

Researching Contradictions: Cultural Historical Activity Theory Research (CHAT) in the English Classroom

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Abstract

This article argues that Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) is an appropriate theoretical and methodological framework for researchers in English interested in the social contexts of culture and its relationship with the formation of mind and activity in the English classroom. Two key concepts in Vygotsky's thought central to understanding CHAT research are explored: the zone of proximal development and the principle of double stimulation. Implications for CHAT research in the English classroom are then addressed.

Introduction

During a recent conference presentation, I was taken to task by a conference delegate for using the terms 'social' and 'cultural' in relation to the literacy learning of students within educational institutions. How could I argue that schools have cultures when they consist of individuals with their own cultures and experiences? How can learning be social when it is an intensely personal experience? To teachers of English, and researchers of English, the concepts of culture, history, language and social relations are so integral to the subject that these questions may seem absurd. English as a subject is concerned with the processes of communication and language use in a wide variety of literary and linguistic forms. Research in the subject of English seeks to understand the cultural understandings embedded within literate practices as well as the cultural and historical practices that shape the production, reception, and understanding of literary and non-fiction texts.

Yet the questions posed by the delegate highlight a tension at the heart of English subject research: how do we research the largely unobservable processes of minds grappling with literacy demands in social settings? How do students acquire the conceptual understandings that allow them to engage with and act on the cultures of literate practices? One of the dilemmas for researchers of schooling is how to frame research designs that look at the interactions between: the complexity of the social organisation of school as an institution and the consequent design of curriculum; the social relations within that institution (at both staff and student level); and the development of individual learning competences within these social settings. This form of research involves a combined focus on the dialectic between systemic cultural-historical practices and contradictions, social interactions, and individual development. This article argues that Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), developed from the ideas of Vygotsky (1987) and Leontiev (1978) principally by Cole (1996) and Engeström (1987, 2007) is an appropriate theoretical and methodological framework for researchers in English interested in the social contexts of culture and its relationship with the formation of mind and activity. The article will briefly address two key concepts in Vygotsky's thought, the zone of proximal development and the principle of double stimulation, central to understanding CHAT research.

Vygotsky's Legacy and English Research

Vygotsky (1987) conceived learning as both a social and situated cultural activity. Learning involves mediated activity through psychological tool usage and in particular the culturally acquired conceptual tool of language. It matters both who we learn from and with as well as how and where we learn. In culturally diverse English classrooms, activities of writing, reading, and speaking and listening are both distributed in the sense of many participants contributing to these specific acts of literacy and situated within the context of the classroom and school environment.

The English subject classroom, as a social and communicative activity system, has long been a site for research from a Vygotskian theoretical stance aimed at understanding: students' conceptual learning in the subject of

English (e.g. Bazerman 2012; Burgess 2007; Thompson 2015); the development of writing abilities (e.g. Bazerman 2009; Britton et al. 1975; Russell 2009 Thompson 2012, 2013); beginning English teachers' emergent understandings of pedagogy (e.g. Ellis, 2008; Smagorinsky 2015) and the role of talk for learning in the classroom (e.g. Cazden; Mercer).

The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)

The Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky 1987) is both the best known and perhaps least understood concept in Vygotsky's thought. Unlike the predominant model of children's learning that sees the function of learning as acquisition of knowledge, Vygotsky's theory of the ZPD stresses the importance of the educative process in the psychological development of higher order thinking. For Vygotsky, the ZPD is the difference between existing and potential levels of development revealed through an analysis of how far a student is able to master a task by themselves or with help from a more knowledgeable other such as a teacher or more capable peer. As Chaiklin (2003) has argued, Vygotsky's concept of the ZPD defines the potential *development* of a child rather than an abstract metaphor for learning. For Vygotsky, real learning is that which is in advance of development and is mediated through interactions with other people and through the social and cultural acquisition of sign systems. The ZPD indicates both the presence of maturing psychological functions and the possibility of meaningful interventions that can stimulate conceptual development. This process of conceptual development involves co-operation and collaboration between the teacher and the learner, or between learners at different levels of development. For Vygotsky, collaboration and co-operation are crucial features of effective teaching. Vygotsky (1987) argued that learning can take place when the learning task is set at a level in advance of the student's current mental level of development. This has research design implications for researchers of classroom activity concerning the relationship between instruction, students' development, and the classroom environment. As Derry (2008) points out, 'the learning environment must be designed and cannot rely on the spontaneous response to an environment which is not constructed according to, or involves, some clearly worked out conceptual framework' (p.61). In an educational context, activity theorists argue that whilst learners' needs must determine classroom activity it is through appropriately structured activity that pupils learn.

Vygotsky argued that school learning introduces something fundamentally new into students' development. By giving students specific tasks of understanding scientific concepts within a designed environment, school learning introduces new concepts that stimulates psychological development. It is within the dialectical interplay between the students' grasp of everyday spontaneous concepts and the development of their scientific conceptual understanding that learning leads development.

Double Stimulation as an Intervention Methodology

Vygotsky's (1987) principle of double stimulation grew out of his search for new methodological tools to research interaction and development. The aim of this tool was to focus the researcher on the dynamic and historical processes of transformation in order to observe the development and inner structure of higher mental processes. Vygotsky understood that all human action is shaped by the ways we use culturally and socially acquired knowledge to make sense of the world. The principle of double stimulation describes a situation in which an individual is confronted with a researcher-set problem or dilemma that they do not yet have the knowledge or the psychological tools to solve without the secondary stimulus provided. The problem constitutes the object of the activity and the secondary stimulus, in the form of tools or artefacts, which provides the potential means of solving the dilemma. Vygotsky described the researcher-set problem as the "stimulus-end" and the tools as the "stimulus-means" or "auxiliary means." Vygotsky argued that by studying the ways in which people appropriate these tools to try to solve the problem, it is possible to reveal the ways in which they interpret the environment and contexts they act in. As Sannino (2015) explains the process of double stimulation begins with a conflict of motives which is resolved through volitional action, or will. In trying to understand this developing agency of students in the activity setting of a classroom there is a need to look at both the pedagogy of teacher interventions as well as the introduction of new tools that can stimulate change. For example, the use of a computer programme in the classroom as a mediational or collaborative tool for composition in certain

circumstances can act as a means of transforming both the activity of writing and the interaction of teacher and student within a ZPD.

Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT)

The term Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) was developed by Cole (1996) from the activity theory work of Vygotsky's former colleague work of Leontiev (1978). Leontiev's research moved away from attention on the mind in society to a focus on the object of social activity. Leontiev formulated a distinction between goal-orientated actions that are conscious, tool-mediated operations which he called 'the methods for accomplishing actions' (Leontiev, 1978, p.65), and collective activity as a unit that involves both actions and operations. The concept of object motive is a key element in CHAT research not least because of the possibility of conflicting or contradictory object motives within an activity. The object motive for teachers and the reason they design classroom activities are their students' learning trajectories. The object motive for the students involved in these activities may well be very different.

Vygotsky's emphasis in the concept of the ZPD was on the development of the individual child in their social situation of development. CHAT theorists, on the other hand, emphasise the importance of the collective and the role of learning in leading development through the creation of zones of proximal development. CHAT research therefore focuses on the historical and cultural contexts related to learning within activity systems. Cole argues that 'the structure and development of human psychological processes emerged through culturally mediated, historically developing, practical activity' (Cole, 1996, p.108). He goes on to develop the idea that learning is mediated by culture and its products or artefacts. Wartofsky (1979) defines artefacts as things that humans create in three distinct areas: primary artefacts (words, writing instruments etc), secondary artefacts (beliefs, norms etc) and tertiary artefacts (imagined worlds, play, creative representations etc). Secondary artefacts, in Vygotskian terms, include sign and semiotic resources. Tertiary artefacts are ones in which 'the forms of representation themselves come to constitute a 'world' (or 'worlds') of imaginative praxis' (Wartofsky, 1979, p.207). These three levels allow semiotic mediation of human action to take place within activity systems. This CHAT theoretical framework views individual psychological development as being rooted in culture and society (the social situation of development). It is both through interaction with others, and our response to the contexts within which we develop, that we attempt to make sense of the world around us.

Engeström (1987, 1999, 2007) has developed Leontiev's description of activity systems by extending Vygotsky's concept of action constituting a subject, an object and mediational tools to account for the social relations that affect the mediational process. In particular, he highlights the importance of rules and division of labour within activity. Engeström's theory of expansive learning views joint activity, as opposed to individual actions, as the central unit of activity. Internal contradictions of this activity are 'the motive force of change and development' (Engeström, 1999, p.9). Mediated activity changes not only the subject but also the social context of the activity system. The 'reflective appropriation of advanced models and tools' as 'ways out of internal contradictions' result in the development of new activity systems (Cole and Engeström, 1993, p.40). Engeström (1987) has adapted Vygotsky's mediational triangle of subject, object, and mediational tools to include: the rules in an activity; the community; and the division of labour within an activity (see Figure 1).

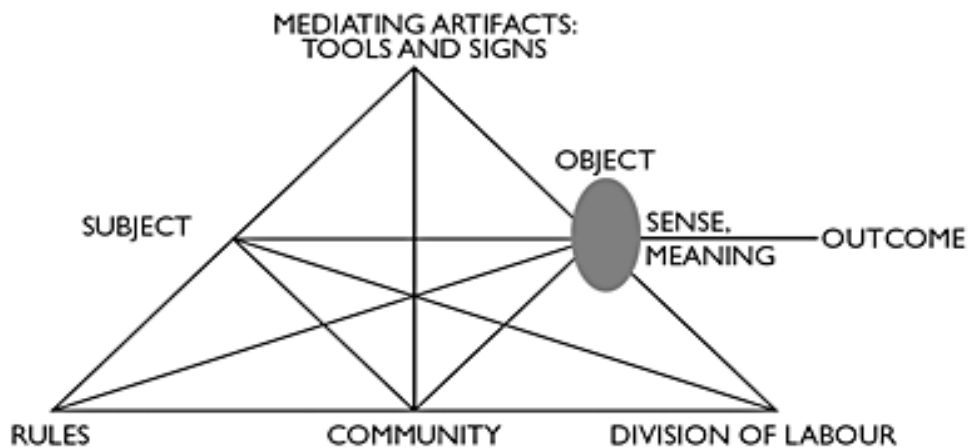


Figure 1 The structure of a human activity system (Engeström, 1987, p. 78)

The CHAT analysis of collective activity is linked to an ‘emphasis on action or intervention in order to develop practice and the sites of practice’ (Edwards and Daniels, 2004, p. 108). CHAT research then is interventionist and aims to study contradictions within processes of learning through the process of double stimulation or by changing the division of labour within an activity system. This involves both transforming the activity and expanding the agency of the participants. Engeström and his colleagues’ Developmental Work Research (DWR) projects are based on these theoretical understandings.

CHAT Research in the English Classroom

The CHAT focus on the social situation of development means that for researchers in this tradition context is not viewed as being separate from activity. CHAT therefore offers researchers in English a potential tool for researching the complexities and contradictions within the teaching and learning of the subject. Some CHAT research in the English classroom (e.g. Bazerman 2012, Thompson 2015) has focused on students’ acquisition of conceptual understanding in order to use literate practices to make sense of the world. Burgess (2007) points out that concepts relating to the study of English are central to: students’ use of critical literacy; the ability to compare texts; the reading of a novel from another period or culture; or when writing in different genres. The teacher’s role is to design tasks and learning environments that challenge students and enable them to acquire and internalise the learning tools necessary for them to develop conceptual understanding. The key to this development is collaborative or joint activity that engages students in mediated activity. Given the central role of language within Vygotskian theory, CHAT research in the English classroom often focuses on analyses of talk (see for example Mercer’s work on exploratory talk, 2002, 2009) and the cultural and social conditions that both create and are shaped by that talk. Russell (2009) views writing within organisations as activity systems. The texts produced within these systems are seen as tools for the mediation of activity. Likewise Bazerman’s (2004) research has looked at speech and genre within the activities of writing. CHAT is also used in English education research as a tool of analysis of the process of transformation. For example, Ellis’ (2008) Developmental Work Research (DWR) project looked at concepts of teacher identity and teacher agency in research on contradictions in learning to teach English.

Researching Activity in the Field

A CHAT research focus in the English classroom does not simply describe how students and/or teachers act or behave within the activity system, but instead examines processes of change as these actors encounter contradictions within problematic situations. There is much to learn about development and conceptual understandings within the subject of English from an analysis of the use and appropriation of cultural and historical psychological tools and physical artefacts that participants use within an activity system. Typically,

this means: identifying a problem based on a conflict of motives; introducing a secondary stimulus; and then analysing the way students use the stimulus to attempt to resolve the problem.

Two brief examples 'from the field' suggest the potential of CHAT research in the English classroom to study contradictions within processes of learning through the method of double stimulation or by changing the division of labour within an activity system. Both examples highlight the importance of the conceptual tool of language for students' development. The first is drawn from a research project (Thompson 2013) that identified critical incidents in the negotiation of meaning between a teacher and student when co-constructing a written text. The original conflict of motives arose from the refusal of the student, who found writing a challenge, to attempt a collaborative writing task set by the teacher. The teacher then became the secondary stimulus as the student's writing partner. Doyle and Carter (1984) have argued that the school day is made up of classroom tasks that carry the pedagogic purposes of teachers but are in reality negotiated between teachers and students. In this research the negotiation led to critical incidents where the student had to choose whether to collaborate with the teacher. The identification of these key moments from video data of classroom interaction was a key research method of analysis. This theoretical sampling of data was based on the underlying position that learning is situated and involves mediation and negotiation of meaning. The research concluded that writing, like other acts of literacy, is a situated activity system involving a dialectical tension between thought, talk, and the act of composition.

The second example explored the task design impact of introducing a secondary stimulus to literature circles (Thompson 2015) involving both eager and reluctant lower secondary school readers (aged 11-12) in low set English classes. The research adopted Vygotsky's (1987) principle of double stimulation as a methodological tool to research interaction and development. The teacher's object motive for establishing these literature circle reading activity was to promote the collaborative act of meaning making through interpersonal discourse. However, object motives of the eager and reluctant readers varied markedly. The aim of this study was to determine whether these literature circles were more effective if confident older readers (aged 15-16) from other classes acted as facilitators to students' discussions. In literature circles, students are assigned specific roles designed to mirror the analytical and cognitive decoding tools used by experienced and successful readers. Each circle was assigned a confident reader whose role was to listen, respond to questions, and to make suggestions. The primary mode of data collection was classroom observations and recording of the discussions. Students also completed questionnaires and were interviewed. The results suggested that the confident readers were used by the younger students as a secondary stimulus within the collaborative reading activity to support processes such as inference and criticality employed by successful readers. The task design element of this form of collaborative reading attended to the concern with active reading for meaning. The students were helped to engage with the cultures embedded in texts and to act on this knowledge through their collective interpretation. But the conducting role of the confident older student, as assessor and as prompt, was equally important in helping students to acquire new ways of thinking about and interrogating texts and this positively affected these students' attitudes towards reading

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