



Sociocultural influences on the use of a web-based tool for learning English vocabulary



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 21 January 2013

Received in revised form 7 October 2013

Accepted 16 October 2013

Keywords:

Activity theory

CALL

Vocabulary

English for academic purposes

ABSTRACT

This paper presents evidence that sociocultural aspects influence how adult second language (L2) learners use web-based language learning tools. Quantitative evidence from mouse-click and on-line gloss look-ups by 41 Arabic-speaking and 21 Korean-speaking learners of English as a Second Language (ESL) revealed different behaviors with a web-based reading and vocabulary tutor. Qualitative data from class observations, questionnaires, and interview data revealed different cultural views of reading and word learning. Using activity theory to interpret these data, we suggest that learners' perspectives on learning vocabulary from a written text can transform the Object of a vocabulary learning activity in different ways. Implications for teachers and computer scientists are that students' actions when using online tools may differ by sociocultural background. In addition, their actions may not align with longterm learning objectives, but may instead be directed toward short-term task completion requirements.

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1. Introduction

For all adult second language (L2) learners, the development of a rich L2 lexicon is a challenging yet essential goal (Nation, 2001), but it is especially important for students who are preparing for academic work in a second language. Learners must expand their lexicon from the basic service list of 2000 word families to nearly 9000 words to succeed in an academic program (Schmitt, 2008). In order to assist L2 learners with this important task, students and ESL preparation programs in a variety of institutional settings turn to web-based tools in the hope of individualizing and enhancing both the quality and rapidity of learning outcomes. However, little research exists on how learners from different socio-cultural groups view and use web-based tools in real time. This paper therefore seeks to make a practical contribution to our understanding of how culture affects students' use of a computer-assisted vocabulary tutor. Through such understanding, teachers and curriculum supervisors can maximize the learning opportunities of such tools.

A need also exists for theory-based research on how technology influences the process of vocabulary learning. Thus, the research in this paper draws on activity theory (Engeström, 1999; Lantolf and Thorne, 2006; Leontiev, 1981; Swain, Kinnear, & Steinman, 2011), vocabulary acquisition research (Coxhead, 2000; Nation, 2001), and computer-assisted language learning (CALL) (Chun, 2007; Grace, 1998; Smith, 2004; Yamada, 2009; Zapata and Sagarra, 2007). Specifically, the paper addresses concerns voiced in Chapelle (2009, p. 749), who calls for evaluation of computer-based learning tools based on 'an iterative process of stating ideals for the materials based on the theoretical framework and providing a judgmental analysis of the degree to which the desired features actually appear in the materials. Features include opportunities for learners to obtain

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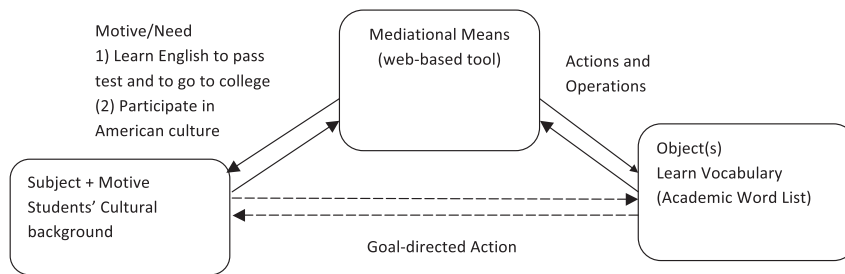


Fig. 1. Basic activity theory triangle: using the web-based tool.

help through interaction with the program, learners' focus on the meaning of the language, and the appropriateness of the level and activity fit for the learners.' A mixed methods research design that includes quantitative and qualitative perspectives (Dörnyei, 2007) is appropriate because both students' quantitative actions with the computer and their agency or intent (Lantolf and Thorne, 2006; pp. 238–240) behind those actions must be considered together.

The context of this study is an Intensive English Program (IEP) in the United States that prepares students for academic work in English-medium higher education. The curriculum supervisor in the IEP had expressed a strong desire for more extensive exposure to Academic Word List (AWL) vocabulary (Coxhead, 2000) during regular class time. This need arose because students were not reading extensively outside class and textbooks were perceived as inadequate for students' individual extensive reading needs. The problem of individualized instruction is significant in an IEP with diverse learners because a native speaker of a Romance language, for example, will find the AWL less challenging than someone whose L1 shares fewer cognates with English. To address the supervisor's concerns, a web-based reading and vocabulary tutor was adopted with the agreement of the supervisor and teachers. This web-based tutor is unique in that it uses automatically web-generated texts from free internet sources and provides a research component to investigate the help-seeking behavior of students. The tool utilizes a search engine that finds passages that satisfy very specific lexical constraints on the internet (Collins-Thompson and Callan, 2004). The database of texts contains 50,000 documents after filtering from 10 million. Each document contains about 1000 words. After a student selects a topic of interest, the tutor retrieves a text on that topic which contains 3–5 AWL words highlighted with a colored hyperlink to a dictionary definition. These words appear in the context of an interesting reading passage to promote deeper processing of the new words. Learners can click on the AWL words to learn about their meaning. Previous studies have reported learning outcomes related to tutor (e.g., Heilman et al., 2010; Heilman, Juffs, & Eskenazi, 2007). However, this paper concentrates on the different socio-cultural influences between two different groups of learners who used the tutor in real time, rather than the learning outcomes *per se*.

We begin by introducing activity theory as an appropriate theoretical framework in computer based L2 research. We then describe the web-based tool in more detail along with data collection procedures and how the research questions emerged from the use of the tutor in this setting. We present results of quantitative mouse-click data from three semesters followed by a quantitative and qualitative analysis of a subset of these students' views about learning and behaviors with the tool itself.

2. Literature review

2.1. Activity theory

Beyond their roles in general learning and human behavior (Engeström, 1999), sociocultural theory and activity theory contribute to our understanding of how students behave in classrooms and how they engage in learning tasks (Coughlan and Duff, 1994; Lantolf and Thorne, 2006; Swain et al., 2011). Kuutti (1995, p. 25) suggested that activity theory is not a 'theory' in the usual sense of the term, but a framework that provides an accepted terminology to describe goals and behaviors at the individual and group level in a complete setting. However, some scholars now hold that activity theory is actually a current instantiation of Sociocultural theory (SCT). No matter its theoretical status, activity theory permits an analysis of the vocabulary learning in the IEP from the perspective of the interactions among the learner (Subject/agent), the Object (the target of instruction, in this case vocabulary), and the mediational means (the web-based tutor). Crucially, activity theory links the concept of setting, which is defined as 'the sociocultural interpretation or creation that is imposed on the context by participants,' (Lantolf and Appel, 1994, p. 17) with 'motive'. Motive in activity theory is defined as 'cultural-psychological-institutional impetus' that links hoped-for future outcomes (the object/goal) with immediate actions (Lantolf and Thorne, 2006, p. 223). This link is important because, as Lantolf and Appel point out, activity cannot exist without motive. Importantly for this paper, activity theory accommodates (remote) cultural background with actions in the 'here-and-now' in classrooms and learning interactions. Finally, the framework, *a priori*, requires inclusion of all stakeholders and is especially good at identifying tensions and clashes between participants in an activity system (Swain et al., 2011; pp. 93–116).

Researchers who work on computer-based learning tools also consider activity theory to be important in understanding computer use (Bannon, 1992; Kuutti, 1995). Bannon (1992) established that activity theory helps us to see students as

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