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Reading transition in Chinese international students: Through the lens of activity system theory

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores the intertwined relationship between the impact of the learning environment and Chinese international master's students' reading approaches through the lens of activity system. Data were collected twice in one academic year by means of focus groups (8 participants at Time1, 4 at Time2) and interviews (15 on both occasions). It is noted that a change of learning environment from China to the UK not only triggers a transition in these students' English reading from 'learning to read' to 'reading to learn', but also gives rise to two different activity systems in which different goals, mediating tools, values, and division of labour are involved. All these elements largely determine what reading approaches Chinese students would use in their English reading. As international students, the gap between what they have brought with them from their home country and what they are expected to achieve in the UK constantly generates tensions and conflicts in their academic reading, which greatly inhibit the reading transition during their master's study.

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1. Introduction

In second language acquisition, the "imbalance between social and contextual orientations to language" (Firth & Wagner, 1997, p. 757) has triggered increasing research interest in how to rectify this phenomenon. Block's (2003) 'Social Turn' maintains that SLA should be interpreted as second language Activity, in that the notion of activity can reflect the interaction between language learning and the specific environmental impact on learning *per se*. Likewise, Ortega (2009) believes that language learning is not only shaped by the social context, but is also bound inextricably to that context. In her view, without knowledge of a given social context, nothing can be known (pp. 217–8).

Despite the importance of contextualising students' learning, strategy research in L2 academic reading has mainly focused on students' cognitive entities, either examining students' perceptions of strategy use, or their actual deployment of strategies in on-line reading (Phakiti, 2008; Poole, 2005; Strømsø, Bråten, & Samuelstuen, 2003; Zhang, 2010). Few studies explore the intricate relationship between the impact of the learning environment and students' choice of strategies, especially in the case of international students who are studying in western universities. The present study aims to investigate how a change of learning environment affects Chinese international master's students' reading approaches through the lens of activity system.

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2. Literature review

This study will be mainly based on Vygotskian sociocultural theory (SCT), in particular, the concepts of mediation, genetic approach, and activity theory. As "a theory of mind" (Lantolf, 2004), SCT addresses the dialectical relationship between social milieu and human mental development (Swain & Deters, 2007, p. 821). The concept of mediation refers to establishing the "connections in the brain from outside" (Vygotsky, 1997, p. 55), and cognitive development is regarded as a "transformation of the innate capacities once they intertwine with socioculturally constructed mediational means" (Lantolf & Pavlenko, 1995, p. 109). These mediational means or tools can be either physical or symbolic. Symbolic tools usually refer to symbolic systems, like language, or to people with whom the learners interact, or to objects, such as learning tasks or assessments (Donato & Mccormick, 1994, p. 456). The importance of the mediation concept is that it highlights the interplay between contextualised sociocultural processes and human cognitive change (Donato & Mccormick, 1994, p. 456).

A genetic approach, on the other hand, views individuals' cognitive development as "constituting and constituted by their social milieu" (Swain & Deters, 2007, p. 823). It assumes that human mental functions depend on the mediation generated in a specific social and cultural context (Kozulin, 1990, p. 135). Lantolf and Thorne (2006) contend that the only way to understand these functions better is to investigate their genetic origins in a socially and culturally situated activity, and to discover their dialectical relationship. What really matters is the process rather than the product, in particular, the dynamic elements which are called into play during the developing course of a human's higher mental functions (pp. 28–9).

Similarly, activity theory "conceptualizes human cognition in relationship to human physically and socially motivated activities" (Swain, Kinear and Steinman, 2011, p. 97). Its main thrust is that the study of human mental functions should focus on human activities, rather than on individuals. As the fundamental unit of analysis, an activity constitutes three levels: motive, action, and conditions (or operations) (Lantolf, 2000, p. 8). The causality in human action is "a disposition to respond to certain conditions in certain ways" (Harré & Gillet, 1994, p. 120). Therefore, actions are highly motive-oriented (Harré & Gillet, 1994, p. 123). On the other hand, operations are the conditions under which actions are taken, the "real-time in-process means by which an action is carried out" (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006, p. 219).

Built on activity theory, Engeström's (1987) activity system, represented by a triangular model (see Fig. 1), highlights the specific social context in which goal-directed actions are embedded. Within this system, actions undertaken by agents (subjects) are largely determined by the goal (object), and mediated by tools such as people or artefacts functioning as resources. At the bottom of the triangle, the rules reflect the values and regulations of the community: a social group undertaking the same actions towards shared goals. These rules, together with division of labour, greatly determine how the tasks are elaborated and carried out in the community. The end result is the outcome of the activity system. According to Engeström (1999), all these elements are interacting with each other, and motives are produced through interactions, which in turn either afford or restrain agents' actions towards their goal (p. 381). Lantolf (2000) claims that these elements "provide a conceptual framework that brings together local human activity and larger social-cultural-historical structures" (p. 13).

Previous studies (Gao, 2006; He, 2002; Lei, 2008; Takeuchi, Griffiths, & Coyle, 2007) suggest that there exists a link between learners' choice of strategies and the environmental impact. Takeuchi et al. (2007) contextualise the classroom as a learning community, and find that secondary school students' language learning strategy use is largely affected by the scaffolding provided by the community (teachers and classmates), and the students' own effort to appropriate the help.

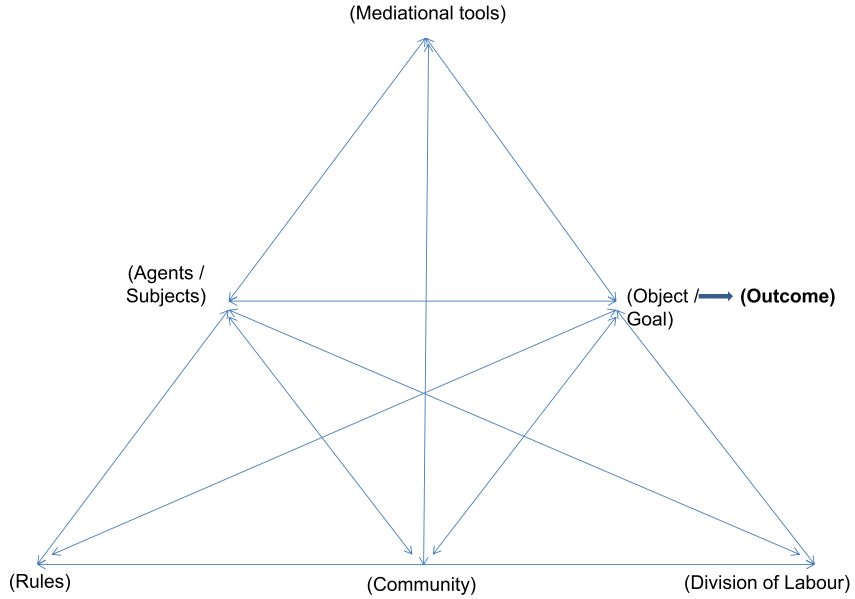

Fig. 1. Elements in activity system (Engeström, 1987).

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