

Perspectives on Professional Growth: A Study on the Diaries of Undergraduate ELT Students

By Deniz Zeyrek (Turkey)

Diary studies have become a useful tool for both L2 teachers and teacher educators. Such studies encourage teachers to assimilate lessons they have learned throughout their teaching experience. For teacher educators, using diaries has the promising benefit of focusing on teaching as it is understood by teachers. That is, diaries help clarify the motivations for teachers' decisions and actions, which are normally hidden from an external observer.

Most published works on diary studies are on new teachers or graduate students (e.g., Brinton and Holten 1989; Holten and Brinton 1995; Numrich 1996; Enginarlar 1996). The benefits of the method and the scarcity of published work on preservice teachers made it worthwhile to carry out a study with undergraduate ELT students as well.

Therefore I implemented a diary study with fourth-year ELT students doing their practicum. One of my aims was to obtain feedback on the preservice ELT courses and the practicum by understanding the students' feelings and attitudes toward various aspects of teaching. This feedback could give me a chance to reconsider the undergraduates' needs and the content to be included in the courses. Second, I was aiming to give students an opportunity for self-exploration and reflection on professional growth and its relationship with teamwork and the use of technology in teaching English.

This is a report on how I carried out the study on the diaries of undergraduate ELT students and the implications I drew from it. In particular, I examined the student teachers' thoughts on professional growth and the possible changes that could be implemented in the practicum.

Using diary keeping as a component of the practicum

In the spring semester of 1997, I taught the practicum to 24 fourth-year ELT students at Middle East Technical University in Ankara, Turkey. In the previous semester, the same group of students had taken their last methodology course from me. In that course, I had begun to observe my students' assumptions and personal views about various aspects of teaching. I hoped to use those assumptions while analyzing and interpreting their diaries the following semester.

At the start of the spring semester, the students were paired up and assigned to the fourth and fifth grade classes at a local primary school. They were required to observe English lessons for 30 hours, 4 to 6 hours of which would be teaching. The practicum involved class observation, assessed and unassessed teaching, and weekly two-hour seminars at the university. To these I added a compulsory component of diary keeping.

Diary studies can have two approaches. One is a focused or directive approach with clearly defined aims, and the other is a nondirective, open-ended approach, which leaves the job of gleaning the most notable aspects of teaching to the person who analyzes the diaries (Numrich 1996). In the present study, I followed neither approach strictly. I told my students what I wanted them to focus on, but I also left room for reflection on all the other aspects of practice teaching. So in the first seminar of the practicum, I briefed them about various aspects of the course; and to keep me informed about their observations and teaching experiences, I asked them to write entries in their diaries emphasizing the following:

- Their ideas about the classroom teacher's techniques
- The use of technology in the classroom (or lack thereof), its effectiveness, and

their ideas on the usefulness of technology in the class

- Their feelings about the present state of EFL teaching and what kind of teacher

they'd like to be in the future

- The role of collaboration among teachers and whether or not they would team up

with their colleagues (to initiate projects, revise syllabi, and so on) in their future school when they felt the need to do so

In addition, I explained to my students that keeping diaries would foster self-exploration of personal views about teaching, provide me with feedback on the design of the practicum and the methodology courses, and provide data for a project on teacher development.

Analyzing the diaries: Emerging themes

I told the students to write diary entries after each day of observation and teaching and to submit them to me twice during the term: on a designated day in the middle of the semester and upon completion of their practice teaching. This allowed me to analyze the diaries in two stages. In the first stage, I read them to see whether any common themes were emerging in the entries. During the first half of the students' apprenticeship, they were writing about the following concerns and ideas, which were quite similar to the results presented in previously published studies about diaries:

- Initial stage fright in front of students
- Comparisons of the teaching methods and techniques used in their own L2

learning with what they saw in their class observations

- Analyses of the cooperating teacher's class management strategies and her

techniques of carrying out various tasks and error correction

After reading the diaries carefully, I discovered that 13 of the 24 students were particularly reflective and self-exploratory on these and other issues, while the rest appeared unmotivated to write entries. I wrote comments to all of them, encouraging them to think deeply, especially about the issues of technology and professional development.

In the second stage, I found that all the students were trying to respond to my comments and write more substantial entries. The same 13 were more reflective and self-exploratory in their practice teaching experience, however. Seeing that the difference between the students persisted, I decided that 11 of the students were really not interested in providing me with the feedback I needed, and perhaps regarded diary keeping as an unnecessary addition to their already heavy course load. So I decided to continue my study analyzing only the entries of the "interested" group of 13.

After a careful analysis of the diary entries of this group at the second stage, I was able to glean a number of themes of interest to my study, which can be placed into two broad categories: first, a concern for the needs of the children of the information age, and second, a desire for self-improvement and speculation on the ways to achieve professional growth. In the rest of this article, I would like to discuss the most frequently mentioned themes in these two categories, with excerpts from the diary entries. Following Numrich's data analysis method (1996), I considered a theme worth mentioning if it appeared in one-fifth of the entries.

Needs of children in the information age

Many student teachers in the group showed an awareness of the changing needs of young students. The student teachers seemed to discover this while comparing the teaching methods and techniques used in their own L2 learning with those of the cooperating teacher. In several entries, they mentioned the young students' interest in computers and the need for integrating technological devices in the EFL classroom. The two most common themes mentioned in this category are shown in Table 1 below.

Here is an entry written by Aylin (these names are pseudonyms), who was awestruck by the technologically aware young students. Her deep concern for their needs and the need of a teacher to stay up-to-date are especially noteworthy:

1. Today, I observed that the teaching profession is getting hard, because the new generations are very clever. They know more than we do when we were at primary school, so we must be prepared for their interests, needs, and questions.... Neither the teachers nor the students are the same as those we saw 10 years ago.... The students are very clever and creative.... I think they are the products of technology.... Most of them have computers at school, if not at home.... They know whatever is going on around the world.

Other student teachers in the study share Aylin's concerns and emphasize the potential of audiovisual aids in the classroom as one way of meeting young students' needs. Here is Pamir, who is surprised at the cooperating teacher, and implicitly critical of her for not using the tape recorder. She also comments on how audiovisual aids can provide positive learning:

2. There's one more thing attracting my attention; the teacher does not use any audiovisuals! She should, for instance, be using the tape recorder for listening activities. I believe audiovisuals are very effective and enjoyable for children. Furthermore, I think they help students acquire the information rather than memorize it.

Yeliz, a student who had not thought she could be a teacher when she graduated, grew out of her worries as a sensitive and interested teacher and was well on her way to acquiring the craft of teaching toward the end of the practicum. She was highly observant of the educational processes in the class, noting the possible areas in which computers can be used in the EFL classroom. The two extracts below illustrate her growth pattern and awareness of the effectiveness of computers in class:

3. I never thought of becoming a teacher until I did my practice teaching. I realized how I liked to be with children, teach them, and see them enjoy the English lesson. But it is not easy.... I think it can only be achieved with a depth of knowledge and experience in the field. I don't have them yet, let alone the depth! I need more experience and a wide range of reading about my future profession.... Considering my practice teaching experience, I think I will apply for a teaching job. I think teaching is one of the most enjoyable professions in the world.

4. As far as I observed in the class, most of the students use computers to write their journal entries. That is, they make use of technology already. As a teacher, I would very much appreciate the use of computers by my students and wish I could demonstrate for them the use of English in certain contexts, like greetings, suggestions, etc., on the computer or video player. In this way, students could learn the target culture as well as the language.

Interestingly, there were two students in the class who philosophized about the extent to which computers should be used in education. Here is an excerpt from one of them, Selen, who intelligently comments on the use of multimedia without actually using the term. She reflects on how multimedia can be useful for students practicing English on their own. Her apprehensive ideas about computers having an increasingly central role in a child's life are also thought-provoking:

5. Computers in education. I've been thinking about this. I do not deny the potential use of computers in class, but I'm irritated by the idea of computers taking the place of the teacher in the near future.... My idea is that a student may practice his English on a computer in his room at home. This may be better than practicing it with books, because with computers he has the chance of hearing the correct pronunciation and enjoying colorful pictures of films. But a child's best friend should not be computers.... Student and teacher are not just the provider and receiver of knowledge. If it were the case, computers would easily be the teacher. It is much different to be praised by your teacher, for example.... There are many aspects of student-teacher interaction that a computer cannot get at.

Self-improvement and professional growth

While reading the diary entries from the first weeks of the practice teaching period, I found that almost all the student teachers mentioned their ambition to excel in teaching English. During my rereadings of the diaries, trying to reach the student teachers' deeper feelings on this, I found numerous comments reflecting the need to be creative in class and recurrent criticisms of the all-

knowing, authoritative teacher figure whom they experienced in their own L2 learning. In addition, many student teachers speculated that they would be on the road to professional growth if they kept up with the recent trends in EFL and worked collaboratively with other teachers.

Such comments revealed to me that student teachers envisage self-improvement as starting with the rejection of those negative aspects of teaching from their own experience as L2 learners and by trying out up-to-date, innovative methodologies. These themes are summarized in Table 2 below.

Here is Yeliz, the author of the third and fourth extracts above, encapsulating the desires verbalized by other student teachers and criticizing the "godlike" teachers whom she had encountered in her own L2 learning:

6. Our teachers were the god in class. Today's students are lucky. My cooperating teacher is very flexible and tolerant.... She provides a democratic atmosphere for her students.

She writes in another entry about the type of teacher she would like to be in the future:

7. I foresee an interested teacher in me. I would certainly like to communicate with my students... and of course discuss with my colleagues the techniques and the curriculum. Actually this is what makes me fear most—being forced to strictly follow the curriculum. But I'll never become a traditional teacher, which was what I hated most in my school times.

Hayriye is another student teacher sensitive to the issue of continuous learning and collaboration among teachers, implying that this paves the road to professional growth:

8. In my opinion, a teacher should be aware of the fact that she is a person who is actually a learner.... She should always try to learn more and more, improve herself, and should never be satisfied with what she has accomplished.

She further spells out her reaction to the all-knowing teacher figure and comments on the type of teacher she foresees herself becoming:

9. I will never give the impression that I know everything because I believe it is not possible for anyone to know everything.... I would try to be in cooperation with my colleagues. Working with them, you can learn many things or you can teach them what they don't know. You can find solutions to problems like selecting the best textbook for your class, understand students' needs better, etc. Also, if you work together, there will be uniformity in the lesson plans, materials, etc.

Yaprak, one of the high achievers in her graduating class, had been very keen on innovative ideas and breaking the bonds with the textbook since the start of the methodology course. The comments below reflect her enthusiasm and determination to be a versatile teacher, as opposed to the teachers she has observed so far:

10. This week I taught in class. I came to class having worked really hard and spent at least two hours to record a song plus preparing a chart and flash cards to teach it. All this was for a 15-minute activity. As far as I could observe, few teachers come to class with such preparation and

equipment. The lessons are done in quite an ordinary style. Teachers do what the textbook says and nothing more, except some work sheets. This is probably because of the strict curriculum, which leaves little time for the teachers to do extra things. I definitely want to be a teacher who does coherent things in a different style.

An emerging need

Considering the themes that emerged in this study, I saw that the student teachers' desire for self-improvement (Table 2) is closely related to their concern for the changing needs of younger generations, which involves the inclusion of technological devices to their knowledge base (Table 1). Seeing that these are inseparable made me aware of a particular topic missing from our curriculum: computer-mediated language learning. I learned from this study that undergraduate students should be sensitized, at a minimum, to the ways computers can be used in EFL classes as, for instance, Carrier (1997) explains.

Teachers and teacher educators can benefit greatly from devising methodologies using the Internet. First, Internet activities would answer the student teachers' need for learning about developments in computer-assisted language learning (CALL). If the CALL activities can be carried out as pair or group work, the student teachers' need for learning from peers could also be met. Second, these activities would empower them through self-directed work and make them confident teachers. Third, since student teachers are EFL learners themselves, learning about the richness of Internet resources would help them improve their own language competence and make them more autonomous learners.

Considering the ideas in Carrier (1997), I am now planning to integrate using Internet resources in my EFL classes. My idea is to include the topic "Internet activities in EFL classes" the next time I teach one of the three methodology courses offered by our department. At a minimum, I would like to assign this topic to interested students and ask them to demonstrate their work to their peers, giving a chance for the whole class to have an understanding of what it means to use the Internet in an EFL class.

Conclusion

Considering the aims of this study of diaries, I obtained the feedback I was hoping to get from my students. Even though I analyzed the diaries of only a limited number of students, I became aware of their personal views on the topic of professional growth. I can predict that a majority of this group will be open to new methodologies in class and will welcome innovative ideas on professional development. I can also imagine many of them volunteering for or perhaps initiating teamwork in their future workplace with the aim of learning from colleagues. These student teachers' desire to identify the needs of the younger generation and their readiness to keep up with changing needs suggest that they will pursue their idea of professional development.

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Note: A preliminary version of this work was presented at the 8th Biennial Conference of the International Study Association on Teacher Thinking, Kiel, Germany, October 1–5, 1997.

Acknowledgment: I would like to thank my colleague Hüsni Enginarlar who made me aware of the usefulness of diary studies in EFL.

Deniz Zeyrek is an associate professor at Middle East Technical University in Ankara, Turkey.

Table 1. Concern for the needs of the children of the information age (n=13)

Theme	No. of student teachers who mentioned it
Innovative ways of teaching, leaving behind traditional textbook-based approaches and/or all-knowing teacher	11
Keeping up with new developments in EFL	7
Interacting and collaborating with other teachers	5

Table 2. Desire for self-improvement and speculation on the ways to achieve professional growth (n=13)

Theme	No. of student teachers who mentioned it
Need to identify the changing needs of the children of our age	5
Need for technology in the EFL classroom (i.e., audiovisual aids, computers, etc.)	8