ABSTRACT

This article reports a study with Action Logs in two different contexts of English teaching: Japan and Brazil. The results suggest the narrative aspect of Action Logs which helped students’ emotional contagion, belief deconstruction and more collaboration among students.

Key-words: action logs; narrative, emotions

RESUMO

Este artigo relata um estudo com Action Logs em dois contextos de ensino de inglês: Japão e Brasil. Os resultados sugerem o caráter narrativo dos Action Logs que serviram para o contágio emocional entre os alunos e para a desconstrução de crenças, e maior colaboração entre eles.

Palavras-chave: action logs, narrativa, emoções
Introduction

Action logs, which have been used abroad for a long time (WOO & MURPHEY, 1999; KINDT & MURPHEY, 1999; MURPHEY, 1993), are “learners’ written comments on activities and classroom events, their attitudes, thoughts, perceptions, beliefs and feelings about their learning process” (BARCELOS & MORAES, 2011: 192). According to Woo & Murphey (1999: 15), in writing action logs, learners are reflecting on “socio-affective factors that contribute or impede their progress” and “intensifying [their] own awareness and control over the learning process.

Action logs (ALs hereafter) are usually written at the end of a class, and can be drawn from by the teacher to make class newsletters which are shared with students in the following class. According to Kindt & Murphey (1999), class newsletters are “a collection of comments from students’ action logs or other forms of feedback” (p. 87). Because AL comments and feedback are shared with other learners in class newsletters, they become a collective story of learning experience that promote reflection on their own learning process, learners’ and teacher’s roles, and other aspects in learning and teaching. Moreover, “when students read others’ feelings, beliefs, and strategies, they can re-evaluate their own from a new perspective” (WOO & MURPHEY, 1999: 15).

Action logs and newsletters (AL&NL hereafter) provides learners with the opportunity to narrativize and co-narrativize their ongoing learning experience. In terms of narrative theory, action logs can be seen as a type of travel journal produced through daily increments. And since the whole class (of travelers) writes them, there is the opportunity to notice the co-constructed, emergent qualities of identities in progress. Through AL&NL, learners voice their motivations, de-motivations, emotions, hopes, beliefs and express their agency throughout their learning journeys. While there may not always be time in class to allow students to read everyone’s action logs, newsletters can create a mini-narrative of selected gems of the week’s adventures, allowing both teachers and learners to hear each others’ voices, re-storying their experience which is “constantly being restructured in the light of new events” and “shaped by lifelong personal and community narratives” (BELL, 2002: 208).

As Brumfit (1991) has pointed out, we can neither control nor know all the language that is being produced in communicatively oriented classrooms with pair and group work. Still, teachers tend to guess as to where students are and what they need from class to class. This guesswork and testing often result in a frustrating inefficiency and lack of curriculum
There are better ways than guessing. The gap between the different perceptions and expectations of students and teachers could be resolved by simply asking students what were the things they did in class and how useful, interesting, and difficult were each of the activities. It is also fairer and richly entertaining if teachers take into account student perceptions (to the extent that students can give them and teachers can actually understand and respond to them). One simple way to do this is to ask them to write action logs. Our experiences and the data from our students show that AL&NLs promote less guessing on the part of teachers, more reflection literacy on the part of students, and generates emerging narratives that help class members form communities and emotionally take more control over their lives.

In this article, we report on two experiences by different researchers in different countries using AL&NL, one in Japan (by Tim Murphey) and another in Brazil (by Barcelos & Moraes). We organized the article into 3 sections. Besides this introduction, in which we first introduced the topic, we have a second section that comments briefly on narratives. We then describe the procedures for using AL&NL and discuss the data. We conclude with some implications for language teaching and learning and teacher education.

Narrativizing our lives

Narrative researchers have indicated that “showing concrete details of a specific life can convey a general way of life” (ELLIS, 1998: 1), and that “it is valid and effective to draw on personal experiences as an aid to explore a topic, as well as a prime source of data” (GAITAN, 2000: 9). The authors assert that students’ comments and evaluations about class activities and the atmosphere are concrete details that teachers are seldom aware of and that narrate important information. As Bruner (1996), citing Kierkegaard, so aptly states, “telling stories in order to understand is not mere enrichment of the mind: without them we are, to use [Kierkegaard’s] words, reduced to fear and trembling” (p. 90). Indeed, we dare to suggest that when students and teachers do not construct stories about their experiences in classes that they, too, may be reduced to fear – fear of misunderstandings, dislike, boredom, etc.

Murphey (1990) has gone so far as to call teaching the “guessing profession”: teachers teach material and guess their students learned and liked it to a certain extent, and then they guess the students are ready for their next set of exercises, activities, or projects, and they continually fret
over whether they are guessing correctly. Truth be told, many students see their own daily school experience as a guessing game as well—they guess they understood certain things and why they did activities and guess they should study other things to better prepare but often are not really sure. Our alternative to guessing is AL&NL—students re-storying their ongoing learning experience, co-narrativizing past and present events and expectations, and co-constructing a desired classroom atmosphere. In this way, there is less guessing and more co-constructed, co-narrated, and daily incremented, reconstructed, and shaped storytelling. Students can actually give feedback on all the activities and the classroom atmosphere, so the teachers can adjust (MURPHEY, 1990) and through reading newsletters students also tend to understand each other better and adjust to create a collective dialogic narrative.

Kindt and Murphey (1999) state that, “… getting feedback is great, but that this can be used more, and more proactively, when we feedforward student comments in the form of newsletters” (p. 88). AL&NL also is supported by the “Just In Time Teaching” literature (NOVAK, n.d.) in which teachers get to read students’ most recent reflections and work and can then better teach what is relevant to their needs at that point in time (EDWARDS et al, 2006).

Pavlenko and Lantolf (2000) add, “Most importantly, narrative-based theory and research also has ecological validity as that which ‘has something to say about what people do in real, culturally significant situations’ (NEISSER, 1976: 2)” (p. 161). As such, “It explores the messiness of what it means to become a teacher. It situates the writer and researcher as text” (RENNER, 2001 par.1; UNDERHILL, 2012). In real culturally significant language classrooms, teachers’ stories demonstrate that teachers can be learners capable of change throughout their careers (JOHNSON & GOLOMBEK, 2002). In fact, “Change efforts have found that the fate of new programs and ideas rests on teachers’ and administrators’ opportunities to learn, experiment, and adapt ideas to their local context” (DARLING-HAMMOND, 1997: 214). We contend that this is equally true for students and that through AL&NL we are providing incremental tools and opportunities for all participants to co-construct the many narratives of a class, to track changes and plot development.

Considering the inherent complexity in narrative inquiries, which involves more than telling and listening to stories, AL&NL should then give us insight into the co-construction and impact of narratives to help teachers and teacher educators improve their own practice (CLANDININ et al., 2007). In 1984, Allwright asked, “Why Don’t Learners Learn What Teachers Teach?” and answered his question by showing that students
create their own understandings of what goes on in a classroom. In Allwright’s research, when students were asked after class what went on, most usually gave different versions (stories) of what they did in class, some vastly different. So Murphey (1993) argued that if different students, because of different perceptual filters, learn different things from the same common experience, and if teachers cannot be too sure what they are actually learning, “why don’t teachers learn what students learn?” He proposed this could be at least partially done through AL&NL.

The narratives

The basic procedure for AL&NL, as laid out in 1993 (MURPHEY, 1993), has not changed much: (a) Ask students, as homework after every class, to write down briefly in a notebook what they think they did in class and how they liked it, with a date for each entry. Some teachers prefer for students to write the last 5 minutes of class and they collect them at the end, either in notebooks or single sheets of paper. Others have begun doing it online (ROWLAND, 2010); (b) Then collect and read them daily, weekly, or every few weeks, writing comments where appropriate and returning them in subsequent classes; (c) Put all the comments, or for larger classes just some select comments, on to a newsletter to redistribute to the classes. Note that this is not a diary in which students write about things totally unrelated to class. Rather, they are sharing their valuable perceptions of the activities, their learning, and of what is happening in class (MURPHEY, 1993: 6).

Our data below shows that the single most reported reassuring tendency when doing action logs and newsletters is that students can know what classmates think and thus implicate themselves (participate more) in the co-construction of a group narrative (WERTSCH, 2006). Below we provide two short case studies of groups of students who have benefited from AL&NL. The first one, described by Murphey who has been doing AL&NL for about 20 years, is a group of first year Japanese university students. The second is by seasoned teacher-trainers in Brazil (Barcelos & Moraes) who are using the processes for the first time with a group of teachers in training. While Murphey’s narrative focuses on students’ agency, Barcelos and Moraes stress the power of narratives to help learners become more reflective and emotionally literate.

A Japanese Narrative
While I (Tim) have done AL&NL for many years, I probably had my best experience of it with my once a week first year university seminar in 2009. They bonded well with each other in class while shadow reading and summarizing (MURPHEY, 2001) their communal newsletters about one every two weeks. They also wrote their language learning histories (LLHs) in the first semester. In the second semester, I put them into groups to analyze everyone’s LLHs for motivational and de-motivational factors, and then asked them to write up reports about these, giving advice to students, teachers, and the ministry of education. Throughout all of these I was monitoring their action logs and creating NLs out of their comments regularly, and I could see the excitement grow. Finally, we decided to condense all our findings into a fast pace 2-minute YouTube video that we put up in January 2010, “The Real Voice of Japanese Students” (MURPHEY, 2013). We also mailed the LLHs, the reports, and the YouTube link to several newspapers and to the ministry of education. One student strongly advocating change commented in her action log in early December on the stories most class members told of junior and senior HS and the positioning of these stories on YouTube:

_I never thought that we would make a video on YouTube. It’s just GREAT! I was questioning how we learn English from middle school. I didn’t like the way we learn English at JHS and HS in Japan. So I could understand how people who don’t like English feel. Our project, it could be just small steps to change MEXT [Ministry of Education]! But a lot of small steps come together to be big steps to make change in Japan. Just watching and doing nothing, it won’t change anything. If we want to change something, we have to make first small steps!!_

Others described the usefulness of their action logs and newsletters and displayed how much they had bonded near the end of the year:

_Today I reviewed my action log, all that I wrote. I remembered my feelings and thoughts about [the university] and this class... My rollercoaster [of
motivation) is going up! Higher than in the past. Surely I will realize that this class is a precious experience in the future.

I strongly agree that the NL helps our motivation to go up because it helps me a lot. It’s better to know what other students think. I love the atmosphere that I can talk in English at all the times. And I also feel that I’m allowed to ask questions. My classmate’s attitude is just great! I love my class so much. I’m sure I can learn from them. They motivate me a lot.

In retrospect, it is interesting how they progressed from action logging to LLHs, to reports, to YouTube, basically retelling their stories in different media/genre each time. The LLHs and the reports and YouTube were mostly about their JHS and HS English education and how they wished it would have been different, more like what they were experiencing in university. Their action logs and the 17 newsletters (about one every two weeks) caught their emerging stories of their claim for ownership of their learning lives and their reflections about producing their stories in other media. Sending the reports to the Ministry of Education empowered them to believe that they had a voice, and that even if their voices were not heard, their views were still worth clearly communicating. In the end, our actions gave us hope, regardless of how hopeless the situation might be. The emerging mega-story was one of an increased sense of agency and engagement in learning and living lives worth working for. AL&NL are crucial scaffolding tools in this developmental story of belonging and agency (NELSON & MURPHEY, 2011).

A Brazilian Narrative

Unlike Murphey, this was our first experience of using AL&NLing in class and we were amazed at finding out how they helped students deal better with their emotions, especially their fears and anxieties in speaking the language in class. The ALs&NLs provided an opportunity for us to see beliefs-in-development as students were able to wrestle with and (re)construct different beliefs. We first used AL&NLs with a group of language student-teachers in 2007, following the procedures outlined by Murphey (1993). Our analysis shows how AL&NLs help students’
belongingness, sense of community, and identity construction. By narrating their experience, learners in our study became more aware of their own pathways toward goals and toward dealing with emotions in class, as shown in these student comments:

It’s been so motivating because [the action log] helps students feel more comfortable with each other and it helps them lose the fear of learning a language. (20/09/07)

I think this discussion is very important to our English learning process because I usually feel very anxious about learning and I should be a more passionate language user. (03/10/07)

AL&NLs give students a chance to emotionally reframe their stories, first individually, and later, collectively. Narrativizing keeps us from being “reduced to fear and trembling” (Kierkedgaard in BRUNER, 1996) since story-telling allows us to make meaning out of our experiences. AL&NL provides the group with the opportunity to exercise their agency, as well as influence others to act more positively. In that sense, AL&NLs are narrative tools of emotional scaffolding¹ (ROSIEK, 2003), as illustrated below:

I feel very calm and enthusiastic. I am confident with myself. I believe my English will improve. (22/08/07)

L. said that she is more self-confident and this is great! I’m more self-confident too. We learned the importance of being self-confident! (07/12/07)

Students’ ALs often contained a lot of positive words and feelings that spark and spread a sense of motivation, self-confidence, enthusiasm and hope among the group when read by classmates. They are also places to bring up important topics that need to be talked about further and “aired out” in the classroom. When students reveal their expectations, they increase their

¹ Rosiek defines emotional scaffolding as “teachers’ pedagogical use of analogies, metaphors, and narratives to influence students’ emotional response to specific aspects of the subject matter in a way that promotes student learning” (our emphasis, p. 402).
commitment and willingness to take more risks, to speak up and learn, and their sense of belonging blossoms. Thus, AL&NL function proleptically\(^2\) (van LIER, 2004) to project student behavior and individual growth, as commented on below:

\[\text{J said that she could notice in this semester that we can learn English outside class. It just depends on us. Before this semester, I had never thought about this either. (07/12/07)}\]

\[\text{In this class, I liked the discussion about “to have an accent, is that a problem?” I had never thought about that. (14/09/07)}\]

With their classmates, students eventually discover things about themselves they did not know (such as the feelings of becoming more self-confident and losing their fear and shame). In doing this, students are also re-narrating their stories of themselves as language learners, thus creating a more cohesive collective narrative (WERTSCH, 2006).

**Final considerations and implications**

Narrativizing our learning and teaching lives can be done incrementally with small reflections and awareness raising activities through AL&NLing, or even with lower pre-literate levels, through drawings (KALAJA ET AL, 2008) and sentence frames (CHOU et al., 2007). Asking students to reflect on their ongoing stories of learning can greatly assist teachers in dynamically assessing (LANTOLF & POEHNER, 2004) their needs, and students in becoming reflection-literate. Continual, on-going, multiple reflections by all voyagers (i.e. narrations on the fly) are needed in order to grasp the wisdom of the crowds (SUROWIECKI, 2004) and dynamically adjust our multiple sails and maps to fluctuating, co-constructing, and emerging realities (LARSEN-FREEMAN & CAMERON, 2008) (and mixed metaphors!). AL&NL has also shown themselves to be

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\(\text{\(^2\) According to van Lier (2004), prolepsis “is a form of looking ahead, of assuming something to be the case before it has been encountered, a foreshadowing in some sense” (p. 152).}\)
positive tools for more successful learning and teaching, promoting more interaction between students and with teachers, as well as helping all to become more emotionally literate and agents of their own learning.

Finally, AL&NLs are excellent tools for scaffolding teachers into action research (ALLWRIGHT & HANKS, 2009). In addition, ALs can help teachers to get in tune with what students know and thus, learn from them, adjusting their teaching and becoming more confident teachers (KINDT & MURPHEY, 1999). ALs are also a rich and powerful research tool that help educators and researchers understand the complexity of the classroom system. In this sense, ALs offer researchers and educators singular insights on learners’ actions and their relationship with their beliefs, emotions, and how they link to learning and teaching in the classroom. As stated elsewhere (BARCELOS & MORAES, 2011: 213), ALs serve as tools for positive emotional contagion among learners, allow them to deconstruct some beliefs, collaborate and build a learning community. In short, we believe ALs&NLs can be useful tools for teachers to use in their classrooms to deal with learners’ emotions and beliefs. Thus we encourage teachers to engage more directly in action research with AL&NLs and recruit their students' voices to meld with their own in collaboratively constructing positive class narratives.

References


