

Diary Studies: A View from the Heart

An Interview with Christina Gkonou, University of Essex, England, about using learner diaries for learner development research



Jenny Morgan, Wayo Women's University, with Christina Gkonou, University of Essex

At the October 2016 Tokyo get-together we were extremely fortunate to have Christina Gkonou as our guest workshop leader on using diary studies for learner development research. Christina was in Tokyo on a brief visit to different universities to arrange joint postgraduate TESOL programmes between her university and potential partner universities in Japan. After her workshop I had the pleasure of interviewing Christina about her work with diary studies.

Jenny: *Hi Christina, thank you so much for making the time for this interview following the Tokyo get-together workshop in October 2016.*

Christina: Thank you very much for inviting me.

Jenny: *First, as a bit of background, how did you become interested in the area of language learner anxiety (LA) and learner diaries as a research tool?*

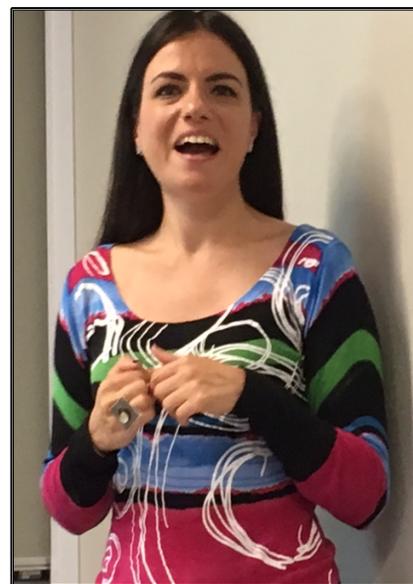
Christina: Well, I think I was a bit of an anxious learner myself.

Jenny: *Really?*

Christina: Yes, haha, and not only an anxious foreign language learner, but an anxious student generally. So, I would feel that whenever I would be called on to speak in class I would start experiencing all of these physiological symptoms of anxiety, like sweating, strong palpitations, and so on. I think I was a very good student, but I wasn't very keen to volunteer answers, although I knew the answers and so on. I always wanted to be, well, not necessarily hiding, but somewhere at the back of the class. But not being that easily seen by the teacher. So, I think that this (interest in LA) emerged from my own experience as a learner, and also from my experiences as a teacher, as a language teacher. I would see different kinds of students in the classroom, students that were very good, they were clearly capable and intelligent, and so on, but they wouldn't talk in class.

Jenny: *Sort of... volunteer?*

Christina: Yes, they wouldn't do that. Whereas, there were other students who were so loud and forth-coming, and they were not as diligent as the other group of students that I have identified. So,



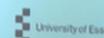
I was just trying to think of why there is such a difference between the students, and I started reading about LA because it was one of the assignment topics for one of the modules in the MA I was doing. I thought this was very interesting, I could identify with what was already reported in the literature, so I thought this (LA) was a very interesting topic.

And then, diaries...because all my work was on anxiety which is a negative emotion and emotions more generally, other negative emotions, I mean, my supervisor actually suggested that I use a more personal kind of research tool, of data collection tool, and he suggested diaries. So, I started reading about diaries, how to use them, what they are, and so on. I thought yes, that's a very nice match. And I used it with EFL learners in Greece in private language schools, and I got some very interesting data.

A diary is...

... a first-person account of a language learning or teaching experience, documented through regular, candid entries in a personal journal and then analysed for recurring patterns or salient events.

(Bailey, 1990: 215)



Jenny: Yes, because if you're talking about emotions then, something like a diary is going to give a much closer insight, the learner's view...

Christina: Yes, an insider's view...

Jenny: Rather than just what us (teachers) are looking at in the classroom... is that student paying attention, is that one anxious?

Christina: Yes, a view from the heart, giving insider knowledge about the students, about the participants, and diaries I think help to a large extent (to achieve this).

Jenny: Yes, well you've kind of answered my next questions about why it is important/useful for both learners and teachers to be aware of the issues of LA and its effects in the learning or teaching process?

Christina: Yes, because I think research and all our theorizing about learning has moved away from what was considered true, what people believed in the past. Intelligence is of course very important for learning. So (we thought) a student who is not participating in class, is not a capable student, and I think research has shown that these are outdated thoughts, that there are other factors that play a role in language learning, and they influence how our students behave in class. And the same goes for teachers. I mean if a teacher is anxious this does not mean that the teacher is not clever. So, we shouldn't over-generalise about our learners, we need to think of ourselves (in their place) - like when would I feel anxious? I would feel anxious when this happens because of this or that. It has nothing to do with how intelligent we are as teachers, or how creative, or flexible, or good teachers we are. It might actually have to do with something that's happening in our life outside of the class or which is not related to the job.

Jenny: Yes, of course we bring our whole selves into the classroom, as a student or a teacher...

Christina: And the same goes for our students.

Jenny: Yes, I often have to remember...are they sleeping or switched off because me, or because of their part-time job, family issues, daily things... it really takes a load off us if we can remember that students have whole lives as well.

Christina: Yes, exactly.

Jenny: You did your study in Greece, you're teaching in the UK, and now you've visited Japan- have you found

any cultural differences or universal tendencies with how learners experience anxiety and how they cope with it, or manage it?

Christina: No, not really, I would say, it's just the context is different and I think aspects of classroom culture are different. I think people say that people from south Europe or the Mediterranean are actually very loud and so on, and I think this comes out in the classroom as well. I mean the majority of students are not shy in the classroom, and I think this is part of the classroom culture and also the (wider) culture more generally. In the UK, foreign language learning has got a different status and the levels of motivation in foreign language learning in schools are different. There, students who are learning English in the UK are in completely different contexts, have completely different motives- they might be bilingual children, they might be children who came to the UK at the age of six without knowing the language but they're thrown into a primary school classroom with English students and also with students from other countries. So, I think there are contextual differences.

Jenny: Yes, which bring up different anxieties...

Christina: Exactly, there are some aspects of classroom cultures and perhaps in the institutional culture. I haven't conducted any research to compare these contexts yet. So, what I'm saying is based on my own experiences as a student in Greece and the UK, and as a teacher in both countries, and as a visitor in Japan.

Jenny: Yes, you have some rich insights for sure. Particularly, with what's happening in Europe now...well, we won't get into Brexit! But all of those issues, as insiders and outsiders, add to anxiety, how much you need to learn that new language (for survival) or not, EFL and ESOL...

Christina: Yes, the different, let's say, status of English or EAL⁵ in UK school where English is an additional language for many primary school students.

Jenny: Yes, they may have different home languages, and are they valued at school too, or not? Well, moving on

I never travel without my diary. One should always have something sensational to read on the train.

Oscar Wilde, The Importance of Being Earnest

⁵ For more information on EAL, see <http://www.naldic.org.uk/eal-teaching-and-learning/eal-resources/>

to learner diaries, how have you seen diaries or reflective writing in learner journals, help learners to reduce their anxiety, and foster language learning? Can you give some specific examples?

Christina: Yes, that's a good question. I think the more self-aware we are the more we understand about ourselves, what we like, what we don't like, what worries us, what probably scares us, (what we struggle with), what are our difficulties, our concerns and worries. But also what are the positive things, our strengths, not only negative things. The more we know about ourselves, the better we can understand what is going on in the classroom around us; both as teachers and as learners. Being able to report on your thoughts, in a personal diary certainly helps because our students in this way can really focus on what worries them, what thrills them, and what makes them happy at the same time. They can identify (these things) with some help from the teacher, or from the researcher, they can identify all these different things and emotions that emerge and they can work towards this. If there's something they find difficult they can make an action plan to overcome this difficulty. Or, something that they like a lot, they can in their spare time spend time to focus on this (activity) that makes them happy. So, that they experience more positive emotions that then reflect in the classroom.

Jenny: *Yes, using their strengths to foster other things. How frequent do these written reflections need to be to have the positive effects? How about the length of written entries?*

Christina: Again, there are no clear guidelines, and as I said in the workshop I myself had very high expectations in the first diary study I did. So, it depends on the context, and on the students who volunteer. It would be great if we can have the whole classroom do it, so all the students are doing the same thing, all of them are writing a diary and they might be having the same questions, so we can help them. But that might not be the case, some of them might not want to do it, and as we explained in the workshop we cannot push them, and we *shouldn't* push them. It has to be something which is not too prescriptive, it has to be free. I mean, students shouldn't see it as homework...

Jenny: *But often as language teachers, some of us may find we have to set journal writing as homework...*

Christina: ...Yes, sometimes we need to 'pack' it like that otherwise they won't do it. So, it really depends on the context and what we expect our students to get out of this, and how they perceive this as well. Whether they think this will help them...

Jenny: *Yes, that kind of 'training' or scaffolding the diary writing is clearly important for their engagement in the diaries.*

Christina: Yes, really important.

Jenny: *And what about the length of diary entries - a few sentences, a page? I guess it depends on the language level of the learners?*

Christina: Yes, the length, what we were saying earlier about beginners. It depends on the language level. The proficiency in English or in the foreign language will determine the language in which the diary entries will be written, (*how deeply they can express themselves*). So, if we're dealing with beginner level learners of English it's most likely we'll ask them to write their diary in their L1 because it will be difficult for them to express all these things in the foreign language. So, it depends on the level of proficiency in English and the language we have chosen to write the diary in.

Actually, I wouldn't go for very short entries, longer entries are a lot better than shorter entries. Sometimes we cannot avoid short entries because our students might be tired, or whatever. But monitoring or moderating the process can help towards getting students to write longer entries.

Jenny: *Yes, one way I've scaffolded reflective writing is have students do their first one in class, like Alex mentioned at the end of the first class, saying to them, that I'm not looking at their English grammar, but just try to write about how you feel about the classroom activities, etc. Then, get students to do a word count each time, their goal each week is to write a little longer, a bit more deeply, using some teacher prompts. It might take them longer each time, or it might not, it depends on what they are reflecting on at the time, e.g., skills, content, etc. I'm teaching a global issues content class right now and learners write reflections about their research process, about their own performance in presentations, and also what they've learnt from their peers, so it's a mix of things they are reflecting on and writing about.*

Christina: Yes, scaffolding is very important, they can do the first one in class, you read it and tell them what they could focus on, "*it was a bit short, try to write a little more, you could have expanded on this point, you could have added reasons,*" as so on, and

they will gradually produce longer texts, longer entries.

Jenny: *You mentioned in your PowerPoint workshop about “private and public diary entries”... I know some of us in our research skills courses have our learners write regular reflections about how their research process is going, they reflect on the content they are engaging with, set goals for their next homework, also what they are learning from class-mates - they write these journal reflections either in class or for homework, then they come to class prepared to share their reflections with peers each week. So, this makes their diary or journal “public” with one or two classmates, ... is this OK? Do you have any comments on this public-private tension?*

Christina: Yes, here the diary entries are public in this sense, but if students already know they will share it with their peers they wouldn't... this will change the content of their entries, so if they already know they'll share it, they wouldn't probably say too much (personal). They will focus on the class, whereas in the examples that we were talking about earlier where students shared quite personal information knowing it would be just their teacher who would read it. The context of the recipients of the diary entries play a role in that case ...

Jenny: *Yes, that's right, it would... but reflecting on research processes is quite different from reflecting on anxiety which is much more personal and emotional, or reflecting in a study abroad journal...*

Christina: Absolutely.

Jenny: *OK, thank you, I feel OK about having students make their entries public then... I guess the main thing is getting them engaged (in writing) and they know what will happen, and the recipient also gives feedback so then it's co-created research/peer reflections in this class...and we always talk about why, what the goals are for peer-sharing their reflections...*

So, now moving on to using the diary entries in research, I was reading in your article about “content-analysing learner data.” Right now, I'm doing some research using the reflective journal entries done by my students in a small content-based research class- they've been writing regular reflections, initially in class, and now for homework. I've collected my learners' weekly reflections, and also results of an end-of- course survey which I encouraged them to answer in Japanese so that they could write in more depth and detail. But I'm still unsure what connections, aspects and dimensions of learner development I could/ should be exploring for my research. In the past, I have usually tried to talk with my learners and learn from informal discussions with them, so I am not experienced with

analysing the reflective writing that they produce. I wonder if you might share with us kind of “coding schemes and relational models” you have identified in your own diary study research?

Christina: Coding means you *label* your data really. So, you have the diary entries, the texts, you read them line by line, and any thoughts that come to your mind while you're reading the data, you write them in the margin, and the “codes” are like “labels.” Or, you can write your thoughts while you're reading the data, then go back and try to *reduce* those notes to just a few words. If you can do it straight from the beginning, just noting down two or three words for each section of the data that you think is important then that will be great. But, you can start with noting down thoughts then reducing those to a few *keywords*. Then, you need to put them all together, all these labels, topics, or themes (codes). And then you can *count* them, you can see how many times each of these labels might appear in your data. See, for example, your idea of “culture,” why there are more mentions of it than say the word “course book,” and why was that? Then, you take this a step further. You are trying to see if there are any links, any relations, associations between the data. You know your context better than anyone else because this is a class you're teaching. You will be able to see a little bit beyond the data, a little bit beyond what is in the diary entries.

Jenny: *Thank you, that's a lot clearer now. So, for example what were some relational connections you found in the learner anxiety data in Greece?*

Christina: For instance, the students commented on different aspects of the lessons, but also they talked about the fact that the Greek foreign language education system is so heavily based on exams. They take so many exams. Your proof of knowledge of a foreign language has to be a B2 exam according to Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). This is something that is very important. These are like the Cambridge exams, testing the four skills, grammar, syntax. Because the education system is so much exam-influenced, and success- oriented to a certain extent, the students will also talk about causes of anxiety that stem from this. So, this is like the wider national culture, or let's say the wider educational culture, or whatever you want to call it. So, there was a strong link between the classroom culture which is one environment and environments that were outside this and were not

controlled by the students. The students did not set up the rules for exams. It is Cambridge, then, it's the country's system that pays a lot of attention to this. Of course, having a certificate is important, it does show a lot about your knowledge of a foreign language but it shouldn't be the end in itself. (Knowledge) is not just that, how about communication, how about intercultural understanding, how about in our highly globalized world? In the classroom you're doing OK, in the exams you're doing OK, but how about outside of this?

I found that there were lots of causes for anxiety. For these particular learners because of factors that were really beyond their control

Jenny: *And what was their age range?*

Christina: They were adults, all above 18 but again within these groups there were different age ranges. The majority were university students around 20 years, 22 years old. But there were some students who were already finished with all this, they had a job, but they knew that if they could improve their English they would get a better job, or a promotion, so they had to take extra classes and that was why they were in the classes I worked with.

Jenny: *You mentioned in your article about the attrition rate in your study, and you still got some really rich data from the seven learners that remained. I've found my current learners seem to struggle with their reflective writing, perhaps in part due to their low English proficiency, and also because reflections are a new concept for many; they also struggle with **what** they should/can write. So, I've been providing a list of writing prompts or "reflective questions" but I worry, that these prompts make the whole personal reflection process too prescriptive, not spontaneous or honest enough. What are your thoughts on scaffolding for diary studies with prompts?*

Christina: Yes, I would definitely go for prompts too because otherwise it's too open-ended. And you can increase the number of prompts and tell them to focus on any number of these. So, one option would be to have short list of prompts and you ask them to reflect on *all* of this. Or, you can make the list longer and ask them to *choose* what they want to focus on. So, in this case, you are making it less prescriptive. And as they go along and they have written more diary entries, you can reduce your input in this, like you can take away the prompts, they are used to (reflecting), they know what to do. The help from

the teacher is very important; we can't just leave them (to write) on their own.

Jenny: *Do you have any final tips for teachers new to using diaries, learning journals, or who wish to help their learners develop their self-direction and greater autonomy?*

Christina: Well, the first tip would be to keep in mind that in any research we do there will be some hiccups, there will be some obstacles there. So, we need to be prepared and we shouldn't be thinking that this happened I had not predicted it, I'm doing something wrong. It doesn't work this way. It happens in any kind of research we do whether we are using diaries or any kind of research tool...

Jenny: *Because it involves people...*

Christina: Yes, I think the more research we do, the better we learn about all this, the more aware we are of all these issues, and how to overcome them. When it comes to diary studies and learner development in particular, I would say that diaries or journals are a very helpful tool for collecting data without necessarily putting your students on the spot because they might be doing it in class but it is something that only they themselves and the teacher will see. So, it's not like a classroom discussion where they might be exposed, where they might lose face and so on. Diaries and journals are a very useful tool for collecting data for these purposes, in particular if we want to focus on relationships in the classroom, feelings towards inner aspects of our students.

A tip for research on diary entries and learner development is to make sure we focus on development. So, by this I mean that we need to look at change, we need to focus on how learners develop. First of all, *whether* they develop, I think all students develop from one lesson to the other, but we need to see what kinds of changes took place, and why? Who is responsible for that? Did the students take extra steps, is this an indication that they are becoming more and more autonomous? Do I as a teacher need to give some more input to make them even more autonomous? Or to help them develop, am I really tracking their development in what I am doing?

Jenny: *Well, thank you again, Christina, for making the time for this informative discussion, particularly making the connection between learner development and diaries, and also diaries as a research tool.*

Christina: Thank you very much, I really enjoyed the discussion with you.

References and further reading

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