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A Study of EFL Students' Argumentative Writing
Through the Lens of Activity Theory

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To Mom and Dad,

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Abstract

This qualitative study employs Activity Theory to investigate the role of previous activity systems as well as contradictions in EFL students' learning of argumentative writing. The participants were twenty eight EFL female students at Al-Zahra University who participated in this study for a period of two semesters.

The primary data, gathered through questionnaire, audio-taped interviews, samples of writing and the students' observations and interpretations of their learning over the semesters, were triangulated and in order to obtain the best result regarding reliability and validity the researcher employed thick description techniques.

Findings of the analyzed data revealed that students' previous activity systems played a great role in their appropriation of tools and concepts of argumentation and self evaluation by providing the flexible building blocks for learning the new concepts presented in class, and influencing students' goal formation which itself affected the nature of their participation and appropriation. Moreover, contradictions were found to be the driving force of learning and change when students reflected and acted on the contradictions arising from differences between their present experiences and their previous sociocultural and historical activity systems.

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Chapter One

Introduction

1.1. Overview

Sociocultural theory is receiving attention with researchers studying how L2 students are socialized into their academic disciplines. Originating with Lev Vygotsky, this theory tackles social and cultural influences on learning. For the learner, knowledge is said to occur first on the social plane and afterwards to become internalized on the psychological plane (Vygotsky, 1981, p. 163). In fact context-independent cognition is non-existent, but rather all human activity is socially, culturally, and historically situated and mediated through cultural tools, both psychological and material.

To explain how individuals acculturate to societal practices, several forms of sociocultural theory have arisen. Two that are somewhat known in second and foreign research are situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and socially mediated action (Wertsch, 1991). A third is activity theory, which is the leading theoretical approach in Russian psychology (Kaptelinin, 1996).

Activity theorists study “human practices as development processes” (Kuutti, 1996) because “you are what you do” (Nardi, 1996, p. 7). At the same time, “what you do” is always embedded in and shaped by systems of activity.

In activity theory, learning to write is a sociohistorical process. Activity theorists concur that learning involves reflection and dissonance but add two points.

First, learning is mediated by society and its material and conceptual tools. Second, resolving contradictions in problem-solving tasks is not enough. In learning activity, according to Engeström (1987), students transcend the task’s

given context, and expand and generalize the results to other contexts for their own goals, motives, and productive societal practices.

In addition, learning is not limited to individual students but includes collective classes and schools. In the activity system of a composition course, then, contradictions between students, teachers, course curriculum, and institution must be addressed and resolved so that students, teachers, and institutions all learn and develop.

1.2. Statement of the problem

The focus of most studies in the field of second and foreign language writing is on the *products* and *processes* of *individual* students. In fact they mostly focus on process, product, or socialization, describing differences between good writers and novices, the strategies that each of these writers use and between native-speaker products and those of non-native speakers. Such a research does not address the nature of learning or explain how students learn to write in a second or foreign language.

Moreover most researchers do not investigate language learners as social beings whose consciousness are socially produced, rather for most scholars this concept merely means that individuals live in a social world or use socially inherited forms(Williams, cited in Horner, 1997).

Having this picture in mind, Activity Theory asserts that human cognition is “in a very fundamental sense a cultural and social process” (Hutchins, 1995, p. 353) and is mediated by the tools and resources used (Wertsch, 1991, 1994). In

other words this approach emphasizes the sociocultural and historical influences of the institutions in which students engage in learning and provides a useful framework for understanding how students learn to write in a second or foreign language.

1.3. Purpose and significance of the study

Moving away from the predominant focus of second and foreign language pedagogy on the individual, Activity Theory emphasizes the sociocultural and historical nature of the learning setting and investigates language learners as social beings.

In addition, as it was previously mentioned, most research in the field of second and foreign language writing points out differences between good and novice writing and strategies. These theories only note the two ends and offer only descriptions of what good and novice writers do. They do not explain how novices acquire their expertise and become good writers, thus there seems to be a need to focus more on the nature of learning and for this reason, Activity Theory provides a useful framework for understanding how students learn to write in a second or foreign language.

Moreover, students' participation in class, their appropriation of rhetorical concepts and writing tools, the conflicts they face in learning, and their ability to expand and generalize their learning, all are mediated by the concepts and tools of the past and present activities in which they have engaged and are engaging. Consequently, to understand how students learn to write in a foreign language, or

learn to do anything, requires an analysis of the activity systems in which they have been embedded and an analysis of the contradictions inherent within activities and between them.

As Engestrom(1987) mentions, contradictions are the driving force of change in systems of activity and can happen between individuals and sociohistorical influences, between two or more elements of an activity system or between different activity systems. And to develop means to resolve these contradictions and transform them into new contexts. A process Engestrom (1987) called expansive learning.

Following the previous point, if the course was to make transformative learning possible, it needed to bring students into an encounter with knowledge, ideas, and practices that would be new and challenging, and sufficient to prompt critical reflection. And as Kurfiss (1988) mentions, argumentative writing, has been considered to be critical to challenge students' critical thinking.

Thus the main purpose of this study was using Activity Theory as a framework to investigate how EFL students' previous activity systems mediate their appropriation of tools and concepts of argumentation and self-evaluation, and how contradictions influence their learning process of argumentative writing.

1.4. Research questions

1. Based on the framework of Activity Theory, how do EFL students' previous activity systems influence their appropriation of tools and concepts of argumentation and self- evaluation?
2. Based on the framework of Activity Theory, how do contradictions influence EFL students' learning process of argumentative writing?

1.5. Definition of key terms

Activity Theory

Activity theory is a psychological meta-theory, paradigm, or framework, with its roots in the Soviet psychologist Vygotsky's cultural-historical psychology. Its founders were Alexei N. Leont'ev (1903-1979), and Sergei Rubinshtein (1889-1960) who sought to understand human activities as complex, socially situated phenomena and go beyond paradigms of psychoanalysis and behaviorism. It became one of the major psychological approaches in the former USSR, being widely used in both theoretical and applied psychology, in areas such as education, training, ergonomics, and work psychology.

Appropriation

According to Grossman, Smagorinsky, & Valencia's (1999) appropriation refers to the process through which a person adopts the conceptual and pedagogical tools available for use in particular social environment and through this process internalizes ways of thinking endemic to specific cultural practices.

Argumentative writing

Argumentative writing or genre refers to a genre of writing which involves arguments, facts, evidence, reasons, description or explanation which support the side being argued, use reference to expert authority whom the reader is apt to believe, to make the writer's position seem indisputable (Crossley and Wilson, 1979; Smalley and Hank, 1982; Munsell and Clough, 1984; Feez and Joyce, 2000). It is also concerned with the analysis, interpretation and evaluation of the world around us and its emphasis is on persuading someone to our point of views (Derewianka, 1990, p. 75).

Contradiction

The Oxford and Macquarie dictionaries [5, 6] define contradiction as, 'a lack of agreement between facts, opinions, actions etc.' From Roget's Thesaurus [7], we can also add the synonyms; 'being contrary; a contrast, dissent, discordance, difference, diversity, discrepancy, incompatibility, opposite, antithesis.'

Based on the concepts of Activity Theory contradictions can happen between individuals and sociohistorical influences, between two or more elements of an activity system or between different activity systems.

To understand change at both individual and system levels requires an analysis of the contradictions among the elements of activity systems and between activity systems.

Self- evaluation

Self- evaluation is defined as checking one's own performance or one's own success on language, teaching (Richards, 1992).

In the present study students evaluated themselves through writing interpretations on their change and development, presenting a claim corresponding to their development, offering reasons for their claim, and providing evidence for their analysis in the form of their work and observations.

Toulmin model of Argumentation

Toulmin model of argumentation (1964) contains six interrelated components for analyzing arguments, **including:**

Claim: the statement the arguer wishes to have accepted or to prove.

Data: evidence to support the claim.

Warrant: connects the data to the claim. This is the reasoning upon which the data relies.

Backing: further supports the *warrant*. This is not always included or made explicit.

Qualifier: defines the importance or the extent of certainty of the claim.

Reservation (Rebuttal): may anticipate a counter-argument or prescribe circumstances that may allow for exceptions.

1.6. Delimitations of the Study

This study did not consider both genders because of the situation at Al-Zahra University which is an all female university. In a mixed class consisting of both girls and boys or in another single-sex class including just male students the results might be different. Moreover, this study was done in two semesters while expansive cycles cover periods of years, consequently, long-term longitudinal studies would need to surpass the academic lifetime of individual students, looking into how networks of activity, students' objects, and course objects change cyclically.