

Chapter 14

Interactive Learning Between Chinese Students Learning English and English Students Learning Chinese on the Platform of Wiki

Dongshuo Wang

University of Manchester, UK

Bin Zou

Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University, China

Minjie Xing

University of Manchester, UK

ABSTRACT

This research investigates the interaction between English students learning Chinese in the UK and Chinese students learning English in China via a wiki platform. Activity theory and legitimate peripheral participation theory were employed as a theoretical framework; wiki was embedded as an interactive learning tool. The findings revealed that Chinese native speakers assisted English students learning Chinese as foreign language (CFL) by means of reorganizing word orders and restructuring sentence patterns. The usages of clarification and elaboration were more frequent than the usages of added and deleted information. Both CFL and English as foreign language (EFL) students interacted with each other in attending to language forms through the essay correction and revision process, and the interaction consequently enhanced their target language learning. The study suggests that wiki provides a dynamic platform, which encourages further integration into the syllabus to support foreign language learning.

INTRODUCTION

The present situation of foreign language learning still focuses on classroom instructions: language tutors introduce vocabulary, explain grammar rules and students practise pattern drills accordingly; whereas out-of-class, learners lack the opportunity to get involved in activities with other learners of the same target language, and have little chance to be directly involved in productive activities with native speakers (NS). Even with those who have physical contact with NSs, psychological and or social factors prevent them from taking part in the activities: some of the learners are too shy to approach NSs, and some others are not sure if the NSs are willing to use the language with them or not. There are some “English corners” or “language communities” for foreign students to practise English (Gao, 2009; Wang, 2010), but activities like this for English speakers who practise Chinese are few and far between; learners also lack the opportunity for autonomous learning, as the participation in activities is either peripheral or arranged by language tutors, not real use in communication. Language learners are very often asked to practice in artificially created situations where the participation is hardly real, or they are left in a situation where the prescribed syllabus, learning materials and learning goals are set by authorities rather than by the learners themselves. The way to integrate linguistic knowledge learning in class and language practice after class remains as a question for educators and language practitioners.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Activity Theory

Activity theory, originating from Soviet psychologists Vygotsky (1978), Leonntiev (1978) and Ratner (2006), believes that psychological phenomena are formed as people engage in socially

organized activities (Meyers, 2007). Since activities are socially formed, they provide a social and cultural influence on cognition. Activity theory emphasizes social factors and the interaction between agents and environments.

Activity theory believes that actions are undertaken by agents who are motivated towards the solution to some problem. Agency comes from working with others in a community, but this collaboration is constrained by cultural factors such as conventions and rules, and by the way in which a society is stratified according to its own division of labour. In this division of labour, mentors or experts and newcomers play different roles in achieving higher mental functions. The activities of newcomers with the assistance of mentors or experts move from lower mental functions to higher functions and these functions are made into routines and performed automatically (St. Clair, 2008).

The power of activity theory as an explanatory framework rests in the concept of contradictions (Engeström, 1999). Contradictions arise when new ways of thinking or doing come in conflict with traditional or currently accepted ways of thinking and doing. They may also occur within each of the elements, between elements, or among activities, and may result in a breakdown of the activity system itself. Very often, in the course of activities, breakdowns in activity will be repaired or negotiated, but not all contradictions are obvious to the agency engaged in a given activity (Blackler, 1995). Engeström (1999) describes that the practice, rather than seeing contradictions as adverse consequences, provides a potential driving force for innovation and improvement of practices.

Agency participation in the learning does not only mean being engaged in activities, it also requires that the activity to be productive, i.e., leading to certain improvements in the practice. In language classrooms, learners are engaged in the learning activities in the form of mechanical drill-and-practice and role-playing scenarios. With these activities, what foreign language learners

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