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Modelling typical online language learning activity

Carlos Montoro¹, Regine Hampel², and Ursula Stickler³

Abstract. This article presents the methods and results of a four-year-long research project focusing on the language learning activity of individual learners using online tasks conducted at the University of Guanajuato (Mexico) in 2009-2013. An activity-theoretical model (Blin, 2010; Engeström, 1987) of the typical language learning activity was used to analyse and interpret data. The study revealed (1) problems for learners to move beyond the task's objective (i.e. making a video) to attain the set language learning outcomes (e.g. developing speaking skills), and (2) the prevalence of orality over literacy in learning practices. Methodologically, a sample of 10 learners individually engaged with a purpose-built task. This was followed up by stimulated recall sessions (Gass & Mackey, 2000). The resulting video data was segmented using the concept of *disturbances* (Montoro & Hampel, 2011, p. 124; adapted from Engeström & Sannino, 2011), that is, deviations in learner behaviour from teacher expectations. Twenty-three dimensions and six processes were used to categorise data. A major systemic *contradiction* (Engeström, 2001), stemming from institutional and societal mass-production and efficiency-oriented practices, emerged, which partly led learners to take an other-than-language-learning orientation associated with, for instance, their underuse of learning tools and an over reliance on memory, perception, oral instruction and private speech.

Keywords: CALL, online tasks, activity theory, language learning, modelling.

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1. Introduction

In the context of an unprecedented expansion of and demand for the provision of English language learning and teaching opportunities at the University of Guanajuato (Mexico), a four-year (2009-2013) research project was launched to look into the language learning activity of individual learners using online tasks in a self-access centre.

After modelling the typical online language learning activity in this context, data analysis results revealed a systemic contradiction blocking the movement from the pursuit of the language task's objective (i.e. making a video) to the attainment of language learning outcomes (e.g. developing speaking skills). Most learners completed the task following the most direct route, paying scant attention to learning tools and learning opportunities, relying heavily on orality instead (e.g. private speech) and resisting a more literacy and text-based approach.

2. Method and results

Following a cultural-historical activity-theoretical (CHAT) approach (Engeström, 1987; Leontiev, 1978; Vygotsky, 1987), the unit of analysis in the study was the language learning activity system (see Montoro & Hampel, 2011 for details). Building upon work by Blin (2010), the system was refined to achieve a model of the typical language learning activity that applies to this context. Next, extensive video data was analysed. It consisted of video-recorded and computer-tracked individual sessions with a sample of ten intermediate language learners at a higher-education institution who engaged with a purpose-built online task followed by stimulated recall (SR) (Gass & Mackey, 2000) sessions to discuss their performance.

Data was segmented using the concept of *disturbances* or “deviations in learner behaviour from the language teacher-designer's expected course of events” (Montoro & Hampel, 2011, p. 124; adapted from Engeström & Sannino, 2011). Later, 23 dimensions (e.g. inner speech-private speech, technological affordances), grouped under six main processes (e.g. mediation by tools, orientation), were used to categorise the data and characterise the language learning activity.

Qualitative and quantitative results revealed the existence of a major systemic *contradiction* (i.e. an instance of a “historically accumulating structural tensions within and between activity systems”; Engeström, 2001, p. 137) affecting the transition from the learner to the immediate, practical objective of the task

and ultimately to the attainment of more general language learning outcomes. Institutional and societal forces based on mass-production and efficiency-oriented practices were reflected in the ‘getting things done’ approach and in an aversion to errors and tool-use shown by most learners.

3. Discussion

An other-than-language-learning orientation to the task meant several learners understood *what* they were doing (i.e. making a video to introduce themselves in English) but, because they derived their motivation from sources other than improving their English, they cared less about what they were doing *this for*, which resulted in poor language learning gains. This orientation affected the system in various ways, such as in the observed underuse of learning tools, the emergence of a hidden curriculum with self-imposed rules and the need for support from the community.

For instance, learners overwhelmingly preferred ‘hearing’ (from others and from themselves through private, self-addressed speech) to reading when learning, and relied on memory, on knowledge existing ‘in their heads’, rather than on text-based sources such as dictionaries and their own written notes. This explains why they would rather ‘find’ information (on *Google translate*, for instance) instead of ‘searching’ for information. Learners seemed to operate orally at the level of perception and memory instead of using higher psychological skills (e.g. problem solving) that require advanced literacy skills (e.g. summarising, reformulating).

4. Conclusions

To conclude, learners in this context are in need of more opportunities to work within their zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978) with more capable peers or teachers. The focus must be placed firmly on language learning and learner development to assist learners in their efforts to make the transition from orality to literacy, from memory and perception to higher psychological functions using more complex learning support tools.

A number of concepts can help in this regard, such as *dynamic assessment* (Lantolf & Poehner, 2011), fusing instruction and assessment, and practical applications of activity theory such as the *miniature cycles of expansive learning* (Engeström, 1999) and the *change laboratory methodology* (Engeström, Virkkunen, Helle, Pihlaja, & Poikela, 1996), notwithstanding the potential value of CALL tasks and SR as teaching-learning-researching tools.

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