Online Synchronous English Learning from Activity Theory Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

The implementation of Online Synchronous Learning (OSL) poses many challenges to existing instruction technology theory because of the complexity of the digital age. Although many studies have been carried out for an OSL, there is little evidence of OSL for teaching language learning. This is especially so when it involves multiple cultural perspectives. This chapter describes the implementation of OSL for teaching English to foreign students from different cultures. The authors believe that the cultural historical Activity Theory is ideal for understanding OSL and its pedagogy. Through the lens of Activity Theory, this study takes close look at OSL courses and examines the socio-cultural factors affecting the success of the course as well as their complex relationships. Applying Activity Theory to analyze data collected over three years we have developed a framework to help educators who intend to implement OSL from multiple cultural perspectives. [Article copies are available for purchase from InfoSci-on-Demand.com]

Keywords: Activity Theory; Communicative Competence; Contradiction; Online Synchronous Cyber Classrooms (OSCC); Online Synchronous Learning (OSL); Synchronous Learning Management System (SLMS); Zone of Proximal Development

INTRODUCTION

For students in Taiwan, learning English as a second language is not trivial. It is very difficult to have students exposed to environments where they can learn the language. Ideally it would be great if students have the chance to go overseas...
to spend time in an English speaking country such as the UK. However, for most it is too costly and involves the students leaving the country. Getting hold of good native English-speaking tutors is not easy in Taiwan. To overcome the problems, we have opted for online learning to teach English as a second language to our students at National Sun Yat-sen University in Taiwan. The Business and Communication course was born as a result of this, using Online Synchronous Learning (OSL).

There are several advantages of online learning of English as a second language for students. The main benefits are the removal of barriers of students traveling to another country, as well as cost saving by not having to seek native English speakers from overseas.

Although there are studies of online language courses for second language in English, as far as we know, there has been little work done on the use of synchronous learning with tutors from different cultural backgrounds.

One of the problems concerning the design of effective learning applications is that instructional designers have often overlooked the cultural and historical aspects of education, focusing instead on individual learners encountering the machine interface (Blunden, 2007; Lewis, 1997; Roth, 2007). Human learning, unlike much animal learning is not the simple result of stimuli, or inborn cognitive structures, but rather a complex result of our interactions with others mediated by tools in the culture, including language (Vygotsky 1978).

According to Russell (2002), Activity Theory understands learning not as the internalization of discrete information or skills by individuals, but rather as expanding involvement over time, social as well as intellectual, with some other people and the tools available in their culture. The question of individual learning now becomes the question of how that which is inside a person might change over time as a consequence of repeated social interactions with other people and their tools, including the very powerful tools of words, images, and gestures (Hutchins, 1995, p. 290).

Because learning with computers is profoundly social and cultural, it is important that when designing constructivist learning, we understand how people use cultural tools to teach and learn, to change and be changed, through our interactions with others.

From an Activity Theory perspective, learning activities cannot be fully understood without understanding the social or institutional contexts for learning (Engeström, 2008). Activity Theory suggests studying human practice in a social and historical context and emphasizes the interaction of human, social, technological and organizational behavior of human practice (Daniels, 2007; Lecusay, Rossen, & Cole, 2008; McMurry, 2006). In Activity Theory, activities are mediated by social and cultural forces, including rules and division of labour among communities, and the artifacts that carry and transmit these forces.
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