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The importance of the self: using online diaries in the EFL classroom

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Abstract: Learner journals, diaries, and logs have been used in a variety of learning contexts, including foreign language learning. This paper investigates how diary writing can be used in the EFL classroom to encourage students to express their identities through the language they are learning; it is also a way of supporting them in their quest for greater autonomy, with a view to exploring the interconnections between learner autonomy, learner self (L2 self), and learner emotions. More specifically, it will be shown how reflective writing – in the form of online diaries – can offer learners an important tool to explore their thoughts and emotions and reflect on their identity as learners and users of English. Moreover, diaries are a qualitative research tool for teachers and scholars, who can examine metacognitive and affective aspects of language learning. The paper reports a study conducted within a university English Language course, in which the students were encouraged to keep a reflective online diary throughout a semester. The analysis of their personal and expressive writing has shed light on their need to speak as themselves, not just as language learners, and to explore their emotions, both positive and negative. A final questionnaire has revealed that the students were generally positive about the activity, highlighting its usefulness in terms of learner autonomy, self-awareness, and self-regulation.

Keywords: EFL; emotions; learner autonomy; L2 self; online diaries; reflective writing

1 Introduction

Learner journals, diaries, and logs can be used – and have been used – in a variety of learning contexts, including foreign language learning (Litzler and Bakieva 2017). This paper sets out to investigate the interconnections between learner autonomy, learner identity, and learner emotions as they emerge in reflective diary writing within a university English Language course. More specifically, it will be

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shown how online learner diaries can be used in the EFL classroom to encourage students to express their identities through the language they are learning and as a way of supporting them in their quest for learner autonomy. On the one hand, reflective writing can offer learners an important tool to explore their thoughts and emotions and reflect on their identity as learners and users of English. On the other, journals and diaries can be a qualitative research tool for teachers and scholars, who can investigate metacognitive and affective issues in language learning.

The paper reports a study conducted within a university English Language and Translation course, in which the students were encouraged to keep a reflective online diary throughout a semester. The analysis of their personal and expressive writing has shed light on their need to speak as themselves, not just as language learners, and to investigate their emotions, both positive and negative. At the end of the semester, a questionnaire was administered to the students to assess their overall evaluation of diary writing and its potential benefits for language learners.

2 Telling the story of the self: learner journals and diaries

Human beings are natural storytellers. As Ryan and Irie (2014: 109) aptly explain,

All of us create and share stories. This is something we start from a young age, in our earliest social interactions, and continue throughout our lives. One of the key stories that follows us over the course of that lifespan is the story we tell to ourselves: the story of the self. This story affects how we interpret our pasts, how we see ourselves now, and the paths we envision for our futures.

This paper considers how “the story of the self” is told by language learners and how it emerges in the narrative form of reflective and autobiographical diary writing. Indeed, language learning is an experience that reflects the desire of learners to explore and expand their range of identities (Pavlenko and Norton 2007: 670), sometimes leading to the creation of possible and imagined selves that are integral to the language learning process, such as the ideal L2 self and the L2 ought-to self (Dörnyei 2005).

The self is a complex construct, which Ryan and Irie (2014) described as temporarily situated through subjective interpretations of past, present, and future and which Mercer (2014: 162) conceptualised as “a complex dynamic system” composed of several interrelated components, including the EFL self-concept. As underlined by Ryan and Irie (2014: 119), teachers and educators “need to know

more about the real stories learners tell themselves and how these are incorporated within their self-concept". Indeed, language learning involves more than a gradual acquisition of skills and knowledge and is related to "the process of becoming, or avoiding becoming, a certain person" (Pavlenko and Norton 2007: 670).

One way of exploring learners' sense of self is through their own voices that emerge from their personal narratives of the L2/EFL learning experience. This is a qualitative research method that has been acknowledged in SLA literature (Lantolf and Pavlenko 2001; Pavlenko 2007), precisely because such personal narratives can offer an insight into the relationship between language and self in L2 learning. Hence, autobiographic narratives can help to understand how people experience L2 learning and make sense of this experience (Pavlenko 2007).

Since the "narrative turn", which occurred in the field of SLA in the 1980s, an increasing number of studies have focussed on learners' autobiographic narratives such as learners' diaries, and have "challenged the portrayal of L2 learners as unidimensional abstractions and presented them as human beings who have feelings" (Pavlenko 2007: 164) thus allowing a greater understanding of L2 learners, their emotions, and their agency. In other words, the private L2 learning experience that emerges from personal narratives allows the researcher to address multiple aspects of language learning.

Among the various types of autobiographic narratives are learner diaries and journals, "written by L2 learners either spontaneously or in response to teachers' and researchers' requests" (Pavlenko 2007: 165), which represent a unique and rich source of information about learners' beliefs, feelings, and L2 self-concept. Journals can be intrapersonal or dialogue: in the first case, "we are both the writers and the audience of our own journals" (Gebhard 1999: 80). In other words, the writer functions as both narrator and reader, telling the story of the self to the self. While in intrapersonal journals "the emphasis is on introspection through communication with oneself", the aim of dialogue journals is "to gain awareness through connection with others" (Gebhard 1999: 82).

As underlined by Litzler and Bakieva (2017), learner journals, diaries, and logs have been used for several decades in a variety of learning contexts including psychology, business, education, and foreign language learning and teaching. Oxbrow (2000: 177) considers diaries, journals, and logs as "important self-report introspective tools in language-learning research", which have been used to investigate various aspects of SLA. According to Moon (2010), learning journals, diaries, and logs can be highly structured or free, and they can serve different purposes: learning journals can be used to make explicit and record the learning that occurs, reflective diaries can be used to reflect on the learning experience, and logs, a shorter version of journals and diaries, can be used to record events that have happened. Little (1991: 53) describes learner diaries and journals as having

“the necessary purpose of giving retrospective shape to the learning process, making it tangible, something that can be recalled and talked about.” Dam (2000: 32) views learner diaries as a “tool for awareness raising and genuine, authentic language use.” Diaries and journals can also be kept by teachers themselves to gain insight into their own classroom behaviour and motivation (Bailey 1990, 1991) and to explore teaching beliefs and practices (Gebhard 1999).

A recent study by Litzler and Bakieva (2017) discusses the use of learning logs in an EFL class of university students with a view to investigating student receptiveness to this kind of writing activity. Their findings show that most students responded positively to the activity both in terms of learning strategies (Oxford 2011) and learner autonomy (Benson 2011; Holec 1981), while the minority found logs demotivating or time-consuming. The study thus concludes that “offering a variety of options may prove to be the best route for accommodating learners of different styles and preferences” (Litzler and Bakieva 2017: 76).

Learner journals and diaries are clearly interconnected with language and identity. As noted by Little (2007: 26), “journals become the story of the individual’s language learning, illustrating the gradual expansion of identity that comes with developing proficiency in a second or foreign language.” The studies carried out by Karlsson (2015, 2016, 2017) and Karlsson and Bradley (2018) present learner journals and diaries as a form of autobiographical writing which is considered therapeutic, “a process of personal growth, wellbeing, even healing and transformation” (Karlsson 2016: 44), a form of self-discovery which is possible through writing and telling one’s own story (Karlsson and Bradley 2018: 114). In this perspective, autobiographical reflection and writing is seen as

a way of supporting students in the process of developing their learner autonomy, which can be very significant for students with language classroom anxiety. They talk about their learning as a part of their whole lives, as the holistic process that it is; it involves the whole person, their personal history, feelings, actions and language and, importantly, an integration of formal and informal learning. (Karlsson 2015: 412)

According to Karlsson (2016), for learners who feel troubled or anxious about foreign language learning, diary writing in English, when done without linguistic pressures, can alleviate classroom language anxiety, which is an intense and frequent experience in SLA (MacIntyre 2017: 11).

In the present paper, reflective diary writing is seen as a tool that students can use to construct a vision of themselves as learners and users of English. Students are encouraged to express their L2 self through the language they are learning, but also to “speak as themselves” (Karlsson 2015: 413), thus giving voice to other aspects of the self. Furthermore, it is seen as a safe, informal, and encouraging environment, “a welcome and personalised, unthreatening arena” (Oxbrow 2000:

176) aimed at empowering students to take responsibility for their learning, to share their feelings and emotions about language learning and to talk about themselves, telling their own stories.

Oxford (2017: 190) claimed that a “reduction of anxiety can occur when learners are taught to control intrusive thoughts and images and when they share their feelings through constructive self-disclosure in a safe environment”. Indeed, reflective diary writing can offer learners the opportunity to share information about themselves with themselves, with no fear of being judged or making mistakes. In this sense, diary writing can be used both as a pedagogical tool beyond the confines of the classroom and as a research instrument to investigate metacognitive and affective aspects of EFL learning.

3 The study: online diaries in an EFL classroom

The main objective of this study is to investigate metacognitive and affective aspects of EFL learning as they emerge in reflective diary writing, focusing the attention on the interconnections between learner autonomy, learner self, and learner emotions. It also discusses how students reacted to diary writing, analysing their written texts and finally investigating their opinions and thoughts about the activity through a questionnaire.

Students were encouraged to keep an online learner diary, where they could write about anything they wished, from recording the activities that they were doing in the English Language course they were attending at the University of Parma and their progress in the target language, to reflecting on their learning strategies and difficulties. They could also report their thoughts about themselves as language learners, their experiences, feelings, emotions, memories, and their personal beliefs and views on themselves and their learning of the English language. Moreover, students were encouraged to reflect upon their personal language learning history and their past foreign language experiences, as well as their wishes and expectations for the future. In this sense, reflective diary writing can be like “language memoirs”, a term coined by Kaplan (1994), which refer to “autobiographical, fictitious or authentic narratives that thematize the experience of language learners or of multilingual individuals” (Kramsch 2004: online). As Karlsson and Kjisik (2009: 169) note, “language memoirs bring into focus the role of private memory and imagination in foreign language learning: remembering *how* (past experiences and emotions) and imagining *what if* (future scenarios for action).”

The online learner diary is a free-form text which is available on the university e-learning platform and allows students to cover any topic they like on any day

they feel like writing in English. Some basic guidelines were provided, but students could decide not to follow them or to follow them partially. They were simply encouraged to write down *their* own story:

You can use this diary to put down your thoughts about yourself as a language learner. Think and write about your experiences, your feelings and memories, your personal beliefs and views on yourself and your learning process. This is YOUR story!

You can reflect and write about:

- What learning English means for you (in your own words)
- Your language learning history (the past)
- Your wishes and expectations (the future)
- Your feelings and emotions as a language learner (the present)
- Your progress in language learning

Students were invited to write in the target language, keeping in mind that this kind of reflective writing would not be corrected or evaluated by their teacher.¹ The learner diary was understood as an intrapersonal form of writing which would not involve any kind of feedback from the teacher.

3.1 Context and participants

The study was conducted with first-year university students attending the English Language and Translation course offered in the bachelor's degree in Communication Studies at the University of Parma, Italy, in the academic year 2020–2021. It is important to point out that the students attending the English Language and Translation course were not specialising in Foreign Languages, therefore English was not their main subject of study, but one of the mandatory subjects of the degree.

Reflective diary writing was presented at the beginning of the course as an optional activity that could be carried out throughout the semester, and perhaps even after the end of the course. Students were explained the advantages of keeping a diary in English, but they were free to decide whether to take up this activity or not. The number of students attending the course during the semester was around 100 and 55 students decided to keep an online learner diary, of which 11 male students and 44 female students. The fact that not all the students opted to carry out this optional activity seems to indicate that reflective diary writing might be perceived as time-consuming or impractical by some students, who most likely prefer to focus just on compulsory activities and to prepare for their exams. Furthermore, it might be possible that some students did not deem their level of

¹ Students were informed that their texts might be used for research purposes.

English sufficient to carry out a writing activity in the target language. Finally, it is interesting to note that the majority of students who decided to keep a learner diary were female: on the one hand, it might reflect the general preponderance of female students who attend this university degree, and on the other, it may indicate a greater propensity for reflective writing on the part of female students.

3.2 Method and data collection

In order to investigate the metacognitive and emotional dimension of foreign language learning and the emergence of the (L2) self, the online learner diaries were analysed using a qualitative approach. Pavlenko (2007: 165) notes that three interconnected types of information can be gathered from personal narratives: “subject reality (i.e. findings on how ‘things’ or events were experienced by the respondents), life reality (i.e. findings on how ‘things’ are or were), and text reality (i.e. ways in which ‘things’ or events are narrated by the respondents)”. The present study focuses especially on subject reality, through a thematic analysis aimed at examining students’ thoughts and feelings about the language learning process, and on text reality, to explore how they construct selves in the target language using a written form of self-disclosure.

Although this study is mainly qualitative in nature, a quantitative analysis was also carried out by means of a final questionnaire aimed at considering the students’ evaluation of reflective diary writing.

4 Analysis of online learner diaries

This section examines the texts written by the participants who compiled the online learner diary available on the university platform, with an emphasis on obtaining a record of thoughts and feelings about language learning. Looking at the diaries globally, it can be noted that the number of entries – as well as their frequency and length – varies from one student to another. A small number of students wrote in their diary almost daily, with texts that range from just one or two sentences to longer blocks divided into paragraphs, while other students decided to report their thoughts in the learner diary after each lesson (i.e., three times a week). Many students opted to write once a week, keeping track of their learning experiences and describing their feelings and thoughts as they evolved from one week to the next. Finally, a significant number of students used the diary sparingly, once a month or even less, including some students who compiled their diary only once or twice and then gave up.

From a thematic point of view, the topics covered by the students in their written texts were varied, including general observations, thoughts, and feelings about language learning, reports of classroom activities and self-reports of learning strategies, reflections on their learning process, plans, and expectations for future learning, narrative accounts of experiences related to (language) learning but also of a more personal nature. From a stylistic point of view, their reflective diary writing ranged from more organised texts, divided into paragraphs and sections, to a kind of stream-of-consciousness writing through which students express whatever comes to their minds.

In the first entry of their learner diary, many students described their relationship with the English language – often referring to past experiences – and expressed their hopes and expectations for the future, as can be seen in Extracts 1–4.

Extract 1 *It's been around 8 months since I stopped practicing my English, after I finished high school in June. Because of that I feel glad to start this course that will certainly help me to improve the use of the language. In particular, I want to practice the listening and the speaking in order to have a better pronunciation. Indeed every time I have to speak in English with someone I feel very anxious and I try to get someone else to speak for me, because I'm too ashamed of saying something wrong. Finally I hope this course will help me with having more confidence in myself as a language learner.*

Extract 2 *I don't like English because until now I've never met a good teacher for me. I hope to change my mind during this course.*

Extract 3 *Today is the day. I've just started to take this journey to improve my English language knowledge. I hope that I will be enough good for this challenge! Of course I will give everything to reach the best I can do!*

Extract 4 *I recognize that I have an unsatisfactory and low level of English and although I try to improve it seems to me that I never make progress. Curiously I went to look at the elementary school reports and I was already doing badly there in English, so I don't think it's for me ... But it costs nothing to try (I'm pretty stubborn).*

The first entry of the learner diary was also used by many students to describe themselves, not only as learners and users of the English language (L2 self) but also in relation to their identity (name, age, town of origin), personality traits, hobbies,

and passions (see Extracts 5–7). Some students even attached a photo of themselves – a selfie – which can be considered a sort of visual representation of their current state of mind (see Extract 7). Some students also used emoticons and emojis, which are a common feature of informal writing often found in text messages and used as a paralinguistic device to convey the writer’s attitudes and emotions.

Extract 5 *Hello! My name is [...], I am 19 years old and I live in [...].
I'm honest, I've never had the good fortune to fully learn English, although it has always been the language that fascinated me most, after Spanish.
Unfortunately in high school I often changed teachers and at the beginning of the school year my class and I found ourselves without a teacher, spending months without a teacher.
Today I feel very insecure and thoughtful about the future English language exam that waits me.
I waited a week before starting to fill in my diary, to see how it went.
I must say that I am finding myself very well and I am able to follow and take a lot of notes in class, who knows, is it the right time that approach me in the best way to this language?
I always had a passion for travel and one of my biggest dreams is to go to America. For this, however, a great knowledge of English is required.
I very much hope to be able to learn more of this language and I promise to do my best.*

Extract 6 *Today I started the writing of this “learner diary”. This is my first time witnessing this special and curious method of studying a language. I have studied 3 languages in school: French, German and English; the first one and the last one are the languages which I learned best. I have been studying English since elementary school and, having done the linguistic high school, I managed to improve it. I very much regret those carefree days; in these days I'm physically and mentally in pieces, also because of the many days locked up at home without seeing girlfriend or friends. But fortunately I can console myself with my passion: football. This is my medicine in this period.*

Extract 7 *I'll end with a photo of myself hoping to stay in the same mood until the end!*

4.1 Emotions in the story of the (L2) self

What clearly – and constantly – emerges from the students' diaries is a series of first-person accounts of emotional experiences related to English language learning. In various entries, students freely described their emotions, both positive and negative, thus offering interesting insights into the affective side of learning.

The most common words, which appear with great frequency when the students describe how they feel when learning or using English included, on the one hand, “anxious”, “nervous”, “afraid”, “scared”, “ashamed”, “shy”, “fear of failure”, “insecurity”, and, on the other, “confident”, “proud”, “satisfied”, “excited”, “passionate”, “happy”, “glad”, as can be seen in Extracts 8–15. In most cases, negative adjectives and nouns were used to talk about their difficult relationship with the English language, often as a consequence of negative learning experiences in the past (see for example Extract 9). These stories are emotional accounts of encounters with teachers, which seem to have influenced students' perception of language learning and teaching. Words with positive meaning were frequently used to talk about the present, when students reflect on their learning process or progress (see for example Extracts 11–14), and the future, when they express their motivation to improve their competence in the foreign language and to become more confident learners (see for example Extracts 8, 9, 15, and 16).

When students narrate and reflect upon their past and present language learning experiences and emotions, they give voice to their L2 self, which appears to be complex and dynamic. As can be seen in Extract 17, while telling the story of the L2 self, some students also consider wider aspects of their identity as individuals.

Extract 8 *Especially when I study a language, I am often afraid of making mistakes and this leads me to “back out” in many situations. Probably the fear of failure is one of my biggest problems because I know that if you don't try to do something you will never learn it so I hope to get over it someday. I want to stop being so strict on myself.*

Extract 9 *I guess my relationship with this language is basically a consequence of a bad relationship with my English high school teacher, who caused me this feeling of insecurity and being scared, but now I'm ready and excited to start this new adventure and be more confident in myself!*

Extract 10 *Today I want to do something for me. I'm really scared because I'm not very good at this subject but I chose to try.*

- Extract 11 *I found the last three translations a bit more difficult, but despite this I'm proud of myself and how I approached this part of the course, I've always loved English and now I'm even more passionate about it! I keep watching TV series and movies in English and I understand better and better what I listen. I hope to travel soon as possible to practice my English with English people, even if I'm a little ashamed, but this course has also helped me to throw myself because "sbagliando si impara"!*
- Extract 12 *Dear diary, today in class we did the Italian translation of "Headspace guide to meditation" and I was pretty satisfied with myself since I missed few words that could have been translated better. Then we talked about emotions and all I can say is that I attended a Liceo Linguistico for 5 years and I lived mostly with fear of failing or not learning as much as I wanted but also with satisfaction at the end of my journey.*
- Extract 13 *Watching and understanding English movies makes me feel proud of myself and every time I finish watching a movie in English I realize I keep thinking in English inside my head all day and that makes me so happy!*
- Extract 14 *Dear diary, today is Friday 5th March. I just did the Friends' review and I was glad I was able to do it myself, almost without the help of the dictionary!!!*
- Extract 15 *I want to change the fact that many times I feel anxious and nervous when I have to do or study for an exam. Also, I want to be less shy when I'm in new situations or when I have to talk with other people in another language, which of course is one of my weak points. Obviously, I want to improve in these areas. So I will keep fighting and never look back, or get lost in negative thoughts, with more strength I can do the best I'm capable to do! I hope so.*
- Extract 16 *Dear Diary,
for today I decided to share with you my feelings about this new language learning experience. I think that the possibility to study could be seen as a sort of escape from the dramatic world with which we have to cohabit. However it isn't only the possibility to upgrade my knowledge of another language that makes me feel satisfied, but also an innovative way of learning.*

Extract 17 *Dear diary, in my future I want to be less of a perfectionist at school and work and I'd say less naive in my everyday life, not always trying to think about the future.*

4.2 Metacognitive skills

As can be seen, the texts written by the students are widely autobiographical. In this sense, reflective learner diaries become the place for memories of a different kind, concerning past experiences of language learning as well as encounters with teachers, peers, and native speakers of English. Telling these stories gives students the opportunity to understand more deeply their own feelings, emotions, and thoughts. As Karlsson and Kjisik note (2009: 185), the writing process “helps the writer focus on memory, imagination and experience, and in this way develop a clearer perspective on past and future.”

Learner diaries are also the place where students can become more aware of their metacognitive skills. Indeed, it is interesting to see how many students, after reflecting on the past and making sense of it, in later entries began to focus more on the present and the future (see Extract 18), by self-evaluating their language learning (Extracts 19 and 20), identifying difficulties (Extract 21), considering and implementing learning strategies (Extracts 22–24), and planning activities to do. By thinking more about their learning, students could explore and become more aware of both metacognitive and affective dimensions of language learning, which encouraged them to develop learning strategies that could satisfy their own needs while fostering their motivation.

Extract 18 *Dear diary,
I'm back and ready to write new thoughts about me as a language learner. Last time I spoke about my past and my history with languages, especially English. Today I want to talk about my expectations for the future...*

Extract 19 *I re-watched a Ted that I had watched one year ago. I found out that now I can understand more than 50% of what is said. I'm proud of my progress. But I want to improve more and more. I can say that I'm on the right track!*

- Extract 20 *I decided to continue watching my current series (The big bang theory) in English with English subtitles as well. At first I was a bit in trouble but slowly I notice some improvement, even if small. I paid a lot of attention to the subtitles, especially as regards punctuation because I found many aspects covered in class that helped me to better understand what we talked about so I find this activity very useful (and relaxing!)*
- Extract 21 *I just finished the translation of the review about “A star is born” and I found it easier than “How dark was the darkest hour”. Maybe because the last lesson on translation helped me understand “how to move” in this work and also because I knew the subject on which I did the assignment. My biggest problem remains that of the specific lexicon, in fact I always have to look for some words in the dictionary because, although I understand most of the sentence, I miss them to fully understand the meaning of the text to be translated. I will work hard on this!!*
- Extract 22 *I started noting all the new words in a notebook. Since then, I have noticed that it is easier for me to learn new words. For this reason, I recommend it to everyone. In addition, I use an App called “Cake” which helps you learn new words and idioms in a particular way.*
- Extract 23 *I honestly think the most important thing about learning this language is ... read, listen, and read and listen again!*
- Extract 24 *I think learning from interesting content is more efficient than anything else because, in this way, I'm more motivated to get to the bottom of the task.*

5 Final questionnaire

At the end of the semester, the participants completed a questionnaire consisting of six questions in which they were asked to give their opinion on the use of learner diaries in English. The first three questions were close-ended and were aimed at investigating students' overall evaluation of the activity:

1. Was the learner diary useful? Yes – No – I don't know

2. How do you rate this activity on a scale from 1 to 5?
3. Do you think you will keep a diary in English in the future? Yes – No – Maybe
4. Explain how the diary was useful to you.
5. What have you learnt about yourself as a language learner?
6. Free comments

The last three questions were open-ended in an attempt to explore students' perception of the activity and garner more detailed feedback from the respondents' own words. Question 5 was designed to investigate the learner self, that is, students' perceptions of themselves as learners and users of the English language, and to see whether their perceived identity had changed during and after diary writing. Finally, students could write their own free comments, clarifying their opinion, giving suggestions on certain aspects of the activity, or pointing out any difficulties they might have encountered.

As far as the close-ended questions are concerned, all the participants (100%) thought that the learner diary was useful. The second question asked the students to rate the activity on a scale from 1 to 5, which served as an overall indication of their satisfaction with reflective diary writing. The students' evaluation was overall positive since no one gave negative scores (1 and 2), while 50% of the participants gave a score of 3 (good), 25% gave a score of 4 (very good), and 25% gave the highest score (5, excellent). In the third question, 37.5% of the students think that they will continue to keep a diary in English even after the end of the course, while 50% are not sure ("Maybe"), and 12.5% do not think they will use it again.

In the first of the open-ended questions, the participants explained how the learner diary was useful to them. Many students underlined that the diary was a useful tool to practise the English language and to keep track of their improvement and progress, in a stress-free, relaxed environment, and with no fear of being judged or of making mistakes (see Responses 1–4):

Response 1 *The diary was useful to me because it is a good way to improve my English.*

Response 2 *It's useful to take notes about my progress in English and to practise it. It's also useful to see what I have learnt and what I have continued to improve.*

Response 3 *The learner diary was very useful because I kept track of my progress in English during these months.*

Response 4 *I found it useful because I was able to test myself and I could also have a means by which to practice my English without fear of making mistakes.*

A number of students also considered reflective diary writing a good way to think and reflect about their learning process and about themselves as learners (see Responses 5–7). The learner diary thus gave them the opportunity to develop both metacognitive skills and emotional awareness.

Response 5 *I found it very useful to think and reflect about the difference between how I used to see the English language in the past and now.*

Response 6 *With this course I first heard about ‘learner diary’ and I started using it. For me, it has been useful to reflect on my learning process and to point out my progress.*

Response 7 *In some moments, it made me reflect on my personal path, both emotionally and about the learning of this language.*

Few participants explained that the diary could have been more useful if they had used it more regularly:

Response 8 *This diary would have been more useful if I had used it more.*

In the fifth question (“What have you learnt about yourself as a language learner?”), the majority of participants emphasised their increased awareness about their current language skills, their difficulties, and their needs as language learners (see Responses 9–10):

Response 9 *I learnt to do a sort of self- analysis of my skills and my weak points in English.*

Response 10 *About myself, I learnt some aspects which I never explored in the recent past. As an intermediate English learner, I can say the diary helped me to improve in all the areas, in particular, in the writing and speaking areas. Now I will continue to exercise with perseverance to consolidate these achievements.*

They also pointed out that the process of reflective writing helped them to become more confident and self-aware learners, and made them realise that motivation is an important factor in language learning (see Responses 11–13):

- Response 11 *I learn more if I write down what I think and feel.*
- Response 12 *I learnt about myself that I'm my only limit and if I really want to learn something I'll do it.*
- Response 13 *I realized that I have difficulties in approaching a foreign language but, at the same time, I realized how much I want to be able to give my best to learn as much as possible.*

Some students added further comments about reflective diary writing, underscoring its value as a motivational tool as well as its effectiveness in terms of emotional self-regulation, as can be seen in Response 14.

- Response 14 *I believe that the possibility of keeping a diary is excellent and I hope that this choice can also be proposed to future students because I really think it helps, especially for those who, like me, are a little weak in the English language. I have considered it as a real incentive.*

6 Conclusion

The present paper has discussed some relevant aspects that have emerged from the investigation of online learner diaries written by a group of university students. In particular, focus has been given to metacognitive and affective aspects of language learning as well as their interconnections with the learner self.

The analysis of students' diaries has shed light on some important implications related to reflective diary writing: by telling the story of the self, learners had access to both metacognitive and emotional dimensions of language learning and used the target language to construct a vision of themselves where English is seen as part of their identity. Their stories often show how some negative emotions, such as anxiety and fear, are related to the interpretation of past events that have in some way influenced their relationship with the English language. However, it also emerged that, through autobiographical and reflective writing, students were able to shift their attention to factors over which they have control, and which can lead them to positive outcomes. This seems to suggest that this type of activity can help learners to focus on what they can do rather than what they cannot or have failed to do. If language learning is a process involving the self, then educators need to identify and implement activities and pedagogic interventions that encourage learners to “tell a more positive, more empowering story about themselves to themselves” (Ryan and Irie 2014: 121).

The voluntary nature of the activity has brought to light two aspects. On the one hand, a number of students were not willing or able to participate. On the other hand, those who did participate evaluated the activity positively, underlining how the diary helped them to better understand themselves and their own emotions. This seems to indicate that keeping a learner diary can be a rewarding experience if it is accepted with interest and an authentic desire to explore (Gebhard 1999). Indeed, the students' responses to the final questionnaire highlighted the value of reflective and autobiographical writing as a personal activity that motivates them to become more self-aware, more autonomous learners. Furthermore, many students declared their willingness to continue writing their diary even after the end of the course, showing a high degree of autonomy in considering the benefits of this activity. This also means that when learners are encouraged to tell their own stories, their learning can go beyond the classroom and their stories can empower them to explore the complexities of the (L2) self.

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