Teaching can be a meaningful experience only if it creates a context that promotes effective learning both for the student and for the teacher, enabling both parties to enjoy and benefit from a flow of information that contributes to their personalities, vision and performance. One of the best means of benefiting from this flow of information is collaborative diary writing, where the teacher and the students communicate through diaries. These diaries, in turn, promote the creation of an effective learning and teaching environment full of interaction, sympathy, warmth, appreciation and respect, as well as a real sense of achievement.

Diaries have been widely used in education, especially in the field of language learning and teaching. Bailey and Oechsner see diaries as introspective tools through which the diarist studies his own teaching or learning. For Richards and Lockhart, keeping a diary serves two purposes for the teacher: recording events and ideas for the purpose of later reflection, and promoting a process of discovery where the process of writing itself helps trigger insights about teaching. In another study, Bailey and Nunan state that ‘the use of self-report data from personal journals allows us to tap into affective factors, language learning strategies, and the learners’ own perceptions – facets of language learning and teaching experiences which are normally hidden or largely inaccessible to external observers’.

Starting out
I would like to share my experience of collaborative diary writing, with my students, which I like to call an inner journey into the hidden or the unexpressed. Once I had decided to undertake this journey, I soon found myself in a stationer’s, choosing nice colourful diaries which would attract my students’ attention. When I told the shop assistant I wanted to buy 37 copies, he looked extremely pleased. So did my students, after I explained that each one of them would have a diary of their own and would share it with me. They looked and sounded genuinely excited. I have to confess that the prospect of entering my students’ worlds thrilled me too. I was impatient to start this inner journey with my students, believing that it would provide me with valuable information about them.

My students
The course I was teaching was translation from English into Turkish for final-year students in the Translation Department of the School of Applied Languages at Bilkent University. Students worked on different texts: songs, dance, politics, literature, film subtitles, economics, etc. Each text was supported by a variety of background information and audio-visual aids. After completing each task, usually at the end of a day’s lesson, and inspired by music I chose, the students wrote in their diaries whatever they felt like writing about. This could be classroom experiences, problems regarding their performance, films we had watched or songs we had listened to in class. I then collected all the diaries and hurried to my room. You can probably guess the reason for my hurry. I was hungry for my students’ comments and opinions, and their diaries were to be the tastiest lunch I would ever have! I read the diaries and wrote my comments and suggestions in them. This continued for 14 weeks and, when the semester was over, I wished it...
hadn't passed so quickly. The advantages of collaborative diary writing are listed here under five main headings alongside some of my students' comments.

Affective influence

All my students regarded keeping diaries as a means of relaxation. They said that when they wrote their feelings, opinions and comments in their diaries, they experienced a sense of freedom. They emphasised that being able to share their views on absolutely anything with their teacher openly and honestly made them relaxed:

'Writing in my journal relaxes me; I get away from my problems.'

One student saw collaborative journal writing as a kind of psychological treatment:

'Expressing oneself through writing is a technique recommended by psychiatrists and I know this is a treatment that works well.'

Another important affective influence of collaborative diary writing is that it promotes genuine interaction between teacher and students. Almost all my students expressed the idea that they felt closer to me and happy when they wrote about their inner worlds:

'I am happy because I am free and I know that whatever I write, you won't misunderstand me.'

Receiving immediate feedback or responses from me made students feel valued and increased their self-confidence:

'Ve never wrote diaries, I wouldn't be able to tell you all about my expectations.'

Awareness of methodology

Diaries are an effective means of creating an awareness of the methodology used in class and a forum for reacting to it. This allows teachers to cater better for their students' needs and expectations and to make any necessary adjustments. In my classes, I always emphasise the importance for the translator of background knowledge of the topic on which a text is based, and I help my students to understand this through materials and activities. The students' diaries indicated that they had developed an awareness of the importance of background knowledge, audio-visual aids and visualisation for translation:

'Background knowledge on the topic to be translated helps me to understand and interpret the text better ... Being equipped with the background knowledge makes me more confident. Without it I would feel lost in the middle of the ocean.'

'Audio-visual aids help me to visualise the text and choose the right vocabulary while translating.'

Memorable learning

A diary allows a person to explore feelings and ideas that may not be accessible in other ways. By reviewing what was written at a later date, things that may not have been obvious when they were first recorded may become apparent. Furthermore, since diaries are written accounts of classroom experiences, once students write about them, they don’t forget them. Whenever they feel the need to look back at previous classroom experiences, they are easily accessible:

'What I find most interesting in keeping a diary is that when I look back, I remember the things I have done before. Sometimes I laugh at my previous mistakes and learn from them. After each class, I summarise whatever has happened in class and this makes it more memorable.'

'Keeping a diary may help the person when he wishes to reconsider some past event. So far, I haven't done so very often, but now my diary helps me to think back, look back and remember things.'

Self-discovery

Self-monitoring is a systematic approach to the observation, evaluation and management of one's own behaviour. Through self-monitoring, teachers can understand their own instructional processes and 'move from a level where they may be guided by impulse, intuition or routine to a level where their actions are guided by reflection and critical thinking' (Richards). Since self-monitoring provides feedback, it is an essential ingredient in a teacher's continuing growth and development as a professional. It enables teachers to arrive at their own judgements as to what works and what does not work in their classrooms.

Like teachers, students can discover things about themselves while reflecting in their diaries:

'We don't question ourselves very often. Luckily, keeping a diary gives me that chance. It's an opportunity for self-reflection and self-evaluation.'

Self-monitoring played an important role in encouraging them to think critically about their weaknesses and strengths:
An inner journey

'I have realised that by monitoring myself, I come up with positive and negative views about myself and my own performance; in other words, I discover more about myself. The more I write, the more aware I become of my needs. I also know on which areas I need to concentrate more in the future.'

Self-monitoring also helped the students to reflect on their learning difficulties or anxieties. The more often they monitored and assessed themselves, the more aware they became of their anxieties:

'I've realised that I have got problems with sight translation; it really scares me but now at least I know that you won't get angry with me when I make mistakes.'

Several weeks later, after receiving support and guidance from me, the same student added:

'Thank you very much, sir! I think I've started to overcome my problem by communicating with you through diary writing.'

Diary writing enabled some of my students to discover their strengths, which encouraged them and made them more confident:

'I didn't know that sight translation would be so enjoyable. I would like to work on it after my graduation.'

'Until now I have had no intention of translating subtitles when I graduate, but now I ask myself - why not?'

Intellectual maturity

Through monitoring themselves, discovering their weaknesses and strengths and writing about these experiences in their diaries, students develop critical thinking skills and gain intellectual maturity.

My students questioned their learning experiences and their performance and reacted to their own strengths and weaknesses. They drew conclusions, made generalisations and even suggested solutions:

'Translating subtitles was a useful activity. I realised that in sight translation, speed and expressing the main ideas properly are essential. I've realised that I shouldn't translate word by word. Instead, I should translate the main points. I need more practice because my level of vocabulary is not very high. I need to work on this.'

'Sentence structure in English is different from Turkish, so I need to make adjustments while translating subtitles and I should be quick while doing that!'

Students also commented on issues discussed in class. They philosophised on these issues and 'enriched their personalities' as one student nicely put it.

Teacher's Diary

Help the students feel that their teacher is also a good companion.

- Always be ready to assist the students.
- Be quick in formulating and providing suggestions.
- Respond to the students' comments on time.
- Take into consideration the students' points of view.
- Guide the students to think critically.
- Be open to feedback.

For instance, after watching the video on tango, one of the students considered the power of body language:

'I think actions speak louder than words. Sometimes words may not always be meaningful.'

Another student wrote a commentary on the film Il Postino:

'The relationship between the postman and Pablo Neruda was very impressive. It is interesting to see how one's personality is influenced and shaped by others. People whom I take as models in my life have shaped my personality.'

Following this commentary, the student gave examples of people who had enriched her character. Another student wrote:

'I wish everybody could have a guiding light like Pablo Neruda. If we want to achieve something in life, we need to have confidence in ourselves.'

As we can see, diary writing gives significant clues about students' inner worlds. What makes this journey fruitful is the teacher's willingness to find out about his students and his sincerity and competence in doing so.

Through diaries, my students and I were able to go on our inner journey and the closer we got to each other, the more we understood about each other, and the more discoveries we made about our teaching and learning experiences. Although I carried out this project with students at university level, I believe that it could be done at any level and would keep all kinds of teaching and learning fresh. As Margaret Scherer says, those who want to be master teachers 'must attempt to discover whom, what and why they teach' and I believe that diaries can be a good resource for finding satisfying answers to such questions. If students understand the educational rationale behind their decisions in class, if you ensure quality output from your students and if they see you making changes that respond to their needs, they feel more motivated about their learning and become fully engaged in their studies, knowing that you have a genuine interest in them and in their learning and development. The class then is no longer "your" class or even "their" class, but becomes "our" class where responsibility for teaching and learning belong to everyone' (Weimer). Collaborative diary writing prepares a context for 'our' classroom where teaching and learning experiences are always kept fresh.

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Ali Nihat Eken lectures at the School of Applied Languages at Bilkent University in Turkey. His current areas of interest include classroom research, film analysis and critical thinking. He has published a self-study book for English students and articles on films in national newspapers and magazines.

eken@bilkent.edu.tr