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## Making compartmentalized learning a history through reflective diary writing

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### Abstract

*SKBL3113 Psikolinguistik* is a BA Linguistics (Hons.) final-year course in UKM; hence, learners are expected to apply previous linguistic knowledge to this course. However, learners had difficulties in relating previous knowledge to what they were learning. This paper presents the intervention made to assist learners recall what they have learned and to not compartmentalise their knowledge. Results indicate that learners who reflected meaningfully in their reflective diary writing can relate the knowledge they were acquiring to their previous knowledge better than those who did not. This suggests reflective diary writing can help learners decompartmentalise their learning.

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### 1. Introduction

*SKBL3113 Psikolinguistik* is a compulsory course for final year BA Linguistics (Hons.) undergraduates at the National University of Malaysia (UKM). Among the intended objectives of the course are to understand psycholinguistic knowledge effectively and to be able to apply that knowledge to other linguistic disciplines. As it is a more advanced linguistic course, learners are expected to be able to apply their previous knowledge on linguistics to this course. However, through tutorial discussions, presentations, and written assignments, it was evident that learners had difficulties in remembering what they had learned previously in other linguistic courses, in recalling the content taught, and in relating what they were currently learning in *SKBL3113 Psikolinguistik* to previous knowledge and to their future learning.

Psycholinguistics is taught in the Malay language at the Linguistics Program of the School of Language Studies and Linguistics, UKM. Learners enrolling for the course have already studied other linguistic courses such as Phonetics, Phonology, Syntax, Semantics, Discourse and Pragmatics, etc. in previous semesters. The course includes a two-hour lecture and a one-hour tutorial session for fourteen weeks. For the 2011-2012 Academic Session, 28 third-year BA Linguistics (Hons.) undergraduates enrolled for the course. Based on face-to-face discussions with the learners, a majority of them had preconceived ideas about psycholinguistics – namely that psycholinguistics is a difficult course. This preconceived idea about the subject matter was obtained from their seniors' descriptions about

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the course. However, based on the researchers' observations and discussions on previous learners' performance in the course, it is clear that one of the contributing factors to learners' negative perceptions towards the subject matter was the learners' inability to recall what they had previously learned in other linguistic subjects and relate what they were currently learning not only to what they had learned before but also to what they would be learning in the future. For example, when discussing the topic of "*the acquisition of speech sounds*", learners were not able to recall the IPA symbols they had learned in their phonetic course, and could not see the relevance of learning "*the acquisition of speech sounds*" until they understood that this knowledge is useful in parenting.

This paper reviews an intervention technique designed to assist learners to relate what they had previously learned in other linguistic subjects and were currently learning to what they had previously learned and to their future learning applications. The intervention took the form of getting the learners to reflect their acquisition of knowledge through reflective diary writing.

## 2. Body

Reflective diary writing for the purpose of this research refers to a form of "self-study" (Mozzon-McPherson, 1999), which involves learners writing down the strategies they adopt or adapt to improve their acquisition of knowledge. According to Eliot (1943), "Learning – and understanding learning processes – does not happen maximally through experience alone but rather as a result of thinking about - reflecting on – it" (cited in Ash & Clayton, 2009: 27). Reflective diary writing functions as a platform for learners to express their feelings towards certain assignments, which indirectly encourages them to practice writing in a non-threatening environment. It promotes "significant learning, including problem-solving skills, higher order reasoning, integrative thinking, goal clarification, openness to new ideas, ability to adopt new perspectives, and systematic thinking" (Ash & Clayton, 2009: 27; and see also Eyler & Giles, 1999). For course instructors, learners' journal writing is a means of getting feedback on how the learners learn as well as to promote learners' reflective thinking (Williams & Wessel, 2004; Rudge & Howe, 2009).

For reflective diary writing to be effective, the diary has to be submitted to course instructors for feedback and comments with regard to the learners' self-study methods. The comments given by the course instructors ideally should not only encourage the learners to write more (Mozzon-McPherson, 1999), but also, the comments given by the instructors should show learners that the instructors empathise with the learners' learning experience. Comments should also emphasise learners' positive strengths, abilities, and skills, and not focus on the learners' limitations or failures (Jordan, 2000). Reflective diary writing can also be in the form of emails (Marttunen & Laurinen, 2001) and using various media (Lindström, et al., 2006).

### 2.1. Methodology

This is a qualitative study which looks at the quality of reflective diary writing of the learners and how the quality of reflection in their writing can help them not to compartmentalise their learning. Learners' ability to relate what they were learning to what they had learned and would be learning in the future was gauged through their performance on a quiz.

#### 2.1.1. Participants

All 28 BA Linguistics (Hons.) final year undergraduates (4 males) participated in the study. They had enrolled for *SKBL3113 Psikolinguistik* course. The learners were aged between 21 years and 23 years old and all of them had a cumulative grade point average (CGPA) of between 2.53 and 3.52. Except for one, all the participants were Malay and their first language was Malay.

### 2.1.2. Materials

The materials used in the data collection for this study consisted of 1) reflective diary entries from the learners, and 2) learners' answer scripts for their quiz. The quiz had two questions; the first required the learners to relate their current knowledge to what they had learned previously, whereas the second required them to relate their current knowledge to what they could do with the new knowledge in the future.

### 2.1.3. Procedure

At the beginning of the semester, learners were briefed that they were required to be involved in Reflective Diary Writing as part of their course assessment. They were informed that the purpose of the reflective diary writing was to assist them in their learning of psycholinguistics and that by the end of the fifth week, they were expected to submit between 2 and 5 entries of reflective diary writing to the course instructor via e-mail. The maximum number of diary entries for each learner reflects the number of weekly topics covered in the course for the first half of the semester. Since the medium of instruction for the course was Malay and the first language of the majority of the learners was the Malay language, all diary entries were written in Malay.

All learners were informed that their reflective diary writing should include the four components of reflective diary writing proposed by Wall et al. (2004). The components included: 1) Pre-reflective Preparation; 2) Reflection; 3) Learning, and 4) Action as a Result of Learning. They were briefed on what each component meant and what each of them should contain. They were told that there was no limit to the number of words and that their writing should be a reflection on the process involved in the acquisition of knowledge.

On the fifth week, learners completed the quiz on psycholinguistics and submitted their reflective diary entries to the course instructor. Learners' reflective diaries were read and assessed prior to marking their quiz responses. Each learner's diary was categorised either as "VG" (very good), "G" (good), or "M" (moderate) depending on the quality of their reflective diary writing. Diaries classified as "VG" included those that gave a comprehensive summary of the topic learned for the week, a good reflection of the learner's learning strategies, a good display of comprehension through new examples, and demonstrated how current learning relates to previous learning and future use. Diaries classified as "G" were those that mentioned all these aspects, but not too the same extent as in the "VG" diaries, while those classified as "M" only minimally reflected on their learning strategies, and learning processes; they merely regurgitated the points made by the course instructor. The number of reflective diary entries did not play a role in the categorisation process.

The learners' answer scripts for the quiz were evaluated only after all diary entries were read, responded to and categorised using the respective labels. A summary of the procedure is presented in Figure 1.

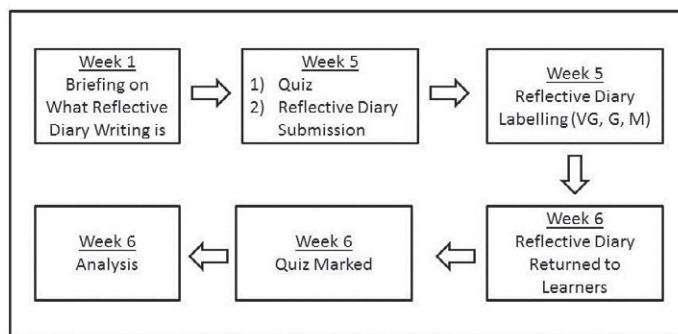


Figure 1. Methodological procedure

## 2.2. Results

A total of 93 entries were received from the learners with an average of 3.32 diary entries per learner. Ten learners submitted 2 entries, 4 submitted 3 and 4 entries, and 9 submitted 5 entries. Out of the 28 diary submissions, 7 were judged as being “VG”, 4 as “G”, whereas the remaining submissions were considered to be “M” standard. Out of the 7 submissions labeled “VG”, only 4 had 5 diary entries whereas the other 3 had only 2 entries. As the data collected were in Malay, they were translated. Table 1 summarises the number of entries for each diary submitted to the course instructor.

Table 1. Number of diary entries for each category

Entries Categories	2	3	4	5	Total
“VG”	3	0	0	4	7
“G”	2	1	0	1	4
“M”	6	3	4	4	17
Total	10	4	4	9	28

Translations of some entries of “VG” diaries exhibiting learners’ knowledge acquisition processes are as follows:

*“On the night before the lecture, I read notes from previous lectures. I had a feeling that what I would be learning the next day has a strong relationship to those given in previous weeks.”* (Learner 9).

*“As the class went on, I copied important information delivered by the lecturer. I believe if we make use of more than one sense, the chances of us remembering better is greater. Besides that, I had some drinking water with me so that whenever I feel tired or sleepy in class, I can always drink some water or sprinkle some water onto my face to freshen up.”* (Learner 9).

One student actually made connections to what she was learning to her personal experience. She wrote:

*“...besides, I have a nephew who is learning how to speak. I notice that my nephew’s speech development is a lot similar to what I learn about child language development from my lecturer.”* (Learner 7).

The same learner also said that although she listened to music while studying, she made sure that the songs she listened to were instrumental songs so that she would not be distracted by the lyrics of the songs. In discussing “negative evidence”, one learner (Learner 3) also indicated that if she has children of her own, she will try not to correct all the mistakes made in her children’s oral production so as to encourage her children to speak confidently.

Where the quiz is concerned, 7 obtained scores higher than 75%, and 6 obtained scores lower than 50%. The average score for the group of learners was 60.71%. Eight of the learners obtained better grades than in previous semesters.

## 3. Discussion and Conclusion

Results show that the number of entries does not necessarily mean that learners wrote a true reflection of their learning. Although 35.71% of the diary writers submitted only two entries to the course instructor, 30% of them were categorised as “VG”. While 32.14% of the diary writers submitted 5 entries to the course instructors, only 44.44% of them were categorised as “VG”.

When compared with the learners’ performance in the quiz, it was found that 6 of the learners whose diary writing was categorised as “VG” scored grades higher than 75%. Interestingly, learners whose reflective diary

submissions were categorised as “VG” improved from obtaining lower grades in previous semester’s linguistic courses to getting better grades in the quiz (e.g., from an average of “B” to “A”). This suggests that the quality of reflection in their diary writing can play a role in helping learners to improve their grades in exams.

According to Bolton (2005, p.166), reflective journal writers should “take responsibility for discovering personal learning needs, and attempt to ensure they are met; learn by examining vulnerable areas, the cutting edge; question, explore, analyse personal experience, actions, thoughts, feelings, and what peers feel, think and do”. The diary should be an “alternative voice”, especially to those who are not good at expressing themselves orally (Boud, 2001).

Reflective diary writing is a platform for learners to express their inner thoughts, feelings, and opinions towards their learning process. It should also be a platform for the learners to inform the course instructors how they feel about the way the course is taught. For course instructors, reflective diary writing could be used for their own professional actions (Trotter, 1999, cited in Bolton, 2005). It should be regarded as a window to the unheard voices of learners (Boud, 2001). By listening to these unheard voices of the learners, course instructors can make necessary adjustments to the way the teaching and learning of the subject matter is conducted, and hence, avoid mismatches between learners’ and teachers’ agenda (Huang, 2006). According to Trotter (1999), “I began to see the journal entries as a mirror of a student’s ever-increasing awareness of the act of teaching” (cited in Bolton, 2005, p.169).

It is a well-known fact that not everyone enjoys writing. Yet, learners can still be motivated to write reflective diaries if they know the reflective diary writing is useful for them and not for someone else. Instructors can play a role by giving almost immediate feedback or responses to learners’ reflective diaries so that learners know their hopes, anxiety, fears, expectations, beliefs, and values are heard and acknowledged by their instructors.

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