

Native Culture Integration in English Teaching

-- A Case Study of Activity Theory

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Abstract

This study selects one English elective course at college as the research object and describes the activity system of integration of native culture into English teaching in this class in terms of its subject, object, tools, community, rules and division of labor, and attempts to explore the way and effects of college English teacher's integration of Chinese culture into English teaching. The results of case study imply: (1) The integration of native culture in this course is a harmonious system composed of multiple elements. (2) The teacher designs the whole teaching process under the guidance of backward approach and selects effective tools according to learning goals and the needs of students.

Keywords

College English Teaching; Native Culture Integration; Activity Theory; Classroom Observation.

1. Introduction

With the development of related disciplines such as anthropology, sociolinguistics, cultural linguistics and intercultural communication, culture in language teaching is being received more attention. Throughout the research results of Chinese scholars, the content of culture integration in English teaching in China can be divided into two main directions: one is target-language culture integration and the other is combination of target language culture integration and native culture integration. The first view regards English as a general foreign language. Its main purpose is to achieve successful communication with native English speakers, so that they can successfully learn the target language culture. The later view regards English as lingua franca. Its main function is to act as a medium of communication between two people from different countries. English learning in our country should be able to introduce and disseminate Chinese culture to the world through English, so as to achieve the true intercultural dialogue with people of other nations in the world. Therefore, it's necessary to integrate Chinese culture in English teaching. How English teachers do so successfully in classroom has also won the attention of teachers and researchers.

2. Theoretical Framework

In 1992, Rubinshtein put forward the idea of "taking human activity as the basic unit of psychoanalysis", and applied the concept of "activity" to psychology (Lv Jinjiao, 2007). Afterwards, it is gradually enriched by the research of Vygotsky, Leont'ev and other scholars.

2.1. First Generation of Activity Theory

The first generation of activity theory is put forward by the former Soviet Union's cultural historical school which is represented by the scholar Vygotsky. Vygotsky (1978) believes that

there is mediation between the stimulus and responses of human behavior and presents this idea in a triangular model as followed in Figure1.

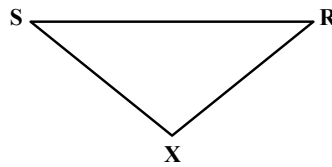


Figure 1. Intermediate behavior in activity theory

In the above figure, S stands for stimulus, which is the subject of behavior; R stands for reaction, which is the object of behavior; X stands for mediation between the subject and the object. Mediation refers to tools, which are divided into material tools and psychological tools. Material tools include external things such as machines and architectures. Psychological tools include language, symbols, mathematics, and cultural artifacts. However, he only puts forward mediation, but not forms a systematic activity theory, and the unit of analysis still only focuses on the individual, not communities (Cole & Engeström, 1993).

2.2. Second Generation of Activity Theory

From the 1930s to the 1970s, Leont’ev, Vygotsky’s students, led other researchers to carry out a large number of psychological experiments and expand the framework of activity theory. He proposed the hierarchical structures, described activity theory in terms of the three-level scheme of activity, action and operation and corresponding motive, goal and instrument conditions. He began to pay attention to the complex relationship between individual and community, and believed that the division of labor in historical procedure made the distinction between individual behavior and collective behavior. Since then, the activity theory has been formally formed. Leont’ev does not use graphics to extend Vygotsky’s original model.

2.3. Third Generation of Activity Theory

In 1987, Engeström introduced Darwin’s evolution theory and Hegel’s thought, and started to think about the differences between animal activities and human activities as well as the transitional relationship between them. The biggest difference between human activities and animals is that humans are not directly in contact with the environment. Tools or mediations appear in the process of human activity. Mediation is not limited to material tools, but also includes a variety of collective traditions, rituals and rules shaped by human society in the long course of evolution and development. With this collective cultural consciousness to constantly improve and permeate into all aspects of human life, division of labor is gradually refined, human activities become more diverse.

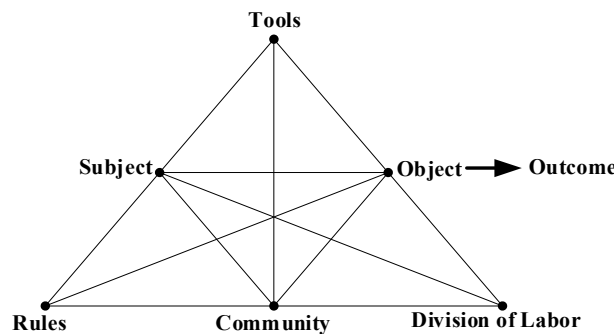


Figure 2. Structure of a human activity system (Engeström, 1987)

Engeström (1987) claimed that the activity system contains three essential elements: subject, community, and object, and three mediation elements: tools, rules, and division of labor and they finally generated outcome. He contends that activity is a system consisting of six elements and four subsystems. The subject is individuals or groups in the activity, the activity is carried out by the subject according to their wishes; the object is operated by the subject, which can be material or spiritual, and is transformed into an outcome by the subject; the community is composed of several individuals and groups, and they share the object. Tools include all things used in the process of transforming objects into outcome, which can be material tools or psychological tools; rules are regulations, laws, policies, and practices that restrict activities, and potential social norms, standards, and the relationship between community members; division of labor is the horizontal distribution of tasks and vertical distribution of rights and status among members of the community. These six elements combine to form four small triangles, which are the four subtriangles of production, communication, distribution and consumption.

In 2001, Engeström analyzed the various drawbacks caused by the school closure, and proposed to break through the school's institutional restrictions with "learner collectives" and "advanced learning networks" to form a larger activity system and increase the interaction between activities. This is a further development of activity theory, as shown in Figure 3. However, Engeström believes that this model still needs to be developed.

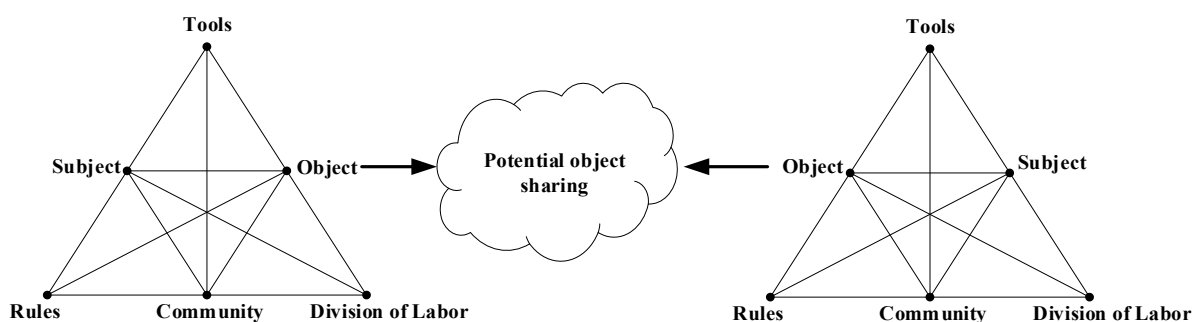


Figure 3. Activity theory system (Engeström, 2001)

The third generation of activity theory put forward by Engeström not only focuses on one activity system, but also makes it pay attention to more than two activity systems. It is believed that the subject and the community share the same object. The subject is simultaneously restricted by the rules, the community, and the division of labor when subject acts on the object. The third generation of activity theory expanded tools and pointed out that contradiction is the motivation of activity. The occurrence of a contradiction is that an element in the activity system first changes and develops due to the interaction with other activity systems. The contradiction can be determined by the tension between two or more elements. The third-generation activity theory highlights the social characteristics of activities. Activities cannot be separated from the specific social environment. Activities are all carried out in a certain social environment.

2.4. Framework of the Present Study

As descriptive theory analyzes various activities existing in human society, activity theory supports a systematic and systemic approach to understand human activities and their complex interactions with the real-world contexts. Due to its ability of fully presenting and explaining the dynamic process of realizing the goal of an activity system in some specific social and cultural environment (Yang & Fu, 2014), the activity system analysis is widely used in the field

of language education. Therefore, the present study will adopt the human activity system proposed by Engeström in 1987 as the framework to analyze the integration of Chinese culture.

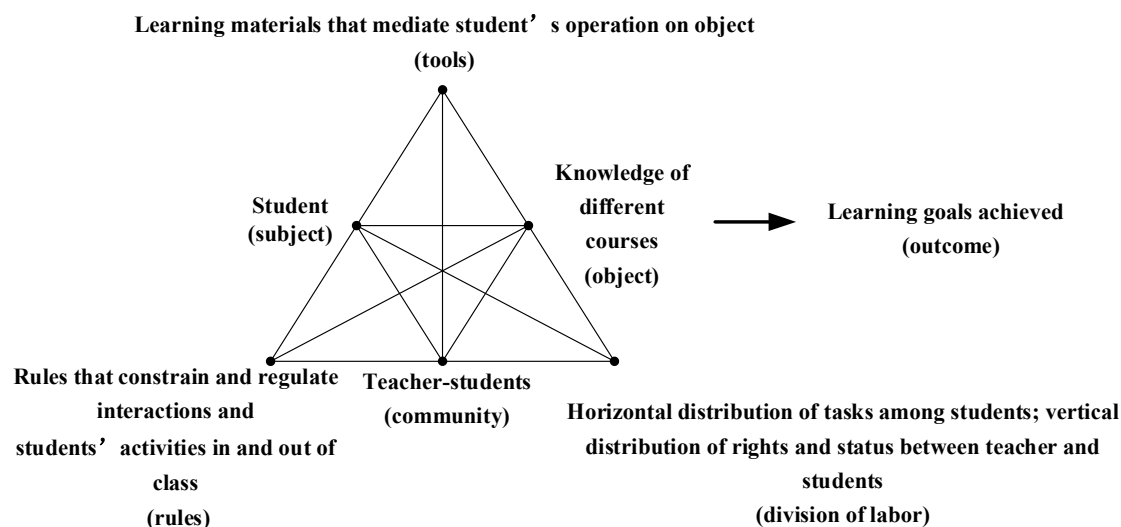


Figure 4. Activity theory system in educational setting

3. Research Methodology

The core of case study is to conduct a detailed research on a particular case or several cases. It is suitable for the characteristics of the classroom teaching environment and the integration of the Chinese culture into the teaching. Therefore, the author conducts a case study on the integration of Chinese culture into college English teaching by classroom observation, Video-recording, questionnaire, interview and documents.

3.1. Research Participants

The present research takes The Art of Public Speaking and Debating course as research subject. The teacher applied an educational reform project which aimed to integrate Chinese culture in college English teaching. This course selectable every semester for any of the four grades is an optional course. There are no textbooks of Chinese culture for students who choose this course. The content of this course barely contains Chinese culture which means the teacher need to combine Chinese culture with her teaching content. There are 26 students choosing this course. Students who choose this course are mainly sophomores and juniors. Most of them have passed CET4 and a few of them have passed CET6 which means most students have an intermediate level of English. This study surveys the teaching process of 32 class hours as research resource.

3.2. Research Instruments

The present research employed naturalistic inquiry, which refers to the classroom observation without intervention and then transcription of video records, to be more precise, the author employed classroom observation and Video-recording as the main methods. In addition, questionnaire, documents and interview were adopted as a subsidiary tool to test the effects of Chinese culture integration and to confirm teacher's intention of designing some teaching activity to make up the limitations of the classroom observation.

3.2.1. Classroom Observation and Video-recording

As a sort of empirical study, the method used in this study is to collect data through observation, recording in a natural and authentic environment as possible. Because of the outbreak of COVID-19, the researcher observed the teaching process online. The researcher observed and

recorded online teaching of the two teachers for whole semester and took field notes and there were totally around 32 class hours under video-recorded and transcribed into written materials manually in detail with the help of notes.

3.2.2. Questionnaire

The questionnaire was adopted as a supplementary tool to collect students' information of learning results. It was written in Chinese with a total of 12 questions including students' attitude towards Chinese culture integration and students' competence of expressing Chinese culture in English

3.2.3. Interview

Interview is a research method in which the researcher collects first-hand information from the subject through conversation (Chen Xiangming, 2000). Semi-structured interview was conducted once before the observation and unstructured interviews were conducted at any time during the teaching process to confirm their intentions of designing such teaching contents, tasks, requests, etc.

3.2.4. Documents

The researcher collected teaching materials including lesson plans, lecture slides of teacher and students, videos, pictures and texts that teacher used and students' assignments. This research also collected supplementary materials for the course and some content of the course on website. After taking the course, students have the right to log in to the school's online teaching system. The researcher obtained the teacher's permission to log in to the system, and collected some supplementary materials as well as learning resources provided by the teacher.

3.3. Procedure of Data Collection

The collected data are categorized, coded and analyzed in line with the elements in activity theory, i.e., subject, rule, tool, object, community and division of labor in the Art of Public Speaking and Debating. According to Yang Luxin (2013), in pedagogical research, including applied linguistics research, the criterion to test validity is "whether the research accurately reflects the real situation of the research content" such as triangulation, which can be verified by various collected data such as interviews, observations, member checking and documents to maintain rigor of the study. Triangulation of the data sources (i.e., observation notes, transcripts of class recording, interviews, documents and member checking) is also used to maintain the rigor of the study.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Analysis of Native Culture Integration

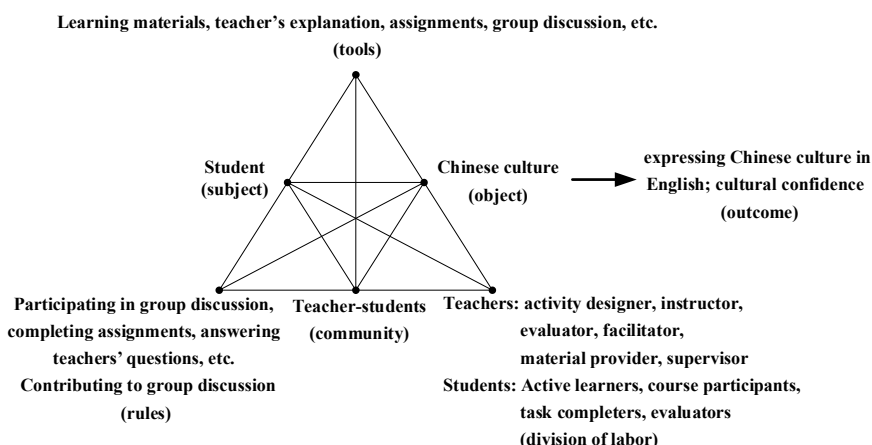


Figure 5. Activity System of Chinese culture Integration

As a powerful descriptive instrument, activity theory provides a way to describe and analyze classroom activity. The present research adopts the six elements of the triangle model proposed by Engeström which include subject, object, tool, rules, division of labor and community to analyze Chinese culture integration in English class. Based on the human activity system proposed by Engeström in 1987, the present research formed the Chinese culture integration activity system.

4.2. A Case Study

The case was selected from the Art of Public Speaking and Debating which was conducted on May 20. Students were supposed to make a debate on the topic about architecture, that is bringing out nature or dominating nature. The object of the Chinese culture integration activity in this class included some Chinese architectures, Chinese philosophy reflected in these architectures and related English expressions. The teaching procedures are: firstly, students were required to comprehend skills of debating, then the teacher gave students the debating topic. Based on the topic, the teacher explained the spirituality of Chinese and western architectures for students to comprehend the debating topic; secondly, the students started to debate on the given topic and the teacher evaluated students' performance.

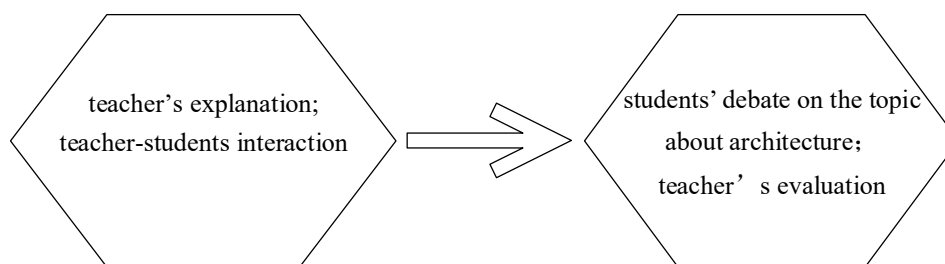


Figure 6. Teaching procedure of Chinese culture integration

At the beginning of the introducing of the debating topic the teacher showed pictures of some architectures in the college such as library to set up teaching situation. In bring out the characteristics of Chinese culture and the spirituality leading to those characteristics, the teacher first presented pictures of Lingyin Temple, the Forbidden city, Zhuozheng Garden and the Summer Palace and lead the students to find the characteristics of those Chinese culture by means of comparing them with some architectures in the west such as the St. Peter's Basilica and Notre Dame Cathedral. And the teacher then used this as cut-in point to introduce the spirituality that leads to the differences which is also the core of the debating topic. The whole process was very smooth and the content of Chinese architecture went from easy to complex. The teacher gave her reason for the way she presented the object.

Actually, the two different views of debating respectively represent the different spirituality of Chinese architecture and western architectures. As the most important goal of Chinese culture integration in this lecture, enable students to master the relationship between spirituality or Chinese philosophy and architecture which is very complicated for the students to understand and it is also the core of the debating topic. As a result, in order to achieve this goal, I choose some pictures of Chinese architectures and lead them to find out the characteristic of those architectures as a natural transition to the spirituality—the reason why these architectures built in this way or that way, because what a building looks like mainly depends on what's in our mind.

(Unstructured interview, May, 2020)



Figure 7. Teacher's presentation slides

It could be seen from the teacher's statement that the way she designed to present object was based on learning goal of students (outcome). This kind of teaching approach is called the backward approach. According to Richards (2013), the curriculum design that starts with a careful statement of the desired results or outcomes is a typical "backward approach", with clear regulations on learning objectives and results, and designing tools used in the class to mediate the object based on objectives.

According to Engeström (2016), the object should be designed based on the "Zone of Actual Performance" so that learners can solve problems beyond their own abilities with the help of mediation tools. In terms of the degree of difficulty, the design of the object should be beyond the learner's existing ability, but the learner can achieve it with the help of mediation tools or the help of others. In this case, in order to enable the students to understand the relationship between Chinese architecture and the spirituality or the Chinese philosophy which beyond the students' existing knowledge, the teacher presented some pictures of Chinese architectures and lead them to find out the characteristic of those architectures and with the help of the pictures, their findings of the characteristics of those buildings and teacher's explanation, they finally understand the object.

The outcome generated from the subjects acting on object mainly reflected in students' debating. Students were supposed to choose one point of view of the debating topic according to their own willing, and have free debate in the class. Students were active in the process of debating. In the process of presenting arguments, students who choose the viewpoint of bringing out nature mentioned architectures such as the Summer Palace, Zhuozheng Garden, Guanzhong Folk Museum and the Temple of Heaven. Some of them stress the spirituality of Chinese architecture which is harmonious between man and nature. They stress that most of ancient Chinese architectures integrated with nature which should be inherited to protect the nature.

5. Conclusion

This thesis makes a descriptive analysis of Chinese culture integration in college English teaching based on the six elements of activity theory. The integration of Chinese culture in this course is a harmonious system composed of the six elements. The teacher helps students give full play to their subjective initiative, and achieve the goal of learning Chinese culture with the help of a variety of effective tools (teaching materials, learning tasks, assignments, etc.) and reasonable community rules and division of labor. The teacher designs the entire teaching process based on the concept of backward approach, and selects effective tools according to learning goals and students' needs. Tools that the teacher carefully chooses to integrate Chinese culture into English teaching include videos, pictures, texts, teacher's explanations, group tasks and assignments.

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