Insights from Using Activity Theory Frameworks
to Understand an ESP Task-based Instruction

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Abstract
Developed as an important aspect of Vygotskian sociocultural theory, activity theory (AT) views learning and cognition as a complex social practice acquired through dialogic communication located within cultural and historical contexts (Haught, 2006). AT is defined as “a philosophical and cross-disciplinary framework for studying different forms of human practices as developmental processes, with both individual and social levels interlinked at the same time” (Kuutti, 1996). It posits that conscious learning emerges from activity, but not the precursor to it (Jonassen and Rohrer-Murphy, 1999) and the appropriate unit of analysis is tool-mediated goal-directed action (Zinchenko, 1985, cited in Lantolf, 2000). Vygotsky’s colleagues, Leont’ev and Luria perceived that perception, imagination, thinking, and emotion are not only derived from doing activities, but also are activities themselves. Activity and cognition are inseparable and unified. ESP task-based instruction is about engaging students in performing language activities for specific purposes. Learning arises and cognition becomes a functional system as learners appropriate the tools used to accomplish the tasks especially the use of language as a vital tool.

Using AT frameworks of Leont’ev’s (1978) and Engeström’s (1999, 2001), my research findings showed that (1) the participants’ activities differed across tasks and time, and (2) participants’ successful performance were mostly influenced by themselves as subjects, objects that motivated them to complete the course, the teacher and their partners in division of labor, and the tools they used to complete the tasks. They were less influenced by the rules and the community. Finally, (3) Students joined the course with similar and different motives, goals, and motivation. They shifted and were transformed. In other words, the students’ motives were not stable across time and tasks. Moreover, the emotional factor or affect also helped mediate L2 development as suggested by Imai (2007).

1. Introduction
Activity theory, which is an overarching theory of sociocultural theory (McCafferty, Roebuck, and Wayland, 2001), is not a method or a theory in the usual sense of the term. It does, however, provide a terminology and an analytical framework that help us to make sense of human and social practice in specific contexts (Blin, 2004). This theory posits that human behavior results from the integration of socially and culturally constructed forms of mediation into human activity (Lantolf, 2000). In addition, this theory privileges human agency in doing any activity. Lantolf (2000, p. 8) further explains that activity theory, “is not merely doing something, it is doing something that is motivated either by a biological need, such as hunger, or a culturally constructed need”,…..then “needs become motives once they become directed at a specific object”.

Leontiev (1978) defines activity in terms of three constituents (i.e., subject, object, and tools) operating on three levels: collective activity, group or individual action, and automatic operation. According to Leontiev, an activity consists of a goal-directed hierarchy of actions that are used to accomplish the object namely activities, actions, and operations. Lantolf (2000) explains that motives are only realized in specific actions that are goal-directed (thus, intentional and meaningful) and carried out under particular conditions and through appropriate meditational
means. Activity, then, can only be directly observed by others at the levels of conditions and operations. However, the motives and goals of particular activities cannot be determined only from the level of operations, because the same observable activity can be linked to different goals and motives and different concrete activities can be linked to the same motives and goals.

The relationship among activities, actions, and operations are dynamic as indicated by the bidirectional arrows in Figure 1.

![Hierarchy of activities, actions, and operations](image)

**Figure 1.** Hierarchy of activities, actions, and operations

The above maxim of activity theory is directly related to task-based instruction in that, in order for a task to be meaningful to a learner, it needs to be goal-directed and that goal needs to be realized. Students need to be able to grasp how a certain task relates to them, and that it does so in a meaningful way. In addition, a variety of task outcomes from students should be accepted as long as the tasks are satisfactorily completed. In certain instances, the students may not be able to complete the tasks due to some conditions or limitations such as the unavailability or the inaccessibility of resources or materials or a lack of language knowledge. Moreover, task repetition is necessary. According to activity theory, with goal-directed practices and internalization, activities collapse into actions, and eventually into operations, as they become more routinized and requiring less conscious effort (Blin, 2004; Jonassen, and Rohrer-Murphy, 1999). Therefore, fluency can be achieved through working on similar tasks after students learn from the previous main task.

Activity theory also posits that other components in an activity system influence learning. They are rules, division of labor, and community, operating on the three levels of activities, actions and operations, identified by Leontiev (1978). This expansion of activity theory is suggested by Y. Engeström (1987, 1999, and 2001). The subject is not acting in isolation but is part of a community.

Task-based instruction is a challenging social event for both teachers and students. The class participants bring with them their socio-cultural background, including pre-conceptions of how language should be learned, as well as their own preferences and goals. They interact, negotiate, collaborate, and co-construct their knowledge together for task completion. Thus, for task-based instruction to succeed, it requires dynamic, attentive, engaging participation of everyone involved. Nardi (1996) notes that, it is not possible to fully understand how people learn and work “if the unit of analysis is the unaided individual with no access to other people or to artifacts for accomplishing the task at hand” (p. 69).

2. *Rationales for using activity theory as analytical tool*

There are three compelling reasons to use activity theory as an analytical framework for task-based research. First, it is a useful framework for investigating any activity in context (Engeström, 1996; Kuutti, 1996; Lantolf and Genung, 2002; Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001). The theory aims to make sense of both individual and collaborative behavior and motivation within
its socio-cultural setting as it conceptualizes the social context in which individual learning takes place (Mitchell & Myles, 2004). By definition, it is a framework for studying different forms of human practices as developmental processes, with both individual and social levels interlinked at the same time (Kuutti, 1996), because it sees that all human actions, especially mediated actions, as configurations of influences, both social and individual, within a dynamic system (Wertsch, 1995). This social event of task-based learning and teaching will also involve outside factors as much as the factors inside the language classrooms. These factors may involve prior experiences of students with the instruction or with the target language itself, perception and values of the target language culture, curricular orientation, and administrative policy of the institution. Thus, investigating task-based instruction through activity theory as analytical tool, which encompasses relevant contexts, should enable us to understand thoroughly the dynamic socio-cultural, activity setting such as task-based classrooms.

Second, activity theory takes goal-directed activity as the main focus of analysis. Lantolf and Pavlenko (1998) explain that activity theory sees mental behavior as action. The theory concerns all aspects of action such as what the person is doing, how the person is acting with objects and/or other individuals in the social environment, and why or what motives and goals underlying the activity are. Investigating learners’ goals and motives are specifically important in task-based instruction because it is the motives that determine how learners respond to a particular task (Leontiev, 1978). In other words, it is learners as human actors (i.e., agents or agency) that make a task-based activity possible, since “people act because something matters to them; that is, because something has meaning in their lives” (D.A. Leontiev, n.d., cited in Lantolf, 2004, p. 27). Thus, learners with different motives may perform the same task in different ways, and the same motive may result in different activities.

In this regard, Thorne (2004) contends that “through activity theoretical lens, one can look at orientations toward the activity at hand, as well as the varying roles that participants and artifacts play, without the blind spots that teacher-centered, student-centered, or technology-centered approaches tend to produce” (p. 53). In accomplishing a task, the individual students or groups of students act as subject or subject collective in an activity system (i.e., task-based activity) and work towards the object, which represents the orientation of the activity. This orientation is the driving force for the production or outcome. Thus, it is important to investigate learners’ goals and motives through the lens of activity theory.

Third, activity theory is a tool for innovation and transformation of instruction. Through analysis of various aspects of instruction, activity theory can direct educators to how they can improve their instruction. Thorne (2004) contends that activity theory, especially Engeström’s model, can be used as a research framework as well as a heuristic supporting innovation. Thorne explains that,

activity theory does not separate understanding (research) from transformation (concrete action). That is, it encourages engaged critical enquiry wherein an investigation should afford an analysis that would lead to the development of material and symbolic-conceptual tools necessary to enact positive interventions” (p. 52)….and to enact innovations in the teaching and learning local to a given context (p. 53).

In this respect, Thorne (2004) gives an example of a case study of a peer revision in a Spanish foreign language program. This small-scale qualitative action research was conducted by
Jiménez and Spata (unpublished manuscript, n.d., cited in Thorne, 2004). Using Engeström’s model of activity theory, Jiménez and Spata found that the model was very useful, as it revealed which components of the activity were successful and which needed improvement. For example, they found that the result (or outcome) of the peer revision activity became more robust than what they initially planned or expected. The model also showed them the areas that were likely to improve if they change something to the activity system such as division of labor and rules. Interestingly, what they found was not only the product (or outcome) of learning, but also the evidence of learning in progress. Thorne (2004) concludes that activity theory enables researchers to “define and analyze a given activity system, to diagnose possible problems, and to provide a framework for implementing innovations” (p. 63).

Tracing the development of activity theory from its genesis, initiated by A. N. Leontiev (1978), to its third generation, proposed by Y. Engeström (1987; 1999), Lantolf and Thorne (2006) contend that activity theory provides a useful framework for investigating second language learning, since it privileges human beings as agents for their own learning. Taking from Engeström’s model of activity theory (see below), Thorne (2004) elaborates that the theory emphasizes not only human agency,

but a human agency mediated by the mediational means at hand (technologies like computers and books, and also semiotic tools such as literacies, pedagogical frameworks, and conceptions of learning), the communities relevant to the situation, the implicit and explicit rules and divisions of labor in these communities, and the object, or orientation, of the activity system under consideration (italics added, p. 53).

These six components of Engeström’s model of activity theory is illustrated in Figure 2 and explained in details as follows;

![Figure 2. Engeström’s activity theory model (1987, 1999)](image)

This diagram depicts the core features of an activity system. In this visualization, the unit of analysis is an activity, which is directed at an object which motivates activity, given that there is a specific direction. The subject refers to the individual or group, whose motives and goals are taken in the analysis of the activity. The object is the target of activity within the system.
Mediation tools refer to internal and external mediating means or instruments which help to achieve the outcome of the activity. The community is comprised of one or more people who share the object with the subject (in terms of either supporting or impeding the activity). Rules from within or outside the activity system regulate actions and interactions within it. The division of labor involves how tasks are divided horizontally between community members as well as referring to any vertical division of power and status.

van Lier (2004) explains the usefulness of this model,

First there is the triangle of subject > object > mediating artifacts/tools; next there is the triangle of subject > object > community. Then other triangles can be traced that bring in other aspects of the context, such as division of labor, values and rules and so on. The idea is to represent an interconnected system of physical and symbolic aspects of the environment within which the activity occurs………. There is no doubt that this model is a very effective way of connecting learning activities with their context of enactment. It is particularly useful for showing inherent contradictions and tensions between different influences in the setting. (pp. 210-11, emphasis added).

3. Research Questions

1. What did participants do to complete the task?
2. What influenced the participants’ task-based performance?

4. Findings

4.1 What did participants do to complete the task?

First, in the conversation Task 2 (Welcoming visitors), considering that mutual cooperation was required, the pairs collaborated a great deal. Challenged by limited time and the required role-play, on-stage performance, however, both pairs responded to the task conditions with different goals that could be traced to different motives: to gain understanding vs. to make as few mistakes as possible. Then, they came up with different decisions on operations: to draft the conversation in the Thai language first vs. to make a lot of rehearsals. The same task can result in different activities. This finding conformed to the findings in study of Coughlan and Duffs (1994).

Second, in the Company Presentation (Task 3), the activities involved making slides, composed texts on slides, and speech presentation, allowing students to work either collaboratively or individually. Challenged by the presentation itself, limited time, and the ability to use technology, both pairs operationalized the task inspired by different motives, goals, and came up with actions involving decisions on how to regulate the task considering all conditions at hand such as talents and tools. It seemed that the larger the task was, the more varieties of activities they would appear.

Third, in Reading Business News (Task 5), although both pairs read and worked on the same piece of news and task, in several steps or actions they took to accomplish the tasks, they obviously engaged in different activities. One pair read the news together since the start, while the other decided to read it individually first. The decisions they made in each step varied
according to the diverse task goals, their relationship, the ways they handled the task conditions (i.e., how to use the tools or whose talents), as well as their prior learning experience and/or beliefs on how to do the tasks well.

The following Table 1. shows the summary of what influenced the differences in their *activities* of the three observed tasks.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The observed tasks</th>
<th>Their diverse task goals</th>
<th>Their relationship</th>
<th>The decisions on how to handle the task conditions</th>
<th>Their prior learning experience/beliefs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Task 2</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task 3</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>Yes, though it was not obvious</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task 5</td>
<td>Yes, though it was not obvious</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although *conditions* of the task affected the *operations* of the *subjects* or the way they approached the task, mostly it was the subjects, who determined how they handled the tasks or the direction of the *activities*. In other words, it was the participants who decided on how to respond to the tasks according to their task *goals* and *motives* on how they would like to see their task outcome.

4.2 *What influenced the participants’ task-based performance?*

The analysis revealed that (1) the performance of the participants were mostly influenced by themselves as *subjects*, the agency of learning, their *objects of activity* that motivated them to complete the course, the teacher and their partners in *division of labor*, and the *meditational tools* or instruments that they used to complete the tasks. (2) The participants were less influenced by the *rules* (e.g., task rules, business etiquette, and scoring rubrics) and the *community* (i.e., other classmates, parents, and the university). (3) All of these factors were many times overlapped and influenced one another confirming that they were interrelated and mediated one another. For instance, in many moments, students’ partners served three separate functions. First, they served as the *mediational tool* (to mediate their thinking and planning); second, as the *division of labor* (used to ease the burden of tasks, such as the time-consuming Company Presentation Task); and third as a *community* (for academic and emotional support). In certain situations, the teacher-researcher was the only *community* and means of *division of labor* they had, since the participants sometimes had to pair with her to perform role-plays. Finally, the teacher appeared to be the center of the activity system that held all factors together while she assisted and encouraged the students to move forward towards learning through tasks and working towards the task completion (*outcome*).

5. Insights

There has long been a discussion on the quest of which task types are better than the others for the learners’ second language acquisition. However, my findings (Sirisatit, 2010) revealed that the agent of learning in task-based instruction is the learners, not the task. Thus, an
ESP task design can be directed by goals or objectives rather than types of task so as to facilitate students’ accomplishment on tasks and language learning should occur at the same time.

Factors that affected task performance of participants in my study were as follows: (1) students’ diverse task goals, (2) students’ relationships, (3) the ways students’ managed task conditions, and (4) students’ prior learning experience and/or beliefs on how to do the tasks well. First, according to activity theory, learners ultimately decide how activities are carried out in terms of their goals, the resources they brought to tasks, and motivation.

Second, in addition to the diverse task goals and motives, their relationship affected the ways they managed tasks. It was found that if the pair was closed friends, they tended to work on similar goals. Thus, tasks were accomplished faster and with favorable performance.

Third, although tasks characteristics such as role-plays, presentation, and reading somewhat dictated the format of the task outcome, they did not determine the process of the activities, or how students perceived and handled the tasks. In other words, the task operations cannot be predicted (Donato, 2000) since they varied depending on the learners.

Finally, their prior learning experience and beliefs in how to manage tasks well affected participants’ activities. Tasks would also be better understood, if the partners had prior learning experience with similar tasks that was appropriate to the completion of the task at hand. For example, reading the whole business news article first to grasp the main ideas correctly was an effective reading strategy for a pair of participants.

6. Conclusion

It is essential for the teacher to investigate all factors that involve in the activity including subjects, tools, objects, rules, division of labor, and community. The teacher of a task-based business EFL course is recommended to examine whether he or she creates the learning environment that helps the learners recognize the usefulness of the activity or not. The learning context of a task-based course should not only be meaningful, but also mediating, then, memorable and motivating to the students.

References


