

# Students' Perceptions of Keeping a Language Learner Journal

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## Introduction

For decades, learners keeping track of their language learning experience in the form of diaries (or journals, I use the term interchangeably in this paper) has been recognized as a rich source of data on learners' attitudes and beliefs (Allison, 1998; Bailey & Ochsner, 1983; Peck, 1996). This first-person introspective account can be useful to the language teacher or researcher for understanding students' side of the learning/teaching experience. The use of diaries has also been suggested for the purpose of raising awareness of language learning strategies (LLS). If a learner were aware of strategies available, and if efforts were made to apply these strategies, it could very well aid the language learner in becoming a more proficient user of the new language.

## Literature review

### Studies on language learner journals

Let us consider first of all what it is that learners write in their language learner journal (LLJ). Regarding the content of assigned language learner diaries, Rubin (1981) recognizes two ways of keeping such a journal. One is the directed type, where learners are given explicit prompts by the teacher such as writing about a certain LLS. The other type is not as structured, but still keeping strategy use as its theme. Bailey's (1983) diary study also revealed

insights on learners' use of LLSs, though she was more concerned with looking at competitiveness and anxiety among adult learners. Generally speaking a language learner diary focuses on what was learned, the process of learning, and may include self-evaluation as well as opinions of the materials, instructional methods, or interaction with classmates and teachers.

As for the procedures of reading and reviewing the journals as a classroom task, a (rather non-interactive) way is to have the learners submit their journals at the end of the term for marking and analysis. A more interactive procedure is conducted at regular intervals during the term (a) the students to write in the journal, (b) the instructor reviews it and gives some feedback, (c) the journal is returned to the student, (d) repeat. An alternative procedure is peer-journaling. In this case, a student is paired up with another student, and the writing begins: (a) each one writes (b) students exchange journals, read, and write feedback, (c) they return the classmate's journal, and (d) repeat. The last two methods can be thought of as a time-delayed conversation on paper.

While there are several diary studies which report on the insights gained from written content of the journals, there seems to be a need for a meta-analysis on learners' perception of the usefulness of engaging in the journal keeping task itself. Bailey (1991) lists two general categories of studies on language learner diaries: (1) the researcher analyzes his/her own language learner journal, and (2) the researcher analyzes journals written by other people. Schumann and Schumann (1977) are considered to be pioneers in the work of first-person analysis of diaries, which detailed their experiences of learning Farsi and Arabic. Bailey (1980) carried on with this line of research in her own study, recounting her experience in a French reading course. Rivers (1983), reported on her own use of LLSs while studying Spanish in Latin America. Schmidt and Frota (1986) analyzed Schmidt's diary data on

learning Portuguese in Brazil for five months.

Bailey's (1983) diary study on competitiveness and anxiety is one of the first major studies on analyzing *other* people's journals, not just the researcher-turned-language learner. This study differs from the previously mentioned studies in another way; Bailey's (1983) interest was specifically aimed at anxiety and competitiveness, though her study does report on language learning strategies.

### **Purpose of the study**

After having reviewed some of the literature on keeping language learner journals, I decided to include a requirement to keep a journal in one of the courses that I teach. I was interested to see if (and how well) learners would record their language learning strategies and their processes of learning. Few would doubt that linguists who analyze their own language learner diaries inherently perceive the usefulness of keeping a journal. However, would the average foreign language learner also arrive at the same level of detail and ultimately the same conclusion?

That being said, the purpose of the present study is not technically a diary study, since the data analyzed are not the language learner journals themselves, but questionnaires on learners' opinions of the task. This study explores students' perceived benefits, if any, of having done a weekly (and required) journal-writing task for one semester. The present study also looks at whether or not students intend to continue journal writing on their own, even after the course is over.

The research questions are as follows:

1. How useful was the LLJ task for the students in their language learning?
2. What did they like or dislike about doing the writing for the LLJ?
3. After having experienced the LLJ as a mandatory task, would they like to continue a similar task on their own?

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

The participants of this study are 17 first-year university students in Japan who belonged to my 15-week English course on listening and speaking skills. The total number of students in this course was 25 (19 females and 6 males). Due to the fact that not everyone submitted their data, the final number of people included in this study came out to be 17 people (14 females, 3 males). All of the members of this group are Japanese L1 speakers. (It is worth noting that international students, one from Korea and one from China, were in the class. Unfortunately, they were among the eight who did not submit their data. Hence, the gathered data are not as rich as they potentially could have been.)

Topics covered in the class came from a commercially available textbook. These topics became the basis for our listening and discussion activities. In addition to the book, I prepared slideshows and language games to elicit, teach, and review vocabulary. A required out-of-class task was the Language Learner Journal. In this task, students had to reflect on their language learning experiences and submit a page of writing a week. While typical diary topics such as recounting daily life events were not discouraged, topics related to language learning were explicitly requested. Suggestions included were: (1) current or past experiences in learning languages, L1 or foreign language, (2) reporting successes, weakness, or other problems in language learning, (3) resolutions to overcome such problem areas, or (4) general observations or realizations regarding language.

### **Materials and Procedures**

#### **Questionnaire**

A questionnaire was given to the participants on the final day of the semester

to gather information on their previous experience with language learner journals, the content of their journals, their opinions on the usefulness of the task, what they liked or disliked about the task, and whether or not they would keep on writing. The questions asked were:

1. Have you ever written a language learner journal before this class?
2. What did you write about in your journal?
3. Did you think writing the journal was useful to your learning?
4. What did you like or dislike about writing the language learner journal?
5. Would you continue doing such a journal after the class is over, just for yourself? Why or why not?

Response types differed depending on the question. The format of Question 1 was a yes or no answer. Question 2 listed a selection of responses and participants were free to choose as many as they thought applied to their situation. The choices were: (a) What happened in the lessons, (b) self-analysis about your learning, (c) personal goals and reasons for your learning, (d) troubles you faced in your learning, (e) successful episodes or happy moments in your learning, and (f) Other topics, followed by a blank space for writing in a description of other topics. Questions 3, 4, and 5 were open-ended questions soliciting free responses.

Data from the handwritten responses were transferred into an Excel spreadsheet and analyzed by question type. Question 1 has discrete data in the form of YES / NO responses. Question 2 contains five pre-set responses and one free response. Responses to Question 3–5 were in the form of prose, which were analyzed by coding them into categories.

## **Results and Discussion**

This section presents the findings of the questionnaire administered to the students as pertains to this study's research questions. The results in this

section will concentrate on the responses from Questions 3 to 5, as they are the most relevant in light of the research questions posed.

### Perceived Usefulness

For Question 3, on the “usefulness” of the journal-writing task, 16 out of 17 students responded with answers categorized as useful. One participant (ID 6) did not respond to the question. (See Appendix A for the complete set of responses.)

The following is a breakdown of the three categories of usefulness, found in Table 1, with excerpts of students’ comments. From the 16 responses indicating the LLJ as being useful to their learning, one response (ID 14) contained no elaboration beyond, “Yes, I think it was useful.” The remaining students’ responses on the usefulness of the LLJ can be categorized into three groups: writing practice, remembering/reviewing lesson content, and “conversation” with the teacher. It should be noted that there is the possibility of overlap in these results since participants wrote in free responses and were not restricted by having to choose from a list of options. Nine students (ID numbers 2, 3, 7, 10, 11, 13, 16, 21, and 25) cited that doing written work in English was useful to them. Examples of such responses are listed below:

Student 16: I think it was useful. We hardly write sentences freely, so it’s little difficult at first, however I come to be used to write more and more.

Table 1 *Responses to Question 3 on the usefulness of the Language Learner Journal*

Useful (no details)	Useful as Writing Practice	Useful as Lesson Review	Useful to “Converse” with the teacher
1	9	12	1

Student 11: I think it's useful because it is a good chance to write full sentences with picking up a dictionary.

Twelve participants (ID numbers 1, 3, 5, 7, 10, 12, 13, 15, 17, 18, 21, 22, 25) deemed the LLJ as useful because it was a way to remember what they had covered in class, thus enabling them to re-visit the lesson. Below are representative responses mentioning reviewing the lesson:

Student 3: Yes, I think so, because it's good practice for me about writing, and when I wrote the journal, I could review what I learned in class.

Student 15: I think writing the journal is very useful because LLJ can do a review of the last lesson.

Student 22: Yes, I did. Because we can look back (at) lessons through writing.

One participant's (ID 10) comment spanned all three categories of writing practice, reviewing lessons, and holding "conversations" on paper with the instructor:

Student 10: I think writing (a) journal is useful to my learning because I can review what I learned today and practice writing. It becomes a chance to think back (on) the lessons. Moreover, I can feel that I make conversations with my teacher every lesson. Though it is demanding for teachers, language learners can get benefits from the journals.

The final sentence of this student's response shows that she understands something of the time commitment teachers make when reading and responding to students in their journals.

All of the students who responded to this question (16 of 17 people) are of the opinion that the LLJ was a useful activity in their learning. My expectations, based on readings of previous studies, were that the top reason for this would

having a chance to reflect on their learning processes and strategies for dealing with a foreign language. Instead, they identified practical aspects of the assignment such as recollecting that week’s lesson content and having the (mandatory) opportunity for self-expression in English as the most useful on the questionnaires given.

### **LLJ likes and dislikes**

Question 4 asked what the students liked and/or disliked about keeping LLJs. (For a complete listing of responses to Question 4, refer to Appendix B). Six students (ID 2, 5, 11, 14, 15, 16, 21) wrote about likes only, three students (ID 1, 10, 17) wrote about dislikes only, two students (ID 13, 18) wrote somewhat ambiguous responses which are open to interpretation, two students (ID 3, 25) included about both likes and dislikes, and three students (ID 6, 7, and 22) did not write a response.

Aspects that students liked about the LLJ are summarized in Table 2. We can see a similarity with the categories of responses for Question 3: a general “like” (with no details), writing practice, reviewing lesson content, and communicating with the teacher. Two students (ID 2, 16) expressed liking the LLJ with a simple “I like writing the language learner journal”. Students 14 and 25 clearly indicated that they liked the writing practice. Five students (ID 2, 5, 11, 15, 21) said they liked using the LLJ as chance to remember what

*Table 2 Categories of Responses to Question 4: “What did you like or dislike about writing the LLJ?”*

Likes	Dislikes (source of dislike)
General Like (no details given)	Tiresome (task)
Chance to do writing practice	Lack of vocabulary (self)
Chance to remember lesson content	Poor grammar ability (self)
Chance to communicate with the teacher	Lack of writing ability (self)
	Time management (self)



they learned. Student 3 liked being able to tell the teacher her reactions to the lesson materials.

Due to the format of the questionnaire's design, it is difficult to prove a statistically significant relationship between perceived usefulness and aspects they liked about the LLJ. Nonetheless, the similarities between the types of responses for Questions 3 and 4 suggest a connection. It is that these students like tasks that they deem to be useful to their learning.

Things that they disliked about this LLJ activity can be put into two groups: criticism of the task and self-criticism. Student 1 writes, "It is a little tiresome," which is a direct comment on the task. Other students wrote that the source of dislike is not the task, but rather their own lack of time management, creativity, or linguistic ability to carry out the task. Examples of this second group are as follows:

Student 3: ...But I disliked some things, because I'm not good at grammer (sic).

Student 10: If I forget to write LLJ soon after the class, I can't remember what I learned during the class. So I though it was not beneficial. To avoid (such a) result, I should write the journal (within) two days after the lesson.

Student 17: I dislike it because there are not so many things that I'm able to write. I guess that's because I don't study hard the language.

Student 18: Sometimes, I can't think of the topic I should write...

Student 25: At first, I disliked about writing the language learner journal, because I'm not good at writing English. But, the practice is very important, now I think that the language learner journal is good for me.

I had expected comments on how time consuming the LLJ was, or on how students were feeling pressure and stress due to the workload. Rather, we can

see from these comments that they mentioned why the task was *challenging* for them, rather than things they *disliked* about the task and the procedures involved. From the stance of theories in clinical psychology and educational psychology such as the *locus of control* (Rotter, 1954) and *attribution theory* (Weiner, 1985), the positive side of this is that the students have identified a perceived weak point in themselves—instead of blaming the teacher, the task or the environment. This could be the starting point for making efforts to improve these perceived weaknesses and taking responsibility to overcome them.

One possible explanation for why there were virtually no critical remarks towards the task is that this course was an elective course that they “volunteered” to join. While the Language Learner Journal assignment itself was a required element, taking this course was not. It is possible that this level of motivation is the reason why the students did not report negative comments on the LLJ task.

### **Continuing the LLJ**

Now that the course is finished, there is no longer an obligation to keep on writing their journals. Question 5 asks if students intend to continue keeping a language learner journal on their own. (A complete listing of Question 5 responses appears in Appendix C.) As can be seen in Table 3, the breakdown of the responses has four categories. Eight students (ID 2, 3, 5, 13, 15, 16, 21, and 25), or 47% of the class, stated a clear “yes”. Two students (ID 10, 22) had clearly stated “no”. Five students (ID 1, 11, 14, 17, 18), or 29% of the class, mitigated their responses with “maybe” or similar strategy. Two students (ID 6, 7) did not respond.

As for their reasons, three students reported they would continue to “record my study” or that “It’s good for me to review the lesson”. Both of the students

Table 3 *Number of Responses to Question 5: "Would you continue doing such a journal after the class is over, just for yourself?"*

	Yes	No	Maybe	No Response
Responses (%)	8 (47%)	2 (12%)	5 (29%)	2 (12%)

(n=17)

who clearly wrote about *not* continuing the LLJ predict that they will be too "lazy" and too "busy" to keep up with it. From looking at the phrasing in the "maybe" responses, it is predicted that four of the five essentially use "maybe" to mean "probably not", citing the lack of a teacher to supervise them doing it.

Student 11: Maybe I won't continue, but I want to study English (hard).

Student 14: If I take another English class, maybe I will continue.

Student 17: If I can I want to continue it, but there is no teacher around me.

Student 18: I feel I should, but maybe not. I can't do that without a teacher who gives advice and a comment.

As the teacher of this course, I was encouraged to see that nearly half (47%) of the participants reported their intention to continue writing a Language Learner Journal. I expected a lower percentage of students would intend to continue simply because they would no longer be forced by a teacher. Indeed, students 10, 17, 18 specifically mentioned that having a teacher require the journal would be a key factor to motivate them. If we count the "maybe not" responses, there is an increase from 12% to 35% who would not keep on journaling.

### Conclusion

Reasons for doing foreign language diaries are numerous. Diary writing in a foreign language is a tool for developing vocabulary. You look up words that you need in order to express yourself. Getting into the habit of writing

routinely increases one's contact time with a foreign language and can help maintain one's language level. The old maxim "Use it or lose it" comes to mind here. Additionally, keeping a diary in a FL is an opportunity for self-reflection and reviewing events that have happened.

As can be seen from the results, students in this study liked writing the Language Learner Journal, which was perceived as relevant to their learning. I anticipated students would find this task useful because it gives them a chance to reflect on their language learning processes. It seems that my expectations were set at a more abstract, metacognitive level, while the students reported more concrete aspects of the task. From a review of the questionnaire responses, many found the LLJ useful because it was (1) a tool to recall what they had learned in class and (2) it gave them the chance to practice writing in English.

Additionally, the results seem to point to a class with high motivation. They agreed to take on the challenges of the course. This may account for why they seemed to like the LLJ, and for why they didn't "bad mouth" the assignment, but rather turned their critical eye inwards. There was only one (softened) complaint, "a little tiresome", of the writing the LLJ itself, and nearly half intended to continue journaling on their own.

### **Limitations of the study**

This study is not without its limitations. The ones quick to identify are the demographics and sample size. It would be very difficult to generalize the results of just 17 Japanese university students to the population at large. Also, as mentioned in the introduction, the data come from end-of-semester questionnaires, not actual journals. This data relies on what participants were able to recall at the end of the semester. It is one step removed from their first-hand, quasi real-time week-to-week writings. A look at their actual diary

entries will almost certainly reveal a more detailed and accurate description.

Another limitation is the design of the questionnaire, which mostly contain open-ended questions. If this study were to be done again in the future, I would rework the questionnaire to include Likert scales or other types of more quantifiable measurements to support the qualitative side and present a more balance (mixed) view of the phenomena.

## **Implications**

In the narrower view, this study's results may inform the language teacher who is considering whether or not to implement the Language Learner Journal in their courses. When weighing the costs and benefits to the teacher as well as the student, certain questions may come to mind. What is the time commitment for the teacher? For the student? What topics would be allowed? Would the activity serve as a cognitive tool or metacognitive tool? Would having the students do the LLJ be worth it? In the end, I would say that for this teaching situation, with this group of students, it was worth the effort.

With respect to assignments, activities and tasks in general, if teachers can communicate the link between learning activities and how they may concretely lead to improving skills, they may be surprised to see students take on rather challenging, even tiresome tasks because they perceive the concrete benefits inherent in the task.

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#### Keywords

language learner journal, journal writing, diary, language learning strategies

## Appendix A

### Question 3 Responses on Usefulness of the LLJ.

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Student	Question 3: Was the LLJ useful in your learning?
ID 001	I can remember what I learned in class.
ID 002	I think writing the journal was very useful to my learning. I can learn many writing ways.
ID 003	Yes, I think so, because it's good practice for me about writing, and when I wrote the journal, I could review what I learned in class.
ID 005	Useful. Writing what I learned was good review. What I cannot write, I cannot say.
ID 006	(no response)
ID 007	Yes, it was useful. It helped my putting the things I learned in order. And also, only listening and speaking are not enough to improve our English skill. Expressing our opinions in sentences is important for the future. There'll be a lot of chances that you have to write and read English when you work.
ID 010	I think writing (a) journal is useful to my learning because I can review what I learned today and practice writing. It becomes a chance to think back (on) the lessons. Moreover, I can feel that I make conversations with my teacher every lesson. Though it is demanding for teachers, language learners can get benefits from the journals.
ID 011	I think it's useful because it is a good chance to write full sentences with picking up a dictionary.
ID 013	I think it was useful for brush up about contents I did in each class and practice in writing English.
ID 014	Yes, I think it was useful.
ID 015	I think writing the journal is very useful because LLJ can do a review of the last lesson.
ID 016	I think it was useful. We hardly write sentences freely, so it's little difficult at first, however I come to be used to write more and more.
ID 017	Yes, it was good time to remember English only a day in a week.
ID 018	Sure! I can study again through writing the journal. I try to use the words and phrases I was taught, it must be helpful for students.
ID 021	Yes, I did because I learned writing skills, and I reviewed some words I learned in this class.
ID 022	Yes, I did. Because we can look back (at) lessons through writing.
ID 025	It was useful for me to review lessons. And it was a good opportunity to practice writing English.

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## Appendix B

### Question 4 Responses on Likes and Dislikes of the LLJ.

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Student	Question 4: What did you like or dislike about doing the LLJ?
ID 001	It is a little tiresome.
ID 002	I like writing the language journal, because I can understand about lessons in English
ID 003	I liked it because I could tell you how I thought in the lesson. For example, I heard it at the first time, and so on. But I disliked some things, because I'm not good at grammar (sic).
ID 005	Like: It was easy (easier than speaking), but effective to fix my new knowledge Dislike: Nothing
ID 006	(no response)
ID 007	(no response)
ID 010	If I forget to write LLJ soon after the class, I can't remember what I learned during the class. So I thought it was not beneficial. To avoid (such a) result, I should write the journal (within) two days after the lesson.
ID 011	I liked it because I could look back (at) my process of learning English.
ID 013	I have little vocabulary, so I had to search words mean I want to say.
ID 014	I could practice writing (in) English.
ID 015	I like the language learner journal because it reminds me of the interesting thing at classroom.
ID 016	I like writing the language learner journal.
ID 017	I dislike it because there are not so many things that I'm able to write. I guess that's because I don't study hard the language.
ID 018	Sometimes, I can't think of the topic I should write but I like this way.
ID 021	What I liked about a journal is remembering.
ID 022	(no response)
ID 025	At first, I disliked about writing the language learner journal, because I'm not good at writing English. But, the practice is very important, now I think that the language learner journal is good for me.

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## Appendix C

### Question 5 Responses on Intention to Continuing an LLJ.

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Student	Question 5: Would you continue keeping an LLJ after this course is over?
ID 001	Yes, maybe...but I write a little passage.
ID 002	I want to continue doing such a journal after the class. I'm not so good at English, but I like English and writing.
ID 003	Yes. I'm thinking that I'll start to read many books which are written in English from Spring vacation. So I'll try to write resume. And if I take the English class, I'll try to write journal too, because it's good for me to review the lesson.
ID 005	I would like to continue to record my study.
ID 006	(no response)
ID 007	(no response)
ID 010	I will not (be) able to continue my journal because I'm lazy and busy. I know it's beneficial for my English improving, but I won't. If it's obligation, like this class, I can do (it).
ID 011	Maybe I won't continue it, but I want to study English (hard).
ID 013	I want to do. Because by writing the journal I could get some vocabulary. I was not good at English and now I am, but I became enjoy writing something in English.
ID 014	If I take another English class, maybe I will continue.
ID 015	I will, for writing journal, I can get much vocabulary.
ID 016	I would like to continue to brush up my writing skill.
ID 017	If I can, I want to continue it, but there is no teacher around me. So, I concentrate on studying another language.
ID 018	I feel I should, but maybe not. I can't do that without a teacher who gives an advice and a comment.
ID 021	Yes, I would! Because I want to brush up my writing skill.
ID 022	I wouldn't continue write a journal because I think I will be busy with preparing for other classes. But I will continue English writing not once a week.
ID 025	I want to continue doing such a journal, because it is necessary for me to promote my English ability. For my writing skill, I want to have many opportunities to write English.

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