Most Important Educationally | Least Important Educationally |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Textbook Listening** | 11 | 6 | 10 | 3 |
| **Other Listening Activity** | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| **Textbook Exercise** | 7 | 8 | 15 | 4 |
| **Internet Assignment** | 2 | 2 | 0 | 0 |
| **Pair Work** | 11 | 1 | 4 | 2 |
| **Group Work** | 6 | 0 | 1 | 2 |
| **Speaking Activity** | 14 | 7 | 17 | 6 |
| **Writing Assignment** | 1 | 0 | 4 | 0 |
| **Non Textbook Handout** | 2 | 2 | 2 | 0 |
| **Vocabulary Practice** | 0 | 5 | 17 | 1 |
| **Assigned Project: Oral** | 11 | 0 | 6 | 0 |

| Book Report | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Assigned Project: Oral News Report | 11 | 1 | 0 | 2 |
| Other: Homework Check | 1 | 1 | 2 | 1 |
| Other: Advice | 0 | 0 | 3 | 0 |
| Nothing | 4 | 44 | 0 | 54 |

Obviously, activities that were performed most often received higher numerical rankings.

The most frequently used activities were "Speaking Activity" (fifteen times), "Vocabulary Practice" (ten times), and "Textbook Listening" (ten times). "Textbook Listening" was selected as "Most Interesting" and "Most Important Educationally" more often than it was chosen for "Least Interesting" and "Least Important Educationally". "Speaking Activity", "Vocabulary Practice", and "Textbook Exercises" were all checked for the "Most Important Educationally" category numerous times. Both "Book Reports" and "News Reports" were selected eleven times as "Most Interesting", but only "Book Reports" were ever chosen as "Most Important Educationally" (six times), whereas "News Reports" were never selected for this category. Regardless of being partially inconsequential, the analysis identifies some insight into how students in these seventeen classes perceived the lesson activities pertaining to interesting, uninteresting, educational, and not having educational value.

The questionnaire itself was not meant to be analyzed for specific quantitative statistical evidence to prove any specific theory, but rather to help me better understand how my students identified the different types of activities done in the lessons and allow them to comment on lesson activities as interesting, uninteresting, educational, or not educational. If anything, students seemed to always consider some lesson activity as being important educationally. The feedback results possibly hint at the assumption that these students do not dislike any particular activity type, nor do they have a specific all-encompassing preferred activity style. It is quite possible that the questionnaire results suggest that as long as a variety of activities are used and a semblance of learning something exists, the students

feel as if the activities are successful.

Taking these results into consideration, I feel that the wide variety of lesson activities used during the first semester can continue to be used during the second semester and in future teaching of this Communicative English course since no activity can be isolated as being uninteresting or not educational.

## 4.9 Further analysis

The most interesting statistic revealed from the questionnaire responses was that of the seventeen lessons involved, eight lessons had questionnaires resulting in at least one category being selected by 100% of all students in attendance that day. Therefore, statics show that on occasion, the students shared a unanimous perception about the value of some of the class activities. Table 4.3 shows the activities and categories that were unanimously selected that day, and the amount of students in attendance.

*Table 4.3*: **Unanimous Questionnaire Activity Selection in One Category**

| Date | Number of Students | Activity | Category Selected by All Attended Students |
|------|------|----------|------------|
| 6/22 | 4 | Pair Work / Speaking | Most Interesting |
|  |  | Vocabulary | Most Important Educationally |
| 7/2 | 5 | Oral News Reports / Speaking | Most Interesting |
| 7/4 | 6 | Pair Work / Speaking | Most Interesting |
| 7/6 | 5 | Oral Book Reports / Group Work | Most Interesting |
| 7/11 | 4 | Oral News Reports / Speaking | Most Interesting |
| 7/20 | 6 | Speaking | Most Interesting |
|  |  | Nothing | Least Interesting |
|  |  | Speaking | Most Important Educationally |
| 7/25 | 4 | Listening | Most Interesting |
| 7/27 | 3 | Nothing | Least Interesting |
|  |  | Nothing | Least Important Educationally |

If anything, the data collected in Table 4.3 shows that students, at times, had the same mindset as to which activities were most interesting and most important

educationally. This minute statistical evidence supports my personal belief that these students associate communicative based speaking activities as interesting but not necessarily educational since six of the seven "Most Interesting" activities unanimously selected were interactive speaking activities but "Speaking Activity" was only once selected as "Most Important Educationally". An assumption could be made here that the students might not value Speaking activities as being educational since the focus is on output rather than input.

Perhaps the most significant use of the feedback questionnaires was how I used the results in my diary reflections. I was able to make assumptions about the likeability and importance of activities prior to reading their survey results and then notice if my perceptions about the activities were similar or different from the students'. Originally I had hypothesized that students would find text based activities to be of most importance, whereas speaking activities developed outside the textbook would be interesting but not educational. This was evident with the Oral News Reports since they were never selected as the "Most Important Educationally" but they were chosen a few times as "Most Interesting". Students might have thought the activity was meant to improve their knowledge about current events or even translating Japanese into English, since they were encouraged to use Japanese news sources to gather the information outside of class, but they were required to discuss the news in English in class. In actuality, the activity was simply meant to be a source of discussion to begin with on Mondays. This insight into their perception about Oral News Reports not being important educationally has made me more aware of the importance of thoroughly explaining the purpose of certain activities. It appears evident from their comments and ranking of the Oral News Reports that they perhaps didn't understand the reason why they were doing this activity or how it would improve their English conversation skills. My diary comments about the Oral News Reports often mentioned that the students would resort to explaining their Oral News Report topic or story in Japanese after they initially read about it to the group in English. This completely defied the purpose of the activity, since the activity was supposed to focus on their ability to convey a message in English, not just to show that they could gather information in English. Therefore, my teaching has the potential to be improved through my awareness that I was not explaining the activity's purpose well enough. Perhaps repetitive comments in my diary has heightened my awareness of

this issue and identified it as a critical problem in my lessons that I need to try and solve so that students can be more communicatively successful.

Initially I had expected more distinctive differences of opinions in regards to the importance and interest of activities. Surprisingly though, students and I often held similar perspectives about the importance of some of the activities. Since no drastic discrepancies existed between the students' and my perceptions about the important, unimportant, interesting, uninteresting, educational, and not educational value of certain lesson activities utilized in the Communicative English class researched for this research, I have come to the assumed conclusion that the types of activities used in lessons do not negatively affect the communicative output displayed by the students; however, how lesson activities are taught, facilitated, explained, and assessed by the teacher might have a more pertinent influence on students' attitudes towards lesson activity success.

## 5.1 Conclusion: General diary study analysis summary

The three main self-identified salient topical patterns about the lessons reflected on that became evident from the diary study were: my preference for pair work to group work and a reluctance to completely abolish group work, recognition that students had difficulty asking interactive and logical questions, and noticing that there was a lack of constructive, evaluative, and encouraging feedback given to the students. Concerns about these three topical areas, especially in their relation to class activities, were addressed by the teacher and the information can be used to better prepare future lesson activities and thus allow for possible teacher improvement.

## 5.2 Research question 1 summary

In regards to specifically interpreting the student's attitudes towards lesson activities, the questionnaire analysis conducted along with the diary study reveals that students did not appear to have any overt lesson activity preferences, but they seemed to appreciate when I, their teacher, addressed concerns they themselves identified. Moreover, the questionnaire results revealed that students did perceive numerous types of lesson activities as being educationally valuable and both students and I often interpreted speaking based activities as educational and interesting. One slight difference of opinions existed in that students often regarded

Textbook activities as educational yet students themselves seemed split on Textbook activities being interesting or uninteresting; whereas, I usually thought the Textbook activities were less important educationally and prevalently uninteresting.

## 5.3 Research question 2 summary

Analysis of the diary entries showed that some observations made during the diary writing process seemed to have influenced my lesson activity selection or modification so that certain lesson activities focused directly on areas of concern the students had mentioned in their feedback comments. Through a combination of student questionnaire responses and diary reflections influenced by those student comments, I was able to concentrate on assisting students in these weak areas by altering lesson activities. By attempting to address concerns students had about lacking vocabulary during discussions and having difficulty with Listening activities, I believe my teaching ability improved because I was able to provide extra guidance and additional support in the lessons to help students improve in two specific areas they perceived as being problematic.

## 5.4 Final thoughts

I believe that introspective self-reflection for teacher self-improvement through a diary study is achievable since, through information made noticeable from both diary entry and student questionnaire response analysis, students in the Communicative English course involved in this dissertation's research were able to receive attentive assistance in developing areas of their ESL studies that they perceived as requiring improvement. Diary studies can be regarded as a beneficial data collection method for applied linguistics research since many possibilities exist as to how diaries can be used for introspective self-reflection exploration. I strongly support Nunan's (1992) declaration that "diaries, logs, and journals in particular have a great deal to offer research in foreign language learning".

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# Appendix I
# Student Feedback Questionnaire

Date: _____

## *Today's Lesson*

1. *Check ALL that applied to today's lesson.*
   ○ Textbook Listening  ○ Other Listening Activity  ○ Textbook Exercises

   ○ Internet Assignment  ○ Pair Work  ○ Group Work

   ○ Speaking Activity  ○ Writing Assignment  ○ Non Textbook Handout

   ○ Vocabulary Practice  ○ Assigned Project : _____

   ○ Other: _____

2. From the list above, what was the most interesting for you today?

   _____

3. From the list above, what was the least interesting for you today?

   _____

4. From the list above, what was the most important educationally today?

   _____

5. From the list above, what was the least important educationally today?

   _____

6. What do you feel you learned today?

   _____

# Appendix II
# Diary Entry for June 15th 2012

I have begun a new diary journal today for my first year Communicative English class consisting of six students who are of high intermediate level. As two months have passed, I feel the students are comfortable with each other and me at this time, just over halfway through the semester. My goal is to find out what activities students enjoy and find most educational by having them answer a questionnaire at the end of each class. By examining the results, after I write my diary response to each lesson, I can see if we have similar thoughts as to what worked or failed in regards to lesson activities. My main intention is to shape next semester's classes based more on the results of their questionnaires. I can focus attention on what students feel they want to improve upon most. At this time it seems to me that all students are quite motivated and they are now comfortable talking to each other during speaking based activities in class.

We began with a homework check where we go over the homework as a class. So the students read their answers as I call upon them. After that we got straight into the text topic. Today's lesson was primarily text book based with little to no real communicative interaction between students. This is rare in this class but it felt like a productive lesson for setting out the grammar target for the unit. The following classes will have more peer interaction. We began with introducing the topic of "Giving Advice" for travel with attention paid to Modal Verbs for necessity and suggestion. After eliciting some examples the students had to write three sentences each and then they read them in class and then I made corrections. The target was then further introduced with a short listening activity from the textbook. The final part of the class was doing the textbook grammar activities individually, but when they do this kind of activity they are permitted to talk to the people next to them and work out answers together if need be. Usually students work independently, as was the case today.

There didn't seem to be any problems or concerns with this lesson. For a text based, somewhat boring style lesson I thought it went well. To spruce it up I taught them some additional phrases that were not part of the text and explained which ones were more natural sounding or more commonly used. I'm not sure if any students thought anything was interesting today but hopefully they thought the

grammar points were educational. For myself I think my explanation about what is more popular or natural sounding was the most educational point from today's lesson. As for the most interesting aspect of today's lesson, I think it might be my one or two personal anecdotes I shared today about Australia that linked to the text listening topics. So if anything, they also learned some good cultural tidbits about international travel. As for the checked activities, I didn't think anything was overly interesting since everything was text based today. I thought the grammar focus and textbook activities were most educational.

## *Student Feedback Reports:*

**Today's Activities**: Textbook Listening, Textbook Exercises, and Writing Assignment.

This is the first time I used this survey and I think I'll continue using it. The problem might be that they might get bored with it three times a week, but only time will tell. I am quite happy with the results in that students seemed to write real answers, they just didn't rush through it.

**Similarities and Differences:** "Most Interesting" and "Least Interesting" varied. "Most Educational" was similar in that three of the five students shared my opinion. By not commenting on "Least Educational" are students being sincere, or do they value everything as educational?

Here is the chart breakdown:

| Most Interesting | Least Interesting | Most Educational |
|---|---|---|
| Listening<br>Grammar<br>Writing<br>Nothing X 2 | True or False (Listening)<br>Listening<br>Text Exercise<br>Nothing X 2 | Writing<br>Textbook Exercises X 3<br>Listening |
| **Least Educational** | **What did they learn** | |
| Nothing X 4<br>Writing | Grammar & Listening Difficult - wants to improve listening.<br>Didn't like English before but now does.<br>Need more Vocabulary<br>It was fun X 2 | |

There seems to be a mix but I now have some decent feedback I think. So in the next few classes in order to respond to the feedback I will try giving some

Listening advice and make sure to include some more Listening; however, I don't want to focus too much on Listening since all students take special Listening classes once a week. This is a communicative course but I want to help as best I can. Grammar focus might be something I focus on more when they are engaged in talking activities. Right now I don't like interrupting their conversations to correct them so I might try taking notes during the speaking activities and afterwards mention some of the positive points from their discussions as well as areas that need improvement. I think it is a good idea to recap generally rather than single out any students. I will recommend Vocabulary books for them and explain some vocabulary study techniques. I think I should talk with one of my co-workers because he focuses on vocabulary so he might have some helpful ideas.

# Making a Difference with Diary Study Self-Reflections

Brian Wojtowicz

## ABSTRACT

How beneficial, for teacher self-improvement, can a diary study focusing on lesson activity selection be for teachers? Does the analysis of diary entries focusing on lesson activities and student feedback on lesson activities enable a teacher to better understand his or her classroom environment and thereby become an improved teacher? This paper explains the results of a diary study that not only examined the researcher's lesson activity preferences, but also analyzed student feedback regarding classroom tasks. The two main research questions addressed are:

- What can a diary study reveal about the teacher's and students' attitudes towards the importance and educational value of a variety of lesson activities?

- How did a teacher diary study in conjunction with student feedback questionnaire responses affect lesson activity selection and influence teacher self-improvement?

Diary entries for this study not only focused on observations noticed within one Japanese university first year Communicative English class, but also included analysis of a student feedback questionnaire about lesson activities used in each lesson. This researcher aims to show that teachers can use a diary study to analyze both teacher and student reactions and responses to lesson activities for the purpose of teacher self-improvement through introspective self-reflection.